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## **ERITREA: 103 Christians arrested for trying to record Christian music on YouTube**

**ERITREA: 103 young Christians arrested for trying to record Christian music on YouTube**

*Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the Eritrean authorities to immediately and unconditionally release hundreds of Orthodox, Protestant and Jehovah's Witnesses who remain in prison because of their faith.*



HRWF (24.04.2023) – As religious repression goes on unabated in Eritrea, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* urges the Eritrean authorities to “immediately and unconditionally release all those who remain in prison without charge or trial because of their faith or belief” as the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea had called for in his report on 12 May 2021.

### ***Massive arrests of Evangelicals and Pentecostals***

Around mid-April, Eritrean authorities arrested 103 young Christians for trying to record Christian music on YouTube, according to Release Eritrea. Some were from Mai-Nefhi technical college. They are said to have been taken to the notorious Mai-Sirwa prison.

At mid-March, police arrested 30 Christians who had gathered to worship in a home in the town of Keren, 60 miles northwest of the capital Asmara, according to Release International.

Estimates vary as to the number of religious prisoners in Eritrea. Release International’s partner Dr Berhane Asmelash estimates there are more than 400. Most Christian prisoners are believed to be Pentecostal or Evangelical.

The government has closed many Protestant churches and even registered churches come under tight control.

Some Christian prisoners have been kept in shipping containers, exposed to searing heat by day and freezing cold by night. Some are beaten and tortured to try to force them to renounce their faith.

The prison authorities ban praying aloud, singing, preaching or reading religious books.

Sometimes prisoners are tied up and hanged from trees. One form of hanging is known as the Jesus Christ, because it looks like a crucifix.

### ***Some releases***

Nine Protestant prisoners were released in March. Four were set free from Mai Serwa prison. Most of them had served sentences of more than nine years.

Five other prisoners were released from the town of Assab, on the coast near the border with Djibouti. They include female house church pastor Abenet Yemane who has been in and out of prison for the past 20 years for her religious activities.

### ***24 Jehovah's Witnesses still in prison***

As of 22 April 2023, twenty-four Jehovah's Witnesses remained in prison (18 males and 9 females). Twenty-eight of them (26 males and 2 females) were set free on December 4, 2020, after being imprisoned for their faith for between 5 and 26 years each. On January 29, 2021, one male Witness was released after being imprisoned for over 12 years, and an additional three Witnesses were released on February 1, 2021 (one male and two females). They had been imprisoned for between four and nine years.

Four Witnesses have died while imprisoned in Eritrea, and three elderly Witnesses have died after their release from

prison because of the harsh conditions they experienced while detained.

In 2018, two Witnesses died after their transfer to the Mai Serwa Prison. Habtemichael Tesfamariam died at age 76 on January 3, and Habtemichael Mekonen died at age 77 on March 6. Eritrean authorities imprisoned both men in 2008 without charges.

In 2011 and 2012, two Witnesses died because of the inhumane treatment in the Meitir Prison Camp. Misghina Gebretinsae, aged 62, died in July 2011 as a result of the extreme heat he experienced in a punishment area described as the "underground." Yohannes Haile, aged 68, died on August 16, 2012, after almost four years of imprisonment under similar conditions. Three elderly Witnesses, Kahsai Mekonnen, Goitom Gebrekristos, and Tsehaye Tesfariam, died after their release as a result of the conditions they endured while in custody in the Meitir Camp.

### ***Religious demography***

In 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published a report about religious freedom in Eritrea saying concerning the religious demography:

"As of 2020 the US government estimates the total population of Eritrea at six million. The population is *split equally* between Christians (49 percent) and Muslims (49 percent).

The Christian population mainly resides in the southern and central regions

of the country, whereas the Muslim population lives predominantly in the northern region. The Muslim population is predominately Sunni, and the Christian community is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox with various denominations including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and

Pentecostals. In addition to these two main religious groups, there are small communities of Baha'i (approximately 200 individuals) and a handful of Jews. Finally, about 2 percent of the population are adherents of African traditional religions."

The totalitarian government in Eritrea exercises rigid control over its citizens. Around a fifth of the population has fled abroad. Many head eventually to the UK, which grants asylum to 70 per cent of Eritreans who apply.

Eritrea broke free from Ethiopia in 1991 after a 30-year war for independence. Since 1993 the country has been ruled by a dictatorship, under the authoritarian president Isaias Afwerki and his party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Christianity took root in the region in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**See HRWF's Database of FORB prisoners: 30 documented cases**

**Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, Coptic Orthodox**

**[Further reading about FORB in Eritrea on HRWF website](#)**

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