

ERITREA: Conditional release of 27 Christian prisoners

CSW has confirmed that 27 Eritrean Christians were released from Mai Serwa Prison near Eritrea's capital, Asmara, on 4 and 8 September, possibly in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSW (11.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2Fxp0M0> – According to CSW's sources, the group consisted of 19 men and eight women who had been detained without charge or trial for between two and 16 years, and who are thought to be the first of around 54 anticipated releases. However, the releases are reportedly conditional on the submission of property deeds ensuring their guarantors are held liable for their future actions.

Sources confirmed that the releases did not include any detained church leaders. Moreover, the releases were preceded by the arrests of several Christians in Asmara, including around four church leaders, two weeks earlier.

Commenting on these events, a CSW source said: "It is a government strategy. They cannot detain everybody, so they keep you for some time, hoping that you will become weak or frightened. Then they put in other people. They release and put other people in prison at the same time."

The source put the number of Christians currently detained at a little over 300, including 39 children, "although these numbers fluctuate."

Tens of thousands of Eritreans are currently held without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in more than 300 sites across the country. Among those incarcerated are prisoners of conscience, some of whom have been detained for well over a decade on account of their political views or religious beliefs. Conditions in these facilities are overcrowded, unsanitary and inadequate; detention facilities include shipping containers, underground cells, and the open air in the desert, and access to medical attention is insufficient and often withheld as punishment. Mai Serwa prison, where the former detainees were jailed, is infamous for utilising metal shipping containers as holding cells.

The spate of recent releases is being attributed to the spread of COVID-19 in the country's overcrowded prison system. However, Eritrea is officially reporting just 341 cases, and claims that no one has died of the virus so far. There has been no independent verification of these assertions.

In an earlier development, reports emerged in August indicating that members of the Muslim community who were detained in 2018 in connection with protests following the death of respected Muslim elder Haji Musa Mohammed Nur had been released.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: "While applauding the fact that people who were deprived of their liberty have regained their freedom, it is also important to recall that they were detained arbitrarily and without due process for excessive periods simply on account of their religious beliefs. Moreover, these releases remain conditional, as they

were secured by property deeds, leaving the guarantors vulnerable to losing their properties. The guarantors could also lose their freedom should a former detainee exercise the right to leave the country, a right articulated in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Eritrea is party. Far more prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily detained than have been released, and the fact that these releases were preceded by further arrests is indicative of an ongoing repression of the right to freedom of religion or belief. CSW therefore continues to call for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners detained arbitrarily, particularly in view of a pandemic that poses a risk to life for those still held in inhumane conditions.”