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15 Christians re-arrested

Release International (20.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39pyHte> - The Eritrean authorities recently arrested 15 Christians in raids on their houses in the capital Asmara. All have previously been imprisoned for their faith – some for up to 16 years.

This latest wave of arrests of men and women from different churches aged from their late 20s to their 60s, puts paid to any prospect of a softening of policy towards Christian prisoners in Eritrea after a number were recently released. Some have already served up to 16 years behind bars while others have been imprisoned for between five and six years. They were released last summer, but rearrested following the discovery of a list of Christian contacts.

The believers were all taken to Mai Serwa maximum-security prison in the capital.

In July, the authorities re-arrested two elderly pastors, Girmay Araia and Samuel Gebrewleldi. Both are in their 70s and leaders in the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea. No reason has been given for their arrest.

It is estimated that there are now about 160 Christian prisoners in Eritrea.

Photo: Release International

Two elderly pastors imprisoned for their faith

By Anugrah Kumar

The Christian Post (11.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3CfdH4M> - Two elderly pastors are being held in Eritrea's maximum-security interrogation center as one of the world's most repressive and closed countries continues to persecute Christians.

“Pastor Girmay Araya, 75, and Pastor Samuel Okbamichael, 74, were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and brought to an unknown location,” the news agency Church in Chains reported, [according](#) to the U.S.-based persecution watchdog International Christian Concern. “It later emerged that the two pastors were taken to the maximum-security Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation interrogation centre ...”

Police intended to also arrest 72-year-old Pastor Georgio Gebreab “but they found him sick in bed and told him he was under house arrest until he is well enough to be taken into custody.”

When arrested, Eritrea’s persecuted Christians often disappear without a trace, leaving their loved ones with no information on their whereabouts or safety. Prison conditions are some of the harshest in the world, with inmates kept in shipping containers and believers often tortured in an attempt to get them to renounce their faith.

Eritrea’s President Isaias Afewerki is a member of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Asmara — belonging to the largest among the only three Christian denominations allowed to function in the country: the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches.

Afewerki, 75, who’s the leader of the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice Party, also has a reputation of being an alcoholic and a ruthless autocrat. Afewerki’s policy of restrictions is more about his fear that religion will mobilize people as a political force than religion itself.

In March, authorities raided two separate prayer meetings in Asmara and the city of Assab and imprisoned 13 of the 35 Christians, including several women, who were taken into custody, ICC [reported](#) at the time.

In February, 70 Christians from evangelical and Orthodox backgrounds, including women, were [released from three prisons](#) in Eritrea, some after being held without charge for more than a decade.

Since last September, at least 160 Christians had been released from prisons in Eritrea at the time, but the news arrests “dampened hopes that the government was easing its harsh repressive policy against Christians,” Barnabas Fund said at the time.

“In Eritrea, citizens have a duty to report anything untoward happening in their community,” Release International added. “This can turn ordinary neighbors into spies. In some cases, their own family members have reported Christians.”

Photo: Reuters/Pascal Rossignol

**About 400 individuals still detained for their faith,
according to USCIRF**

HRWF (27.08.2021) – Despite several collective releases in 2020 and 2021, about 400 Eritreans are still behind bars, according to the latest report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

According to July 2018 estimates by the US government, the total population of Eritrea is six million. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation, but it is estimated that 49% of the population are Christian and 49% are Sunni Muslim.

The country is ruled by a totalitarian one-party dictatorship of Maoist inspiration. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of continuous armed struggle by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Since then, national presidential or legislative elections have never taken place.

A number of beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have been perceived negatively by the current government.

Jehovah's Witnesses are politically neutral and conscientiously cannot participate in military service. They refuse to kill or receive training on how to kill. Because they will not participate in compulsory military service, Eritrean authorities consider them to be opposed to the regime.

Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses develop missionary activities in close social networks and hold religious meetings in private homes, which is illegal. Furthermore, Jehovah's Witnesses decline to participate in political elections.

By a presidential decree dated 25 October 1994, President Afewerki revoked citizenship for Jehovah's Witnesses because they did not participate in the 1993 independence referendum and they are conscientious objectors to military service. Prior to enforcing conscription, Eritrean authorities had provided genuine alternatives with civilian service. Numerous Jehovah's Witnesses took part in these alternative options under different government administrations. The authorities systematically issued 'Certificates of Completed National Service' and often praised participants for their work. However, since this presidential decree, security forces have imprisoned, tortured, and harassed Jehovah's Witnesses in an effort to force them to renounce their faith.

HRWF Database of Faith Prisoners

As of August 2021, HRWF Database of prisoners contained documented cases of [29 prisoners](#)

Jehovah's Witnesses: 20

Protestants: 5

Oriental Orthodox: 4

Many more Protestants are in prison but details about their names, charges, sentences and numbers are not available due to the secrecy of the regime.

On 4 December, 26 male and 2 female Jehovah's Witnesses were set free after being imprisoned for their faith. They had spent between 5 and [26 years](#) in prison. Due to their release, the [number of Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars](#) dropped from 52 to 20 and this was the latest situation as of 25 August 2021. In almost all cases, they have been arrested and imprisoned without any formal criminal charges, trial or sentencing. Like many other prisoners, they have no legal recourse and so cannot challenge their indefinite detention.

USCIRF Report

[Press Release](#) (19.08.2021) - On 19 August, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) released the following new country update highlighting religious freedom conditions in Eritrea:

[Eritrea Country Update](#) – This new report provides an update on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea, noting progress made and ongoing challenges in the country. The Eritrean government has eased some restrictions on the Baha’i and Jewish communities and has released some religious prisoners of conscience but has maintained government control of religion and mandatory military service. Moreover, the report discusses diplomatic relations between the United States and Eritrea and provides concrete recommendations for the U.S. government to help advance religious freedom in the country. This includes urging the release of all remaining religious prisoners, such as [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#), as well as removing legal barriers to allow all Eritreans increased religious freedom.

In its [2021 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that the U.S State Department designate [Eritrea](#) as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. The Eritrea chapter is also available in [Tigrinya](#).

Mandatory Military Service

The [law](#) requires all Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 to serve in the military for 18 months. Exemptions are given only to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. Eritrea’s government imprisons those who refuse to serve, including on the basis of

their religious beliefs. It [requires](#) prisoners of conscience to renounce their religious affiliation in order to be released from prison.

Positive Developments

In 2020, Eritrean authorities set free over 240 religious prisoners and eased restrictions on the Baha’i community, the only remaining Jewish family, and the Greek Orthodox Church as well as other faith backgrounds. Some of these positive developments continued in 2021. For example, in February 2021, the Eritrean government released on bail more than 70 prisoners of conscience from different prisons. The government followed with the release of 21 prisoners, mostly women, in March and 36 people in April 2021. These steps were positive, but approximately 400 individuals are believed to still be detained due to their faith. International human rights organizations have called on Eritrea to continue to release all prisoners of conscience or grant them due process in a court of law.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the U.S. government should welcome Eritrea’s decisions to ease some restrictions on the Baha’i community and the Jewish family and to release religious prisoners, it should also continue to encourage Eritrean authorities to advance other religious freedom issues

in the country. This includes urging the release of all remaining religious prisoners as well as removing the legal barriers to allow all Eritreans full religious freedom. Finally, the U.S. government should continue to engage Eritrean officials through official congressional visits to encourage reforms that promote religious freedom.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have been stripped of their citizenship, denied access to job opportunities and government benefits, and imprisoned under poor conditions because of their refusal to serve in the military based on their religious beliefs. As of 2021, [52](#)

Jehovah's Witnesses were being held at the Mai Serwa prison, just outside of the capital, Asmara.

Some of these religious prisoners have spent more than 25 years in jail without standing trial. Due to harsh prison conditions and inhumane treatment of prisoners, two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have died in prison in 2018.

Situation of human rights: Report of Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, the UN Special Rapporteur

***Religious freedom is addressed in six paragraphs
See HRWF Database of information about religious freedom in Eritrea in [2021](#) and [2020](#)***

U.N. General Assembly (12.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3v1wVGW> - The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 44/1, in which the Council extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea for one year and requested the mandate holder to present a report on the implementation of the mandate to the Council at its forty-seventh session.

The report covers the period from 5 May 2020 to 28 April 2021. Owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the related restrictions of movement, and to the lack of cooperation of the Government of Eritrea, the Special Rapporteur was unable to conduct a field visit to Eritrea during the period under review.

The report is based on information gathered by the Special Rapporteur by monitoring the human rights situation remotely and on information provided by other sources, including civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, and the donor community. In compliance with the Code of Conduct for Special Procedure Mandate Holders of the Human Rights Council, a draft report was shared with the Government of Eritrea in order to provide it with an opportunity to comment on the observations and findings of the Special Rapporteur.

The Special Rapporteur wishes to thank the previous mandate holder, Daniela Kravetz, for her invaluable support and the exchanges held with her on the implementation of the mandate.

Situation of religious freedom

44. The Special Rapporteur remains concerned by the lack of tangible progress in relation to the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, assembly and association, conscience and religion, and movement within the country. According to reports received, widespread arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention create a climate of fear that deters any expression of dissent in the country.

45. The Government recognizes only four religions: the Evangelical, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches and Sunni Islam. For as long as followers of unrecognized religions are prohibited from practising their religion and systematically arrested and detained, the religious freedoms of Eritreans of all faiths are curtailed. It is estimated that there are thousands of prisoners being detained for their religious beliefs, including conscientious objectors.

46. The Special Rapporteur welcomes some positive developments in recent months. In August 2020, a large group of Muslim men was released. In January and February 2021, a total of 70 Evangelical and Orthodox Christians were released from three Eritrean prisons: on 27 January 2021, six female prisoners were released, having been detained for worshipping in public in September 2020 in Dekemhare, south-east of Asmara; and on 1 February 2021, 21 female and 43 male prisoners were released from Mai Serwa and Adi Abeito prisons, near Asmara. The prisoners had been held for between 2 and 12 years. Nevertheless, the Special Rapporteur notes at the same time that the Eritrean authorities have yet to ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

47. In this regard, the Special Rapporteur has received information about 13 Eritrean Christians who remain imprisoned after the authorities raided two separate prayer meetings in March 2021 and took 35 people into custody, including women.¹¹ The Special Rapporteur has been informed of the release from Mai Serwa prison on 11 April 2021 of 22 of the 23 Christians who were arrested at a prayer meeting in Asmara, most of whom were women. However, all 12 of the Christians arrested in Assab, to the south-east of Asmara, remain in Assab prison, where conditions are reported to be harsh. The Special Rapporteur notes with concern that this latest wave of arrests is proof that there has been no change in the repressive government policy towards religious freedom in the country.

48. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the release on 4 December 2020 of 28 Jehovah's Witnesses (26 men and 2 women), after being imprisoned for their faith for periods ranging from 5 to 26 years. They include three conscientious objectors – Paulos Eyasu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam – whose cases were highlighted by the former Special Rapporteur.¹² One male Jehovah's Witness was released on 29 January 2021 after having been imprisoned for more than 12 years, and an additional three were released on 1 February 2021 (one man and two women), who had been imprisoned for between four and nine years. The Special Rapporteur notes at the same time that the Eritrean authorities have yet to release 20 Jehovah's Witnesses who remain in prison (14 men and 6 women), one of whom is more than 75 years old. He received information about their names, gender, age and dates of imprisonment, and reports that they were stripped of their citizenship because of their religious affiliation.¹³

49. The Special Rapporteur urges the Eritrean authorities to ensure full respect for their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Special Rapporteur calls on Eritrea to respect the concluding observations of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, namely the Commission's recommendations to ensure that Jehovah's Witnesses retain their citizenship rights, take urgent measures to address the denial of basic rights of all detained persons, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and investigate the reported deaths in detention of Jehovah's Witnesses.¹⁴

11. See International Christian Concern, "35 Christians arrested during prayer meetings in Eritrea", 16 April 2021.

12. See, for example, A/HRC/44/23.

13. See Jehovah's Witnesses, "Special report: the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea", 30 August 2019.

14. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, "Concluding observations and recommendations on the initial and combined periodic report of the State of Eritrea on the implementation of the African Charter on

21 women imprisoned from underground church raids freed

By Libby Giesbrecht

CHVN95.1FM (07.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qxJDeu> - **More than 20 female Christian prisoners have been freed in Eritrea but the forces of the country have been accused of attacking churches in a nearby Ethiopian region.**

The 21 women, all reportedly young mothers, had been captured last August and held in an island prison on the Red Sea after being arrested in 2017.

Their arrests were the result of a series of raids on underground churches by authorities in Eritrea, Christian Today [reports](#).

Many of the women's husbands had been conscripted, thus leaving the children without care.

Several instances of spontaneous releases of Christian prisoners have taken place over the past six months. In February, 70 believers were freed in addition to an earlier 27 who were released in Sept. 2020.

171 Christians have been freed since Aug. 2020.

More than 100 Christians remain in Eritrean prisons while about 150 Christian prisoners are believed to be detained by the army, according to Release International.

But attacks on Tigay are said to be overshadowing the releases as Eritrean forces bear down on the Ethiopian region.

In the city of Axum, around 800 people were killed in one attack, including many priests and church members.

The attack was believed to be against the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Axum, which Ethiopians believe is the home of the Ark of the Covenant from the Old Testament.

Eritrea has denied involvement in the Tigray fighting. Local witnesses to the attacks, however, have reported some troops identifying themselves as Eritrean.

Release International CEO Paul Robinson says these attacks make it far too soon to take the prisoner releases in Eritrea as any sign of a change in heart towards Christianity.

"The attacks on churches in Tigray are appalling, and Eritrea continues to hold many senior pastors who have been detained indefinitely—some for up to 17 years ... Until all are set free and the killing of Christians stops, it's too soon to talk of lasting change," Robinson says.

Eritrea is ranked sixth on the Open Doors World Watch List for the religious persecution of Christians. Persecution in the African country takes the form of denominational protectionism and is at extreme levels, according to the faith-based persecution watchdog.

Photo : Open Doors USA

Christian prisoners Twen Theodros and Mussie Eyob are free!

Human Rights without Frontiers still has over 160 Protestants, 20 Jehovah's Witnesses and 4 Coptic Orthodox in its Database of FoRB prisoners. See <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>

HRWF (26.02.2021) - Twen Theodros and Mussie Eyob are among the latest number of believers to be released.

Since the end of August last year, 150 Christians have now been freed – some after more than a decade behind bars.

Twen Theodros

Twen was first arrested in the Eritrean capital Asmara in 2004, and sent to various prisons. Her story is one of remarkable courage. She shared a shipping container with the gospel singer Helen Berhane, and suffered beatings and torture.

Despite her own suffering, she also volunteered to take beatings intended for Helen. Twen, who was a new believer when she was first imprisoned, could have been released had she chosen to renounce her faith. But she refused.

She is described as a precious, lovely Christian who is determined to stay faithful to Jesus.

She has chosen to remain in Eritrea.

Mussie Eyob

Mussie was arrested in Saudi Arabia in 2011 after preaching outside a mosque in Jeddah.

Because preaching to Muslims is a capital offence the authorities doubted his sanity. But doctors confirmed Mussie was in his right mind.

Eventually he was deported to Eritrea and imprisoned. He told his family he was ready to die for his faith in Christ. Release contacts say Mussie is also doing well.

Photo : Twen Theodros – releaseinternational.org

70 Christians released from three prisons

CSW (05.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/36QZVIj> - **CSW has been informed that 70 Christians from evangelical and orthodox backgrounds were recently released from three prisons in Eritrea.**

On 1 February, 21 female and 43 male prisoners were released from Mai Serwa and Adi Abeito prisons, close to the capital city, Asmara. The prisoners had been held without charge or trial for periods of between two and 12 years.

On 27 January, six female prisoners who were detained in September 2020 in Dekemhare, south-east of Asmara, were also released. The women were arrested after worshipping in public as they were walking down a street, an event which was caught on camera and circulated via social media.

While the releases have been warmly welcomed, there is also speculation that they mark the latest effort by the Eritrean regime to distract international attention from the country's active role in the ongoing war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, where Eritrean troops have been accused of violence which may amount to crimes against humanity, war crimes and possibly genocide.

On 4 December 2020, the government released 24 Jehovah's Witnesses, including the high-profile conscientious objectors Paulos Eyasu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam, who had been held for 26 years, and whose cases were highlighted by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea in her final statement to the UN Third Committee in New York in October 2020. (...)

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: "CSW welcomes the release of these Christians in Eritrea, who were detained without charge or trial, and should never have been incarcerated. However, this good news must not obscure the Eritrean regime's continued complicity in egregious violations of human rights, both within its own borders and now in Tigray. We call on the international community to press Eritrea for the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained arbitrarily on account of their religion or belief. We also call for urgent action to arrest the unfolding crisis in Tigray, including by imposing arms embargoes on the warring parties, and sanctions on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who bear ultimate responsibility for human rights violations that are allegedly being committed with impunity by their respective forces."

Photo: Source: US Central Intelligence Agency. The information on this map, including the location of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, should not be considered authoritative and does not imply endorsement by Human Rights Watch.