

Table of Contents

- ***Eritrea likened to 'giant prison' as latest mass imprisonment of Christians takes place***
 - ***Three Catholic clergymen released from arbitrary detention***
-

Eritrea likened to 'giant prison' as latest mass imprisonment of Christians takes place

Premier Christian News (30.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3RBUvHh> - The Christian community in Eritrea has been rocked by another wave of mass arrests.

According to UK Christian persecution watchdog Release International, 44 Christians were recently detained as they were gathering in their homes for a church small group.

The group is being held at Mai Serwa prison on the outskirts of the capital, Asmara.

Christian religious freedom campaigners in the small African country have said the arrests of 39 women and five men now brings the total number of Christians imprisoned for their faith to at least 415.

Release International partner Dr Berhane Asmelash said: "Eritrea is like a giant prison. The country is filled with jails. It is like North Korea."

Christian persecution has been commonplace in Eritrea for many years. In May 2002, the country's dictatorship closed down most churches, and outlawed every religion except Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church.

Andrew Boyd from Release International told *Premier* Christians who continue to worship in banned congregations are treated as "enemies of the state".

"They're not charged," he said. "They're detained indefinitely. There are no court appearances, there are no legal records kept in that country. You're just rounded up and held in there. And it's been happening for a long time now."

Among those detained and tortured for her faith is Twen Theodros, who was released due to a Covid-19 outbreak in the prison she was in.

She was imprisoned for 16 years and suffered intense persecution for her faith after police spotted her leaving a New Year's Eve prayer vigil 2004.

She was locked into a shipping container for almost three years at Mai Serwa prison.

During her time in a shipping container Twen recalls: "Many believers, mainly teenagers, came in and out of the prison, renouncing their faith in order to get released. These included pastors. So the prison officers put pressure on me, saying: 'We will make you [renounce your faith] by force. If you do not comply, you will die.'

But Twen never gave in. She also suffered severe beatings and was forced to run across ground covered in thorns.

Reflecting on her imprisonment, she said: "The grace of God made everything possible. I feel so blessed to participate in Christ's suffering. Even now, I do not have any hatred against those who put me in prison and tried to make my life miserable. I love them."

Eritrea is named as a country of concern in Release International's annual Persecution Trends report. It's also number four on Open Door's World Watch List, which ranks the worst places to live as a Christian.

Release International CEO Paul Robinson said: "We call on Christians to stand with our brothers and sisters in Eritrea as they continue to go through this dark night of the soul. They need our prayers."

"Freedom of faith is the cornerstone of all human freedoms. Release International continues to call on Eritrea to set free every Christian prisoner and permit full freedom of faith once again in their country."

Three Catholic clergymen released from arbitrary detention

CSW and Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) welcome the releases of three Catholic clergymen who were **detained arbitrarily** by the Eritrean authorities in separate incidents in October 2022, despite belonging to a denomination that is ostensibly permitted to operate in the country.

CSW (05.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3GG8Qxt> - Abune Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim, the first Bishop of the Catholic Eparchy of Segheneity and Father Mihretab Stefanos, the parish priest of St Michael's Church in Segheneity, were released on 28 December, with several [videos](#) emerging of the Bishop [returning](#) to the eparchy. Abba Abraham Habtom Gebremariam, the deputy parish priest in charge of students at the Capuchin Society, was released a month earlier on 23 November 2022.

Abune Hagos was arrested at Asmara International Airport on 15 October 2022 as he returned from a visit to Europe, while Father Stefanos and Abba Abraham Habtom Gebremariam were detained on 11 and 12 October 2022 respectively. While the bishop and Father Stefanos were held in an unknown location, Abba Abraham Habtom Gebremariam was detained in Adi Abeito prison, north of the Eritrean capital Asmara.

In May 2002 Eritrea closed all churches not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian traditions, and began a campaign of arrests of adherents of non-sanctioned churches that continues to this day.

Among those arrested are seven church leaders who have been detained arbitrarily for at least 18 years, reportedly in Wengel Mermera Investigation Centre in Asmara. Rev Haile

Naizge, chair of the Full Gospel Church, and Dr Kuflu Gebremeskel, chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance and visiting lecturer at the former University of Asmara, have been detained since 23 May 2004. Rev Million Gebreselassie, pastor of the Rhema Evangelical Church in the city of Massawa and an anaesthetist at Massawa Hospital, has been held since 3 June 2004. Rev Kidane Woldu, a senior pastor of the Muluwengel (Full Gospel) Church, has been held since 18 March 2005.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has also experienced severe repression despite being sanctioned by the government. Orthodox priests Dr Futsum Gebrenegus, at the time Eritrea's only psychiatrist, Dr Tekleab Menghisteb, a highly respected physician, and Rev Gebremedhin Gebregiorgis, have been detained since 19 November 2004. All three are from the Medhane Alem Church. Moreover, Abune Antonios, the legitimate patriarch, died on [9 February 2022](#), following 16 years under house arrest. Two pro-government bishops installed uncanonically in his place have died in office, the first in [December 2015](#) following a debilitating illness, and the second on [2 December 2022](#), around 17 months after his installation. Unconfirmed reports indicate another successor may have been quietly appointed.

Elizabeth Chyrum, Director of HRCE said: ***'The arrest and subsequent release of the Catholic clergy provide a clear illustration, if one is needed, that permitted religious communities also experience repression. While CSW and HRCE welcome these releases, we also recall that thousands of prisoners of conscience remain detained without charge or trial, some of whom have been held in shipping containers and makeshift, overcrowded and unsanitary facilities for over two decades. We therefore urge the Eritrean government to go much further, by releasing everyone who has been subjected to lengthy and unjust arbitrary detention.'***

Eritrea is heavily involved in the civil unrest in Ethiopia, and the arrests and subsequent releases of the Catholic clergy occurred against the backdrop of punitive door to door roundups and forcible conscription of Eritrean citizens of all ages, [which continue](#) despite the African Union-brokered cessation of hostilities. Eritrea is not party to the peace agreement and its troops have also continued to violate the rights of Tigrayan civilians. Although some recent reports have indicated that Eritrean troops have withdrawn from towns including [Axum and Shire](#), others detail [ongoing violations](#), including the murders of two young men by Eritrean troops in Axum [on 3 January](#), while photographs continue to emerge allegedly showing [Eritrean troops](#) on the [streets](#) of [Shire](#).

Khataza Gondwe, Joint Head of Advocacy and Team Leader for Africa and the Middle East at CSW, said: ***'The continuing presence of troops implicated in the commission of the gravest of international crimes constitutes a clear threat both to the peace process and to the lives of Tigrayan civilians. We call on the African Union and the rest of the international community to ensure the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Ethiopia, including by formulating and initiating additional targeted sanctions and a comprehensive arms embargo, if deemed necessary. We also call for the demobilisation of conscripts, and urge the Eritrean government to end its [military adventurism](#) and focus instead on respecting and fulfilling the rights and freedoms of Eritrean citizens, ensuring that they are finally able to enjoy the dividends of their hard-won independence.'***

Note to Editors:

1. Patriarch Antonios was officially placed under house arrest in May 2007, when he was transported from his official residence to an unknown location. Prior to this

he had been under de facto house arrest in his official residence since January 2006.