

## **Table of Contents**

- ***103 young Christians arrested for trying to record Christian music on YouTube***
  - ***Church leader denied burial site in his hometown***
  - ***Eritrea likened to 'giant prison' as latest mass imprisonment of Christians takes place***
  - ***Three Catholic clergymen released from arbitrary detention***
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## **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

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## **Church leader denied burial site in his hometown**

***A popular Eritrean Christian leader who died on 9 April is being denied a burial place because of his Evangelical beliefs***



*Pastor Tesfay Seyoum (CSW)*

[CSW](#) (21.04.2023) - Pastor Tesfay Seyoum, the founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church, had been detained in Mai Serwa prison near the capital, Asmara, for ten years, but had recently suffered a brain haemorrhage. He was sent to hospital for treatment, but died two months later, leaving behind his wife and daughter.

Following his death Pastor Seyoum's body was taken to his home in the Godaif neighbourhood of Asmara in preparation for burial. However, permission for a burial site was denied.

According to a CSW source, 'the government and the [local] people decided to deny the request for burial based on their belief that the pastor's Pentecostal orientation went against their religious beliefs.' His body remains unburied in what Christian NGO Release Eritrea [states](#) is a 'contradiction to the cultural norms that require bodies to be buried as close to the time of death as possible.'

The pastor's body was subsequently returned to the hospital as efforts continue to find a burial site.

In May 2002 Eritrea closed all churches not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian traditions, including the church founded by Pastor Seyoum. The authorities also launched an ongoing campaign of arbitrary and indefinite arrests that has seen thousands of adherents of unrecognised denominations detained in inhumane, life-threatening conditions, where they may experience torture or even death. Among those arrested are seven Evangelical church leaders who have been detained arbitrarily for at least 18 years, reportedly in Wengel Mermera Investigation Centre in Asmara.

The campaign of arrests continues unabated in 2023. Among the most recent developments, Release Eritrea reports that [103](#) young Christians, including some from Mai-Nefhi Technical College, were arrested in mid-April as they attempted to record Christian music on YouTube, and were transported to Mai Serwa. Earlier, on 19 March, 30 Christians who had gathered in a house in Keren were also detained.

The Eritrean government's campaign of repression also affects permitted denominations. At least 44 Orthodox monks were detained in April for supporting Abune Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church who was illegally deposed, and who died in detention [in February 2022](#) following 16 years under house arrest.

In a particularly disturbing event, on 15 February, Yeneta Israel, an Orthodox monk and a strong supporter of the late patriarch, was himself found dead from multiple stab wounds in his monastery in Mendefera. Despite these circumstances, government agents reportedly declared his death a suicide, and he was hurriedly buried on 16 February without receiving the appropriate religious rites. According to [Human Rights Concern-Eritrea](#), reliable sources allege he was murdered by government security agents.

CSW's Head of Advocacy and Africa Team Leader Dr Khataza Gondwe said: *'We extend our deepest condolences to the family and church of Pastor Seyoum, who have lost their father, husband and leader following his lengthy and arbitrary detention, and whose grief is now compounded by the cruel decision to deny him a final resting place. The fact that the pastor's rights were violated on account of his religious beliefs while he was alive and are still being violated after his death is not only deeply reprehensible, it also constitutes a flagrant affront to the principles of human dignity and non-discrimination that are foundational to international human rights legislation, including the international covenants to which Eritrea has acceded. We therefore urge the Eritrean government to fulfil its international obligations by ensuring a burial site for Pastor Seyoum as a matter of urgency. We also call on Eritrea to release all prisoners of conscience, including those detained on account of their religion or belief, immediately and without precondition, and to end its campaign of arrests and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.'*

#### **Notes to Editors:**

1. 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.
2. Eritrea acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in April 2001, and to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in January 2002.

#### **Last minute**

Pastor Tesfay Seyoum, the founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church who died on 9 April and was [denied](#) a burial place in his home area due to his religious beliefs, was finally buried on 22 April.

Pastor Seyoum was laid to rest at 5pm in St. Teklehaymanot Cemetery in the HazHaz suburb in the north of Asmara. He had been detained in Mai Serwa prison near the capital, Asmara, for ten years, but had recently suffered a brain haemorrhage. The pastor was sent to hospital for treatment, but died two months later, leaving behind his wife and daughter.

According to a CSW source, Eritreans are traditionally buried in their home areas. Consequently, following his death, Pastor Seyoum's body was taken to his house in the Godaif neighbourhood, his home area in the south of Asmara, in preparation for burial. However, permission for a site was denied, reportedly by officials and members of the local community, on account of his Evangelical beliefs.

In a departure from traditional norms which require a body to be buried as close to the time of death as possible, the pastor's remains lay unburied for 13 days, occasioning distress for his family, friends and congregation.

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## **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."

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## **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 Kufly 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 Menghisteab, 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.