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Africa : Eritrea

ERITREA

Head of state and government: Issayas Afewerki

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

UN Women's Convention: ratified

Optional Protocol to UN Women's Convention: not signed

Overview - Covering events from January - December 2005

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Several thousand prisoners of conscience, many held because of their religious beliefs and others for political reasons, were in indefinite and incommunicado detention without charge or trial, some in secret locations. Many detainees were tortured or ill-treated, and large numbers were held in metal shipping containers or underground cells.

Background

The government took no steps to establish a multi-party democratic system as required by the 1997 Constitution. The ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), was the sole party allowed and no opposition activity or criticism was tolerated.

Two thirds of the population were dependent on international emergency food aid. They included 70,000 people living in internally displaced people's camps since the war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, and refugees who had returned from Sudan. Many donors suspended development aid programmes because of the government's failures in democratization and human rights.



Eritrea

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Human rights defenders were not allowed to operate. A new law in May imposed severe restrictions on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), allowing them only to work on relief and rehabilitation projects through government structures. International NGOs had to deposit US\$2 million in Eritrean banks and local NGOs US\$1 million. No local NGOs were able to register.

The government continued to support two Ethiopian armed opposition groups fighting inside Ethiopia, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. The Sudan-based armed opposition Eritrean Democratic Alliance was supported by Ethiopia, although it was not clear that it had carried out any armed activities inside Eritrea during 2005.

Fears of a new war with Ethiopia

The UN Security Council called on Ethiopia to implement the International Boundary Commission's judgment regarding the border areas, particularly its allocation to Eritrea of Badme town, the flashpoint of war in 1998. Ethiopia refused to agree to border demarcation, instead calling for negotiation over certain issues. Eritrea demanded UN action against Ethiopia to enforce the border judgment.

In October, Eritrea banned UN helicopter flights and other travel to UN monitoring posts, further restricting the multinational UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), whose 2,800 personnel administered a buffer zone along the border. Both countries had re-armed since 2000 and deployed troops near the border in late 2005. The UN Security Council threatened sanctions against either side if it started a new war.

Religious persecution

A 2002 ban on religions other than the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Catholic and Lutheran Churches and Islam remained in force. Minority religions were ordered to register and provide details of their members and finances, which many refused to do, fearing reprisals. Those that applied received no response, and remained banned.

The government cracked down on evangelical Christian churches such as the Kale Hiwot (Word of Life) and Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) churches. More than 1,000 believers from some 35 churches were arrested by police in at least 23 incidents during 2005 in Asmara and other towns, while worshipping in their homes or at weddings. They were detained without charge or trial, tortured or ill-treated, and usually were only released if they agreed to stop attending religious gatherings. Parents of detained children were forced to sign guarantees that their children would stop worshipping.

At least 26 pastors and priests, and over 1,750 church members, including children and 175 women, and dozens of Muslims, were in detention at the end of 2005 as prisoners of conscience because of their religious beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses and members of new groups within the Eritrean Orthodox Church and Islam were also detained on account of their beliefs.

- In January, Pastor Ogbamichael Haimanot of the Kale Hiwot church was detained in Asmara. He suffered a mental breakdown in Sawa army camp on account of prolonged solitary confinement, forced labour and denial of medical treatment. He was released in October.
- In July, Semere Zaid, an agriculture lecturer at the University of Asmara who had been detained for a month in January on account of worshipping in the Church of the Living God, was rearrested. He was detained in the Karchele security prison, then moved to Sembel civil prison to serve a secretly imposed prison term of two years.

In August, Patriarch Antonios, head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who had apparently opposed government interference in church affairs, was reportedly stripped of his authority by the government and restricted in his movements. The government denied undermining him.

Prisoners of conscience and political prisoners

Few details were available about prisoners of conscience arrested for their political opinions. Three trade unionists – Tewelde Gebremedhin, Minassie Andezion and Habtom Woldemichael – were detained in Asmara in March and were still detained without charge at the end of 2005.

Thousands of prisoners of conscience detained in previous years remained in incommunicado detention throughout 2005, some of them in secret locations. No political prisoners were brought before a court.

Prisoners of conscience included 11 former government ministers detained in secret since a September 2001 crackdown on people calling for democratic reforms. They were publicly accused of treason but never charged. They included Haile Woldetensae and Petros Solomon, both former Foreign Ministers, and Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo, a former Vice-President.

Dozens of women prisoners of conscience were held. They included Aster Fissehatsion, a former PFDJ central committee member arrested in 2001, and Aster Yohannes, the wife of Petros Solomon, who had returned voluntarily from the USA in 2003 to be with her children. She was detained on arrival at Asmara airport, despite a previous government guarantee of her safety.

Other prisoners of conscience were former leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (now the government), such as Bitwoded Abraha, an army major general detained almost continuously for the past 13 years and reportedly mentally ill as a result; civil servants and professionals; and some 300 asylum-seekers forcibly returned by Malta in 2002 and by Libya in 2003.

During 2005 several prisoners of conscience were illegally sentenced to prison terms in their absence by a secret security committee. They were denied the right to present a legal defence or to appeal to a higher court.

Military conscription

Military service was compulsory for all men aged between 18 and 40, although the upper age limit for women's conscription was reduced to 27. The internationally recognized right of conscientious objection was denied.

- Six Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in 2005 for refusing military service, bringing the total number to 22. They included Paulos Iyassu, Negede Teklemariam and Isaac Moges, detained incommunicado in Sawa army camp since 1994.

Several hundred youths fled the country to avoid military service, and many conscripts escaped from military service to seek asylum abroad. In July and November, relatives of conscription evaders were detained in the southern Debub Region.

Journalists

Two prisoners of conscience were released. Saadia Ahmed, a television reporter for the government's Arabic-language service, detained in 2002, was freed in early 2005, and Aklilu Solomon, a reporter for the *Voice of America* international radio station, detained in 2003, was freed in mid-2005.

Ten other journalists arrested in 2001 when the entire private press was shut down, and two others arrested in 2002, were still detained without charge or trial at the end of 2005. They were held incommunicado and in secret without charge or trial.

- Dawit Isaac, owner and editor of *Setit* newspaper and a Swedish citizen, detained in 2001, was released for a few days' medical treatment in November, then returned to prison.

Torture and ill-treatment

People detained on account of their political opinions or religious beliefs were tortured in military custody. They were tied up in painful positions for hours or days, particularly in a method nicknamed "helicopter", and beaten. Conscript soldiers were also punished in this manner.

Religious and political prisoners were often held in harsh conditions with little or no medical treatment and inadequate food and sanitation. Some were held in underground cells or metal shipping containers.

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