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Eritrea imprisons large group of elderly women

International Christian Concern (07.12.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.12.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that on December 5 at 4 PM local time, officials of Eritrea arrested 30 Christian women in Asmara, the capital city of the country.

The mostly elderly women were praying together at a house when security forces rounded them up and hauled them off to police station one in Asmara. Their children and grandchildren told our sources that they are concerned about the safety of their loved ones.

Most of the detainees are members of Faith Mission Church, an Evangelical Church with a Methodist background. The church has been carrying out evangelistic and development activities in Eritrea for over five decades and was forced to go underground in 2002 after Eritrean officials required all religious groups to register. The officials then allowed only three Christian denominations to register. The three registered churches are: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Evangelical Church of Eritrea.

Since 2002, officials of Eritrea have been cracking down on members of both registered and unregistered churches. They have imprisoned more than 3000 Christians keeping them in underground dungeons, metal shipping containers, and military barracks. Several Christians have died inside prisons due to torture and lack of medical attention.

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa and South Asia, Jonathan Racho said "We condemn the arrest of the 30 women by Eritrean officials. We urge officials of Eritrea to release the detainees and all the imprisoned Christians in the country. We call upon Eritrea to stop violating the freedom of religion of its people."

Third Christian this year dies in Eritrean military prison

Imprisoned for his faith, 43-year-old dies in solitary confinement

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct News (27.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (28.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Another Christian imprisoned for his faith in Eritrea has died from authorities denying him medical treatment, according to a Christian support organization.

Sources told Netherlands-based Open Doors that Yemane Kahasay Andom, 43, died Thursday (July 23) at Mitire Military Confinement Center. A member of the Kale-Hiwot church in Mendefera, Andom was said to be secretly buried in the camp.

Weakened by continuous torture, Andom was suffering from a severe case of malaria, Open Doors reported in a statement today.

"He was allegedly further weakened by continuous physical torture and solitary confinement in an underground cell the two weeks prior to his death for his refusal to sign a recantation form," the organization said. "It is not clear what the contents of the recantation form were, but most Christians interpret the signing of such a form as the denouncement of their faith in Christ."

Andom is the third known Christian to die this year at the Mitire camp, located in northeastern Eritrea. Mogos Hagos Kiflom, 37, was said to have died from torture at the same center in early January. On Jan. 16, Mehari Gebreneguse Asgedom, 42, died in solitary confinement at the Mitire camp from torture and complications from diabetes, according to Open Doors.

It was not immediately known whether Andom was married or how many family members survive him. He had spent the past 18 months at the Mitire camp.

Last October Open Doors learned of the death of another Christian, Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, 36, who died while imprisoned for his faith at the Wi'a Military Confinement Center. He was reported to have died after prison commanders refused to give him medical attention for malaria.

In June 2008, 37-year-old Azib Simon died from untreated malaria as well. Weakened by torture, sources told Compass, Simon contracted malaria only a week before she died.

With the death of Andom last week, the number of Christians who have died while imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea now total nine. Along with the two Christians who died in January and Kiflom and Azib last year, Nigisti Haile, 33, tied from torture on Sept. 5, 2007; Magos Solomon Semere, 30, died from torture and pneumonia at Adi-Nefase Confinement Center, outside Assab, in February 2007; Immanuel Andegergesh, 23, died in Adi-Quala Confinement Center in October 2006 from torture and dehydration; and also at the Adi-Quala center, Kibrom Firemichel, 30, died from torture and dehydration also in October 2006.

More than 2,800 Christians remain imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea, according to Open Doors.

The Eritrean government in May 2002 outlawed all religious groups except Islam and the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches. The government of President Isaias Afwerki has stepped up its campaign against churches it has outlawed, once again earning it a spot on the U.S. Department of State's latest list of worst violators of religious freedom.

Incarcerated Christians from throughout Eritrea have been transferred to the Mitire prison. In April Open Doors learned that 27 Christian prisoners held at police stations in the Eritrean capital of Asmara had been transferred to the Mitire military camp for further punishment.

They included a pastor identified only as Oqbamichel of the Kale-Hiwot Church, pastor Habtom Twelde of the Full Gospel Church, a pastor identified only as Jorjo of the Full Gospel Church, two members of the Church of the Living God identified only as Tesfagaber and Hanibal, Berhane Araia of the Full Gospel Church and Michel Aymote of the Philadelphia Church.

On April 17, according to the organization, 70 Christians were released from the Mitire military facility, including 11 women imprisoned for six months for allegedly failing to complete their required 18 months of military service. The Christians said that authorities simply told them to go home and that they had no idea why they had been released. They had been originally arrested in Asmara, Dekemhare, Keren, Massawa and Mendefera and transported to Mitire for punishment.

Eritrean officials have routinely denied that religious oppression exists in the country, saying the government is only enforcing laws against unregistered churches.

The government has denied all efforts by independent Protestant churches to register, and people caught worshipping outside the four recognized religious institutions, even in private homes, suffer arrest, torture and severe pressure to deny their faith. The Eritrean Orthodox Church and its flourishing renewal movement have also been subject to government raids.

Reliable statistics are not available, but the U.S. Department of State estimates that 50 percent of Eritrea's population is Sunni Muslim, 30 percent is Orthodox Christian, and 13 percent is Roman Catholic. Protestants and Seventh-day Adventists, along with Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is make up less than 5 percent of the population.

Twenty-three arrests in Eritrea include children and elderly

JW Office of Public Information (06.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (07.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Three children ranging from two to four years of age were among the latest group of 23 Jehovah's Witnesses arrested in Eritrea. In that number is also a child of 8, a woman over 70 and another over 80.

On June 28, 2009, some 23 members of one congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Asmara were peacefully meeting together for worship. These meetings also serve to encourage and support congregation members since many have already suffered the loss of other family members who were imprisoned, several of whom were the breadwinners for their family. Most of the latest arrests are female congregation members because their husbands and sons have long since been arrested.

The total number of Jehovah's Witnesses known to be imprisoned in Eritrea is now 69. About 20 of them are in their 60s and 70s. Since July 2008, Eritrean authorities have summarily arrested responsible members of the Witness community. Most are now in prison. Also, over the past several years, the police have often arrested people for merely attending a Witness meeting. In many cases, however, no reason for the arrest was given. This is a contrast from arrests made presumably on the basis of nonparticipation in military service. Three young men arrested on those grounds are still being held in prison nearly 15 years later, but they have never been formally charged.

Eritrean Christians tell of torture and imprisonment

Christian Today (01.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (02.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Christians in Eritrea who were tortured and jailed for their faith have given searing accounts of the brutality they faced to Release International, a ministry serving the persecuted church worldwide.

"The government has imprisoned Christians, they are torturing Christians, they are killing Christians," says Hanibal, a Christian activist who is documenting the persecution in Eritrea. "Christians are treated like animals."

Another prisoner, Hzkias, was chained and kept in solitary confinement in a tiny pitch-black cell for five months. He said that when he was finally let out, he "looked like another creature. My hair and nails were long. My body colour was yellow."

Other prisoners have described being tortured to try to make them renounce their faith. They tell their stories in the latest edition of Release magazine, by Release International. Their accounts were compiled during a recent fact-finding visit to refugee camps.

Release has launched a major campaign to highlight the plight of Christians who are persecuted by the military regime in Eritrea. The campaign includes an online petition calling on Eritrea to honour the right to freedom of religion, guaranteed under its constitution.

Some 160,000 Eritreans have escaped to neighbouring Sudan, and more than 20,000 have fled across the border into Ethiopia. Thousands more have tried to cross the Red Sea into Yemen.

"Up to 500 Eritreans a week are risking the dangers of minefields, crocodile-inhabited rivers and border guards who've been ordered to shoot to kill," says Release CEO Andy Dipper.

"Many are being hounded out, jailed and tortured for no other reason than their Christian faith. Yet those we speak to love their country and want nothing more than to live in freedom as good citizens. Our message to Eritrea is stop the brutality.

"Please add your name to our petition."

Daniel, a refugee, said: "As Christians, we must stand with our brothers and sisters in Eritrea. We must show our love, not only in prayer, but by standing with them. We must tell the world. Our problem is that we are quiet. That's why the world doesn't know what is happening in Eritrea."

Release is helping Eritrean refugees start their own small businesses, and is supporting churches in refugee camps by giving them Bibles and Christian resources.

Indefinite forced conscription

HRW (April 2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Enforced indefinite national service is an increasingly important element of Eritrea's human rights crisis. Conscripts undergo military training, in itself not illegal. However, they are subjected to cruel military punishments and torture, already described above. Many may be deployed in what constitutes illegal forced labor. Those who try and evade national service are treated cruelly. Evaders are detained in terrible conditions, and heavy penalties are imposed on the families of those who evade service or flee the country.

Eritrea's success in its 30-year armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia was due in some measure to extraordinary discipline on the part of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the effective mobilization of the whole adult population in the service of the liberation war effort.¹⁵⁰ Since the border war with Ethiopia ended in 2000, however, increasing numbers of Eritreans—especially youth—voice frustration with the continuing military mobilization and the fact that the democratic transition has been shelved, along with the population's human rights.

An officer who fled the country told Human Rights Watch: "In the first war the Eritrean people were coming by themselves [volunteering] to the army and the hope then was to return quickly to civilian life. Then the Ethiopian offensive into Eritrea made all the Eritrean people rise up. But now the reality has changed... Everyone is in national service."¹⁵¹ One young man who had recently fled Eritrea told Human Rights Watch, "It's okay to do national service, it's fair to serve one's country but not always. It's not fair when it's indefinite."¹⁵² After peace in 1991 and independence in 1993, the new government formalized its commitment to national service in a 1995 proclamation.¹⁵³ According to that proclamation, the objectives of national service are:

- The establishment of a strong defence force based on the people to ensure a free and sovereign Eritrea;
- To preserve and entrust future generations [with] the courage, resoluteness [and] heroic episodes shown by our people in the past thirty years;
- Create a new generation characterized by love of work, discipline, ready to participate and serve in the reconstruction of the nation;
- To develop and enforce the economy of the nation by investing in development work our people as a potential wealth;
- To develop professional capacity and physical fitness by giving regular military training and continuous practice to participants in Training Centers;
- To foster national unity among our people by eliminating sub-national feelings.¹⁵⁴

The law states that all Eritrean citizens, men and women between the ages of 18 and 50, have the obligation to perform national service. In normal circumstances, national service is supposed to last 18 months (article 8). This consists of six months military training and 12 months deployment either on military duties or some other national development project. However, article 13 (2) states that even after completing the compulsory 18 months, national service can be extended until 50 years of age "under mobilization or emergency situation directives given by the government."¹⁵⁵

During the first four rounds of the national service, those who were called up were demobilized after 18 months, but after war broke out with Ethiopia in 1998, everything changed. Former fighters were called up again, reservists who had been demobilized were conscripted, and all national service recruits were retained under emergency directives.

Although the war with Ethiopia ended in 2000, in May 2002 the government introduced the Warsai Yekalo Development Campaign (WYDC), a proclamation that indefinitely extended national service. The government had promised to demobilize thousands of conscripts after the war, and did demobilize some, but by 2007 it reportedly suspended the demobilization program.¹⁵⁶ The WYDC was a national effort in which the generation that had fought for independence would join with new recruits to build the nation. In effect, it meant the forced conscription of every adult male up to the age of 50, although some refugees claim 55 is now the upper limit, with other sources claiming up to 57 for men and 47 for women.¹⁵⁷ Not all national service is military service, since many conscripts are not deployed in the army but on civilian development projects, or are assigned to commercial enterprises with their salary paid to the Ministry of Defense.¹⁵⁸ However, the Ministry of Defense is in control of the national service program and if

someone working on a construction project were to abscond they are still be regarded as a deserter under military law.¹⁵⁹

Refugees interviewed by Human Rights Watch emphasized that there was no difference between military and civilian national service—conscripts are equally at the mercy of the state.¹⁶⁰ One Eritrean academic notes that, “What people do not realise is that in Eritrea, there is no military service. There is only Hagerawi Agelglot (National Service) which is much more ambitious and broader than common Military Service.”¹⁶¹ Military duties are only one of a number of different assignments that conscripts can be tasked with, although it is the most common. At the time of writing, most of the able-bodied adult population is on active, indefinite, compulsory national service or on reserve duty. The only exceptions are on health grounds, or, for women, pregnancy.¹⁶² In discussions with visiting members of the European Parliament, Eritrean government officials, “admitted that military service, although formally to last 18 months, often extends over decades, reducing both the active workforce and the individual freedom and choices of the citizens.”¹⁶³

Eritrea has also used its conscription policy to harass and detain UN and NGO staff, purportedly on the grounds that they have not fulfilled their national service obligations.¹⁶⁴ In 2005, seven Eritrean UNMEE staff were under arrest¹⁶⁵ and the number rose to 27 in early 2006,¹⁶⁶ some of whom were later released.¹⁶⁷

For a country to enforce conscription laws may not be a violation of human rights. However, the way this is done in Eritrea—the violent methods used, the lack of any right to conscientious objection, and the lack of any mechanism to enable a challenge to the arbitrary enforcement of conscription constitutes abuse. Furthermore, although national service and conscription at times of genuine national emergency may be permitted as a limited exception to the prohibition on forced labor, the indefinite nature of national service in Eritrea, the threat of penalty (and collective punishment of families of those who desert), the use of recruits for forced labor, and the abuses associated with punishing those who do not participate violate Eritreans’ basic human rights, various provisions of the Eritrean constitution, and international human rights law.¹⁶⁸

The consequences for Eritrea are disastrous in that the more the government seeks to compel the population, the more people flee the country. Eritrea is now in the grip of a refugee crisis with thousands of people fleeing or attempting to flee every month (see below, “The Experience of Refugees.”)¹⁶⁹ And since everyone must serve, no family in Eritrea is unaffected by the consequences of the national service policy.

Collective punishment of deserters’ families

There are strict penalties for those who try and escape national service as well as for any Eritreans who leave the country without government authorization. Families are collectively punished if their relatives flee national service, usually by being jailed or forced to pay fines. An officer formerly responsible for chasing down deserters explained how if the soldier could not be found then the family was arbitrarily detained instead: If one of the men escapes, you have to go to his home and find him. If you don’t find him you have to capture his family and take them to prison. Since 1998, it’s standard to collect a family member if someone flees. The Administration gives the order to take family members if the national service member is not around. If you disappear inside Eritrea then the family is put in prison for some time and often then the child will return. If you cross the border, then [your family] pays 50,000 Nakfa [about US\$3,050]. If there’s no money then it can be a long time in prison. I know people who are in prison for six months.¹⁷⁰

All of the deserters interviewed by Human Rights Watch were fearful for the safety of their families and anxious that they would face the crippling 50,000 Nakfa fines,

detention, or some other retribution such as the denial of business permits or the forfeiting of land in lieu of a cash fine.¹⁷¹ Three former conscripts said their mothers had been imprisoned for four months, two months, and two weeks respectively because they could not afford to pay the 50,000 Nakfa fine.¹⁷² One man, now in Italy, heard that his family's farm had been taken because he had fled the army: All the families of those who fled had to pay 50,000 or have their land taken away. This happened to a lot of people I knew. About half of the town suffered this. The area is usually a vegetable-growing area—tomatoes and spinach. When people lose their land they depend on God. If they pay 50,000 they get their land back. The memehidar [local administration] of the town demands the land. Sometimes security officials also take matters into their own hands.¹⁷³

Abuse of female conscripts

Refugees told Human Rights Watch that women are conscripted less now than previously. However, those who are recruited are more at risk of rights violations, rape, and sexual harassment in particular. As one female recruit who served as a conscript for 10 years explained, "First you do your military training then they hold you forever without your rights. The military leaders can ask you for anything and if you refuse their demands then you can be punished. Almost every woman in the military experiences this kind of problem." When she was approached by a commanding officer he punished her when she refused his advances:

The officer who asked me [for sex] was married. I said, 'You are married,' and he gave me military punishment and made me work without any break. I was tied in otto for three hours in the sun... this disturbed my mind. He was the commander of 100 [a company]. His official rank is marehai. After he untied me he asked, 'Do you know this is your fault?' I said, 'This is not my fault.' That's when he made me work.

No right of conscientious objection

The National Service Proclamation of 1995 makes no provision for conscientious objection to military service. Exemptions are provided for disability (article 15), and those considered unfit for military training must serve "in any public and government organ according to their profession."¹⁷⁷ But in reality, as one Eritrean refugee said, "the only people who don't go to military service are blind or missing their trigger fingers."¹⁷⁸

Human Rights Watch takes no position on conscription; indeed in many countries it is legal and well-regulated. However, the right of conscientious objection to military service has become an established international norm—a legitimate exercise of the right of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as laid down in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.¹⁷⁹ It is possible, acceptable, and, in most other countries, normal, for individuals to undertake nonmilitary forms of national service, such as community work, construction, or service in the health and education sectors. Many national service conscripts go on to do this kind of service in Eritrea, however their national service begins with a mandatory six months military training. Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly affected by the lack of a right to conscientious objection because their faith forbids them to bear arms. Since independence adherents of this faith have been systematically persecuted for what the authorities have treated as their questionable commitment to the national struggle.¹⁸⁰

Some unlucky youths are viewed by the government as, literally, born to fight. During the war for independence, children born to EPLF fighters were given over to the movement to be raised in communal crèches while the parents fought in the army. These children, called "red flowers" or keyahti embaba in Tigrinya, are not only expected to participate in national service, but are apparently given no choice but to join the military

in their parents' footsteps. One man born during the struggle fled Eritrea because he had no future there except as a soldier: "The government says that the children of yekalo [independence fighters] must join the military; they have to follow their fathers.... I told them I don't want to be a soldier. They told me I must be because my parents died in the war."¹⁸¹

"Psychological derangement" (article 14, 5.1) is also a ground for exemption from military service, and this appears to be a popular way to try and evade service. Recruits who have recently been in Sawa describe a dramatic increase in the number of people in the camp showing signs of severe mental illness. Recruits describe a new disease that has sprung up among young women drafted into Sawa and Wi'a training camps, called "lewt," and only known in the camps. One male draftee explained: "In every cohort at least 10 girls die. The girls cannot handle the pressure and the punishment. The symptoms are a bent back, walking backwards, and some of them shake and fall down. They become like zombies, they just stare at you."¹⁸² But as one said, "I'm not sure if they are genuinely crazy or if they are just pretending to be crazy in order to be demobilized."¹⁸³

"Giffa": press-ganging conscripts

Conscription is generally managed by local councils, the smallest units of local administration, sometimes referred to as kebele, sometimes as memehidar, a general word meaning "administration." These council officials maintain detailed records on the individual families in their area and ensure that those of age are conscripted. But in larger towns, the police or military also try to capture evaders or deserters through ad hoc roundups. Round-ups of the population in towns and villages—known as giffa in Tigrinya—are common and constitute a kind of modern press-ganging. Anyone of age found without the relevant documents exempting them from national service is taken to the military camps of Sawa and Wi'a for training.¹⁸⁴

Even aside from evaders and deserters, any civilian who forgets their identification or travel documents is at particular risk of being rounded up in a giffa and arbitrarily detained. As a young student who was put in Adi Abeto prison for 22 days described: "It was a Saturday and I was having coffee with friends. The police came and asked for papers, I said I would return to Mai Nehfi to get them but instead they took me to prison."¹⁸⁵

Human Rights Watch spoke to many men who had been apprehended by police or military through giffas.¹⁸⁶ A man who was conscripted in 1998 said he had asked dozens of times to be demobilized. "I have not seen the situation change for 10 years. I asked to leave the military but they tell you, 'we are at war, you cannot leave.'"¹⁸⁷ He did not return after a scheduled vacation but was caught in a giffa and jailed in Aderser prison. One young man had absconded from training at Sawa camp but was picked up again during a giffa in Adi Keyh town during 2007: I remember the day because it was a Saturday, a market day. The soldiers surrounded the town the evening before and on Saturday people came to the market for shopping, around 11 a.m. Many people were caught. They ask you for ID card. I tried to escape but because of the crowd I couldn't get away. They beat me and put me in a military vehicle. Soldiers don't have any education, they have no respect, they simply take you away. We waited an hour or so in the truck while the soldiers were catching other people. People were crying. After an hour or two we were taken to Track B [prison] in Asmara. We spent one day there without food except for a single biscuit. Then [we were] taken to Sawa, about 320 of us, almost all men except two or three women. In Sawa, men and women were divided, we were made to kneel down when we got out of the bus, you do it otherwise you will have the stick.¹⁸⁸

Conscription from school

The preferred method of the Eritrean government is to conscript students into national service straight from school, unless they are continuing higher education. To this end, the final year of secondary school was moved to Sawa military camp in 2003. This 12th grade takes place only in Sawa, under military authority, and incorporating military training. Although many 12th grade students are 18 years old, or less, some are older because they take longer to finish high school.¹⁸⁹ Each round or intake of students incorporates 8,000 to 9,000 students.¹⁹⁰

Once they are in the camp, however, military service effectively starts then and there. A teacher whose national service involved teaching in Sawa told Human Rights Watch, "The students could not study. They were always being forced to leave the class for some kind of military service."¹⁹¹ A former student said he did not even enter 12th grade but was ordered straight into national service in July 2007 even though he was less than 18 years old.¹⁹² National service is deeply unpopular, especially because new recruits know that there is no prospect of it ending. Students have started escaping from Sawa camp during their 12th grade year without completing school.¹⁹³ Escape is no mean feat, because, as described above, Sawa is in effect a huge prison. Those who made it described braving machine gun fire, barbed wire fences, and several days of walking through the desert without food and water.¹⁹⁴

Some students, aware of their fate once they reach 12th grade have begun to deliberately fail classes so that they can remain in the lower grades.¹⁹⁵ Government awareness of this practice has been to simply pull anyone of military age—18 and above—out of school altogether, even though it is normal for some students to take extra years to finish school because they are poor or work on family farms. Several students described being taken to a military camp under false pretences.¹⁹⁶ One of them explained: I was a student in Adi Keyh in 10th grade. The government told me I was overage and I was forced to leave the school in January 2006. They took 200 of us on a bus to Wi'a, telling us that we would continue our education there. They took everyone from all schools, not just those in secondary school but also those from junior and elementary school, everyone above 19 years. But in fact it was military training. The director of the school had told us that we would be going to school in Wi'a. We were surprised, we did not believe that we would be schooling in Wi'a, in the hot desert. When we got there to the camp, everyone was sad. It was very hot, people were dying from the sun, we buried about five. After four months I was deployed near Assab, a place called Klima. It was very hot too and people were dying there. I was given a vacation and then I escaped.¹⁹⁷

Wi'a is reportedly the camp where the "not so clever" students go. If it appears that a student will not graduate high school anyway, then the government will send him to Wi'a even before he has finished. One former student who was sent to Sawa explained, "In school, if you are absent more than two weeks, you get sent to Wi'a—for whatever reason. Sawa is supposed to be for educated people. If you get kicked out of school, you are not fit for education anyway, so you go to Wi'a."¹⁹⁸

Source: Service for Life. State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, April 2009)

Footnotes

145 Human Rights Watch interview with former conscript, Sicily, Italy, October 25, 2008.

146 Human Rights Watch interview with former prisoner, Sicily, Italy, October 26, 2008.

147 Democracy Movement of Eritrea, an opposition group opposed to the ruling PFDJ regime, an offshoot of the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE).

148 Human Rights Watch interview with former prisoner, Djibouti, September 16, 2008.

149 Human Rights Watch interview with former soldier, Djibouti, September 18, 2008.

- 150 See Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47, 1 (2009), pp. 41-72, and Pool, *From Guerillas to Government*.
- 151 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean military deserter, Djibouti, September 16, 2008.
- 152 Human Rights Watch interview, Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 29, 2008.
- 153 Government of Eritrea, 'Proclamation of National Service No.82/1995,' *Eritrean Gazette*, No.11 October 23, 1995.
- 154 *Ibid.*, article 5.
- 155 *Ibid.*, article 13 (2).
- 156 See Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 - Eritrea*, 20 May 2008. Online. UNHCR Refworld, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/486cb0fdc.html> (accessed March 3, 2009).
- 157 Human Rights Watch interview with academic, London, January 11, 2009, also Human Rights Watch interviews with refugees Djibouti, Italy, and Britain, September, October, and November, 2008. One witness said, "They say 50 but it's not really," Djibouti, Italy, September 16, 2008. See also, UK Border Agency, 'Country of Origin Report,' Home Office, September 13, 2008, p. 47 for a presentation of some of the source material, at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html#ecuador (accessed January 29, 2009).
- 158 Human Rights Watch interviews with diplomat, Asmara, by phone, January 13, 2009; with Gaim Kibreab, London, December 4, 2008; and with Eritrean refugees in Djibouti and Italy, September and October 2008.
- 159 *Ibid.*
- 160 Human Rights Watch interviews with Eritrean refugees in Djibouti and Italy, September and October 2008.
- 161 Human Rights Watch interview with Gaim Kibreab, London, December 4, 2008.
- 162 Human Rights Watch interviews with Eritrean refugees in Djibouti and Italy, September and October 2008. See also Government of Eritrea, 'Proclamation of National Service No.82/1995,' *Eritrean Gazette*, No.11 October 23, 1995, articles 12 and 14. See note 140, above.
- 163 Report of the fact-finding mission of a Delegation of the Development Committee of the European Parliament to the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia) (25 October-2 November 2008), p. 5.
- 164 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, S/2007/33, January 22, 2007, p. 3.
- 165 United Nations, "Safety and Security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel," A/60/223/Corr.1, November 10, 2005, http://www.iom.ch/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/policy_and_research/un/60/A_60_223_corr_1_en.pdf (accessed March 3, 2009).
- 166 "UN peacekeeping mission voices hope Eritrea will release 11 arrested local staff," UN news, May 12, 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2006/05/mil-060512-unnews03.htm> (accessed March 3, 2009).
- 167 *Ibid.*
- 168 Eritrea ratified the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) on 22 February 2000, *The Constitution of Eritrea*, Chapter III 'Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Articles 13-29.'
- 169 It is unclear exactly how many Eritreans are fleeing every month but the numbers have steadily increased over the past few years. See "Sudan asks UN for aid for Eritrean, Somali refugees," Reuters, December 22, 2008, <http://lite.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LM314868.htm> (accessed March 3, 2009). Ethiopia claims there are more than 30,000 Eritrean refugees in the Shimelba camp but the US Committee for Refugees put the number of Eritreans in Shimelba at 16,800 in 2008. See Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "A Week in the Horn," Jan. 23, 2009, http://www.mfa.gov.et/Press_Section/Week_Horn_Africa_January_23_2009.htm and United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *World Refugee Survey 2008 - Ethiopia*, June 19, 2008. Online. UNHCR Refworld, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/485f50d171.html> (accessed March 3, 2009).
- 170 Human Rights Watch interview, Djibouti, September 17, 2008.
- 171 Human Rights Watch interviews, Djibouti and Sicily, Italy, September and October 2008.
- 172 Human Rights Watch interview with refugees, Sicily, Italy, October 24 and 26, 2008.
- 173 Human Rights Watch interview with deserter, Italy, October 30, 2008.
- 174 Human Rights Watch interview with refugees, Italy and Djibouti, September and October 2008.
- 175 Human Rights Watch interview with former conscript, Sicily, Italy, October 26, 2008.
- 176 Human Rights Watch interview with former conscript, Sicily, Italy, October 26, 2008.
- 177 Government of Eritrea, 'Proclamation of National Service No.82/1995,' *Eritrean Gazette*, No.11 October 23, 1995, article 13 (1).
- 178 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 25, 2008.

179 See for example UN Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1989/59.
180 For further details on the persecution of Christians and Jehovah's witnesses in Eritrea, see Amnesty International, Eritrea: Religious Persecution, December 7, 2005, at <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR640132005?open&of=ENGERI> (accessed February 26, 2009). See also US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report – 2008: Eritrea," <http://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108367.htm> (accessed February 26, 2009).
181 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 25, 2008.
182 Ibid.
183 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, London, November 13, 2008.
184 Human Rights Watch interviews with refugees, Djibouti and Italy, September and October 2008.
185 Human Rights Watch interview with former student, Sicily, Italy, October 29, 2008.
186 Human Rights Watch interviews with Eritrean refugees, Sicily, Italy, October 24-31, 2008.
187 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 25, 2008.
188 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 24, 2008.
189 Eritrea acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on February 16, 2005, with a declaration that the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces is 18. <http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&id=135&chapter=4&lang=en> (accessed February 26, 2009).
190 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 30, 2008, see also UK Border Agency, 'Country of Origin Report: Eritrea,' Home Office, September 13, 2008, p. 44.
191 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 24, 2008.
192 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 27, 2008.
193 Human Rights Watch interviews with Eritrean refugees, Sicily, Italy, October 24-31, 2008.
194 Human Rights Watch interviews with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 24-31, 2008.
195 Human Rights Watch interview with Eritrean refugee, Sicily, Italy, October 26, 2008.

Religious Persecution on the Horn of Africa

By Doug Bandow

The American Spectator (03.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (05.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net
– Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Somalia continues to implode, as Islamists gain increasing control over what remains of the impoverished, conflict-ridden nation. But it is not the only human tragedy in the region. Eritrea, which won its independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after decades of war, has earned a reputation as one of the world's youngest tyrannies. It also is one of the world's worst religious persecutors.

Eritrea poses an early challenge to the Obama administration. Border disputes with Ethiopia continue to threaten to flare into combat. Moreover, U.S.-Eritrean relations deteriorated steadily during the Bush years, as Asmara banned operations by the U.S. Agency for International Development and Washington imposed an arms embargo because of Eritrea's weapons shipments to next door Somalia. Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki now has approached the Obama administration lobbying for a change in U.S. policy -- expressing his hope in his congratulatory letter to Obama on his election that the U.S. will now "advance the cause of regional peace, justice and legality" -- but Washington should make Eritrea's atrocious record of religious persecution part of any dialogue.

Not even two decades old, Eritrea has become one of "the world's most systematic human rights violators," according to the State Department. Some countries establish political tyrannies while leaving people alone in their religious beliefs, but others fear freedom of conscience in any form. Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute explains that "The government had long used the threat of real or perceived enemies to generate popular support." That includes religious believers, even though Eritrea's population is evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. Notes the United States Commission on

International Religious Freedom, "government spokespersons have cited Pentecostals, along with Muslim extremists, as threats to national security."

The result is a consistent assault on religious liberty. The Commission said last year: "The government of Eritrea continues to engage in systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the situation appears to have deteriorated in the past year." The Institute on Religion and Public Policy reports that only four churches are recognized, "the government routinely fails to approve registrations," and "interferes in the everyday workings of registered religious groups at the highest levels." The State Department echoed that conclusion last year: "the government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups." State added that the government "closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members."

The list of charges is lengthy. Reports the Commission: "Current violations include arbitrary arrests and detention without charge of members of unregistered religious groups, and the torture or other ill-treatment of hundreds of persons on account of their religion, sometimes resulting in death. Other serious concerns include the prolonged ban on public religious activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized, closure by the authorities of the places of worship of these religious groups, inordinate delays in acting on registration applications by religious groups, and the disruption of private religious and even social gatherings of members of unregistered groups."

Even as President Afeworki was writing to President-elect Obama, abuses were continuing. In early November 36-year-old Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, an evangelical Christian, died in military detention from lack of medical attention. His death followed that of Azib Simon in July. She was arrested for attending a banned church, tortured in an attempt to force her to recant her faith, and refused medication for malaria for failing to recant. Compass news service reported that another Christian prisoner, Mehari Gebreneguse Asgedom, died at another detention camp on January 16, as a result of torture and untreated medical problems.

Muslims, too, are persecuted. Writes Marshall: "During the first few years of independence, several Muslims were detained, disappeared, or, in some cases, were extrajudicially executed." Only a variant of Sunni Islam is permitted today.

The list of victims goes on: Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who refuse to perform military service, Christians in the military banned from practicing their faith, and Christian-owned businesses and businesses selling Christian products. Many people of faith go to jail for their beliefs. In 2005 Amnesty International published an extensive report "on widespread detentions and other human rights violations of members of at least 36 evangelical Christian churches." The Commission reports that "Eritrean security forces have disrupted private worship, conducted mass arrests of participants at religious weddings, prayer meetings, and other gatherings, and detained those arrested without charge for indefinite period of time." Stories of arrests, imprisonment, and torture have become sadly routine.

Indeed, International Christian Concern estimates that more than 2,000 Christians "are imprisoned in metal shipping containers, military barracks and prison cells." Prison alone almost qualifies as torture. Reports the Institute on Religion and Public Policy: "Prospects for these recent detainees and those held for several years are grim," as "it is not uncommon for prisoners to die from the torture and the inadequate and unsanitary conditions to which they are exposed." Explains Marshall: "Life in detention centers is extremely harsh since it occurs in some of the hottest places on earth. The Bada detention center lies in an area 70 meters below sea level and at times experiences

temperatures of over 60 degrees C. In such conditions, people have died or gone insane."

The Asmara government even attempts to forcibly overturn religious belief. Explained the State Department: "There were reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups held in detention to sign statements to abandon their faith and join the Orthodox Christian Church as a precondition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and/or severe beating until they agreed to sign the document. Reports indicated that these individuals were also monitored after they signed to make sure that they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion."

It comes as no surprise, then, that Eritrea routinely rates near the top of religious persecution lists. In 2004 the State Department targeted Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern." Open Doors recently ranked Eritrea at number nine on its watch list, up from number eleven last year. International Christian Concern also placed Eritrea at number nine in its annual Hall of Shame. According to the ICC the intensity of persecution is "high" and "increasing."

The Eritrean government's responds that such reports are "hyperbole" and "distorted and exaggerated."

There's no easy answer to the problem of religious persecution. But it should be a priority of U.S. diplomacy as a matter of basic human rights. Open Doors reports that "an estimated 100 million Christians worldwide suffer interrogation, arrest and even death for their faith in Christ, with millions more facing discrimination and alienation."

Other faiths, too, face persecution. The Institute on Religion and Public Policy offered set of recommendations to the Obama administration, explaining that "minority religious rights are a global issue: Religious liberty is not partisan, nor is it denominational. The status of Hare Krishnas in Kazakhstan, Ahmadis in Pakistan and Zoroastrians in Iran are just as important as the status of Evangelicals in each of those countries." The U.S. should stand for freedom of conscience irrespective of the faith involved.

That doesn't mean going to war to transform other societies. But it does mean exposing abuses and using the bully pulpit to educate and embarrass. And it means dedicated private efforts, especially through churches and NGOs. America also can accept more refugees from religious oppression abroad, starting with Iraq, where the Christian community has become a target of discrimination and violence.

The Obama administration faces problems big and small. Eritrea is one of the latter. Nevertheless, it poses both a significant moral if not security challenge. How President Obama responds will help set the tone for the rest of his term.

Christian deaths mount in Eritrean prisons

Three more believers die in military confinement centers in past four months

Compass Direct News (21.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (21.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Three Christians incarcerated in military prisons for their faith have died in the past four months in Eritrea, including the death on Friday (Jan. 16) of a 42-year-old man in solitary confinement, according to a Christian support organization.

Sources told Open Doors that Mehari Gebreneguse Asgedom died at the Mitire Military Confinement center from torture and complications from diabetes. Asgedom was a member of the Church of the Living God in Mendefera.

His death followed the revelation this month of another death in the same prison. Mogos Hagos Kiflom, 37, was said to have died as a result of torture he endured for refusing to recant his faith, according to Open Doors, but the exact date of his death was unknown. A member of Rhema Church, Kiflom is survived by his wife, child and mother.

Incarcerated Christians from throughout Eritrea have been transferred to the Mitire prison in the country's northeast. In 2002 the Eritrean regime outlawed religious activity except that of the Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran or Muslim religions.

In October Open Doors learned of the death of Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, 36, who died while imprisoned for his faith at the Wi'a Military Confinement center. He was reported to have died after prison commanders refused to give him medical attention for malaria.

In June 2008, 37-year-old Azib Simon died from untreated malaria as well. Weakened by torture, sources told Compass, Simon contracted malaria only a week before she died.

Together with the deaths this month, the confirmed number of Christians who have died while imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea now totals eight.

Mass arrests

At the same time, the government of President Isaias Afwerki has stepped up its campaign against churches it has outlawed, earning it a spot on the U.S. Department of State's list of worst violators of religious freedom.

The government arrested 15 members of the Kale-Hiwot Church in Keren on Jan. 11, and before Christmas at least 49 leaders of unregistered churches in Asmara were rounded up over two weeks, Open Doors reported. Last November, 34 members of the Kale-Hiwot Church in Dekemhare were arrested.

Those arrested included members of the Church of the Living God, Medhaniel Alem Revival Group and the Philadelphia, Kale-Hiwot, Rhema, Full Gospel and Salvation by Christ churches, according to Open Doors. The church leaders' names appeared on a government list of 180 people who were taken from their homes and work places.

In the November sweep, authorities arrested 65 members of the Kale-Hiwot Church in the towns of Barentu and Dekemhare, including 17 women. In Keren and Mendefera, 25 members of the Full Gospel Church were arrested, and 20 Christians belonging to the Church of the Living God in Mendefera and Adi-Kuala were arrested.

Church leaders in Eritrea told Open Doors that by mid-December, a total of 2,891 Christians, including 101 women, had been incarcerated for their faith.

On June 8, 2008 Compass learned that eight Christians held at the Adi-Quala prison were taken to medical emergency facilities as a result of torture by military personnel at the camp. Eritrean officials have routinely denied religious oppression exists in the country, saying the government is only enforcing laws against unregistered churches.

The government has denied all efforts by independent Protestant churches to register, and people caught worshipping outside the four recognized religious institutions, even in private homes, suffer arrest, torture and severe pressure to deny their faith. The Eritrean Orthodox Church and its flourishing renewal movement has also been subject to government raids.
