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Eritrean Christian dies in prison

Baptist Press (01.11.2013) - A Christian woman perished from pneumonia in an Eritrean prison after facing harsh conditions and denial of medical treatment -- all because she would not renounce her faith.

Open Doors, an organization supporting the global persecuted church, reported this week that Wehazit Berhane Debesai is the 25th known Christian to have died in prison in Eritrea. According to the report, the exact date of death of the woman in her 30s is unknown. Eritrean authorities arrested her a year ago. They held her near the Ethiopian border for being involved in Christian activities outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran church groups.

Debesai's death came as government forces arrested 70 Christians who met for prayer in the capital of Asmara, according to Open Doors. It is the third time the pastor who led the prayer event has been thrown in prison for his faith. This latest development brings the total number of Christians arrested this year in Eritrea to nearly 300. Local Christians call it the government's most serious campaign against the church so far.

In what may be a separate event, according to conflicting reports, government security forces arrested 185 Christians praying together in a suburb to the north of Asmara. According to Release International, a United Kingdom-based group serving the persecuted church, most of those arrests involved women.

"Our Eritrean partners say church leaders fear this mass arrest could herald a new clampdown on Christians and a wave of further detentions," Paul Robinson, chief executive of Release International, told the UK-based charity Cross Rhythms.

The Christians were believed to have gathered to pray for the country's refugee crisis. The United Nations reports thousands of Eritreans try to flee every month despite an alleged "shoot-to-kill" policy by security forces against anyone attempting to escape.

"The arrest has alarmed underground church leaders, who fear that this may be a sign of things to come," Robinson said.

According to International Christian Concern, an organization supporting persecuted believers, Eritrea is one of the world's worst persecutors of Christians. More than 2,000 Christians are believed to have been imprisoned for their faith.

All churches not sanctioned by the government were outlawed in 2002, and their leaders have been arrested since then. Religious groups the government does allow to operate do so under severe restrictions and are also persecuted.

An Open Doors observer asked for Christians to pray for their fellow believers who remain in prison for their faith.

"They are secluded in underground dungeons, metal shipping containers and military detention centers. They face exposure, hard labor and insufficient food, water and hygiene," the observer said. "They are regularly denied medical treatment for malaria and pneumonia which they contracted while in prison or diseases such as diabetes, hypertension or cancer that they may have had prior to imprisonment."

Eritrea jails 125 Christians in campaign against 'illegal' worship

BosNewsLife (05.03.2013) - There was uncertainty Tuesday, March 5, about the situation of 125 Eritrean Christians who were "beaten and detained" in western Eritrea as part of a new government campaign against Christians worshipping outside the state-backed churches, rights investigators said.

At least 85 of them were arrested over the last week, said Open Doors, a major Christian advocacy and aid group. Among them are 45 men and women who were arrested February 27 for worshipping "outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches," the group said.

All of those detained since January are members of an evangelical denomination in the south-western town of Barentu, according to Open Doors investigators.

"Open Doors understands that police arrested these church members from homes and workplaces during broad daylight and then marched them through town to the police station while beating them," the group said.

Eritrea's autocratic President Isaias Afewerki has denied wrongdoing.

Many detained

At least an estimated 1,500 devoted Christians remain detained for their faith in prison facilities ranging from shipping containers, to military prison camps and other facilities, some for years.

Other sources say the figure may be over 2,000 Christians, though some have been released while several Christians are known to have died during their imprisonment.

The reported crackdown began in 2002 when all churches except those belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran denominations were effectively banned. Members of independent evangelical and charismatic churches are particularly singled out, according to local Christians and international rights groups.

However even within the established churches, leaders and devoted Christians have reported harassment.

Orthodox patriarch Abune Antonios, for instance, has been under house arrest since 2006 for resisting government interference in church affairs, and priests seen as sympathizing with him are reportedly detained and harassed.

Government defends policies

President Afewerki has said the policies are aimed at religious groups who are "duped by foreigners", seeking to "distract from the unity of the Eritrean people and distort the true meaning of religion."

The African nation has come under international pressure to allow more religious freedom. In a recent report, the U.S. State Department noted that, "The government continued to harass and detain thousands of members of registered and unregistered religious groups and retained substantial control over the four registered religious groups."

The government also "failed to approve religious groups that fulfilled the registration requirements and arrested persons during religious gatherings," the State Department said.

Additionally, "The government subjected religious prisoners to harsh conditions and held them for long periods of time, without due process. There continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith, torture, and deaths while in custody," it said.

Eritrea officials arrest 10 Church leaders; Christians fear increase in persecution

Asmarino independent (24.01.2013) - Although an incident in which dissident Eritrean soldiers seized the country's information ministry earlier this week is now being downplayed as not a coup attempt, a heightened tension between political and faith groups remains. The Christian persecution watchdog group Open Doors says that at least 10 leaders of churches banned by the government have been arrested.

"The arrest of 10 church leaders in Eritrea could be the start of another wave of systematic persecution in this unpredictable, tiny country bordering the Red Sea," says Open Doors USA Media Relations Director Jerry Dykstra. "The Muslim and Christian population is almost split 50-50. But President Isaias Afewerki has targeted independent Christians over the last decade. A government official once declared there are three enemies which need to be eradicated - HIV/AIDS, the regime in Ethiopia and independent Christians."

Over the past year, Open Doors reported that 31 Christians have died in prison camps.

"Once arrested, religious prisoners cannot appeal in court for official hearings because they are never officially charged and are not allowed to be represented by a lawyer," Dykstra explained. "The moment a prisoner is taken to court one is guilty even before he or she is charged because being a member of the underground church or attending religious meetings is an automatic crime. In other words, there is no justice for most independent Christians."

There have been several such campaigns in the past, but church leaders fear that this particular campaign is far more serious because it wants to "eradicate the underground church by targeting its key leaders around the country," according to Open Doors USA.

Since news of the renewed systematic arrests emerged, several church leaders have gone into hiding for a second time in only a few months. According to trusted Open Doors sources close to the events in Eritrea, church leaders have remained in good spirits despite these pressures.

For Christians in Eritrea, an eastern African country of 4 million, the past few months have been a somewhat of a roller-coaster ride. After the death of the Ethiopian Prime Minister in August last year, there was heightened tension in Eritrea. Christians testified that talk of renewed fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia after the demise of one of their long-time rivals led to a very grim atmosphere. There were reports of the government circulating rifles to households in case war broke out. Some Christians described those months of uncertainty as their darkest night while praying earnestly for the light of a new dawn for their country.

These tensions were then followed in December by the news of the release of 31 Christian students kept at Sawa Military Training Centre since 2006. The group of students from Mai-Nefhi University included 14 females. They were arrested after refusing to participate against their conscience in cultural dancing during Independence Day celebrations.

The believers later testified that despite the difficulties they faced in the harsh prison conditions, they were never placed in a situation where they were forced to deny their faith. Some of the women were apparently enticed with release in exchange for sexual favors. None gave in, but remained strong in the faith, Open Doors USA reported.

Reports of the coup on Monday came amid speculations that President Afewerki's health is worsening. He has travelled abroad in the past to seek medical attention for a liver condition, but official information services refuted these speculations, insisting the 66-year-old was in good health.

Reports of the coup were met by mixed reactions. Some observers fear even more repressive measures by the government to keep society in check.

"Eritrea is ranked No. 10 on the Open Doors World Watch List which was released two weeks ago," Dykstra stated. "Eritrean Christians value our prayers as their circumstances remain uncertain."
