**Freedom of Religion and Belief in Eritrea**

**A Written Contribution Submitted to the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

Despite the important regional and political changes, topped by the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Eritrea still suffers from one of the worst records of religious freedom in Africa and did not show much interest in improving this situation. No new religious institutions have been registered officially, only four religious communities only legally permitted to work.

Since March 2002, the Eritrean government has already banned all the practices that do not belong to Catholic or Evangelical Lutheran, or Christian Orthodoxy communities and Sunni Islam. A campaign of arrests started to target unauthorized communities, and this campaign continues till now.

At present, tens of thousands of Eritreans are detained without any charge or trial under circumstances that threaten their life, especially with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, including a large number of prisoners of conscience, some of them are detained for decades because of their political opinions or religious beliefs. On 23 May 2021, Reverend Haile Naizge, chairman of the Full Gospel Church, and Kuflu Gebremeskel, chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance and member of the executive committee of the Full Gospel Church in Eritrea, completed their 17th year in incommunicado detention.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**In this report, we highlight some cases to confirm that the conditions in Eritrea remain alarming and will likely get worse if no decisive steps are taken by the States, the internationalist bodies, and the civil society organizations to improve the situations of human rights in Eritrea.**

**First: Arbitrary arrest for religious reasons**

Eritrea is still one of the worst world States in terms of religious persecution. Believers from certain communities are subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention without trial. Since the introduction of religious registration in 2002, only three Christian communities are legally permitted, which are Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran, in addition to Sunni Islam.

The unimplemented Eritrean Constitution bans discrimination for religious reasons, and provides for freedom of thought and belief, in addition to the freedom of practicing any religion. But in reality, the government recognizes only four religions registered officially, as the unregistered groups lack the privileges of the registered groups and their members may be subjected to arrest and mistreatment and their release is on the condition of abandoning their belief officially, despite permitting some unregistered groups to work and the government tolerance of practicing their religious rituals. Besides, members of some unrecognized religious groups are subjected to prison and arbitrary detention.

The Eritrean authorities continue to keep the former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Antonios under house arrest since 2006. The government continued to detain 345 church leaders and officials without charge or trial. Also, an unknown number of Muslim demonstrators remain in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The latest reports indicate that up to 3000 persons, most of them are Christians, are imprisoned now because of their religious beliefs, the majority of them were deprived of a fair trial. The Eritrean Christians, who survived imprisonment, described the cells of their detention as very overcrowded cells without any sanitation or ventilation. Others stated that they were mobilized in metal shipping containers, where the temperature under the sunlight was unbearable.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In April 2020, the Eritrean government arrested 15 Christians who were praying in a home without charge, investigations, nor trial.[[4]](#footnote-4) At the end of June 2020, another 30 persons were arrested at a wedding of a Christian couple. They were taken to a police station known as Kalai Medeber, and no information was provided about their detention places or the circumstances of their arrest, especially with the rising threat of the Coronavirus pandemic. The government also did not disclose the charges against them or whether they were subjected to trial or not.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At the end of March 2021, 35 Christians were arrested in Eritrea for holding prayer meetings. This last wave of arrests shatters all hopes for achieving a bitter reality for Christians in the country. The arrests occurred when the army raided a prayer meeting held by 23 women in the capital Asmara.[[6]](#footnote-6)

At the end of March also, twelve Christians were arrested in a prayer meeting in Assab, near the border with Djibouti, they are still detained in Assab prison, as it is known that the detention circumstances there are very inhuman and terrible, as this prison is located in a remote port area in the city specified for military use.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On Sunday 11 April 2021, the authorities in Eritrea released all the 23 Christians who were arrested in one case except for one person, the Eritrean authorities did not charge this Christian man, whose freedom is restricted, with any charges.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A large number of Christians in Eritrea are considered to be from the banned communities. They can be arrested in church mass, Sunday schools, even in weddings, and they are being imprisoned in horrible circumstances such as getting backed into shipping containers, held in open facilities in the military camps, or kept in underground prisons and police stations without charge or trial. The prisoners also are subjected to sever torture, hard labor, inhuman treatment, and food inadequacy; they are deprived of the visits of the lawyers and their families, the Christian prisoners are not allowed to pray loudly or sing or read the Bible. The prisoners also suffer from intense heat during the day inside metal shipping containers, and from freezing temperatures at night, lack of oxygen, and sanitation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The arrests occur amid increasing fears of the spread of the emerging Coronavirus in the crowded prisons in Eritrea, as there are tens of thousands of the Eritreans detained now without charge or trial, under circumstances threatening to their lives in more than 300 prisons throughout the country. The arrested include [prisoners of conscience](https://context.reverso.net/translation/english-arabic/prisoners+of+conscience); some of them are detained decades ago because of their political opinions or religious beliefs.

As to the condition in Tigray, the Eritrean forces attacked the churches in Axiom, resulting in the killing of more than 700 civilians including the reverends and prayers in the church; it was described as a massacre. As a result, a large number of Christians escaped from the attacks to the refugee camps. The Eritrean soldiers, in addition to the Ethiopians, damaged many camps inhabited by those refugees, including Shimelba, which has taken many Christian refugees from Eritrea. Many Christians have died fleeing the violence in the camps.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Second: Damaging sacred places**

### On 18 December 2020, the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces bombed Al Nejashi mosque, the first mosque in Africa, which has a particular importance to Muslims in the Horn of Africa, also many civilians were killed while trying to protect the mosque from bombing,[[11]](#footnote-11) after the Ethiopian and Eritrean army controlled Nejash area on 28 November 2020 after the military operation launched on Tigray Population Liberation Front.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In February 2021, a deacon from Saint Mari church, the holiest Ethiopian Orthodox church in the country, said that Eritrean soldiers broke into the church on 28 November in the time for prayer; the Eritrean forces shot many prayers, the killing continued outside in the streets for hours. It was estimated he killing of about 800 prayers in the church and civilians outside the church. The Eritrean soldiers did not allow for the burial of the dead bodies, so the dead bodies remained in the streets for many days, which were subjected to hyenas coming down from the hills to feed on dead bodies. After the withdrawal of the Eritrean forces from the area, the local population was able to bury the dead persons in a mass grave near the church.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In Adigart, the Eritrean army continued bombing and killing the people and looting any valuable thing, including the vehicles from Catholic Abrashia Adigart, they even attacked the hospitals which were emptied while the health workers escaped for surviving their lives, as they resorted to the cathedral,[[14]](#footnote-14) catholic Adigart cathedral in Tigray also was subjected to damages and was looted by Eritrean soldiers, who destroyed the monumental contents of the cathedral[[15]](#footnote-15).

In December 2020, a large number of clergy and prayers were killed by the Eritrean forces, including a reverend called Hailu Abraha, during heavy bombardment of the Maryam Dengelat Church near Adigrat, also about 48 Orthodox priests were killed in Adi Fetaw village, close to the Eritrean border, and 24 priests in Edaga Arbi[[16]](#footnote-16).

Medhane Alem Church was subjected to artillery bombardment by tanks on 24 November 2020, the church was bombed 17 times and a big part of the church was destroyed[[17]](#footnote-17), not less than 29 persons were identified as victims for this massacre committed by the Eritrean forces inside Medhane Alem Church in Gotelo village, the victims included five reverends and four deacons.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Third: Continuing arrests of prisoners of conscience**

The Eritrean government continue to arrest political opposition arbitrarily under harsh circumstances in secret prisons without charge or trial in a clear violation of human rights standards. For example, some political prisons are still in the Eritrean jails like Dawit Isaak, the Eritrean Swedish journalist, and ten of his colleagues, who are under arrest, are isolated from the outside world for more than two decades. These are other examples for several cases of individuals who are in the Eritrean prisons, without the possibility of their release. It is difficult to talk about the progress made in Eritrea while their cases are still without a solution.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Furthermore, Petros Solomon is still the head of the strategic and president of the military intelligence before the independence of Eritrea in 1991. After independence, in 2001, the former Ministry of Defense and Exterior expressed his displeasure that President Afwerki is turning the country into a holistic regime. On 18 September 2001, governmental forces arrested Petros Solomon with other ministers, governmental officials, and journalists, since then, he has not been brought to trial with any charge. Also, his wife Aster Yohannes was continuing her education in the United States of America at that time and decided to return after the arrest of her husband, she was promised by the former Ambassador of Eritrea to the United States of America, Girma Asmerom, to access safely, while she was taken to an unknown location after her arrival till now, there has been no disclosure of any information about her.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Based on the foregoing, Elizka Relief Foundation recommends the following:**

1. The Eritrean government must unconditionally release all people arrested over religious or ideological basis.
2. The Eritrean government must immediately amend law 2002 which recognizes only 4 religious’ groups in the country, as the law is incompatible with the human right in the freedom of belief.
3. The international community must open a thorough investigation into the violations conducted by the Eritrean soldiers in Tigray.
4. The international community must pressure Eritrea to release all prisoner of conscience who had been held for many decades.

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