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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by World Evangelical Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[02 February 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Eritrea: Freedom of Religion or Belief

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is deeply concerned by the ongoing incarceration of evangelical Christian leaders in Eritrea. These leaders are imprisoned without formal charges and are often held under appalling conditions. For example, Pastor Ghirmay Araya, one of the founding fathers of the Full Gospel Church in Eritrea, died in prison in May 2024 after being arrested in 2021 and never being charged with any crime (1). Evangelical Christians are imprisoned in inhumane conditions that amount to torture.

The government of Eritrea recognizes only four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (2). In 2002, the government imposed a registration system for all other religious groups (3). However, after the churches and religious organisations submitted the required documents, the government did not register them. Thereafter, Church leaders from other Christian traditions, and anyone sharing their faith or religious literature from other Christian traditions, has been subject to being arrested and detained.

We note that Eritrea became a member of the Human Rights Council in 2018, and therefore should be respecting the highest level of human rights protection. It ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2002 and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2001. Eritrea also ratified the Covenant against Torture and other Cruel Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 2014. As is documented below, Eritrea appears to be violating its obligations under these important Conventions.

Detentions on the Basis of Religion

The Commission on the Human Rights situation in Eritrea reported in 2015 on the significant violations of religious freedom for churches and leaders of those churches since 2002 (4). Churches were closed. Gatherings of adherents were banned. Leaders and adherents were arrested and imprisoned without charge or trial. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea reported that these leaders were still in jail without charge in 2015 and nothing has changed in the intervening years (5). The World Evangelical Alliance no longer has a member alliance in Eritrea as it is a banned organisation. Its leadership is either imprisoned or live as refugees in other countries.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea stated in his report in 2020, "Since May 2019, the Eritrean authorities have carried out a crackdown on non-recognized Christian congregations." (6)

We note that detention conditions are reported to be horrific, including long periods of solitary confinement in complete darkness and detention in shipping containers. This is well documented (7) and violates the human rights of those detained, often without charge.

Dr. Kiflu Gemremeskel (8) has been in prison in Eritrea since May 2004. Before his arrest, he was the Chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance. In 1999, Dr. Kiflu left his academic position as faculty head of the University of Asmara to be full-time pastor of the Southwest Full Gospel Church. It was part of a network of 150 Pentecostal house churches called the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea. In May 2003, those churches were closed by government decree and given an application to register. While the registration was filed immediately, there was no reply from the government. Dr. Kiflu was arrested in a 5 am raid on his home in the capital Asmara on 23 May 2004. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.

Along with Dr. Kiflu, two other leaders of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea were arrested with him. Rev Haile Naizghe (9) was chair of the Full Gospel Church. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center. Pastor Tesfatsion Hagos (10) was the pastor of Rhema Evangelical Church in Asmara. He was released in 2010 due to ill health and has left the country.

On 3 June 2004, another Pentecostal leader was arrested, Pastor Meron Gebreselasie (11). He was the pastor of Massawa Rhema Evangelical Church. He was arrested at a police checkpoint outside of Asmara. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.

On 18 March 2005, Pastor Kidane Weldou (12), pastor of the Full Gospel Church, was forcibly disappeared from Asmara. His car was found abandoned. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported to the Human Rights Council in March 2023 that 150 Christians were detained in Asmara in September 2022, 98 of whom remain in Mai Serwa prison. In January 2023, a further 44 were detained in Mai Serwa prison (13). The horrific conditions of this prison are detailed in the Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea. This includes detention in shipping containers with extreme variations in temperature, sometimes kept in complete darkness and subject to torture (14).

Release International reported on 3 July 2024 that 110 Christians were arrested between January and May 2024, bringing the number of Christians in detention to 400 (15).

Most of those detained for their faith are not charged with a crime. They are held in appalling conditions, including overcrowding and torture. Those detained do not have access to legal representation or due process of law. When some Christians are released from detention, other Christians are detained.

Recommendations to the Government of Eritrea

We urge the government of Eritrea to live up to the obligations it took on by ratifying United Nations Conventions that require it to observe human rights standards in relation to its citizens: specifically, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and the Covenant against Torture and other Cruel Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

We urge the government of Eritrea to allow all religious communities, including Christian communities other than the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, to register, build places of worship and hold worship services in accordance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the ICCPR.

On behalf of their families and religious communities, we plead with the government to immediately release the prisoners currently detained for their religious beliefs and practices and put an end to detention on the basis of religion.

We encourage the government to implement the 1997 Constitution. This will include establishing the National Assembly, the Executive and independence and impartiality of the Judiciary. It will also include promoting and protecting human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

We urge the government to extend a standing invitation to UN thematic special procedures to visit Eritrea and assist the government to move towards compliance with international law in its application of the rule of law, human rights and refugee law, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

Recommendations to the International Community

The World Evangelical Alliance asks the members of the Human Rights Council to take note of the ongoing situation of serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea, and to address this concern with the government of Eritrea.

- (1) Release International, “Eritrea church leader dies in prison,” 17 May 2024. Online: <https://releaseinternational.org/church-leader-dies-in-prison/>
- (2) Sheila B. Keetharuth, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 23rd session, A/HRC/23/53, 28 May 2013, p. 13. Online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/140/99/PDF/G1314099.pdf?OpenElement>.
- (3) Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 29th session, A/HRC/29/CRP.1, 5 June 2015, p. 160. Online: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf.
- (4) Ibid, pp. 166-169.
- (5) Ibid, p. 246.
- (6) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Human rights situation in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 44th session, 15 June–3 July 2020, A/HRC/44/23, p. 9. Online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/111/87/PDF/G2011187.pdf?OpenElement>.
- (7) Ibid., pp. 221-310.
- (8) Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/>.
- (9) Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/>.
- (10) Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/>.
- (11) Human Rights Without Frontiers, In Prison for their Faith 2020, P. 104. Online: https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/In-Prison-for-Their-Faith_Full.pdf; Church in Chains, “Meron Gebreselasie.” Online: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/meron-gebreselasie/>.
- (12) The Voice of the Martyrs, “Kidane Weldou.” Online: <https://www.prisoneralert.com/prisoners/146/kidane-weldou>.
- (13) Christian Solidarity Worldwide, HRC52: Oral statement on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. 6 March 2023. Online: <https://www.csw.org.uk/2023/03/06/report/5948/article.htm>.
- (14) Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 29th session, A/HRC/29/CRP.1, 5 June 2015, pp. 236-238. Online: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf.
- (15) Release International, 200+ arrested, including children. 3 July 2024. Online: <https://releaseinternational.org/eritrea-200-arrested-including-children/>.