

Release all Political Prisoners and Prisoners of Conscience

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Eritrean people believe in the rule of law. For example, the rule of law was so essential that if someone committed an offence, they would be forced to obey the law and be obligated and reminded strongly to summon themselves to court and hear the charges brought against them without being subjected to prison. In fact, prisons were less known in Eritrean in particular in the countryside before the arrival of foreign forces in Eritrea. If anyone was charged with a crime or brought litigation against, they would be tried under the traditional court system, Eritreans had constituted in their respective regions and villages: village judges and elders (*chika adi and shmagnetat*). Prisons became part of the Eritrean society when colonial powers began to arrive in Eritrea. Even then, it was largely confined to towns.

During the reign of Italian empire in Eritrean, the worst prison ever known to Eritreans was the prison of Nakura, located in the Dahlak Islands. Kazrema Mussolini prison of Asmara was another worst prison under Italian rule. Under Ethiopian successive occupations, Senbel and Adi Quala prisons were known for their horrendous torture and punishment of a large number of imprisoned Eritreans. Then, there were different prison houses or villas such as Bermuda established during the reign of Derg

But the worst and brutal prisons that outperform any other prisons in the history of Eritrea are the ones being run under the present dictatorial regime of Isayas. Wia, Gelalo, and Gahtelai are prison houses known for their melting temperature, unlivable conditions, and hardly humane by any stretch of imagination. In addition, there are many prison facilities throughout the countryside of Eritrea such as Irai, Adi Abyto, Adi Nfas, Mai Idaga, and Sawa ...etc. Yet, more prison houses are being built in big towns of Eritrea in addition to the ones already built and housing many Eritrean prisoners. In the western region of Eritrea, namely Barentu and Teseney, the dictatorial regime runs the worst prisons known for their torture and brutality. In addition, there are many other prison houses and camps literally in every corner of Eritrea run by army commanders and generals. Prisons in Eritrea are growing overnight as rapid as mushrooms: they are underground; they are in metal containers, you name it.

The violence, torture, horror, and untold crimes that go on in these prison houses and camps have no comparisons. Even the worst prison system that we have come to know under the former colonial powers were not as harsh and inhumane as the prisons we have now in Eritrea under the regime of Isayas. But this in itself is a separate topic that can produce tons of information enough for someone to write many books.

The following are groups of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Eritrea:

- Members of opposition organizations and parties
- Members of PFDJ who opposed the regime
- Members of various religious institutions
- Members of private and governmental news media and press

- Eritreans refugees who were forcibly returned from foreign countries
- Eritrean citizens who had previously worked for embassies and non-governmental agencies
- Those who evaded national service
- Eritrean parents who failed to pay \$50,000 Nakfa because the regime held them accountable for their adult sons who abandoned the national service and left the country. Many others are also in prison for personal vendetta such as Aster Yohannes; Aster Yohannes is the wife of Petros Solomon who himself is in prison since 2001.

Most inhumane of all is neither member of their family nor human rights organizations are ever allowed to visit the prisoners; no lawyer is allowed to see them, assist them or represent them even though none of these prisoners were ever brought before the court. As a result, the conditions and whereabouts of all Eritrean prisoners is not known. Information about their conditions is rarely obtained through prisoner guards or through those who escape from prison. Many are dying in prison and their remains are not returned to family members. Under the dictatorial regime, the value of life, the meaning of life, and the dignity of Eritreans are reduced to nonentity.

To mention some names of the political prisoners and prisoners of conscience:

- Woldemariam Bahlibi and Teclebrhan Gerbresadiq (Wodi Bashai), both former members of ELF-RC, are in prison since April 25, 1992.
- Former senior government officials: Mohammed Sherifo, Petros Solomon, Hailemariam Woldetensae (Diru), Hamid Humed...etc, are in prison since Sep 18, 2001.
- Private newspaper owners: Yosuf Mohammed Ali, Amanuel Asrat, Suim Tesfai and including seven others, are in prison since Oct 10, 2001.
- Religious leaders: patriarch Antonyos, pastor kidane Woldu, pastor Luel Ghebreab, pastor Mengisteab Tewoldemedhin, pastor Haile Naizghi, pastor Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel,
- From union leaders: Tewolde Gebremedhin, Minasie Andezion, and Habtom Woldemichael...etc and many others are in prison without due process and justice.

With respect to the plight of Eritrean prisoners, the first & Constituent Congress of Eritrean People's Party had this to say in its resolution, "The wrong policies of the dictatorial regime have subjected the Eritrean people to arbitrary killings and widespread imprisonment. The congress expressed deep concern of this sad situation and resolved that the leadership of the new party shall exert strenuous efforts to further expose the abuses of the regime and draw the attention of the international community to the plight of prisoners in Eritrea."

Further, the demonstrations scheduled for Sep 18, 2008 in Brussels by European network of civic societies calling for immediate release of all Eritrean prisoners is a welcome event. Those who care to see not only justice and the rule of law to prevail in Eritrea but also to respect human rights in Eritrea must support this holy mission.

The brutality, victimization, and torture being perpetuated upon Eritrean political prisoners and prisoners of conscience are violations of human rights. Thus, the purpose of this article

is to call upon Eritreans to rise up in one voice and demand immediate release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. Claiming justice, democracy, and peace for the country and for the people alone is not acceptable if we cannot stand in unison and demand for the immediate release of all prisoners in Eritrea.