



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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SUBMISSION TO THE UN UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

ERITREA

18TH SESSION OF THE UN UPR WORKING GROUP OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS
COUNCIL

JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2014





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- 1 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International warmly welcomes the Universal Periodic Review system and trusts it will improve the implementation of fundamental human rights in all UN member states.
- 2 Aligned to the mandate of Open Doors International, this submission focuses on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- 3 Open Doors International welcomed the eleven recommendations regarding Freedom of Religion or Belief in Eritrea, made during the first cycle of the Universal Periodic Review.
- 4 It saddens Open Doors International to report that, to our knowledge, the recommendations made during the first cycle have not been implemented so far. There has been no significant improvement in the circumstances of religious communities in Eritrea since the previous Universal Periodic Review. In fact, between our NGO submission in April 2009 and the present, the government's repression of religious groups and entities in the country continued and even intensified.

Open Doors has had several on camera interviews with Christians still living in Eritrea who testify of continued restrictions of their Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief

- 5 An Eritrean church leader in diaspora, who is still closely connected with the Church inside the country¹, expressed to Open Doors in May 2013 his concerns regarding religious believers in Eritrea. "If I am to describe the situation of religious persecution in Eritrea, I would say it is still at its highest level ever and getting worse," he told Open Doors.
- 6 At the beginning of the year, an editorial in the Hadas Ertra Ministry of Information newsletter vaguely alluded to a plan to eliminate religious elements in Eritrea. It came shortly after security officials arrested several key Muslim leaders. Open Doors sources informed us that since then several church leaders have had to go into hiding, being warned of pending arrests.
- 7 Following the above editorial, the government embarked on a sweeping arrest campaign, moving from town to town to arrest large numbers of Christians. Since the beginning of 2013, security forces have arbitrarily arrested at least 191 Christians.

¹ Name withheld for security reasons.



- 8 To our knowledge those arrested since the beginning of the year, just like those arrested in previous years, have not been formally charged and have not benefited from due legal process. As far as we know, all are kept incommunicado in inhumane conditions and risk torture. Captives are kept in metal shipping containers, underground dungeon-like cells, and police stations. Open Doors is aware of the fact that these prisoners receive insufficient food rations while often being required to perform hard labour.

For example, a pastor was arrested in January. He is a diabetic and Christians fear for his life under his current incarceration conditions. Church leaders are also concerned over the poor health of an elderly woman in her eighties, who was arrested in January. She was kept in an Asmara prison but later moved to a metal shipping container at Mai-Serwa because she refused to sign a recantation declaration.

- 9 Although this campaign has been particularly intense, the arrest of Christians is something that has continued unabated between the previous report and the beginning of 2013. In 2009, sources reported to Open Doors 109 arrests, including 26 Orthodox monks. In 2010, there were at least 132 arrests. In 2011, sources reported 243 arrests, which included 120 members of the recognised Catholic Church. The year 2012 saw at least 80 arrests.
- 10 In one incident in August 2012, seventeen young people were arrested as they were gathered at a home in Keren. From there, the seven women and ten men were marched through the busy town centre while being ridiculed. From the Keren police station where they were held at first, they were taken to the notorious Aderset military camp in Western Eritrea.
- 11 Open Doors is aware of the deaths of at least 22 Christians because of torture, refusal of much needed medical attention and exposure since May 2002. However, it is likely that the actual number is significantly higher since the government never informs family members of deaths. Word on these deaths has been leaked to Open Doors' local sources (see Annex).
- 12 The arrests since October 2009 affected males and females, students and professional people and often include elderly people. Open Doors is aware of cases where mothers with children were arrested.
- 13 Although the persecution against Christians is felt most severely by Christians belonging to the unregistered groups, officially recognised groups have suffered from pressure too. The elderly but deposed Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios remains under house arrest. There are grave concerns for his health. He is a diabetic, and family members say he is getting insufficient medical attention and not the kind of food required for his medical condition.
- 14 In 1997, the government called out a decree whereby they ordered all religious groups outside of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Catholic Church, and Islam, to register. The Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Bahá'í applied, but have yet to receive a response from the state. The government has told critics that it has placed the process on ice until Eritrea is no longer at war.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International urges the Eritrean Government to release all prisoners of conscience immediately.
- 16 Eritrea is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The legislation regarding religious groups and organizations falls short to the obligations following this covenant. The registration requirements are complicated and all applications are pending since 2002. The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International urges the government of Eritrea to review the laws regarding religious groups and organizations and make sure that they comply with the obligations under the ICCPR. It also recommends a transparent registration process and asks the Government of Eritrea to recognize the applicants as soon as possible.
- 17 Open Doors International Advocacy Department urges to end the practise of incommunicado detentions and corporal punishment.
- 18 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International urges the Eritrean Government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- 19 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International urges the Eritrean Government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross to assess the situation regarding the treatment of prisoners in Eritrea.
- 20 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International welcomes the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, and calls upon the government of Eritrea to cooperate fully with the mandate and to permit the Special Rapporteur access to visit the country.
- 21 Democratisation in Eritrea, if any, is in a dormant state and the Constitution of 1997 still has to be implemented. Almost all national and international NGOs are prevented to operate. Open Doors International Advocacy Department is convinced that a vibrant civil society is crucial for the well-being of a country and its people. It therefore recommends the government of Eritrea to withdraw restrictive NGO laws enabling civil society to organize itself and make itself heard.
- 22 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors calls on the Eritrean Government to allow for a structural and constructive engagement between the government and all Eritrean faith groups and civil society more in general, on the wellbeing of the country.





ANNEX

LIST OF NAMES OF CHRISTIANS WHO DIED IN PRISON

Open Doors is aware of the deaths of at least twenty-two Christians because of torture, refusal of much needed medical attention and exposure since May 2002. However, it is likely that this number is significantly higher since the government never informs family members of deaths.

1. Immanuel Andegergesh, male, aged 23, died October 2006 in Adi-Quala due to torture and dehydration
2. Kibrom Firemichel, male, aged 30, died in Adi-Quala October 2006 due to torture and dehydration
3. Magos Solomon Semere, male, aged 30, died in February 2007 in Adi-Nefase due to torture and pneumonia
4. Nigsti Haile, female, aged 33, died in Wi'a Military in September 2007 due to torture
5. Azib Simon, female, aged 37, died in Wi'a in July 2008 due to torture and Malaria
6. Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, male, aged 36, died in Wi'a in October 2008 due to torture and malaria
7. Mogos Hagos Kiflom, male, aged 37, died in January 2009 due to torture
8. Mehari Gebreneguse Asgedom, male, aged 42, died of torture and diabetes complications in January 2009
9. Yemane Kahasay Andom, male, aged 43, died of malaria coupled with torture and solitary confinement conditions in July 2009.
10. Mesfin Gebrekristos, male, age unknown, died in September 2009 in Wi'a Military camp of Meningitis
11. Hana Hagos Asgedom, female, aged 41, died in Alla Military Camp in January 2010
12. Efreem Habtemichel Hagos, male, aged 37, died in March 2010 in Adi-Nefase Military camp in solitary confinement due to malaria and pneumonia and refusal of medical treatment.
13. Senait Oqbazgi Habta, female, aged 28, died in Sawa Medical Centre from prolonged anaemia and malaria for which she was refused proper treatment in April 2010
14. Ferewini Gebru Tekleberhne, female, aged about 35, shot dead in November 2010 while trying to escape from Sawa where she had been kept in metal shipping container for the past two years
15. Seble Hagos Mebrahtu, female, aged 27, died in Sawa military training centre in January 2011 from torture and malaria for which she was refused treatment.
16. Hiwet Gebremichel Tesfu, female, aged 23, died in Alla military camp, Jul 2011, from torture and being denied medical treatment.



17. Zemane Tesfayesus Mehari, female, aged 27, died at Alla military camp, July 2011, from torture and being denied medical treatment
18. Terhase Gebremichel Andu, female, aged 28, died at Aderset military camp, October 2011, from torture, starvation and failing health.
19. Ferewini Genzabu Kiflu (Kifly), female, aged 21, died at Adersete military camp, October 2011, from torture, starvation and failing health
20. Angesom Gebremichel Andu, male, aged 26, died at Adi-nefase, August 2011, from malaria and being denied medical treatment
21. Adris Ali Mohammed, male convert from Islam aged 31, died in October 2012, after two years imprisonment in the Aderset Military Camp and suffering from severe malaria for which he was denied medical treatment.
22. Belay Gebrezgi Tekabo, male in his early thirties, died at Ala Military Camp in March 2013

Open Doors have also heard of the death of Gebreneguse Mebrahtu Kidane, a Jehovah's Witness in his mid-forties, at Sawa in February 2013.