



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
XX May 2024

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

Fifty-sixth session

18 July–12 July 2024

Agenda item 2

**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 Jubilee Campaign, 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.

[17 May 2024]

---

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

## Eritrea's Persecution of & Human Rights Violations against Religious Communities, Committed Domestically and Transnationally

### Item 2: Interactive Dialogue on the report of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea (HRC res. 53/2)

#### Background

The Eritrean government only formally recognizes five religions: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Evangelical Lutheranism; however, the legal status of these religious groups does not protect its practitioners from unjust violations upon their right to religious freedom.<sup>1</sup>

#### Arbitrary Detention of Christians

Eritrean authorities have maintained a concerning and confusing pattern by which they both arrest large groups of Christian believers and also release large groups of Christian prisoners, sometimes with only weeks between incidents. This trend has observably expanded since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when virus mitigation efforts were cited as reasons for mass releases of prisoners from often overcrowded or unsanitary detention facilities.<sup>2</sup> In March 2021, Eritrea released 21 Christian prisoners of conscience – all of them young mothers – renewing the total to 171 Christians that had been released from their unjust detention within seven months.<sup>3</sup> Then, just over a month later in April 2021, another 35 Christians were arrested in a single day – 23 were holding a prayer gathering in Asmara, while the other 12 were holding a prayer meeting in Assab.<sup>4</sup> Sudden and arbitrary mass arrests and releases of Christians continue even after COVID-19 has largely subsided and concerns over prison safety are less salient. In one week in March 2023, authorities detained en masse 30 Christians who were attending a worship gathering in the town of Keren, and fourteen other Christian prisoners were released from Mai Serwa prison and another detention center in Assab.<sup>5</sup> One month later in April 2023, police arrested 103 Christians, many of whom were students, for recording gospel music with the intention to upload it onto YouTube.<sup>6</sup> The very same month, 44 Orthodox monks, all of whom were vocal supporters of the legitimate Eritrean Orthodox Church patriarch-turned-martyr Abune Antonios, were arrested.<sup>7</sup> In late January 2024, authorities in the capital interrupted a baby's first birthday celebration, arresting 30 Christian adults and an unreported number of children.<sup>8</sup>

In July 2023, following a call to action issued by The Voice of the Martyrs for Christians around the world to pray for the release of church leaders of the unregistered Full Gospel Church, Haile Nayzgi and Kiflu Gebremeskel - both of whom had been imprisoned since 2004 - it was reported that 13 Christians had been released from prison, although neither Nayzgi nor Gebremeskel were included in the batch of released detainees.<sup>9</sup> Eritrean authorities similarly refuse to release two other high profile prisoners of conscience, 74-year-old Pastor Samuel Okbamichael and 75-year-old Pastor Girmay Araya, whom they arrested in 2021.<sup>10</sup> On three separate days in mid-October 2022, authorities detained Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos, Father Mihretab Stefanos, and Franciscan Father Abba Abraham, and although they provided no immediate justifications for the arrest, it was later reported by an anonymous source that the three clergymen were accused of

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Eritrea: Events of 2022*, World Report 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Bicknell, "Eritrea Frees Evangelical Prisoners Due to COVID-19", *Christianity Today*, 28 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> International Christian Concern, "21 Christians Released From Prison in Eritrea", 4 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Keep the Faith, "Freedom hopes dashed in Eritrea as more Christians arrested", 21 April 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Release International, "Eritrea - More Arrests, Some Christians Freed", 22 March 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Without Frontiers, "ERITREA: 103 Christians arrested for trying to record Christian music on YouTube", 23 April 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "Church leader denied burial site in his hometown", 21 April 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy, "At least 30 Christians arrested in Eritrea as police raid baby's first birthday party", *Open Doors*, 25 January 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Meredith Flynn, "Imprisoned Christians in Eritrea released after call to prayer", *The Baptist Paper*, 14 August 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Anugrah Kumar, "2 elderly pastors imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea", *Christian Post*, 11 September 2021.

criticizing the Eritrean government's human rights violations while delivering sermons to their congregations.<sup>11</sup> Father Abraham was released from prison after one month in November 2022, and Bishop Hagos and Father Stefanos were released after two months, in December.<sup>12</sup>

Christians who spent time imprisoned in Eritrea's prison system have testified to horrendous conditions, including: being confined to shipping containers, being exposed to extreme temperatures, use of physical torture to extract faith renunciations, negligent food provision, denial of medical care, being bound with restraints, and more.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses, 36 of whom were detained by the end of 2023, have been persecuted for their conscientious objection to mandatory military service, and their family members have been forcibly evicted from their homes and denied daily necessities as punishment for refusing conscription.<sup>14</sup> Three Jehovah's Witnesses, Negede Teklemariam, Paulos Eyasu, and Isaac Mogos, were imprisoned for 26 years and released in 2020. Upon their freedom, they reported the conditions they personally suffered and witnessed in detention, including forced labor, deliberately inflicted malnutrition, and being partially buried in the ground.<sup>15</sup>

### **Lack of Accountability for Atrocities in Tigray**

Eritrean military forces have involved themselves in the violent incursion into Ethiopia's Tigray region which was authorized by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in November 2020. Within the span of just 24 hours between 28 and 29 November, Eritrean troops seized the Tigrayan town of Axum, where they went door-to-door conducting searches of homes and shooting civilians.<sup>16</sup> The majority of those killed in this incident were men and young boys, wielding no weapons, who were shot as they attempted to flee the danger. Reports have indicated that Eritrean troops have additionally targeted houses of worship and religious heritage sites in Tigray for looting and desecration, including Debre Damo Monastery and Wukro al-Nejashi Mosque.<sup>17</sup> In October 2021, Tigrayan residents claimed that violence committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops had led to the casualties of 325 faith leaders, as well as attacks on twelve churches and mosques.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front signed the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022, Eritrean troops remaining in Tigray continue to commit human rights atrocities against the region's predominantly Christian communities. Amnesty International conducted research into the Eritrean Defense Forces' activities in Tigray between the signing of the cease-fire until January 2023. Women in Kokob Tsibah district who reported that they and their peers had been gang raped by Eritrean Defense Forces in their own homes, or otherwise in military barracks, where they would subsequently be denied food and medical services by Eritrean soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

Notwithstanding irrefutable evidence that Eritrean forces have participated in human rights violations against Tigrayan civilians, accountability remains an empty wish. In early October 2023 the mandate of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia - tasked with conducting investigations and claims of humanitarian law violations committed by all sides in Tigray - had expired with no motions for its renewal.<sup>20</sup> Eritrean soldiers had in fact disrupted and impeded the Commission's efforts to gather evidence in Tigray, similarly preventing the work of an African Union "monitoring and verification

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Jones, "Eritrea Bishop, Priest Released After Two Months in Prison", *National Catholic Register*, 29 December 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "Three Catholic clergymen released from arbitrary detention", 5 January 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Release International, "Eritrean Christians Mark 20 Years of Church Closures", 16 May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2024 Annual Report*, May 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Davide Bagnoli, "Conscientious objection led to real persecution: the sad report of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea", *Pressenza*, 21 September 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International, *The Massacre in Axum*, 26 February 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Mariz Tadros, "Tigray: Why are soldiers attacking religious heritage sites?", *African Arguments*, 12 March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> BBC, "Ethiopia Tigray crisis: From monk to soldier - how war has split a church", 3 October 2021. ; Europe External Programme with Africa, *Voices from Tigray: Brutalities against Religious Leaders, Holy Places and Heritage in Tigray*, 8 June 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International, "Today or Tomorrow, They Should Be Brought Before Justice": *Rape, Sexual Slavery, Extrajudicial Executions, and Pillage by Eritrean Forces in Tigray*, 4 September 2023, AFR 25/7152/2023.

<sup>20</sup> Emma Farge & Aaron Ross, "UN-mandated investigation into Ethiopia atrocities lapses", *Reuters*, 4 October 2023.

team”.<sup>21</sup> Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has dismissed proven allegations of his military’s horrendous misconduct, calling them “fantasy”, “fabricated lies”, and “misinformation”.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Professor Steven Ratner, Commissioner of the aforementioned International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, explained that accountability may be further hindered as “Ethiopia has no interest whatsoever [in] prosecuting Eritrean forces for violations of human rights on Ethiopian soil.”<sup>23</sup>

---

---

<sup>21</sup> Gianluca Mezzofiore, Bethlehem Feleke, and Eve Brennan, “Eritrean forces stop UN mission in Tigray, Ethiopia, aid workers tell CNN”, *CNN World*, 26 May 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Teklehaymanot G. Weldemichel, “What does Eritrea’s ruler’s statement in Nairobi tell us about justice and accountability for human rights violations in Tigray”, *TGHAT*, 9 February 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Wyss, “War and Accountability in Tigray: Interview with Professor Steven Ratner, Commissioner on the International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia”, *Harvard International Review*, 1 February 2024.