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Public Statement

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Amnesty International appeals for the release of six women prisoners of conscience on the occasion of Eritrean Independence Day

As Eritrea celebrates its 12th year of independence on 24 May, large numbers of prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners – possibly amounting to several thousands – languish in indefinite incommunicado detention – held without charge or trial and without access to friends, family or lawyers.

Amongst those prisoners of conscience are six women detained solely on account of their peaceful opinions. None of the women has been allowed to see her children since her arrest. Their whereabouts are unknown.

Amnesty International urges President Issayas Afewerki to use the occasion of the anniversary of Eritrean independence to release all prisoners of conscience and ensure the fair trial of all other political prisoners. Prior to their release, Amnesty International is also urgently calling for the six women to be given immediate access to their families and their children, and any medical treatment they may require.

The six women prisoners of conscience are:

Aster Fissehatson

Aged in her 50s with one son, Aster joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1974, becoming a political commissioner and representative of its women's association. After independence in 1991, she worked in various government ministries in Asmara, and was elected to the central committee of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ, formed from the EPLF). In 1996 she was dismissed from government employment on account of her criticisms of the government but was re-instated in 1999 during the war with Ethiopia. She was arrested in the September 2001 round-up of political dissidents, who included her former husband, then Vice-President of Eritrea, Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo.

Aster Yohannes

Aged 46 with four children (including twins), Aster joined the EPLF in 1979 when she was an electrical engineering student at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. Her husband, Petros Solomon, detained in the September 2001 round-up, was head of the EPLF security and intelligence service. After independence in 1991, she brought up her children and then worked for government departments from 1995 while her husband held ministerial posts including Foreign Minister. Aster herself was reportedly not engaged in political or public activities, and in January 2000 went to study marketing at Phoenix University, Arizona, USA with a UN grant. Despite her husband's arrest and her own fears of being arrested, she returned voluntarily to Eritrea on 11 December 2003 after graduation to be with her children. She was detained in

arrival at Asmara airport, despite a previous government guarantee of her safety. Aster is evidently detained as a consequence of her husband's detention. She is reportedly held in a secret security section (known as Wenjel Mirmera) of the 2nd police station in Asmara. She has not been allowed to see her children. Aster suffers from asthma and a heart complaint.

Helen Berhane

Aged 30, a well-known evangelical church singer who has recorded several music cassettes and is a member of the Rema church, Helen has been detained incommunicado since 13 May 2004. She is one of almost 150 women members of banned evangelical churches who have been detained without charge or trial on account of their religious beliefs. She refuses to abandon her faith and religious singing, despite promises of release if she does so. Helen is held at Mai Serwa military camp near Asmara in a metal shipping container, hot at night and cold in the day, with no washing or toilet facilities.

Miriam Hagos

Aged in her 50s with one daughter, Miriam was brought up by Eritrean parents in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In the early 1970s, with a degree in commerce, she moved to the USA and was active in an EPLF-affiliated student association. She joined the EPLF in 1977 and worked in the information department in EPLF-held territory. Miriam was detained three times by the EPLF during the liberation struggle on account of her opinions. After independence in 1991 she worked in different government departments, and was Director of Cinemas at the time of her arrest. She was detained on 6 October 2001, apparently on suspicion of connections with the detained dissidents. She has kidney and eye problems.

Saadia Ahmed

Aged 24, a reporter for the official Eritrea Television Arabic service, Saadia has been detained since February 2002. She was arrested with two other members of the Arabic television service at a time when questions were being raised among the Muslim community, which comprises almost half the population of Eritrea, particularly in the poorer lowland areas, about the subordinate status of the Arabic language in Eritrea.

Senait Debessai

Aged in her 40s with three daughters, Senait joined the EPLF in 1976, initially working in healthcare. She later joined the EPLF folklore cultural group, performing as a singer and guitarist. After independence she was elected to the executive committee of the National Union of Eritrean Women. Senait moved to Kenya in the mid-1990s when her husband was appointed Eritrea's ambassador to Kenya. On their return to Eritrea Senait entered the University of Asmara to study accountancy. She was arrested on 15 November 2003, allegedly through the influence of her husband with whom she was engaged in divorce proceedings. The arrest may also have been connected with the re-arrest apparently for political reasons at the same time of her brother, Ermias Debessai, former EPLF representative in the United Kingdom during the liberation struggle, and later Eritrea's ambassador to China.

Background

Large numbers – possibly several thousands - of prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners are held in Eritrea in indefinite and incommunicado detention without charge or trial. They include former EPLF liberation movement leaders and government ministers; journalists from the private and state media; civil servants and professionals; trade union leaders; members of minority Christian religions; Muslims accused of links with Islamist groups in a Sudan-based and Ethiopia-supported armed opposition coalition, the Eritrean National Alliance; asylum - seekers fleeing military conscription who were forcibly returned by Malta in 2002 and by Libya in 2003; and members of the armed forces. Some have been detained in secret for over a decade, such as General Bitweded Abraha and three Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors to military service – Paulos Iyassu, Isaac Moges and Negede Teklemariam.

Eleven former government ministers and EPLF leaders were detained in September 2001 in a crackdown by President Issayas Afewerki, the EPLF leader who won independence from Ethiopia in 1991.

The crackdown targeted those calling for democratic reforms after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia. All private newspapers were also shut down and ten leading journalists of the private press and three state-media reporters are still detained. Some 900 Christian evangelicals are currently detained in the continuing pattern of arrests of members of minority Christian religions since May 2002, when the government banned religions other than the main Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Muslim faiths. None of these prisoners have been charged or tried. The whereabouts of most of them is not known to their families.

Countless other individuals have “disappeared” into secret military and security prisons all over Eritrea. One such case is Said Abdulmenan, a British citizen and former refugee from Ethiopian rule in Eritrea, who was arrested on 27 May 2004 on a visit to Eritrea, and has been detained incommunicado without charge or trial or embassy access since then.

Some of the prisoners have been tortured, particularly conscription evaders. Many are held in appalling conditions in metal shipping containers or underground cells, without adequate medical treatment or sanitary facilities.

In response to international concern about these serious abuses of basic human rights, the Eritrean government persists in denying that it is violating human rights. Despite the evidence, the government attempts to claim that there is no religious persecution and refuses to communicate with families of prisoners or international human rights organizations.