



## BECOME AWARE & TAKE ACTION

### BECOME AWARE:

#### PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN ERITREA

IRD has been monitoring human rights and religious freedom violations in Eritrea since 2002. Eritrea is an egregious violator of human rights. It has an abysmal record with the U.S. State Department's report on human rights. It has also been listed as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by the State Department's Office on Religious Freedom since 2004.

In addition, Eritrea continues to be named as a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which advises that the conditions for religious freedom in Eritrea *appear to have worsened* over the past year, and include arbitrary arrests and detention without charge of members of unregistered religious groups, and the torture or other ill-treatment of hundreds of persons on account of their religion, sometimes resulting in death.

#### GOVERNMENT SANCTIONED REPRESSION AND PERSECUTION

But it's not just U.S. Government reports that paint this bleak scenario. Dispatches from people on the ground in Eritrea, from Eritreans living outside the country, and from other human rights news sources say the same thing. The ruling Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) government (Why do these regimes always cloak themselves in irony? Popular? Democracy? Justice?) of Eritrea, under President Isaias Afwerki, has become increasingly repressive since canceling elections in 2001. Since that time, the PFDJ has imposed severe, even draconian restrictions on religious freedom, and has enacted harsh and extremely bizarre persecution against religious believers of every faith, but particularly of Christians from the "unregistered" minority denominations such as the Pentecostal and evangelical churches.

Christians from unregistered, minority denominations face discrimination, persecution, imprisonment, torture, and even death at the hands of the repressive Eritrean government. The property of Christians is confiscated, Bibles are burned, young people found to be Christians who are serving in the



military are brutalized, and Christians are subject to arbitrary arrests and detentions. These detentions take place in the most inhuman and brutal manner conceivable. **In fact, the conditions of Christian prisoners in Eritrea are actually inconceivable!**

## CHRISTIANS IN CONTAINERS

More than 2,000 Christians – men, women, and children – are currently imprisoned in Eritrea for such “crimes” as having prayer meetings, attending a wedding or a wedding rehearsal dinner, having a picnic in the park, or any other type of harmless gathering. So, among the international human rights standards of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that are being violated by Eritrean government is the right to assembly.

One well-known case of persecution in Eritrea was that of a Pentecostal Christian gospel singer, Helen Berhane, who was arrested and detained for her music. She, like many hundreds of other Eritrean Christians, was kept in **conditions tantamount to torture. She was confined in a metal shipping container.** When pressure from around the world (including from fellow artists such as Gwen Stefani, Coldplay, Sting, Duran Duran, and others) forced the Eritrean government to finally release Ms. Berhane more than two years after her arrest, she had permanent injuries to her feet and legs.



Amnesty International has said about the shipping container prisons: “conditions in the containers, which have no light or ventilation, are said to be extremely hot and suffocating.” They add that the prisoners are “allegedly being given little food, refused medical care, and have to perform bodily functions inside the container.” In addition, many of the security facilities where Christian prisoners are kept are in the desert. One of these prisons is Wi’a military training center, which Release-Eritrea, a Christian human rights group, describes as **“one of the hottest spots in the world.”** They observe that it was used by the Italian colonizers of Eritrea for cases of extreme punishment. President Afwerki is making the same use of it today against innocent Christians!

## PERSECUTION IS ON THE INCREASE – THIS IS TORTURE

The persecution of Christians in Eritrea is not only continuing, but increasing. According to a Compass Direct News Service report in September 2005, there were 17 pastors and more than 900 Eritrean



Christians incarcerated. Now, in 2008, there are over twice that number. These victims of government abuse remain jailed in prisons, military confinement camps, police stations, and metal shipping containers for months and even years after being arrested. Eritrean authorities have refused to charge the victims with any crime or bring them before a court of law. While in custody, Pentecostal and evangelical Christians are tortured to attempt to force them to recant their faith.

One evangelical Christian woman, Azib Simon, who had been imprisoned and tortured for her faith since last December 2007, died of malaria in Eritrea's Wi'a Military Training Center in July 2008, according to a report from Compass Direct News Service. Weakened by ongoing torture, sources said, Simon died only a week after contracting malaria. And like many Christian prisoners, Simon received no medical treatment for her malaria. Compass Direct says that Simon is the fifth Christian that they have been able to confirm has died in an Eritrean prison after being tortured for refusing to recant.

This outrage against Christians in Eritrea must not be allowed to continue. The Eritrean government denies that they are persecuting people of faith, saying they these are political issues of rebellion against the government, but the roll of prisoners and martyrs in Eritrea says otherwise. Surely we can raise our voices to urge the U.S. Congress to action, and we can attempt to shame the Eritrean government into stopping this torture and releasing the innocent prisoners of faith in Eritrea.

Even being a voice for the Christians in Eritrea is hazardous! On October 30, 2008, Eritrean government supporters in Rome attacked human rights activists protesting the persecution of Christians in Eritrea. Similar situations have taken place in London, Stockholm, and New York. Dania Avallone, an Italian female human rights activist who was knocked unconscious by the Eritrean thugs told [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#), "This is what they do in Eritrea; they forcibly repress everyone and everything. But we are in Europe, and we have the right to speak out. They can't stop us or persuade the police to move us, so in their frustration they assault us." Avallone, who said that it was the fourth time that she and her friends had been assaulted by supporters of the Eritrean government, continued, "I am Italian living in my own country, yet they assault me without fear. Can you imagine what they will do to an Eritrean refugee? They can kill them at any time and no one will know or take action."

### **TAKE ACTION:**

In spite of U.S. policy by both the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the U.S. State Department over the past four years condemning the egregious human rights abuses in Eritrea, and diplomatic actions ordered by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the Eritrean government has



stubbornly persisted in its actions, and has, at the same time, denied that it is persecuting Christians. They have not allowed U.S. Embassy Officials to meet with government authorities responsible for religious affairs, despite repeated attempts by the U.S. government.

What can we do? Pray for the Christians in Eritrea on a regular basis, asking the Lord to intervene in this seemingly impossible situation.

We must also expose this persecution in such a way that the media and our U.S. Congress will take action. This should not be difficult. **People are being held in shipping containers! We should be able to exploit this brutal outrage in such a way that it will come back and bite the Eritrean government.** At present, in spite of the attention by USCIRF and by the State Department, there are no pieces of legislation in Congress concerning religious persecution. Congress should also hold hearings on persecution in Eritrea.

Because of the lack of response by Eritrea to pressure from the U.S. government alone, we must also reach out and work with Christians in Europe and elsewhere who are advocates for human rights in Eritrea. [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) took part in a special hearing on this issue in September 2008 sponsored by the European Union. We can encourage our own church leaders who have partner church leaders in Europe to work together with one voice for the Christians in Eritrea. You can also get in touch with [Free Eritrea](#), a U.S. advocacy group for Eritrea. IRD's Religious Liberty program has met together with some of the American and Eritrean leaders of this organization, and is looking forward to working together for freedom and human rights in Eritrea.

### **Other resources about Christians in Eritrea:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbVXriOdBdl&feature=related>

<http://blip.tv/file/443487> (BBC Interview with Helen Berhane)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxMZx4mfZhw> (Amnesty YouTube of Helen at Christian festival)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkfCvbGslrI&feature=related>

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=28633>

[http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions\\_details.asp?ActionID=10](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=10)