



THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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From The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

**Contribution to the Report of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights
prepared pursuant to the new review mechanism of the Human Rights Council,**

established by GA Resolution 60/251

and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution 5/1 of 18 June 2007

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Eritrea

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SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSION

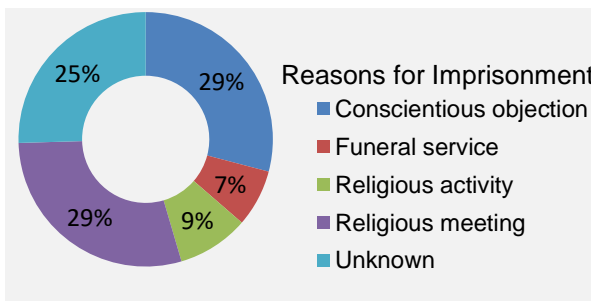
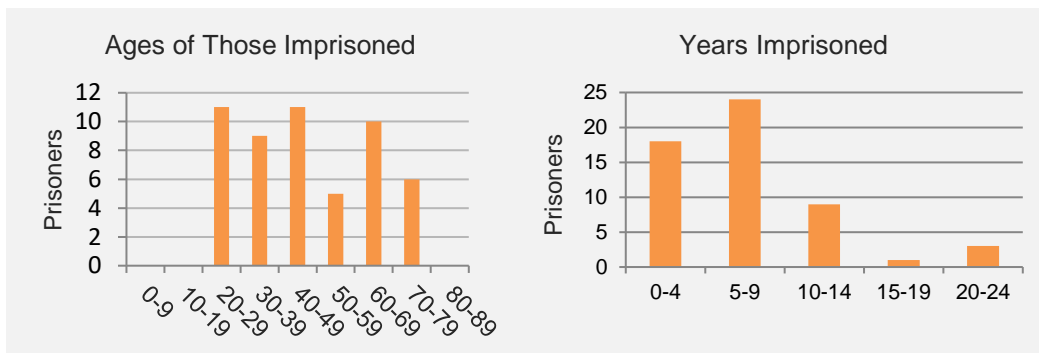
This submission to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on Eritrea highlights human rights issues in the past four and a half years.

As described below, serious issues of concern persist. Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eritrea and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the government of Eritrea to:

- (1) Immediately release all of Jehovah’s Witnesses currently in prison.
- (2) Allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to have full rights as citizens, to register as a religion and to manifest religious beliefs individually and jointly with others in the peaceful exercise of freedom of religion and freedom of assembly.
- (3) Recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide for alternative civilian service so that Jehovah’s Witnesses may serve their country with a clean conscience.
- (4) Meet with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss these issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses (EAJW) is a charity registered in the United Kingdom. It assists adherents of the faith of Jehovah’s Witnesses in various areas of the world.
2. Jehovah’s Witnesses experience their most intense persecution in Eritrea. The government has consistently imprisoned, tortured and harassed Jehovah’s Witnesses since Eritrea became an independent country in 1993.
 - Eritrea currently imprisons 53 of Jehovah’s Witnesses.
 - Eritrean officials refuse to meet with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses.
3. This submission focuses on the blatant violations of the rights protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”).



Many seniors are imprisoned:

Nine are in their 60’s, and six are in their 70’s.

Three male Witnesses have been in prison for 23 years without formal charges against them.

II. PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ON THE GROUND

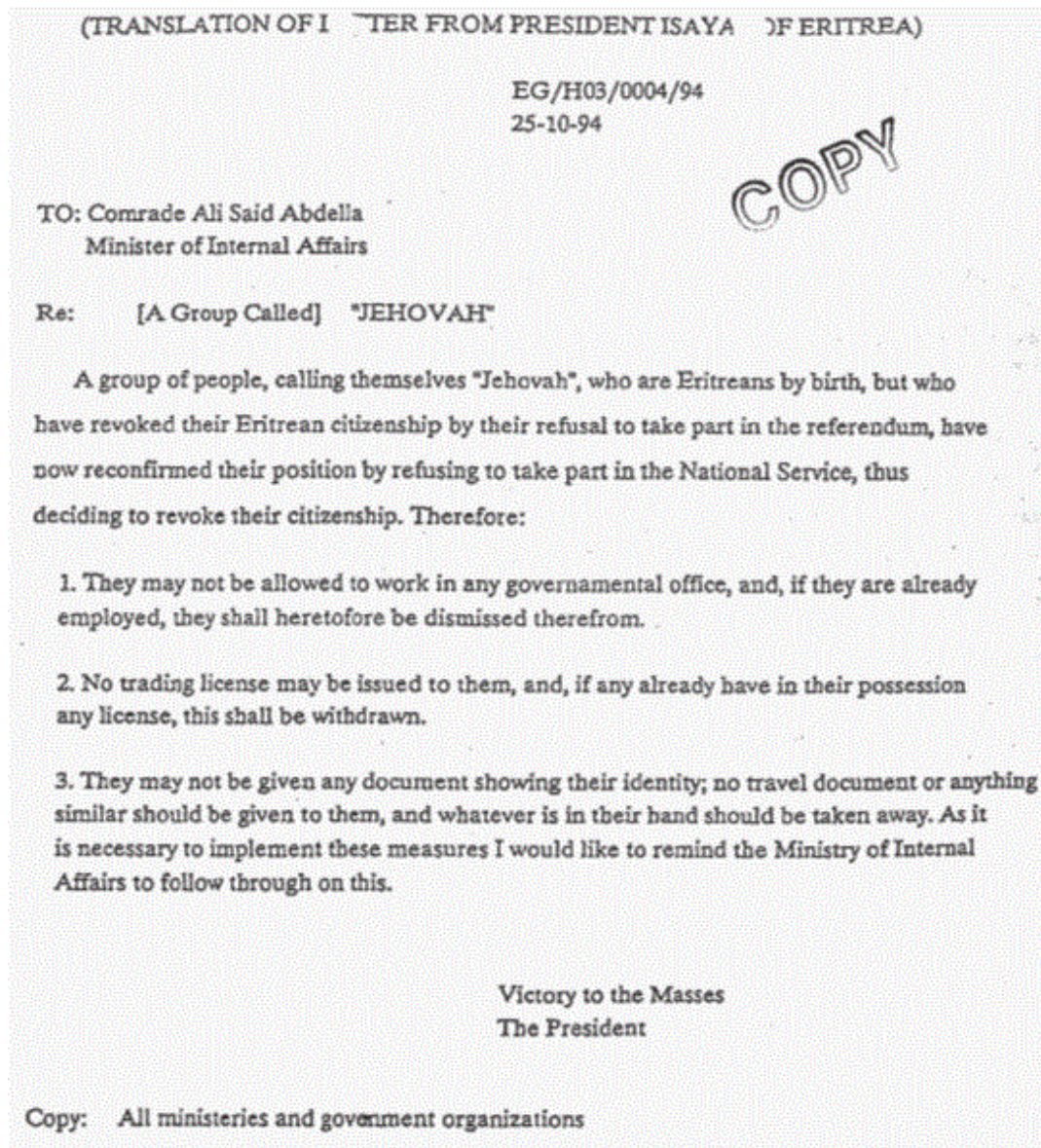
Restrictions on Religious Freedom

4. Background. The persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eritrea escalated after a presidential decree dated 25 October 1994 declared that Jehovah’s Witnesses who are Eritrean by birth revoked their citizenship “by their refusal to take part in the referendum and have

reconfirmed their position by refusing to take part in the National Service.” Consequently, the government stripped Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eritrea of their basic civil rights.

5. The government does not allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to work in government offices, revokes their business licences and confiscates their identity cards and travel documents.

A photocopy of the presidential decree banning Jehovah’s Witnesses



6. Jehovah’s Witnesses cannot receive a full secular education. Upon completing the 11th grade, high school students are obliged to register at the Sawa military camp to complete their 12th-grade education while receiving military training. Therefore, in order to maintain their conscientious stand to refrain from military training and military service, Jehovah’s Witnesses are unable to register.
7. Since 2008, Eritrean authorities have further oppressed Jehovah’s Witnesses, arresting and imprisoning elderly men, women and children. Many Witnesses were forced to flee the country; those who remain must exercise extreme caution and are severely limited in their religious activity and worship.

UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/29/L.23, dated 2 July 2015, called upon the government of Eritrea to “respect everyone’s right to freedom of expression and to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.”

International Body Draws Attention to the Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses

8. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) determined in its second report, dated **9 May 2016** (A/HRC/32/47), that the severe and uninterrupted persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses since 1991 amounts to a crime against humanity.

The COIE report states: “Jehovah’s Witnesses have been targeted since May 1991 ... Persecution has been an integral part of the Government’s efforts to maintain its authority in a manner contrary to international law. The commission therefore finds that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of persecution, a crime against humanity, in a widespread and systematic manner since May 1991.”—Paragraph 88.

Status of Prisoners

9. Of those currently imprisoned, 16 were apparently arrested for their conscientious objection to military service. Others were arrested by the police while attending religious meetings or publicly sharing their faith or for undisclosed reasons. Of the many Jehovah’s Witnesses imprisoned since 1993, only one has ever been tried in court and sentenced. Most do not know how long they will remain in prison.

Harsh Treatment in the Meitir Camp

10. On **5 October 2011**, all 25 male Witnesses imprisoned at the Meitir Camp were transferred from the regular prison facility to an area for special punishment and were placed in a half-buried metal building. They remained in the special punishment area until August 2012. In the summer months, the intense heat made it unbearable to stay inside the building during the day. The men remained outside under an open-air structure with a thatched roof and then returned to the metal building at night. As a result of this experience, the health of several of the Witnesses became critical and was further diminished by inadequate food and insufficient water.
11. In **July 2017**, all Witnesses at the Meitir Camp were transferred, along with other prisoners, to the Mai Serwa Prison, just outside of Asmara, where conditions may be more bearable.

Deaths in prison camps or after release from prison

12. Four of Jehovah’s Witnesses died while imprisoned in Eritrea. Yohannes Haile and Misghina Gebretinsae died in the Meitir Camp:

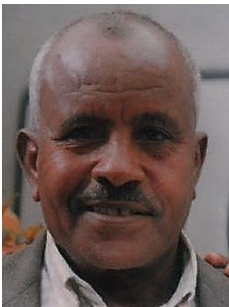


Yohannes Haile,
died at age 68
in the Meitir Camp on
16 August 2012.



Misghina Gebretinsae,
died at age 62
in the Meitir Camp in
July 2011.

13. Habtemichael Tesfamariam and Habtemichael Mekonen died in the Mai Serwa Prison:



Habtemichael Tesfamariam,
died at age 76
in the Mai Serwa Prison
on 3 January 2018



Habtemichael Mekonen,
died at age 77
in the Mai Serwa Prison
on 6 March 2018

14. Kahsai Mekonnen, who was arrested in October 2008 when he was 76 years old, was released from the Meitir Camp a year later because of serious health problems. He died in 2013 as a result of the conditions he endured while imprisoned at such an advanced age. Because of the treatment they received while in custody, two other Witnesses—Tsehaye Tesfamariam and Goitom Gebrekristos—also died, on 30 November 2016 and 29 December 2014 respectively, after their release from the Meitir Camp.

UN Human Rights Council report of Special Rapporteur Sheila B. Keetharuth, dated 13 May 2014, recommended that the government of Eritrea “guarantee the physical integrity of all prisoners; ensure access to medical treatment for those in need . . . and improve the conditions of detention in accordance with international standards.”

Denial of Right to Religious Assembly

15. A number of those currently in prison were arrested for attending peaceful religious meetings with fellow Witnesses. In **April 2014**, police arrested members of the Saba Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses who were attending the annual commemoration of Jesus’ death. They were not released on bail until 21 March 2016, when 54 of them were finally charged with “illegal assembly” and 53 were fined. One Witness, 28-year-old Saron Gebru, pleaded not guilty. This was the first time that a Witness had been formally charged and tried in court.

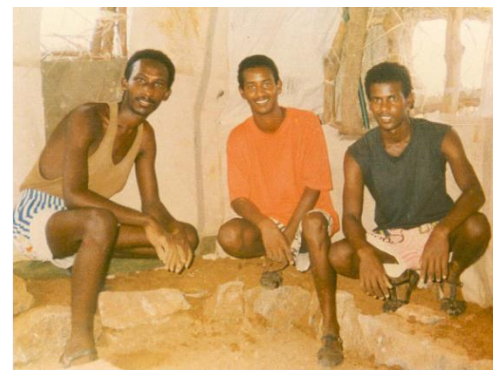
16. On **5 April 2016**, the court tried Saron Gebru without her having legal counsel. She was convicted, sentenced to a six-month prison term and held without opportunity to appeal in the Haz Haz Women’s Prison in Asmara until her release on **5 October 2016**.

Recent Arrests

17. On **9 April 2016**, Samuol Dawit, 27 years old, was arrested for conscientious objection to military service. On **30 March 2017**, her sister, Hadas Dawit, 38 years old, was arrested for an unknown reason. Both are detained in the Mai Serwa Prison. In September 2017, two young male Witnesses were arrested for their religious activity and detained in an Asmara jail.

Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service

18. Eritrea has no provision in its national military service program for conscientious objection. To avoid arrest by the ever-present military police who patrol the streets, most male Jehovah’s Witnesses between the ages of 18 and 40 are forced into hiding. Police arrest any they find and take them directly to a military camp. Once they express conscientious objection to military service, they are indefinitely detained without charge or trial and are usually tortured. Others of military age are forced to flee the country to avoid arrest; many have been caught in the attempt.



19. The government has imprisoned Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam in Sawa prison since 24 September 1994, apparently because of their conscientious objection to military service. In the intervening 23 years, the government has neither filed charges against them nor given them a hearing in court.
20. Other male Witnesses have been imprisoned under the same circumstances for many years. Aron Abraha has been in prison since 2001; Mussie Fessehaye, since 2003; Ambakom Tsegezab, since 2004; and three others, since 2005.

UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/29/L.23, dated 2 July 2015, calls upon the government of Eritrea to “provide for conscientious objection to military service.”

Right to Education

21. Jehovah’s Witnesses cannot receive a full secular education. Upon completing the 11th grade, high school students are obliged to register at the Sawa military camp to complete their 12th-grade education while receiving military training. Therefore, in order to maintain their conscientious stand to refrain from military training and military service, young Jehovah’s Witnesses cannot complete their basic education.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACCEPTED RECOMMENDATIONS

22. During Eritrea’s previous review in 2014, Eritrea broadly accepted the constructive recommendations as a way forward for further efforts and broader cooperation in basic

human rights issues and fundamental freedoms. However, as demonstrated in this report, the recommendations below, accepted by Eritrea, have not been properly implemented¹.

- *122.157. Guarantee the right to freedom of religion for the Eritrean citizens (Romania).*
- *122.158, 122.159, 122.160 and 122.154. Ensure that the rights of all its people to freedom of expression, religion and peaceful assembly are respected (Japan, Lithuania, Belgium and France).*
- *122.156. Take steps to improve the status of religious minorities and ensure protection for religious communities from persecution (Canada).*
- *122.162. Take policy and other measures that ensure the enjoyment of freedom of expression, opinion and assembly (Botswana).*

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

23. Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea and worldwide respectfully ask that the Committee make the following recommendations to the government of Eritrea:

- (1) Immediately release all of Jehovah's Witnesses currently in prison.
- (2) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to have full rights as citizens, register as a religion and manifest religious beliefs individually and jointly with others in the peaceful exercise of their freedom of religion and freedom of assembly.
- (3) Recognise the right of individual Jehovah's Witnesses to conscientiously object to military service and provide for alternative civilian service so that they may serve their country with a clean conscience.
- (4) Meet with Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the issues raised in this submission.

All of the above is respectfully submitted by

The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

¹ A/HRC/26/13/Add.1