

Reporters Without Borders

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Africa - Eritrea

Evidence needed

Call for proof of ambassador's claim that journalist is still alive

30 January 2014

Reporters Without Borders wonders how much credence should be given to a claim by Eritrean ambassador to Israel Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas, in a comment to journalists this week in Tel Aviv, that **Dawit Isaac**, a journalist who was arrested in 2001, is still alive.

Isaac, who co-founded the independent newspaper Setit in 1997, was arrested on 23 September 2001 in the course of a round-up of journalists and government critics, and was last seen alive in detention in January 2010.

Defending the arrest of Isaac, a holder of dual Swedish and Eritrean nationality, the Eritrean ambassador to Israel added: "When he comes and doesn't follow the country's laws, he must be punished."

Reporters Without Borders condemns the lack of information about Isaac's fate and expects more from the Eritrean government than a casual aside from one of its ambassadors. Many questions remain unanswered.

"We call on the government to produce solid evidence proving that Dawit Isaac really is alive and to allow humanitarian organizations, his family and his lawyers to visit him in prison," said Prisca Orsonneau, who heads the Reporters Without Borders legal unit.

"The ambassador is demonstrating appalling cynicism when he says Isaac broke the law because Isaac has never been taken before a judge. He should have been taken before a judge within a month of his arrest. All our legal petitions about this case have gone unanswered."

Orsonneau added: "Not only has the Eritrean supreme court not ruled on the habeas corpus petition submitted in June 2011, but the Eritrean government has yet to respond to the petition accepted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in March 2013."

[The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights agreed to examine the Isaac case last March](#) in response to a petition submitted by three jurists in February. Eritrea failed to comply with its obligation to respond by November 2013.

"We call on the Eritrean authorities to respond to this petition and to release Isaac and all the other journalists that they are holding illegally," said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk.

Of the 11 journalists who were arrested in September 2011, [Reporters Without Borders has established that at least three of them have died in detention.](#)

Eritrea continued to be Africa's biggest prison for journalists in 2013 with at least 28 detained. Eritrea has been ranked last in [the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index for the past even years.](#)

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