

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/eritrea-three-journalists-held-since-2001-30-08-2012,43298.html>

Africa - Eritrea

Death camp

Three journalists held since 2001 die in Eiraeiro prison camp

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After several weeks of investigating reports from sources in Eritrea and from prison guards who fled the country, Reporters Without Borders has been able to confirm that three more journalists – **Dawit Habtemichael**, **Mattewos Habteab** and **Wedi Itay** – have died in the northeastern prison camp of Eiraeiro. All three had been held since late 2001.

Another journalist arrested in February 2009, whose identity has not been established with certainty, has also reportedly died in detention – in his case, in Abi Abeito military prison near the capital, Asmara.

The only good news is that **Tesfalidet "Topo" Mebrahtu**, a well-known sports journalist who worked for state-owned radio *Dimtsi Hafash* and state-owned *Eri-TV*, was "released on bond" (he is still under surveillance, with relatives acting as guarantors) in early 2012 after being held for 10 months.

"While all eyes are turned on Syria, another, less visible, tragedy is being played out in Eritrea, a country forgotten by the international community although it is the world's leading media freedom violator and Africa's biggest prison for journalists " Reporters Without Borders said.

"In Eritrea, journalists have been thrown in prison just for daring to express their opinions. Some have been held for more than 10 years and are disappearing one by one. Located in the northeast of the country, Eiraeiro is not a prison, it is a death camp."

Reporters Without Borders first revealed details about conditions at Eiraeiro in January 2008 (<http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-new-revel...>), after meeting a former camp guard. Further details were provided in 2010, on the basis of statements made by another former guard, Eyob Bahta, shortly after he fled to Ethiopia. What follows is based on new eyewitness accounts from this death camp.

I - Three more of the journalists held since 2001 die in detention

Dawit Habtemichael Arrested on 21 September 2001 after hiding for three days in the school where he taught physics, Habtemichael was the deputy editor and co-founder of the biweekly *Meqaleh*. Aged 30 at the time of his arrest, he was one of the youngest of the Eritrean journalists to be detained. After his mental health began to deteriorate in 2007, he became schizophrenic and finally lost all contact with reality in 2010. The failure to treat his steadily worsening mental condition is thought to have been the cause of his death in the second half of 2010. He was prisoner No. 12 at Eiraeiro.

Mattewos Habteab *Meqaleh* co-founder and editor **Mattewos Habteab** and another journalist, **Temesgen Gebreyesus**, were transferred to a prison in the Dahlak Archipelago in late 2008 but were subsequently brought back to the mainland, to Eiraeiro, and it was there that Habteab finally succumbed to the camp's appalling conditions.

Sahle Tsegazab, aka **Wedi Itay** Better known by the pen-name of Wedi Itay, Sahle Tsegazab was a freelance journalist and writer who often worked for privately-owned newspapers such as *Keste Debona* as well as the pro-government daily *Hadas Eritrea*. Arrested in October 2001, he died at Eiraeiro from an identified illness and from the lack of medical treatment.

It was previously established that four of the other journalists arrested around the same time in 2001 – **Medhanie Haile, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, Said Abdulkader** and **Fessehaye "Joshua" Yohannes** – died in detention.

As a result, only four members of the group of journalists arrested in September/October 2001 – **Dawit Isaac, Seyoum Tsehaye, Amanuel Asrat** and **Temesgen Gebreyesus** – are still alive.

II - Torture and mistreatment of state media journalists held since 2009

Former prison guard Berhane Afro fled the country earlier this year and is seeking asylum in Israel. He was a guard at Adi Abeito military prison, where most of the journalists arrested at *Radio Bana* and other state media in February 2009 are being held.

He said information minister Ali Abdu and one of his employees, identified only as Asmelash, went to Adi Abeito recently to talk to the prison's governor, Wedi Welela. He also reported that journalists held at Adi Abeito are subjected to various forms of torture and mistreatment including electric shock, beatings and solitary confinement. Food is sometimes withheld and they are denied medical care.

A journalist identified only by the given name of Bereket reportedly died as a result of these appalling conditions. It is believed that this journalist is **Bereket Misghina**, but Reporters Without Borders cannot confirm this with complete certainty.

All the journalists arrested in 2009 are accused of collaborating with western NGOs and government and with exile opposition groups. They are allowed no visits. Some, such as the journalist, writer and translator **Mulubrahan Habtegebriel** and the young journalist and poet **Meles Negusse**, are still being held at Adi Abeito. Others have been moved to other detention centres. They include *Eri-TV* journalist **Isaac Abraham**, who has been transferred to May Srwa.

Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, [a woman journalist who was arrested in February 2009](#), is reportedly still in an Asmara hospital.

Photo : Eiraeiro death camp

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