

Reporters Without Borders

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Africa - Eritrea

10 years of terror

Issaias Afeworki – no less dangerous than Muammar Gaddafi or Bashar al-Assad

16 September 2011

Ten years ago, on 18 September 2001, the entire world's eyes were still turned to New York, the target of Al Qaeda's devastating attacks the previous week. In Asmara, the Eritrean government took advantage of this distraction to launch a brutal political purge.

"To the international community's indifference, several ministers and former generals and all the newspaper editors were thrown in jail in the space of a week," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard said. "All the privately-owned publications were shut down. The country embarked on an era of terror from which it has yet to emerge. Ten years later, no one can continue to ignore the Eritrean regime's brutality."

"Ten years have gone by without the international community ever understanding the scale of the tragedy suffered by the Eritrean people: a complete absence of freedom of expression, constant surveillance of journalists, harassment of their families, enforced disappearances and secret detention in inhuman conditions.

"The sanctions that were finally adopted by the UN Security Council in 2009 are clearly not being applied because several senior Eritrean officials have just visited Europe. Nonetheless, the Eritrean dictator, Issaias Afeworki, is no less dangerous and cruel than Muammar Gaddafi or Bashar al-Assad."



Eritrea has been ranked last in the Reporters Without Borders international press freedom index for the past four years in a row. More than 30 journalists are currently detained in Eritrea. This makes it the world's second biggest prison for the media, after China.

According to the information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, at least four journalists have so far been arrested this year. They join the journalists who have been held since 2001 and who are still languishing in the country's prison camps.

Three of the latest detainees are radio journalists – **Nebiel Edris**, **Ahmed Usman** and **Mohamed Osman** – who were arrested in February. The fourth is **Tesfalidet "Topo" Mebrahtu**, a famous sports journalist on state-owned radio *Dimtsi Hafash* and state-owned *Eri-TV*. Arrested at the end of March, he is now thought to be in a detention centre near the capital, either May Srwa or Adi Abeito, a military prison. His family is not allowed to visit him.

To escape the extremely oppressive atmosphere in the state media, where everyone is closely watched and no one is allowed to speak freely, Eritrean journalists often flee the country or at least try to. Some succeed, but others are caught and

arrested. This is what happened to **Eyob Kessete**, who was arrested for the second time in the summer of 2010 as he was trying to flee.

Border guards have orders to fire at once on anyone spotted trying to cross the border illegally. The journalist **Paulos Kidane**, for example, was gunned down in 2007 as he tried to cross into Sudan. Those who make it usually find a precarious existence awaiting them, and sometimes a tragic fate. **Lidya Mengesteab**, who used to work for *Dimtsi Hafash* and *Eri-TV* before fleeing to Sudan and then to Libya, died with many other exiles while trying to cross the Mediterranean in a boat in April.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the round-ups of journalists and closure of all the privately-owned print media, Reporters Without Borders is launching an international ad campaign about Eritrea in English, French, Spanish, German, Swedish, Italian and Tigrinya. [Click here](#) and [click here](#) to download the posters. It is also releasing [an updated list of journalists detained in Eritrea](#).



The following journalists are detained in Eritrea right now: Amanuel Asrat, Mattewos Habteab, Temesghen Gebreyesus, Seyoum Tsehaye (winner of the Reporters Without Borders Prize in 2007), Dawit Habtemichael, Dawit Isaac, Hamid Mohamed Said, Saleh Al Jezaeeri, Daniel Mussie, Ibrahim Abdella, Eyob Netserab, Isaac Abraham, Mulubrhan Habtegebriel, Girmay Abraham, Nega Woldegeorgis, Bereket Misghina, Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, Basilius Zemo, Senait Habtu, Meles Negusse Kiflu, Mohammed Said Mohammed, Biniam Ghirmay, Esmail Abd-el-Kader, Araya Defoch, Mohammed Dafla, Simon Elias, Yemane Hagos, Stifanos (father's name unknown), Henok (father's name unknown), Wedi Itay, Said Abdulhai, Eyob Kessete, Nebiel Edris, Ahmed Usman, Mohamed Osman, Tesfalidet Mebrahtu and two journalists whose names are not known.

Four of the journalists who were arrested in September 2001 subsequently died in detention. They are Medhanie Haile, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, Said Abdulkader and Fessehaye "Joshua" Yohannes.

Two other journalists – Musa Sila and Rahel (father's name unknown) – are missing. It is not known if they were arrested, if they fled the country or if they are dead.

Sign a [petition for the release of journalists imprisoned in Eritrea](#).

Dawit Isaac, the co-founder of the now closed newspaper *Setit*, is one of the journalists who were arrested in September 2001. Although he has dual Swedish and Eritrean citizenship, he has been held for the past 10 years without ever being tried, like all the others who were arrested at the same time. None of the detained journalists has ever been brought to trial.

Last July, the Swedish section of Reporters Without Borders organized the submission of a Habeas Corpus petition signed by two European lawyers and a European jurist to the Eritrean supreme court. It asks that Dawit Isaac, assisted by his lawyer, be brought before a court and demonstrates that, under Eritrea's own criminal code provisions and its international obligations, it is illegal to hold someone without bringing formal charges against them.

Dawit Habtemichael is also one of the journalists who were rounded up 10 years ago. He was arrested in Asmara on 21 September 2001 and is being held at the Eiraeiro prison camp. As a tribute to him, Reporters Without Borders is publishing the following personal account by one of his friends:

*"Dawit Habtemichael
Good memories can bring the bitterest tears and disturbing fears.*

Between April 1999 and September 2001, I spent many happy, exhilarating and inspiring hours in Asmara, the beautiful capital of Eritrea, with Dawit Habtemichael, acting editor of the Meqaleh newspaper. Dawit was popular and sociable and I well remember lots of enjoyable hours in his company. But the welfare of Eritrea and its people was the main concern and on that he was passionate.

At that time, the widespread belief was that Eritrea had been the victim of murderous invasion by Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000 and Dawit used his considerable skills and dynamism to support Eritreans and their cause in Meqaleh. By 2001 there was an uneasy peace with Ethiopia and many UN peacekeepers in Eritrea and much uncertainty and debate about the future. That debate was spearheaded mainly by members of the Government and was reflected in the pages of Meqaleh and the other independent newspapers.

In later years, President Isaias described these journalists and politicians as being a threat to Eritrean national security but, in 2001, Dawit's journalism work was almost mundane; he was simply recording and reporting what was happening in his country as reporters do every day in almost every country in the world except Eritrea.

In September 2001, almost unnoticed by the outside world which had thoughts only for the 9/11 attacks the week before, all private newspapers in Eritrea were closed down, the dissident politicians and the leading journalists were arrested. As I lived quite far from Asmara It was some time before I discovered what had happened and in the ten years that have followed it has become even more difficult to get any information. Since 21st September 2001, none of Dawit's friends or family have seen him, spoken to him or been given any firm news. English PEN reported his death in November 2006 but, in 2010, a former prison guard described him as Prisoner Number Twelve, chained and alone in a tiny cell at Eiraeiro, an inaccessible prison camp in northern Eritrea.

I know that I cannot really understand how Dawit's life has been over the past decade and I do not understand the heartless silence about Dawit's 'disappearance'. When Lady Kinnock, who had a long record of being concerned about Eritrea, became a member of the British Government, I thought that, at last, there was someone of power, who might be able to do something. I asked Lord Hylton to put down a Written Question in the House of Lords. Lady Kinnock's official response was "We have no record of any representations from PEN or Reporters without Borders concerning arrests and possible disappearances or deaths in custody of journalists in Eritrea in recent years. However we have received letters on the persecution of Christians and on human rights abuses generally." (20th July 2009). After raising the arrest of the journalists in October 2001, even Amnesty International has been strangely uninterested and inactive. Admittedly, in January 2010, Amnesty Magazine published a letter from me in which I complained about Amnesty's lack of publicity or action but the inactivity has continued.

I have been a poor and weak friend to Dawit in succumbing to the great wall of apathy that the world has erected around that little cell in northern Eritrea; but I still hope that stronger voices can be raised on his behalf.

Alex Hamilton"

You can download those documents on our website :

- List of journalists in jail in Eritrea (September 2011), (PDF - 1.5 Mb)
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