



## RESOLUTION ON ERITREA

The situation for freedom of expression in Eritrea remains deeply problematic. It is still one of the worst places in the world to be a journalist or writer, and at least 15 of them are imprisoned in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.<sup>1</sup> The UN Commission of Inquiry, with which the Eritrean Government refused meaningful engagement, has observed that 'individuals are routinely arbitrarily arrested and detained, tortured, disappeared or extra judicially executed', concluding that 'it is not law that rules Eritreans, but fear'.<sup>2</sup>

The Government of Eritrea tightly controls the State media and runs all news outlets in the country through the Ministry of Information, which imposes a strict editorial line. Any dissenting fact or opinion is censored, which also includes literary, artistic and cultural production. As a result of the persecution of journalists and writers, censorship practices and limited access to the internet (according to the UN International Telecommunication Union less than one percent of the population goes online), access to information in the country is extremely limited.<sup>3</sup>

On 21 January 2015, after almost six years in detention in military prisons under harsh conditions without trial or charge, six *Radio Bana* journalists were released on bail.<sup>4</sup> However, the hope that these welcome releases inspired about the fate of other detained journalists and writers has not since evaporated.

### Dawit Isaak - 17 years of incommunicado detention

For instance, 23 September 2018 marked 17 years spent behind bars as a prisoner of conscience in Eritrea for journalist, playwright and writer Dawit Isaak. He immigrated to Sweden as a refugee from Eritrea's War of Independence in 1987 and acquired Swedish citizenship, but returned to his native country to become part-owner of *Setit*, the country's first independent newspaper, following independence in 1993.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information and analysis, see the joint submission for the Universal Period Review by PEN International, PEN Eritrea in Exile and the Committee to Protect Journalists, 12 July 2018, <http://pen-international.org/news/eritrea-upr-2018>.

<sup>2</sup> See First Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/29/42, 4 June 2015, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/9278236.62757874.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham T. Zere, 'Remembering the day Eritrean Press Died', 18 September 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/remembering-day-eritrean-press-died-170918074330130.html>; Committee to Protect Journalists, '10 Most censored countries', December 2015, <https://cpi.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php>.

<sup>4</sup> PEN International, 'Eritrea: Writers released after six years' arbitrary detention', 23 January 2015, <http://pen-international.org/news/eritrea-writers-released-after-six-years-arbitrary-detention>.

In 2001, Dawit Isaak was arrested and detained together with other independent journalists, writers and opposition politicians after his newspaper published a letter that criticised President Isaias Afewerki. Their whereabouts were never officially confirmed, and the authorities have not responded to repeated inquiries made by the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea<sup>5</sup> and others about their whereabouts, state of health or access to medical treatment. Reportedly, at least some are detained at Eiraeiro, a purpose-built high-security prison with extremely harsh conditions. Allegedly, a number of the detainees have died and since 2005 there has been no certain confirmation that Dawit Isaak is still alive; in 2011 it was even reported that he had died. Despite many efforts to raise his case at the international level, he continues to be arbitrarily held in incommunicado detention, without criminal charges or conviction.

PEN International remains deeply concerned about the situation of freedom of expression in Eritrea and, in particular, about the fate of Dawit Isaak and other detained writers and journalists.

**The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International calls on the Government of Eritrea to:**

- Immediately grant the unconditional release of all writers, journalists and others who are arbitrarily detained, including Dawit Isaak, in line with its obligations under the Constitution and under international law relating to the right to life, liberty and security of the person;
- Provide evidence of the whereabouts and well-being of all prisoners of conscience who are arbitrarily held in incommunicado detention;
- Immediately halt practices of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and adequately investigate and prosecute credible allegations, in line with its obligations under Constitutional and international law;
- Ensure that all detained writers and journalists and all other prisoners receive adequate health care and access to independent legal counsel of their choice, and improve prison conditions;
- End practices of censorship and persecution of journalists and re-establish the conditions for the operation of an independent media that can report without undue constraints and interference; and,
- Cooperate with international and regional institutions and with civil society organisations, with a view to improving respect for the right to freedom of expression and to access information in particular, and human rights in general.

**The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International also urges the UN Security Council to:**

- Ensure that the situation in Eritrea is referred to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, as recommended by the former UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea<sup>6</sup> and calls upon the African Union to establish an independent accountability mechanism.

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<sup>5</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Report to the Human Rights Council, 7 June 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/CountriesMandates/ER/Pages/SREritrea.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, 9 May 2016, A/HRC/32/47, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coieritrea/pages/2016reportcoieritrea.aspx>.