

**Mr. Manfred Nowak**  
**Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel,  
inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment**  
**Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for  
Human Rights**  
**Geneva, Switzerland**

Paris, 11 January 2010

Dear Mr. Nowak,

Reporters Without Borders would like to draw your attention to the extremely worrying situation of journalists who are imprisoned in Eritrea.

After verifying with credible Eritrean sources in Asmara and abroad, our organisation is in a position to say that four journalists, about whom the authorities have provided no information, died in detention between 2005 and 2007.

The journalist, writer and playwright **Fessehaye “Joshua” Yohannes** succumbed three years ago today, on 11 January 2007, to the especially harsh conditions in which he had been held in the Eiraeiro detention centre in the desert of Northern Red Sea province for most of the time since his arrest in 2001. His body was never handed over to his family.

Fessehaye was initially held at the Asmara No. 1 police station following his arrest. He was moved to the underground prison at Dongolo in April 2002 after taking part in the hunger strike to demand the right to be tried. He was then taken several times to Halibet Hospital and Sembel Hospital in Asmara.

Fessehaye was arrested when he surrendered to the police during the week of 18-23 September 2001, after around 10 other journalists and many members of the political opposition had been arbitrarily arrested and the privately-owned press had been “suspended” by the authorities.

A veteran of the independence war against Ethiopia, he was a leading figure in political and media circles. He led a dance and theatre troupe. He had a career as a poet and playwright. And he helped found *Setit*, which was Eritrea’s most popular weekly until the September 2001 crackdown on the media.

Three other journalists also died in the Eiraeiro detention centre in 2005 and 2006. They were **Said Abdulkader**, co-founder and editor of the weekly *Admas*, **Medhane Haile**, co-founder and deputy editor of the weekly *Keste Debena*, and **Yusuf Mohamed Ali**, the editor of the weekly *Tsigenay*.

Our organisation has previously described the conditions in Eritrean jails on the basis of information gathered from former detainees and credible sources who had access to some of the prisons.

A former political prisoner held in Dongolo at the same time as Fessehaye told Reporters Without Border: “Dongolo is a prison with cells that are 1.5 metres wide and 2.5 metres tall. They are lit by a bulb that is never turned off. The prisoners are chained to the wall by their feet. Their wrists are manacled. The harm done to the prisoners’ health by these conditions is indescribable. Insects buzz around the bulb in the ceiling.”

In Eiraeiro, the cells are windowless rooms, 3 metres square, with ceilings high enough to be out of reach. The prisoners are kept in permanent solitary confinement with a light on around the clock. Some are manacled by the feet or hands. Others are not. The heads of the prisoners are shaved every two months by a barber. They are given food twice a day in a plastic bowl – a soup of lentils, vegetables or potatoes. They also have a glass of tea in the morning and six pieces of bread. They are allowed only one litre of water a day.

The prison conditions are notoriously bad in the Dahlak Islands, located off the port city of Massawa. The detainees are kept in solitary confinement in underground cells in which the heat is unbearable. As so few have returned alive from the archipelago, imprisonment in the Dahlak Islands is regarded in Eritrea as a “one-way ticket to hell.”

In Eritrea, prisoners are sometimes left for hours under a hot sun or shut in metal containers. Some are subjected to a form of torture in which they are left tied in painful positions known by such names as “helicopter,” “figure of eight” and “Jesus Christ.”

We are very worried about the 26 journalists and two media workers who are currently detained by the Eritrean authorities.

They include **Dawit Isaac**, a journalist with Swedish and Eritrean dual nationality who worked for the newspaper *Setit* and who was one of the three finalists for the 2009 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. He has health problems and has been transferred several times. He was taken to the air force hospital in Asmara last year. According to the latest information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, he was also admitted to Asmara’s Habtemariam (St. Mary) Hospital, a psychiatric clinic, twice last year.

Our organisation is also very worried about freelance reporter and photographer **Seyoum Tsehaye**, the former head of state-owned *Eri-TV* and winner of the 2007 Reporters Without Borders - Fondation de France press freedom prize, who is being held in Eiraeiro. A great deal of uncertainty surrounds the situation of **Temesghen Gebreyesus**, a sports journalist and member of the board of the biweekly *Keste Debona*, and **Mattewos Habteab**, co-founder and editor of the biweekly *Meqaleh*. Both were transferred to a prison in the Dahlak Islands in December 2008.

As regards the *Radio Bana* journalists who were arrested in February 2009, most of them are being held in Adi Abeito military prison, northwest of Asmara.

Reporters Without Borders believes the conditions in which Eritrean detainees are held are among the most disturbing in the world. The situation is made all the more appalling by the fact President Issaias Afeworki's government, which has become the disgrace of Africa, refuses to provide any information about them. This is why we ask you to do everything possible to obtain news from the authorities and, if possible, to go to Eritrea. We urge you to request access to the imprisoned journalists in order to enquire about their state of health and about prison conditions in Eritrea.

Finally, as all of Eritrea's imprisoned journalists are being held in a completely illegal manner, we ask you and your fellow rapporteurs to put enough pressure on the government to ensure that they are tried or released.

We very much hope you will take account of our requests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Julliard', with a long horizontal line underneath.

Jean-François Julliard  
Secretary-General

Copies:

- Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- Franck La Rue, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression