

E R I T R E A

# PERSECUTION OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

**Discriminated  
Imprisoned  
Marginalized**

**AUGUST 2019 | SPECIAL REPORT**

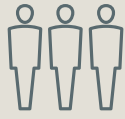
**OFFICE OF  
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WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF  
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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# 52

**IMPRISONED  
IN TOTAL:  
42 MEN AND  
10 WOMEN**

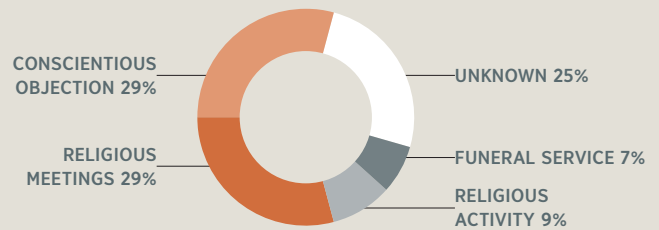


Three male Witnesses have been in prison for **24 years without formal charges against them.**



**Many seniors are imprisoned:** Ten are in their 60's and six are in their 70's.

## REASONS FOR IMPRISONMENT



# Eritrea

## AUGUST 2019 REPORT

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Since Eritrea became an independent country in 1993, Jehovah's Witnesses experience their most intense persecution in Eritrea. The government has consistently imprisoned, tortured, and harassed Jehovah's Witnesses.

- Eritrea currently imprisons 52 of Jehovah's Witnesses
- Eritrean officials refuse to meet with representatives for Jehovah's Witnesses

## Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

### INTERFERENCE WITH FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Background: In a decree dated October 25, 1994, Eritrea's president declared that Jehovah's Witnesses who are Eritrean by birth have revoked their citizenship 'by their refusal to take part in the referendum and have reconfirmed their position by refusing to take part in the National Service.' Subsequently, Eritrea escalated its persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the government has stripped Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea of basic civil rights.

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- Eritrea forbids Jehovah’s Witnesses to work in government offices, revokes their business licenses, and confiscates their identity cards and travel documents.
  - Jehovah’s Witnesses cannot receive a full secular education. Upon completing the 11th grade, high school students must register at the Sawa military camp to complete their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade education while receiving military training. Therefore, because of their conscientious stand to refrain from military training and military service, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not register for the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and cannot complete their high school education.
  - Since 2008, Eritrean authorities have further oppressed Jehovah’s Witnesses, arresting and imprisoning elderly men, several women, and children. Many Witnesses have fled the country. Those who remain must exercise extreme caution in their religious activity and worship.

#### DENIAL OF RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY

A number of those currently in prison were arrested for attending peaceful Christian meetings with fellow Witnesses. In April 2014, police arrested members of the Saba Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were attending the annual commemoration of Jesus’ death. They were released on bail, and the matter remained pending in court until March 21, 2016, when 54 of them were finally charged with ‘illegal assembly’. The court fined 53 of the Witnesses about 18 euros each. However, one Witness, 28-year-old Saron Gebru, pleaded not guilty and was released on bail, awaiting the hearing of her case. This was the first time that Witnesses have been formally charged in court.

On April 5, 2016, the court sentenced Saron Gebru to a six-month prison term. She was held in the Haz Haz Women’s Prison in Asmara and was released on October 5, 2016.

#### STATUS OF PRISONERS

Of the Witnesses currently imprisoned, 16 are known to have been arrested for conscientious objection to military service. Police arrested others who were attending Christian meetings or publicly sharing their faith. They arrested yet more persons for undisclosed reasons. With one recent exception, those imprisoned have never had the opportunity to offer a defense in court. Most do not know how long they will remain in prison.

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In its Resolution A/HRC/29/L.23 dated July 2, 2015, the UN Human Rights Council called upon the government of Eritrea to “respect everyone’s right to freedom of expression and to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.”

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## HARSH TREATMENT AT THE MEITIR CAMP

On October 5, 2011, all 25 male Witnesses imprisoned at the Meitir Camp were transferred from the regular prison facility to an area for special punishment and were placed in a half-buried metal building. They remained in the special punishment area until August 2012. In the summer months, the intense heat made it unbearable to stay inside the building during the day. The men remained outside under an open-air structure with a thatched roof and then returned to the metal building at night. As a result of this experience, the health of several of the Witnesses became critical and was further diminished by inadequate food and insufficient water.

In July 2017, all Witnesses at the Meitir Camp were transferred, along with other prisoners, to the Mai Serwa Prison, just outside of Asmara, where conditions are more prison-like.

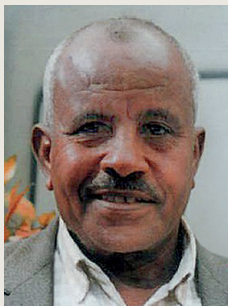
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## They died in prison or after their release

Kahsai Mekonnen, who was arrested in October 2008 when he was 76 years old, was released from the Meitir Camp a year later because of serious health problems. He died in 2013 as a result of the conditions he endured while imprisoned at such an advanced age. Because of the treatment they received while in custody, two other Witnesses—Tsehaye Tesfamariam and Goitom Gebrekristos—also died, on November 30, 2016, and December 29, 2014, respectively, shortly after their release from the Meitir Camp.

### Habtemichael Tesfamariam

died at age 76 in the Mai Serwa Prison on January 3, 2018.



### Habtemichael Mekonen

died at age 77 in the Mai Serwa Prison on March 6, 2018.



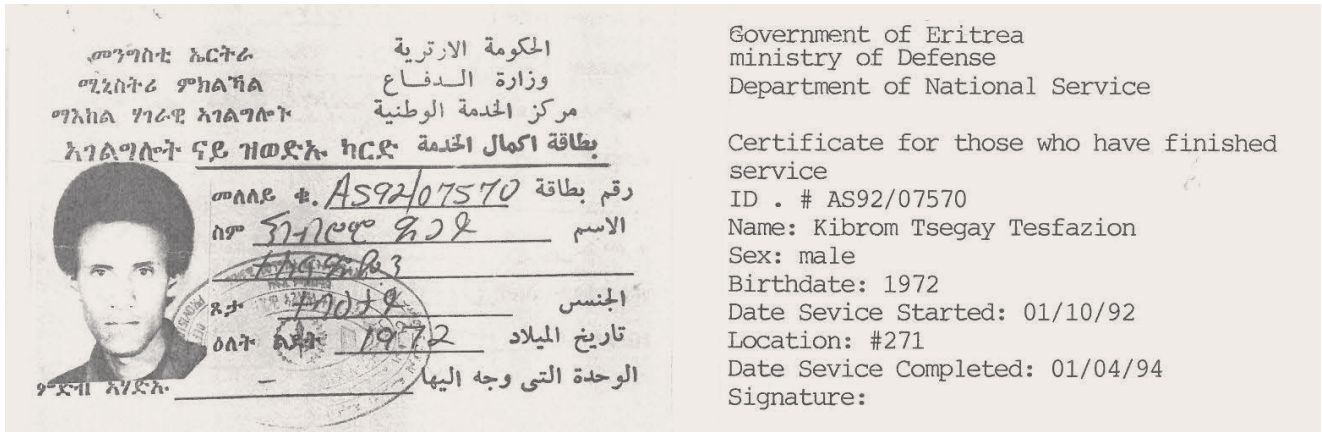
### Yohannes Haile

died at age 68 in the Meitir Camp on August 16, 2012.



### Misghina Gebretinsae

died at age 62 in the Meitir Camp in July 2011.



## Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service

Eritrea has currently no regulations or provisions in its national military service requirement for conscientious objection. To avoid arrest by the ever-present military police, who patrol the streets, most male Witnesses between the ages of 18 and 40 live in hiding. The police arrest those whom they find and take them to a military camp. Once the men express their conscientious objection, police detain and usually torture them. Some of military age have fled the country to avoid persecution; others have been caught while attempting to flee.

Prior to enforcing conscription, the authorities in Eritrea provided for a genuine alternative civilian service. Numerous Witnesses took part in such service in different administrations. The authorities systematically issued “Certificates of Completed National Service” and often praised the participants for their work.

There are currently several other countries that enforce conscription and do not exempt religious ministers, yet still accommodate individuals who conscientiously object to military service. While Jehovah’s Witness will individually decide according to their own well-informed conscience, they do not generally have any religious objection to performing genuine alternative civilian service when it is available and will gladly make a meaningful contribution to their community.



The government has imprisoned Paulos Eyasu, Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam in Sawa prison since September 17, 1994, for conscientious objection to military service. In the intervening 24 years, the government has neither filed charges against them nor given them a hearing in court.

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“Jehovah’s Witnesses have been targeted since May 1991 . . . Persecution has been an integral part of the Government’s efforts to maintain its authority in a manner contrary to international law. The commission therefore finds that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of persecution, a crime against humanity, in a widespread and systematic manner since May 1991.”

Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/32/47, dated May 9, 2016, par. 88.

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## Recommendations by Preeminent Human Rights Bodies Ignored

Eritrea persists in disregarding international human rights standards. Major human rights bodies have condemned the violations of basic rights and continue urging Eritrea to rectify the situation.

**“The Commission recommends that the Government should [...] conduct prompt investigation of the reported deaths in detention of members of the Jehovah[’s] Witness[es], and provide information in the next Report on the outcome of the investigations.”**

ACHPR Concluding Observations on Eritrea Initial Report in May 2018, adopted at 63rd Session, November 2018, p. 14, par. 120, p. 15, par. 120x.

### UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ERITREA

In 2014, the Human Rights Council (HRC) welcomed the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, which urged the authorities to respect the right of conscientious objection “in accordance with international norms” and to “guarantee the physical integrity of all prisoners; ensure access to medical treatment for those in need . . . and improve the conditions of detention in accordance with international standards.”<sup>1</sup> In a 2015 resolution, the HRC called upon the government of Eritrea to “provide for conscientious objection to military service.”<sup>2</sup>

### UN COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN ERITREA

In 2016, the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) determined that Eritrean authorities have committed a “crime against humanity” because of their “persecution on both religious and ethnic grounds” of Jehovah’s Witnesses and others.<sup>3</sup>

1 Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, A/HRC/26/45, 13 May 2014, p. 21, par. 104 (f), (i).

2 Human Rights Council, Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention, Situation of human rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/29/L.23, 20 June 2015, p. 3, par. 6 and 6(e).

3 Human Rights Council, Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/32/47, 9 May 2016, p. 6, par. 29, and p. 13, par. 74.



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## AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD

In 2017, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) expressed its concern that despite the existence

of legal protections, “children who belong to the Jehovah Witnesses” are not able to enjoy the benefits of this right and face harsh treatment. The ACERWC recommended that Eritrea “recognise and fully implement a child’s Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion with no discrimination.”<sup>1</sup>

## AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES’ RIGHTS

In 2018, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights urged Eritrea to “take urgent measures to address the denial of basic rights of all detained persons, including . . . members of the Jehovah Witness faith” and called for an investigation of the reported deaths of Witnesses in detention. The commission emphasized the need for Eritrea to ensure that Jehovah’s Witnesses “retain their citizenship rights.”<sup>2</sup>

## UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

In May 2019, the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) urged Eritrea to guarantee the effective exercise of freedom of religion and belief and to “release all persons arrested or detained for exercising their freedom of religion, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.”<sup>3</sup> The CCPR also requested that Eritrea “ensure the legal recognition of conscientious objection to military service and provide for alternative service of a civilian nature for conscientious objectors.”<sup>4</sup>

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1 Concluding recommendations by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) on the State of Eritrea’s report on the status of the implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, p. 5, par. 13.

2 ACHPR Concluding Observations on Initial Report in May 2018, adopted at 63rd Session, November 2018, p. 15, par. x, p. 16, par. xviii, and p. 17, par. xxviii.

3 UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on Eritrea, CCPR/C/ERI/CO/1, 3 May 2019, p. 8, par. 36.

4 UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on Eritrea, CCPR/C/ERI/CO/1, 3 May 2019, p. 8, par. 38.

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“Jehovah’s Witnesses have no legal recourse and so cannot challenge their indefinite detention. The Special Rapporteur urges the Government of Eritrea to engage in dialogue with this congregation and release those in prison. She also urges the Government to provide members of this congregation with the opportunity to participate in a form of civil service that is consistent with their religious beliefs.”

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/41/43, dated May 16, 2019, par. 40

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# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OBJECTIVES

Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the government of Eritrea to:

- Release all of Jehovah's Witnesses currently in prison
- Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to have full rights as citizens, register as a religion and manifest religious beliefs individually and jointly with others in the peaceful exercise of their freedom of religion and freedom of assembly
- Recognize the right of individuals of Jehovah's Witnesses to conscientiously object to military service and provide for alternative civilian service so that they may serve their country with a clean conscience
- Engage in dialogue with Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the issues raised in this report

**For more information:** Please contact the Office of Public Information for Jehovah's Witnesses at [OPIGOV@jw.org](mailto:OPIGOV@jw.org).



Visit the Newsroom at [jw.org](http://jw.org) or scan here to learn about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses.



Scan here to read the special report "Imprisoned for Their Faith—Eritrea" (Includes chart of imprisoned, updated monthly)

