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ERITREA | Jehovah's Witnesses Die in Prison

Two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses, who had been detained since 2008, reportedly died in early 2018 in Mai Serwa Prison near the Eritrean capital, Asmara. According to a press release from the Jehovah's Witnesses, dated April 25, 76-year-old Habtemichael Tesfamariam died suddenly on Jan. 3 from what is believed to be a stroke. He leaves behind his wife, Leterberhan Bezabih, four sons and three daughters. Habtemichael Mekonen, aged 77, died on March 6, reportedly due to kidney failure. He is survived by his wife, Mihret Ellias, a son and a daughter.

Both men were detained without charge or trial in 2008. Mekonen was arrested at his home in July 2008, while Tesfamariam was arrested at his home in August 2008. Both were eventually transferred to the notorious Meitir Prison Camp situated in the desert north of Asmara where they were subjected to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment. For example, from October 2011 to August 2012, the two men were held in a partially buried building along with other Jehovah's Witnesses, where they suffered severely from heat during summer and from a lack of sufficient food and water.

In 2017, the Jehovah's Witnesses were transferred to Mai Serwa Prison, where they are permitted to receive food packages and access medical treatment when critically ill. However, neither Tesfamariam nor Mekonen recovered fully from their earlier mistreatment.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to severe mistreatment on account of doctrinal exigencies which meant they did not vote in Eritrea's independence referendum in 1993 and announced they would participate only in non-military aspects of national service, in accordance with conscientious objection.

In October 1994, a directive from President Isaias Afewerki effectively deprived Jehovah's Witnesses of their civil, political, social economic and cultural rights. They could no longer access government employment, accommodation, schools, hospitals or any other services generally

available to Eritrean citizens. Perhaps most significantly, they were denied the official identity cards necessary for, among other things, registration of births, deaths and marriages, purchasing property, and gaining passports, internal and external travel permits, and commercial licenses. In 1995, the Minister of Internal Affairs confirmed that by “refusing to accept the government of Eritrea and the laws” Jehovah’s Witnesses had “lost their right to citizenship.”

The deaths of Tesfamariam and Mekonen reduce the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses currently detained without trial in Eritrea to 53. Three of them, Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, have been incarcerated since 1994 for refusing to take part in active military service.

To date, four Jehovah’s Witnesses have reportedly died in detention. Three others died soon after being released, and at least seven continue to experience severe health challenges as a result of mistreatment in prison, years after having been released.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of Mr. Tesfamariam and Mr. Mekonen. The fact that these elderly men died while detained arbitrarily for almost a decade is both tragic and unacceptable. In its June 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry found reasonable grounds to conclude that the government of Eritrea has been committing crimes against humanity since 1991, including the crime of persecution. The ongoing plight of the Jehovah’s Witness community, which was the first faith group to experience gross violations of every conceivable right, is perhaps one of the clearest indications that nothing has changed. We urge the Eritrean government to release the remaining Jehovah’s Witness prisoners, along with all other prisoners of conscience. No one should be punished for exercising their freedom to thought, conscience or religion.”