

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2003/09/16/eritrea-release-political-prisoners>

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The Eritrean government should release political prisoners and allow for freedom of the press, Human Rights Watch said on the second anniversary of a major crackdown against civil society. Eritrea's practice of arbitrary arrests and detentions continues to this day.

"Eritreans, who struggled valiantly to become free and independent, deserve to have their human rights respected," said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "Unfortunately, the government continues to deny them that opportunity."

On September 18, 2001, the Eritrean government arrested eleven leaders of the ruling party after they sent a letter to President Issayas Afewerki calling for democratic reforms, including the implementation of the 1997 constitution.

In the roundup that followed, publishers, editors, and reporters were arrested, and all non-government newspapers and magazines were closed down. In the two years since, the government has arrested scores more, either because of their ties to the dissidents or their perceived political views.

President Issayas has referred to the detainees as "traitors" and "spies," but formal charges have not been filed. To detain people for more than thirty days without charges is a violation of Eritrean law.

Arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without trial has not been limited to politicians and journalists. In late 2002, the government detained 250 refugees who attempted to flee Eritrea after being involuntarily repatriated from Malta. The refugees have been held incommunicado ever since.

Religious minorities are also subject to persecution. Members of Pentecostal Christian churches and Jehovah's Witnesses are frequently arrested for practicing their faiths. There have been so many arrests that some prisoners are being incarcerated in empty cargo containers. International human rights organizations and the International Committee for the Red Cross have been denied access to prisons.

Eritrea is a one-party state. National elections have not been held since Eritrea won its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Elections were canceled in 1997 because of a border war with Ethiopia. They were canceled again in 2001, two years after the war ended, and remain unscheduled.

"The Eritrean government continues to withhold the basic freedoms that the Eritrean people voted for in 1997," Takirambudde said. "In a year in which Eritrea is celebrating the tenth anniversary of its independence, it is highly unfortunate that it is also commemorating the second anniversary of government repression."

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