

Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/03/eritrea-another-birthday-behind-bars>

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Social Media Campaign Draws Attention to the Detention of Ciham Ali Abdu

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[Ciham was arrested](#) on December 8, 2012, shortly after her father left the country, while trying to cross the border into Sudan. Her father was attempting to arrange for smugglers to get his daughter out of the country because he feared that the regime would take action against her as retribution for his defection or that she would face [indefinite conscription](#).

By holding Ciham Ali Abdu incommunicado from the age of 15, the government has effectively disappeared her, said [Felix Horne](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. The release of Ciham and all of Eritrea's political prisoners would send a clear message to the international community that the country's leaders are embarking on a new path of increased respect for human rights.

This week, diaspora groups like [One Day Seyoum](#) are drawing attention to her plight with a social media campaign using the hashtag [#happybirthdayciham](#). But so far, the government has turned a deaf ear to calls to release the many unjustly detained Eritreans.

[Arbitrary and indefinite detention](#) is very much the norm in Eritrea. Eritreans who criticize or question government policies have been punished without trial or means of appeal. Suspicion alone may be enough to lead to arrest. Often a prisoner is not told what crime they committed. Torture in captivity is a major concern.

Although Ciham Ali Abdu is a US citizen, [US officials told Voice of America](#) that Eritrea has not provided them with information about her condition, and does not acknowledge that she is a US citizen. It is not clear whether she is alive or dead.

As is the case with Ciham, incarceration is often incommunicado. Relatives are not given the whereabouts of a prisoner, much less allowed to visit. Family members have told Human Rights Watch about relatives who disappeared for years until their bodies were returned without explanation. They said that they were warned not to ask questions and directed not to have an autopsy conducted.

The July 2018 [peace agreement](#) with Ethiopia brought hope that Eritrea would usher in a new era of reform. Isaias had used the long-running standoff with Ethiopia, sparked by a 1998 border war, to justify rampant repression and indefinite military service. But since the peace deal, the status quo continues, with Ciham Ali Abdu and [thousands of political prisoners](#) still in jail.

Granting Ciham Ali Abdu unconditional release would signal that there is hope for a new era of reform to begin in Eritrea. Horne said. The government has already deprived Ciham of her adolescence; she now deserves to spend her adulthood as a free woman.

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