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# Intercession for oppressed and persecuted Christians

## Focus: Eritrea

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Reminiscere Sunday, 21 February 2016

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Cover picture: Coptic Church in Asmara © Getty Images

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# Introduction

## Greeting from the Chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany



For months now, the press in Germany and the whole of Europe has headlined the many refugees crossing the Mediterranean in crowded boats, or coming on foot through muddy fields on the Balkans. Young men, families, mothers travelling alone with children – seeking refuge from war and persecution. At present, a life lived in safety and with dignity seems a distant dream for many people, and so they flee from the daily terror, the battles and reprisals from Aleppo or Kabul to the supposed safety of Europe.

A relatively large number of these refugees come from Eritrea. Often they are young men escaping from the totalitarian regime and the unlimited duration of compulsory military service, which all are forced to do. The country is closed to the outside world and has isolated itself internationally. It is often hard to gain any reliable information at all. Religious freedom is also affected, as is so often the case in countries in which fundamental human rights are greatly restricted or violated. While the Eritrean constitution officially recognises Sunni Islam, as well as the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic Churches, the very distinction between officially recognised and non-recognised faith communities is problematic in terms of human rights. Members of religious minorities, including many Christian sisters and brothers, also suffer under the regime and the restrictions of personal freedom.

With our intercessory prayers on Reminiscere Sunday in 2016 we want to remember the people in Eritrea and all brothers and sisters who are persecuted or discriminated against, harassed or oppressed. We bring them before God – trusting that God will see their great need and save them from distress. The Lenten period in the church year regularly offers us a specific occasion to do this. It turns our attention to the One who so loved the world that he took its suffering upon himself, so that all may have life.

Believing and trusting in Jesus Christ, let us pray for oppressed people all over the world.

Hanover, January 2016

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Heinrich Bedford-Strohm".

Chair of the Council of the  
Evangelical Church in Germany

## Why pray for oppressed and persecuted Christians?

In different parts of the world, Christian communities or individual believers are oppressed or persecuted. Repression ranges from discrimination and legal uncertainty to the restricting of certain fundamental rights, such as freedom of religion, and even threats to life and limb.

Not every conflict involving harm to Christians has religious roots and not every case of violence against Christians is caused by their faith in Jesus Christ. That is why representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) carefully examine the concept “persecution of Christians” before using it. Often the harm reported is caused by ethnic, political, social, cultural, economic, criminal or geostrategic factors. We do not want to trivialise suffering and oppression by making these distinctions. The EKD shares in the suffering of the sisters and brothers in the conflict regions of the world. And in doing so, it considers not only the hardships in the countries of origin but also the situation of Christians after they have fled oppression and persecution. Some of them, severely traumatised, also find refuge in Germany.

The EKD supports oppressed and persecuted Christians through public campaigns and political talks behind the scenes. It works to improve the human rights situation at different levels. At the same time, it is careful not to foster enemy stereotypes, which, in turn, would create new ones. Advocacy for oppressed and persecuted Christians therefore crosses religious and political borders: religious freedom is something that concerns everyone.



Cohabitation in Asmara, © gettyimages

# Background

## Eritrea



In Eritrea there is neither war nor famine. Yet every month approximately 5000 Eritreans leave their home and set off on the perilous journey to Europe. The small country at the Horn of Africa is ruled by one of the most repressive regimes worldwide, which hardly anyone outside Eritrea knows about.

Actually Eritrea has everything it needs to become a tourism magnet: three climate zones, a lot of natural scenery, a long, untouched coast, beautiful islands and a fascinating marine life. In addition, there are such picturesque remnants from the Italian colonial period as the historical railway from Massawa on the Red Sea up to Asmara, which lies at an altitude of 2300 meters. But practically no tourists go there. The German embassy in Asmara generally advises against making unnecessary trips to Eritrea. In an emergency it would not even be possible to provide consular services, it says. If foreign nationals are arrested, the Eritrean authorities do not inform foreign diplomatic and consular representations and, if an arrest or detention does become known, the consulates are refused access. Foreigners are not welcome in Eritrea. That does not just apply to tourists but also to companies, foundations or international organisations. In view of this isolationist policy it is no wonder that little is known about Eritrea.

And yet reliable information is more important than ever, in view of the rising refugee figures. Eritreans are the largest group of asylum-seekers in Germany, after the Syrians. An estimated 5000 leave the country every month. Around 420,000 are registered with the UNHCR as refugees and asylum-seekers (status: 2014). That is a good seven percent of the total population of Eritrea (6.5 million in 2015).



## Human rights violations

Since 2001 there have been no independent media in the country. All the journalists the regime considers undesirable are in prison, mostly in solitary confinement - without charge and without contact to their relatives. Dawit Isaak is the most well-known. The Swedish-Eritrean journalist, who never wrote anything critical of the regime, was arrested in September 2001 and has been imprisoned in a dark cell ever since. Even the Swedish government, which has intervened several times on his behalf, has not been able to achieve his release. Eritrea has for years come in last on Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, after North Korea. Amnesty International stated in its 2014/15 annual report that "thousands of people were arbitrarily detained and held in incommunicado detention" without charge or trial, some for two decades. "In most cases, relatives were not aware of the detainee's whereabouts" (p. 146). <sup>1</sup>

Amnesty International has furthermore reported that detainees are often kept "in overcrowded underground cells or metal shipping containers, often in desert locations, suffering extremes of heat and cold." Torture and other forms of ill-treatment are widespread in Eritrean prisons. "Prisoners are tied with ropes in painful positions for extended periods (...), beaten with sticks, (...) forced to walk barefoot on sharp objects or to roll on the ground over sharp stones and rough terrain". Many do not survive such ill-treatment and die in prison. "In countless cases their detention amounts to enforced disappearance" (quoted from Amnesty International Public Statement to the UN Human Rights Council, 25 June 2014). <sup>2</sup>

If the regime in Asmara reacts at all to such charges it is only to discredit them as hegemonial propaganda to force Eritrea into dependence on major powers, or the World Bank and IMF. "Independence" is the battle cry of President Isaias Afewerki, who has been president and head of the "transitional" government of Eritrea for 23 years, with dictatorial powers. Afewerki joined the Eritrean liberation movement as a young man. For almost thirty years of his life he fought bitterly for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. In 1991 the liberation movement succeeded in doing what no one thought possible - defeating Ethiopia, which was militarily far stronger, without outside assistance. This victory by its own strength is the moral basis of today's state doctrine: Eritrea can only develop if it remains completely independent. That is why Afewerki will not allow himself to be influenced by anything or anyone, not even by the United Nations (UN).

On the basis of the alarming reports from human rights organisations, the UN in 2012 created the post of special rapporteur and established a commission of inquiry for Eritrea. However, independent research at the local level constantly comes up against the denial stance of the Eritrean regime. UN investigators are not allowed into the country at all. In order to somehow obtain information about Eritrea, therefore, the UN commission of inquiry in spring 2015 questioned Eritrean refugees abroad about the situation in their home country - an unusual, because not neutral procedure. The government in Asmara and regime-supporters abroad criticised this as lacking in credibility. They say that the refugees exaggerate wildly in order to improve their chances of gaining asylum. At any rate, the UN report speaks of killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, rape and penal camps.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr64/002/2014/en/> (abgerufen am 1.02.16)

<sup>2</sup> dto

## **No freedom of religion and belief**

In such penal camps there are many members of religious minorities. Officially only Sunni Islam and the Eritrean-Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic Churches are recognised. In 2001 the government banned the activities of “non-registered” religious organisations, notably evangelical churches such as Pentecostal churches, Faith Mission, the Seventh Day Adventist Mission, but also the activities of Salafists and Wahahabis. Many members of these groups were arrested and detained under repressive conditions with the threat of torture. According to the 2013 annual report of the United States’ Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), around two to three thousand religious detainees had been arbitrarily arrested, tortured and interned without charge. The vast majority were Evangelicals or Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslim Reformists. Just being caught privately reading the Koran or the Bible in colleges or during national service may lead to detention.

## **Early Christianity**

Both Christianity and Islam have a long tradition in Eritrea. In the 4th century Syrian priests landed on the coast of Eritrea and persuaded the King of Aksum to espouse Orthodox Christianity. The first Muslim immigrants arrived in Massawa in 615 AD. According to the government, the population is now divided equally between Christians and Muslims. Yet the regime does not only target Free Church and Reformist groups. For years, it has also systematically undermined the officially recognised religious communities and thus used the established religious institutions to control the population.

For example, President Afewerki in 1996 personally appointed the Mufti of Eritrea, Sheikh Alamin Osman, without consulting the Muslim religious leaders. Other members of Islamic organisations such as the Majles al Awqaaf (foundation council) and the kadis (judges) of the Sharia councils are appointed from circles loyal to the government. They are neither qualified nor experienced, and do not know the Sharia laws that are applied to Muslims in civil and court cases.

Similar measures were also undertaken towards recognised churches. Ninety-five percent of Christians belong to the Eritrean Orthodox Church (ErOC). There is no doubt that it is the oldest and most venerable institution in Eritrea. It was an integral part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church until 1994, when it achieved autonomy. The Church is famed for its profound spirituality, which can be traced back to apostolic times. It has been the cornerstone of society for almost two thousand years.

However, the ErOC is today completely under the thumb of the regime. In 2005 Patriarch Abune Antonios was deposed for criticising the government and replaced by a more compliant patriarch, Abune Dioskoros. Now almost 90, Abune Antonios is seriously ill and has under house arrest since January 2006, without contact with the outside world. Eritrean Orthodox Christians in diaspora are divided in their attitude towards Abune Dioskoros, his government-appointed successor. This explains the fact that in Germany there are often several Eritrean Orthodox congregations in one city.





Old Coptic Church © Getty Images

### **Modern form of slavery**

There are enough reasons for Eritreans to leave their country for ever. The main reason, however, is probably the national service that both women and men are obliged to do between the age of 18 and 50. It was introduced in 1993 shortly after Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which later produced the sole ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, PFDJ). Originally national service consisted of six months military training and twelve months work in reconstruction projects. That made sense at the time, in the eyes of many Eritreans. The country was devastated after a 30-year-old war of independence from Ethiopia and had to be rebuilt. Many believed the argument of the EPLF and saw national service as a contribution to the development of their country. In 2001, the time limit on national service was abolished. Many Eritreans are forced into service for ten or more years, earn practically nothing and have no prospect of ever being discharged.

Most of the commercial operations in Eritrea are controlled by the governing party PFDJ or members of the military. Military service recruits serve party functionaries and generals as forced labour in their own businesses. National servicemen and women build streets and houses for senior army officers, or work as unpaid teachers, nurses and office employees. Regardless of the field in which they work, they are always under the supervision of a military officer who can impose arbitrary punishments and is not monitored by any authority governed by the rule of law. Many women fall victim to sexual violence. While the perpetrators need fear no punishment, the women are stigmatised all their lives by the conservative Eritrean society.

Today there is a lack of young workers above all in manual trades and agriculture, since so many are bound to the army and national service. In addition, the intergenerational contract is no longer in force. The younger generation can no longer care for the elderly because it does not earn anything. Very many people in Eritrea can only survive through remittances from their relatives abroad.

## **Exploited and ill-treated as refugees**

Those who leave their country during national service to build a future elsewhere have officially deserted. Aid organisations report that more and more minors are leaving Eritrea. The reason is that anyone fleeing before they turn 18 has not yet been recruited for national service and is consequently not considered a deserter if the authorities of other countries send them back. Sudan and Egypt, for example, follow this practice: if Eritreans are picked up without a visa they immediately go to prison and are only released when they can produce a ticket back to Asmara.

Yet not only the risk of being sent back to their unloved home country threatens the refugees on their long journey from the Horn of Africa to Europe. Their defencelessness and need is exploited by human-traffickers and smugglers in Africa and around the Mediterranean. An example of this is the tragedy of 3 October 2013, when an unseaworthy ship with 545 people on board caught fire and sank off the small Italian island of Lampedusa. 390 men, women and children were drowned. More than 300 of them came from Eritrea. Such tragedies take place every day on the Mediterranean between the North African coast and Italy, or between Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos.

Human traffickers earn a lot of money with the kidnapping of refugees. For many years the Sinai Peninsula was regarded as a death zone for refugees. According to a study by Tilburg University in the Netherlands, from 2009 to 2013 at least 25,000 to 30,000 people were taken hostage in Sinai. A quarter of them, between 6000 and 8000, lost their lives in so doing. 85 percent of those kidnapped came from Eritrea. During this time, a total of US\$ 622 million in ransoms was paid by relatives in Eritrea and abroad. Now that the Egyptian military has partly regained control of Sinai there are no more reports of torture camps on the Peninsula. However, experts suspect that the human traffickers have withdrawn to Yemen, where the political instability gives kidnappers and blackmailers a free hand.

Anyone arriving in Germany as a refugee and applying for asylum must state their grounds for asylum. For Eritreans that is particularly difficult because there is neither a civil war in their home country nor is it openly at war with another country. There is no acute famine there either. Soon the refugees find themselves confronted with the suspicion that they did not come to Europe to seek protection from persecution. Anyone fleeing Eritrea is aware of the risks and hazards they may encounter on the long journey to Europe. Too many families in Eritrea already mourn relatives who have drowned in the Mediterranean or have been tortured to death in Sinai.

# Practical resources

## Intercessory prayer

*“Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love; for they have been from of old.”  
(Ps 25:6)*

**One:** Eternal, living God,  
You watch over your children by day and by night.  
Nothing remains hidden from you.

**All:** Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord.

**One:** We pray today for our sisters and brothers in faith  
who, all over the world, are persecuted,

oppressed and discriminated against,  
excluded and threatened,  
frightened and hunted,  
their fundamental rights violated,  
deprived of their human dignity,

because they hold fast to Jesus Christ,  
because they trust heaven more than earthly promises, because they do not want to follow the  
logic of power,  
or because they are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time.

**All:** Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord.

**One:** We pray especially for our sisters and brothers in Eritrea, the country at the Horn of Africa.

May they sense the solidarity we feel in our prayers and, despite their fear of repression,  
not lose hope for change.

May they hear and understand your Good News.  
It makes us all citizens of the Kingdom while, at the same time, we have “no lasting city”.  
It encourages us to witness to the truth of faith, even when this truth is inconvenient,  
and even when it puts worldly rulers in their place.

**All:** Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord.

**One:** We pray for ourselves, in safe, rich Europe.

Give us the empathy to recognise the reality in Eritrea and elsewhere, even  
if it still seems so far away.

Help us again and again to look over our own fence and understand that freedoms  
that we take for granted are mortally dangerous elsewhere.  
Free us from the pride of only seeing and knowing what is our own and not  
perceiving the world of others.

Let the bond of fellowship span our world, from Germany to Eritrea and  
even further, held by your love and righteousness.

**All:** In Jesus’ name. Amen

## A prayer written by the Eritrean Evangelical Lutheran congregation in Stuttgart

Eternal God, for you everything is possible,

Hence we plead and pray to you through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
be gracious and forget what we have done wrong,

We pray for your church, keep and bless it so that its members carry your name into the world.

We pray for all who are in prison for their faith.

We pray for all who are persecuted and have fled to find your protection.

We pray for the families in our home country who mourn their children.

Give courage to those who are afraid and comfort to the sorrowful. Give them  
peace. And bring peace to families so that children can grow up with their parents.

We pray for the children and teenagers who have lost their lives fleeing through the desert and  
the Mediterranean.

We pray for the persecuted, that they may obtain justice.

Be with them everywhere so that they may not go hungry or thirsty and experience further  
suffering.

Lord, we pray for those who oppress their people, that their heart may be converted from evil  
through your love in a spirit of peace towards their brothers and sisters.

Lord, be with those of us who have to live in exile, so that we may find new life and feel at home.  
Amen



St. Anthony in Keren, © gettyimages



Hymn

**Moderato**

፩: እግ ዚ እስም ዓ ኒገጸ ሎተይ፣አድህብ፣ስቕ፣አይትበል፣ብብኸያ ተይ። እግ ዚ፡

እስም ዓ ኒገጸ ሎተይ፣አድህብ፣ስቕ፣አይት በል፣ብ ብኸያ . ተይ።

፪: ስደተኛ እየ ትሕቲ ጽላልካ ጋሻ፣ ከምቶም አቦታተይ ኩሎም ።  
፫: ከምቲ ንዘኬዎስ አብ ቤተይ ምጸኒ፣ ብዓይኒ ምሕረት ጠምተኒ ።

(From: Hymn book in Tigrinya, Mesmur Selam © 1986, Evangelical Church of Eritrea, Asmara)

**Translation:**

O God, hear my prayer, look upon me and forget not my cry and pleading.  
I am a fleeing under your shadow, a guest like all my forebears  
As you entered the house of Zacchaeus, come into my home



Mountains between Massawa and Asmara © Getty Images

## Further reading

Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, 5 June 2015

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx>

Amnesty International Report 2014/15 (download PDF, chapter on Eritrea p. 146)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/0001/2015/en/>

Summary of the above chapter on Eritrea

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/report-eritrea/>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/06/damning-findings-of-commission-of-inquiry-on-eritrea-require-urgent-response/>

(all the above documents retrieved on 3.2.16)

Mirjam von Reisen/Katja Buck, Eritrea – Von der Befreiung zur Unterdrückung, herausgegeben vom Evangelischen Missionswerk in Deutschland (EMW), Hamburg 2015: <http://www.emw-d.de/publikationen/publikationen.emw/shop.emw.11/index.html>

UN-Menschenrechtsrat, Bericht der Untersuchungskommission zu Menschenrechtslage in Eritrea, 4. Juni 2015: [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/29/42](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/29/42) (abgerufen am 1.12.15).

Stefan Klein, Land ohne Jugend, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung vom 28.10.2015.

Deutscher Bundestag, Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Luise Amtsberg, Omid Nouripour, Tom Koenigs, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN – Drucksache 18/4505: <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/046/1804609.pdf> (abgerufen am 1.12.15).

Katja Dorothea Buck, Ein großes Gefängnis, in: Eine Welt Magazin 1/2015, 21–25.

Länderinformationen des Auswärtigen Amtes: [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/01-Nodes\\_Uebersichtsseiten/Eritrea\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/01-Nodes_Uebersichtsseiten/Eritrea_node.html).

Amnesty International: Bericht zur Verletzung von Menschenrechten in Eritrea:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr64/002/2014/en/> (abgerufen am 1.02.16)

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