

ERITREA: Edited Testimonies of Detainees

Testimony I

Whilst worshipping in the desert, along with eight others during his term of military service, this singer was captured by military police. He was sentenced to six months imprisonment in a military prison and was released, but was seen as a suspect. The military police told him to leave his faith and that they would let him live if he did, if not, he would be killed. He was also told not to sing, or gather with other Christians, or read the Bible, and was asked to sign a letter attesting to this, but refused to do so.

One of the colonels eventually rounded up all identified Christians and told them they would be imprisoned for three years.

He was separated from the others. The area was very hot, and they were each held in cells four metres underground for six months. He was only allowed out to eat in the morning or to go to bathroom, and he was not allowed to communicate with anyone else.

However, all of the prisoners had managed to smuggle in bibles, which they hid in the holes in the ground they had dug in their cells, so that guards could not find them. One day the guards decided to conduct a thorough search of all of the underground cells and found the bibles. He took responsibility on behalf of the others, saying he had brought all of the items with him when he arrived.

He was tortured. His legs and hands were shackled and he was placed outside in this desert area for 24 hours over five days. During the day time he was directly under the sun. He is bald; consequently, the skin on the top of his head was removed by the hot sun. After five days, he was placed under a tree; however, trees in the area had no leaves, and so did not offer any significant shade. The wind there was so hot that it burned him. All in all, he was tied up outside for a month.

He also faced what is known as “military punishment. This includes:

- Running exercises in the heat.
- He was told to lie on his back and ordered to look at the sun, while the hot soil burned his back.

He actually prayed to die, as this would have been better than the pain he was enduring.

He was subsequently placed in solitary confinement for five months in a specially constructed punishment cell that was 2m long, 70cm wide and 2 ½ metres high. He could not turn around, straighten his knees or move his legs. He could only stretch his legs once the door was opened. The food he received was inedible, and when light trickled into the cell, it caused problems for his eyes. He was informed he no longer had the right to more food, to use the bathroom, to exercise, or to go to the hospital. During this time he developed persistent problems with his knees, stomach, and eyes. His teeth also deteriorated because the bread he received was so hard and dry that it could barely be eaten. When they released him five months later, his health had deteriorated so badly that he urinated blood for fifteen days.

Testimony 2

"I was summoned to the first police station in Asmara and interrogated about my relations with foreign reporters. I said that we knew each other, but that I had no clue about what they do and where they get information. I was then warned and told that I am under a serious follow up. As things got tighter and roundups by security continued, I decided to get out of Eritrea.

I then started the journey to Sudan, and unfortunately we were caught by members of the army near a place called Wokiro and there my problems started. I was arrested bare foot, and remained bare foot for the next years. I spent the first four months in a place called Metkel Abiet in a very small cell, almost two by three meters with four other people. It is the hottest place in that region. No shoes, no blanket, not enough food and water ...no nothing, except torture and things you can't believe. After that they moved us to Alla in the southern region of Eritrea and after two months to Halhale. The four months that I spent in Alla and Halhale were terrible. We were forced to work the whole day on farms owned by military commanders. It is complete slavery; they don't allow you to wear shoes, even in the farms. I had a very terrible experience in this place. The way they punish people is dangerous. They do whatever they want; there is no accountability.

After all this I was taken to a place called Wia for military training. After six months of terrible military training I was assigned to one of their construction companies (Sawa Construction) to slave labour without any salary and rights. But after spending just 20 days in Asmara, other security agents picked me and I was taken to a prison I have never heard before. After that I was moved to a place called Teseney and accused of the same thing: helping foreign reporters, feeding information and the like. I refused to accept this again completely. I was beaten terribly. I have been through a hardship that I can't tell now. They were trying to convince me to accept what they were accusing me by force and tortured me. They put me for two months in an underground cell, that is dark, dirty and muddy too. There was nothing in it. I slept at the ground for two months. They'd call for me during the night and they just beat me terribly. This was for almost one month but I said no to all their accusations. Nothing changed.

After that I was weakened with malaria. I almost died there. Then they took me out of the underground and they sent me to a place called Adarser. I spent almost a month in this place. It is near the border with Sudan in the western part of Eritrea. The problem is it doesn't matter whether you say no or yes, and they don't provide you with evidence or any proof of what you are accused of. I was interrogated in here too, and then they moved me to another prison in Sawa.

This place has six blocks that are almost five meters by six meters. There are around 32 prisoners and above in each block. There is no space left for you to move around, once you lay down you can't move. Actually it is impossible to put 32 people in such a room, but in Eritrean prisons all the impossible is possible. The rooms are locked all the time, but they open you early in the morning to ease yourself and they lock you up again. They also let you go out from the cells for lunch time for almost half an hour, and then lock it up. The same thing happens in the afternoon for dinner. Once the rooms are locked the guards are not allowed to open them. No matter what happens inside them.

Then after three months in Sawa they moved me back to Wia in January 2007. This place is hot like hell. It's around 40 kilometres from Massawa on the way to Assab. It is now second to sawa, they also train people there. There are two prisons in there. Actually it is very difficult to call them prisons, because a prison has rooms, toilets, showers for the detainees and at least you get something to put on your body like a clothe or a blanket. In there they just take your shoes and your belt and throw you to the compound. Believe it or not there was no shelter, just a compound surrounded by a fence made of trees and thorns. No shelter during rainy season and sunny season. In this place we were people of different kind. Most of them were accused of illegal border crossing, refusal to report to military units and the like. The age range was unbelievable. There were people

from the age of nine to 82. The old ones were accused of religion-related issues and the young ones of border crossing. These little kids have no idea why they were escaping; it is because they see their elders flee every day.

Life in this prison was intolerable. The place is just like a foot ball field fenced by trees and thorns, nothing like a house or tent. It is full more than it can hold. They don't provide you blankets you can sleep on. If lucky, your family gets you one. This is if they know where you are. Otherwise no choice, you just sleep on the ground. We are not allowed to wear shoes, just bare foot. Wia is known for its hot temperature and we used to receive 1 litre of water for 24 hours. I know this is unbelievable but it happened to me. I have gone through it. We ate twice a day that is lunch and dinner, no breakfast. Actually this is common in all military prisons in Eritrea. They give you two breads around 11 in the morning and two breads around 5 in the afternoon. The food stuff is terrible and very difficult to eat. It is part of the punishment. There is no toilet inside so they take you like 400 meters away from where you stay. Before we go out the area is surrounded by armed men. This is every morning and every afternoon, because we are allowed to ease ourselves twice a day. If you have stomach aches it is the most suffering thing. Because you are not allowed to go out and there is nothing to cover you up at least while easing yourself inside the compound and in front of all the detainees. Shameful deeds, this goes on not for a week or days; it is for months and years. So it is very difficult to bear it. As a result people used to break the gate and destroy the fence almost every day and try to escape from there. Once prisoners start to escape, the guards just start shooting them. Mostly they fire upwards, but sometimes they do fire straight at the escaping detainees.

We were allowed to take shower and wash our clothes once a week. But the time they give you is less than half an hour and it is very difficult to finish on time as there is no facilities to use. So there is no sanitation and as a result several skin and other kind of diseases. The medical care that they give you is not enough and there are lots of casualties. The most frustrating issue is that no one knows how long he/she is going to stay in there. They don't tell you for how long you are sentenced. You just wait for your name to be called one day and go out. This can be in months or years.”