

Rights Group Calls for Release of Imprisoned Journalists in Eritrea

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On the 19th anniversary of Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, international media watchdog Reporters without Borders is renewing an appeal for the release of more than two dozen journalists imprisoned by the Eritrean government.

Describing Eritrea as Africa's "biggest prison" for journalists, Paris-based Reporters without Borders says no Eritrean citizen should celebrate Independence Day without considering the plight of about 30 journalists who are being unlawfully detained and treated inhumanely in various prisons throughout the country.

The head of the media watchdog's Africa desk, Ambroise Pierre says after a hopeful start in 1991 as a state committed to democracy, Eritrea has emerged in the past decade as a repressive dictatorship under President Issayas Afeworki.

"One can remember when President [Bill] Clinton in the [19]90s was saying about President Afeworki, that he was an example for the new generation of African leaders," he said. "But all of this changed between 1998 and 2001. What happened is that Eritrea had a new war against its neighbor Ethiopia - a border dispute - and this new war convinced President Afework that his country was under constant threat. So, from 2001 up to now, he suspended all freedoms in his country and he considers any criticism as a threat to national security."

Early this month, Reporters without Borders named Eritrea as the worst press freedom abuser.

The organization published testimony from a refugee in Ethiopia, who, until recently, worked as a guard at the notorious Eiraeiro prison for dissidents in northeast Eritrea. Pierre says the former guard confirmed what Reporters without Borders had long feared - that at least four journalists, who were arrested nine years ago, are being held in harsh conditions at the prison.

"We know that in this prison camp, some journalists have already died between 2001 and today," he said. "It is a detention center that is almost a torture and a death camp. The state of media

freedom in Eritrea is not only bad, it is a catastrophe. It is really a shame for the country. It is a shame for Africa."

Although Eritrea has no privately owned media, the government insists journalists have the freedom to report any story they choose. The government in Asmara has repeatedly denied allegations that it violates media and human rights.

On May 24, 1991, Eritrea became Africa's newest nation-state after a bloody 30-year struggle for independence from neighboring Ethiopia.

Eritrea was formally recognized by the international community two years later.

In recent years, Eritrea has been accused of fighting a proxy war against Ethiopia in Somalia by supporting Islamist groups opposed to Somalia's Ethiopia-friendly Transitional Federal Government.