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Christians in Eritrea



In May 2002, the Eritrean government banned all religious groups except the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches and Sunni Islam. The crackdown on Christians followed a Pentecostal revival among young Eritreans doing military service – President Afewerki seemed concerned that soldiers who had become Christians would refuse to obey orders.

Christians from banned denominations began to be arrested and incarcerated in appalling conditions in shipping containers, open air facilities in military camps and police stations, without charge or trial. Prisoners are denied visits from lawyers and family members and Christian prisoners may not pray aloud, sing or read the Bible. Prisoners crowded into metal shipping containers face extreme heat during the day, freezing temperatures at night and a lack of oxygen and sanitation. Beatings, torture, hard labour, filthy conditions and extreme deprivation (starvation and denial of medical care, even after bones are broken in beatings) leave many prisoners disabled and some dead.



The number of imprisoned Christians fluctuates as prisoners are released to free space for those recently arrested, with an average of around two hundred being in detention at any one time in recent years and others under house arrest. Many come under severe pressure to sign documents renouncing their faith. If they refuse they are brutally punished and threatened that their families will be arrested.

Several prominent evangelical church leaders have been held incommunicado in high-security prisons since 2004. In November 2019, Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea said, *"More than one hundred have been locked up for at least seven or eight years. Of these, about forty have been imprisoned for 14 years or more."*

The majority of Eritrean Christians are Eritrean Orthodox (85%), with 7% Roman Catholic, 3% Lutheran and an unknown but growing number of evangelicals (the number is impossible to estimate as evangelicals meet in secret) and even the permitted churches face persecution.

In January 2006, the government deposed the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church [Abune Antonios](#) because he resisted government interference, refused to excommunicate members involved in a renewal movement and asked for the release of imprisoned priests who led the movement. The deposed patriarch was placed under house arrest until his death in February 2022 at the age of 94 and priests and monks seen as sympathising with him were detained, harassed and conscripted; the three priests who led the renewal movement have remained in prison since 2004.

Source: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/country-profiles/eritrea-country-profile/>



Brother Kiflu Gebremeskel – 20 years in Eritrea prison

Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel (67) has been in prison in Eritrea since **May 2004**. Before his arrest he was chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance and a leader in a network of house churches that was banned by the government.

A former maths lecturer, with a PhD from Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, Dr Kiflu was faculty head in the University of Asmara until 1999, when he became full-time pastor of the church he founded, Southwest Full Gospel Church. He was a member of the executive committee of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea, one of the country's largest Pentecostal networks, comprising about 150

house church groups.

In October 2021, Open Doors reported that Dr Kiflu had recently been seen visiting hospital frequently under tight security, and said it was suspected that he had developed stress-related hypertension and diabetes.

Sources: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/kiflu-gebremeskel/>
<https://www.uscirf.gov/node/362>



Brother Haile Naizghe – 20 years in Eritrea prison

Rev Haile Naizghe has been in prison in Eritrea since **May 2004**. Before his arrest he was chair of a network of house churches that was banned by the government.

A former senior accountant with World Vision, Rev Haile Naizghe was chair of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea, one of the country's largest Pentecostal networks, comprising about 150 house church groups. These groups were closed by government decree in May 2003 and given an application form for government registration.

Held in the notorious maximum-security Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation interrogation centre, part of Asmara's 2nd Police Station.

It is believed that many of Eritrea's prominent political and military prisoners are incarcerated in this dungeon-like inner labyrinth of cells, as well as 21 church leaders.

Sources: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/haile-naizghe/>
<https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/haile-naizghe>



Brother Kidane Weldou – 19 years in Eritrea prison

Pastor Kidane Weldou disappeared from the streets of the Eritrean capital, Asmara, in **March 2005**. He is being held in a high-security prison in Asmara, along with several other Christian leaders.

Pastor Kidane Weldou, a senior pastor of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara, has been a church leader for many years and was a member of the executive committee of Gideons International in Eritrea.

Previously he was a secondary school biology teacher, with a science degree from Asmara University. He ministered among students and professions from various churches.

October 2021: Open Doors reported that Pastor Kidane had been seen at an eye clinic and said it was suspected that his eyes had been damaged over the years, possibly by diabetes exacerbated by poor living conditions.

Source: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/kidane-weldou/>
<https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/kidane-weldou>

