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Actions in order to free Dawit Isaak

Reply to Written question¹: Written question No. 564 (Doc. 11868)
Committee of Ministers

Written Question No. 564 by Mrs Acketoft (Doc. 11868)

It has now passed 2769 days (23 April 2009) since the Swedish-Eritrean journalist Mr Dawit Isaak was imprisoned in Asmara, Eritrea.

Mr Dawit Isaak is one of the founders of Eritrea's first independent newspaper, "Setit", which supported democratic reforms. In 2001 Setit published a regime-critical letter signed by 15 dissident politicians. Shortly afterwards the politicians and a number of journalists were apprehended, among them the Swedish citizen Mr Dawit Isaak. He has since then been incarcerated without any legal proceedings or sentencing. No charges have been presented against him.

After 2001 the democratic development in Eritrea has deteriorated rapidly. No free elections have been held, political oppression is common, and no free press is allowed. Despite diplomatic efforts, petitions from the Swedish Parliament and a number of organizations, little progress has been made in the efforts to release Mr Dawit Isaak.

Eritrea Watch for Human Rights and Democracy (EWHRD) has recently reported that Mr. Dawit Isaak was hospitalized in Asmara. He is not permitted to receive any visitors, and only one doctor is allowed to treat him. It is however known that he suffers from high blood pressure. Concerns are now rising for his state of health.

It is now a matter of extreme urgency to pull all forces together to intensify the dialogue with the Eritrean authorities with the aim to free Mr. Dawit Isaak. Hence, within the scope of the Council of Europe, which means can be taken to exert an influence on the Eritrean authorities in the case of the Swedish citizen and journalist Dawit Isaak?

Reply by the Committee of Ministers

1. The unfortunate case of Mr Dawit Isaak falls outside the Council of Europe's jurisdiction since these events have taken place beyond the Organisation's geographical sphere of activity. The Committee of Ministers therefore has very limited scope for action.
2. Nevertheless, having been informed of the honourable member's question, I have called on the Eritrean authorities to release Mr Isaak in the following statement:

"Since 23 September 2001, the journalist and playwright Dawit Isaak has been detained in Eritrea without being the subject of legal proceedings or sentencing.

The lengthy detention of Mr Isaak, and of other journalists imprisoned in Eritrea, also constitutes a serious breach of another principle safeguarded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that of freedom of expression and opinion.

1. adopted at the 1083rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (21 April 2010)



Further, on the basis of the information in our possession, there are serious concerns about Mr Isaak's state of health resulting from the conditions under which he has been detained for almost nine years now.

In my capacity as Chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, I wish to add my voice to the many calls already made for Mr Isaak's release. This long-awaited release would be a welcome humanitarian gesture."

3. This statement was published on the Council of Europe site on 30 March 2010 and has subsequently been reported by several news agencies. It has been transmitted to the Eritrean authorities through diplomatic channels.