

Persecuted Christian Dies in Eritrean Prison

Another Christian has died while in detention in Eritrea, Open Doors learned last week.

This report follows several others in recent months. Sources reporting the death indicated that about 45 other believers are held in horrendous circumstances in dungeon-like cells at Ala. They are enduring severe military punishment because they are unwilling to stop their Protestant religious practices.

Open Doors also received reports that indicate the government's continuation of an extensive arrest campaign against Christians, which started at the beginning of the year. This month, the government conducted sweeping arrests of 125 Christians in Barentu.

Of the most recently reported deaths, Belay Gebrezgi Tekabo, whose age is unknown, died at Ala Military Camp, about 20 miles from the southern Eritrean town of Dekemhare. He was arrested last April in the military training camp for "praying and reading his Bible."

Belay endured severe military punishment during his incarceration for his continued religious activities. He was diagnosed with leukemia six months prior to his death, but officials told him he could only go to the Dekemhare hospital for treatment if he was willing to sign a recantation statement.

On Saturday, March 16, police officers arrested 17 Christians in Keren while they were together at the home of one of those arrested. The group included six female students. They are kept at the Keren Police Station. Although it is customary for family members to take food to relatives in prisons, officers are not allowing anyone to visit this group.

In 2002, the Eritrean government banned all Christian denominations except the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Lutheranism. With the exception of Sunni Islam, all other religious practice was banned.

The government also decreed that non-registered groups could not gather in numbers of more than five. No new churches have been registered since 2002. Security forces continue to disrupt private worship, conduct mass arrests at prayer meetings and other gatherings, and detain those arrested for indefinite periods without charge.

At last estimates, at least 3,000 Christians are imprisoned in Eritrea and, say Voice of the Martyrs sources, nearly every evangelical has been arrested at least once. Most are never formally charged and never receive a court hearing. Prisoners are tortured and subjected to extremely poor living conditions, often locked in metal shipping containers or underground bunkers. Several have died in custody.

Pray that those who've been arrested would remain steady in their faith in Christ. Many have fled across the borders, but pray for boldness for those Christians remaining in Eritrea.