

Negede Teklemariam – USCIRF Testimony

Thank you, Commissioners, staff, and respected advocates. I appreciate this opportunity.

My name is Negede. I spent over 26 years in prison in Eritrea—not because I committed a crime, but because I am one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. While imprisoned, I was frequently subjected to torture.

Over 30 years ago, the president banned Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eritrea and revoked our citizenship.

On September 17, 1994, soldiers came to my home in Asmara in the middle of the night and dragged me away in my pajamas.

For many years, I was kept in an overcrowded metal shipping container. During the day, the metal walls were so hot they would burn our skin. At night, we froze. We had no medical care, not enough food, and were forced to work hard. We had to use the bathroom outside, like animals. I was never charged with a crime, never taken to court, and never knew when I might be released.

The worst part was when the soldiers tried to force me to give up my faith. One night, soldiers threw me into a hole and told me I would be killed unless I joined the military. But I could not betray my faith. They then buried me in burning hot sand up to my neck. They fired shots near my head and said another prisoner had already been killed. I survived, but others did not.

I was released in December 2020, along with 27 others. But Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eritrea continue to be put in prison, tortured, and pressured to give up their faith. Today, 64 Jehovah’s Witnesses are behind bars. This includes ten elderly men and women, like Letebrhan Tesfay. She is 87 years old. They live in cruel conditions without medical care. Some became very sick, had surgery, but were put back in prison before they could heal. Over the past three decades, more than 300 of Jehovah’s Witnesses have been imprisoned under these harsh conditions, most without charge or a release date. At least seven have died due to the inhumane treatment in prison.

Families are suffering too. Jehovah’s Witnesses in prison are not allowed family visits. Some prisoners never saw their children grow up or missed their weddings. Some were

not even allowed to attend the funerals of their loved ones. One young man is now in the same prison where his father died for his faith. Others are in prison with their family members—spouses, parents, siblings, and cousins.

Although I am now free, my heart is still with those who are not. I thank you for shining a light on their suffering. I hope they too can be free, but I ask: Will they suffer for 26 years as I did? Will they die in prison? Or will they soon be released?

In August 2025, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) ruled that Eritrea violated my rights and the rights of two of my fellow prisoners. The ACHPR ordered the government to pay compensation for imprisoning and torturing us. I am thankful for this ruling. But as Jehovah's Witnesses, we do not want conflict. We want peaceful discussion and cooperation with Eritrea. We love our country and want to serve it in ways that respect our beliefs and international human rights.

Thank you again for your continued efforts. Because of you, religious prisoners are not forgotten.