



# Helen Berhane

**Country: Eritrea**

**Occupation: Gospel singer**

At this time, when the towns and cities of Eritrea are tightly controlled by a repressive military regime, the bitter privation and brutality that Eritreans are going through is known not only by those at its receiving end but increasingly by the world at large. Religious persecution has intensified. The authorities have cracked down on the minority churches, breaking into worship services in church premises or private homes, confiscating Bibles and musical instruments, arresting and beating church members on the spot, and torturing them later in military detention centres. There are now an estimated 1800 Christian Prisoners of Faith in Eritrea. Most of those arrested are held indefinitely in incommunicado detention. None are formally charged, given access to lawyers or brought to trial. Some prisoners are released but are warned not to talk about their imprisonment or treatment. Some manage to escape and flee the country. Many prisoners are often held in secret overcrowded prisons, including underground cells. In addition to psychological abuse, solitary confinement and abysmal conditions, escapees report the use of physical torture.

Helen Berhane, 30, is a well known gospel singer in Eritrea, particularly popular with young people. On 13 May 2004, shortly after she released an album of Christian music, Helen was arrested when she refused to sign a document pledging to end all participation in Christian activities, effectively forcing her to abandon her faith. Release International believes that since this date Helen, a member of the Rema Evangelical Church, has been imprisoned at Mai Serwa military camp, north of the capital Asmara. At times Helen has been held in a metal shipping container. Such containers have no washing or toilet

Through our international network of missions, Release International serves persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice.

Please see [www.releaseinternational.org](http://www.releaseinternational.org) for more information.

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**EMAIL ALERT**  
**for prayer & action**

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facilities, and are swelteringly hot during the day and freezing cold at night. She is also said to have been held in an underground cell. *Compass Direct*, reported that a military commander had informed Helen that she would be allowed no visitors, and told her she would 'rot here until you sign this paper.' (a list of conditions that would effectively mean denying her faith). *Compass* also reported that one of Helen Berhane's guards had reported her to the camp commander after he caught her listening to a Christian programme on a small radio in her container. As punishment she was transferred to an underground cell, where she was kept chained for two weeks.

## PLEASE PRAY

- ▶ That grace, peace and strength would be Helen's experience today.
- ▶ Pray for courage, safety and physical protection.
- ▶ Pray for God to intervene and for Helen's release.
- ▶ Pray for her family, her friends, together with other members of the Rema church currently imprisoned in Eritrea.

*'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him'*

**Acts 12:5**

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THE VOICE OF THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

# SEND A MESSAGE OF HOPE

**'YOU WILL RECEIVE NO VISITORS AND YOU WILL ROT HERE UNTIL YOU SIGN THIS PAPER.'**

Reported threat made to Helen Berhane by a military commander

## **Romans 12:14 'Bless those that persecute you' Christian greeting card action**

The Eritrean authorities have not officially acknowledged Helen Berhane's detention so it is not possible to send greeting cards directly to her. Instead, please send a Christian greeting card to General Sebhat Ephrem, the Eritrean Minister of Defence, wishing him God's blessing and asking him to pass on your greetings/ kind thoughts/ best wishes to those Pastors and Christians currently detained at Mai Serwa military camp. This will also ensure that the Eritrean authorities are aware of the international concern about the imprisonment of Christians in that nation. On the advice of our partners, it is inappropriate at this time to write to, or to name individuals when writing to the Eritrean authorities. In the past this has led to prisoners being relocated to a more isolated and a more difficult situation.

**Please do not mention Release International, or advance your political opinion or include anything which could be insulting to the authorities. Please do not name individual prisoners.**

Please send your greeting card to:

General Sebhat Ephrem  
Minister of Defence  
Ministry of Defence  
PO Box 629  
Asmara  
Eritrea

**You may also write a short, polite letter to the Eritrean authorities in support of Prisoners of Faith.**

A sample letter is given below.

Dear [title],

I am deeply concerned for the nation of Eritrea at this time and in particular for the situation where more than 1800 Christians have been unjustly imprisoned. Where a prisoner is detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution, I request that they be released unconditionally.

In the interim, may I urge you to ensure that that all such prisoners are given access to their families, legal advice and any medical treatment required.

President  
His Excellency Isaias Afewerki  
President of the State of Eritrea  
Office of the President  
P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea  
Fax: + 2911 125123  
**Salutation: Your Excellency**

Ms Fawzia Hashim  
Minister of Justice  
Ministry of Justice  
P O Box 241  
Asmara, Eritrea  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

Commissioner of Prisons  
Brigadier General  
Ghirmay Mehari  
Department of Penitentiary Institutions  
Ministry of Internal Affairs  
PO Box 712  
Asmara, Eritrea  
**Salutation: Dear Commissioner**