

Joint Press Release Calling for Targeted Magnitsky Sanctions Against Senior Eritrean Officials

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RWCHR Spearheads International Coalition Calling for Targeted Magnitsky Sanctions Against Senior Eritrean Officials Involved in Gross Human Rights Violations Against Dawit Isaak and His Colleagues, the Longest Detained Journalists in the World

Coalition Calls for Prosecution of Eritrean Officials for Crimes Against Humanity

Montreal – 5 October 2021 – On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the imprisonment of dual Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR), in partnership with an international coalition of leading NGOs and human rights organizations, experts, advocates, and journalists, hosted a High-Level Conference to underscore [20 Years of Dictatorship in Eritrea: A Case Study of the Global Assault on Media Freedom by Authoritarian Regimes](#).

Eritrean authorities arbitrarily detained Mr. Isaak — then reporting for Eritrea's first independent newspaper, Setit — without charge or trial, and held him incommunicado without access to family, consular assistance, and the right to counsel — effectively an enforced disappearance. Mr. Isaak was arrested along with at least ten other independent journalists, some of whom have already died in detention. Mr. Isaak and his colleagues are the longest detained journalists in the world today.

In light of the Eritrean government's ongoing assault on, and suppression of, fundamental rights and freedoms, including media freedom and the persecution of journalists in relation to the case and cause of Mr. Isaak and his colleagues, the RWCHR has called on the Canadian government to impose sanctions against senior Eritrean officials involved in acts of corruption and rights violations.

The RWCHR, in partnership with an international coalition, including Reporters Without Borders (RSF), PEN Canada, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Raoul Wallenberg Research Initiative (RWI-70), the Buxus Stiftung/Fritz Bauer Forum, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI),

Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), and the Human Rights Foundation (HRF) further call on the Eritrean government to adhere to its international legal obligations and immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Isaak and his colleagues.

Quotes:

“It is important that we act expediently to secure justice for Dawit Isaak and his colleagues, and accountability for the human rights violators, for Eritrea’s massive human rights repression. We urge the imposition of targeted Magnitsky sanctions on the senior Eritrean officials responsible for crimes against humanity. We also affirm the call to the Swedish Prosecution Authority to open an investigation into crimes against humanity against Mr. Isaak. The failure to prosecute may be said to indulge, if not incentivize, impunity. And we call on Canada, which led the [Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations](#) to call on its signatory parties to hold the Eritrean authorities accountable.”

– **Irwin Cotler, International Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR)**

– **Judith Abitan, Executive Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR)**

“Reporters Without Borders (RSF) supports the demand for Magnitsky sanctions in the case of Eritrea, the country at the very bottom of our World Press Freedom Index. But they cannot replace justice. The Swedish Prosecution Authority, where we’ve sent several complaints against the Eritrean President and senior members of his administration for Crimes against humanity in Dawit Isaak’s case, can no longer refuse to open a prosecutorial investigation.”

– **Paul Coppin, Head of Legal Desk, Reporters Without Borders (RSF)**

“For twenty years Dawit Isaak and his colleagues have endured arbitrary detention in appalling conditions without being formally charged or tried. Every day that they remain in prison is a further outrage. We urge the government of Canada to do everything in its power to use the Magnitsky sanctions to obtain their immediate and unconditional release.”

– **Grace Westcott, President, PEN Canada**

“After two decades, the devastating mistreatment of Dawit Isaak remains an emblem of the horrific environment for journalists operating in Eritrea. Dawit and all jailed journalists in the country must be freed and this government’s ongoing crusade to censor or silence its critics must be brought to an end.”

– Angela Quintal, Africa Program Coordinator, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

“The long-term imprisonment of Dawit Isaak and his colleagues, comparable to a state kidnapping, without charge and trial, under conditions of torture and in complete isolation from relatives, lawyers and consular support, is not only a serious crime against humanity, but also a political and moral scandal of the worst kind. Why was Dawit Isaac detained? As a journalist, he reported critically about the living conditions and the political leadership in Eritrea, a natural right in every constitutional state. The Eritrean government has thus completely sidelined itself and should be sanctioned diplomatically, legally and economically by the international community, through all possible means.”

– Susanne Berger, Founder and Coordinator, Raoul Wallenberg Research Initiative (RWI-70)

– Dr. Irmtrud Wojak, CEO and Executive Director, Fritz Bauer Forum

“Twenty years on, the case of Dawit Isaak and his colleagues continues to have a grave chilling effect. The arbitrary detention of journalists one of the principal ways in which they are silenced. As international human rights bodies have considered, politically motivated arrests, trials and detention are a particularly serious form of abuse, necessitating a more rigorous review and remedy. We join our partners in calling on Canada to designate targeted sanctions against Eritrean President Afwerki and his regime for the serious human rights violations committed, with impunity, against journalists and the media over decades, including in this tragic case.”

– Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Director of the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)

“Parliamentarians for Global Action calls for the immediate, unconditional release of all political prisoners in Eritrea. In 2015, the UN Commission Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea found that [systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity.](#) The case in

question is emblematic of this situation, which is almost always ignored by the International Community.”

– **David Donat-Cattin, Secretary-General, Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA)**

“Afwerki’s regime, which has an infamous track record of disregarding the rights and dignity of the Eritrean people, has turned Eritrea into one of the world’s most closed societies. He has been able to act with such cruelty and impunity for his crimes, at least in part because of the international community’s inaction. It is about time for his regime to be held accountable for its abuses, and for the international community to take a stand in solidarity with Eritreans.”

– **Roberto González, Chief Legal Officer, Human Rights Foundation (HRF)**

Signatories:

Irwin Cotler, International Chair, RWCHR

Judith Abitan, Executive Director, RWCHR

Paul Coppin, Head of Legal Desk, RSF

Björn Tunbäck, investigative journalist and Board Member, RSF Sweden

Grace Westcott, President, PEN Canada

Angela Quintal, Africa Program Coordinator, CPJ

Susanne Berger, Founder and Coordinator, RWI-70 and RWCHR Senior Fellow

Dr. Irmtrud Wojak, CEO and Executive Director, Fritz Bauer Forum

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Director, IBAHRI

David Donat-Cattin, Secretary-General, PGA

Roberto González, Chief Legal Officer, HRF

Esayas Isaak, activist and younger brother of Dawit Isaak

Dessale Berekhet, writer, journalist, and founder, PEN Eritrea

Bill Browder, CEO, Hermitage Capital Management, Head of Global Magnitsky Justice Campaign, and author of Red Notice

Meron Estefanos, human rights activist, journalist, radio presenter, and co-founder, International Commission on Eritrean Refugees

Terry Glavin, columnist for the National Post and the Ottawa Citizen, contributing editor to Macleans magazine, and RWCHR Senior Fellow