

Helen Berhane



Helen Berhane is an Eritrean gospel singer and former prisoner of conscience. She was arrested in February 2003, during an early morning raid on a house where she was teaching a group of young Christians. Ms Berhane was beaten and imprisoned, spending 32 months in a shipping container in sweltering heat and without adequate ventilation, light, or sanitation. She was repeatedly asked to renounce her religious beliefs, and was eventually released in November 2006, following a severe and sustained assault that almost left her crippled. She managed to escape to Sudan, where she was forced to keep a low profile until being granted asylum in Denmark, where she now lives.

Testimony of Helen Berhane UN Human Rights Council side event, 23 June 2016, jointly organised by CSW and Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRCE) and co-sponsored by Article 19, Defend Defenders and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR)



My name is Helen Berhane and I was born and grew up in Asmara, capital of Eritrea.

I began attending church regularly when I was eight. At that time I attended an Orthodox Church. Some years later my father built a new house and we moved to a different neighbourhood, where I started to attend a Catholic Church.

The population of Eritrea is about 50% Christian and 50% Muslim, but there is no problem between Muslims and Christians. The only real problem we all have in Eritrea is the Government.

In 2002 the government decided to recognise only four religious groups – Orthodox, Catholics, Evangelical Lutheran and Sunni Islam. But even these groups still suffer. For example the patriarch of the Orthodox Church Abune Antonios has been under house arrest since 2007.

I was imprisoned because of my faith and because I was an active Christian. Even before 2002, I had been imprisoned briefly on many occasions and released. The persecution started slowly. We never thought it would continue to this extent.

By 2002 I was a member of the Rhema Church, which at that time was the largest Pentecostal Church in Asmara.

When the government shut down all church activities, I released a CD and video along with another singer so that people could continue studying and learning in their homes. I also taught in the underground church. So the government was aware of me.

In February 2004 I was teaching a group of around 19 young people when the police raided house at around 2am. Most of them were totally drunk. They began to beat us severely on our heads with sticks before taking us to the police station. The females were put in a room already containing other women who were there for different reasons.

We started to encourage these women, talking about our faith and singing. This made the policemen very angry. They made me and a 15 year old girl kneel down all evening. Eventually we were returned to the room.

The next day we were taken to Adi Abeito prison. There we met more Christian women who had been arrested from elsewhere. Three weeks later all of us were transported to Mai Serwa.

We were imprisoned in a shipping container. They pushed around ten of us into one container. It was very dirty and full of lice that jumped around and bit us, so it was hard to sleep because we were being bitten so frequently. When you woke up in the morning your entire body was red from the bites.

The containers were also very cold at night and very hot during the day. We received very bad little food and there was not enough air, food or light. The atmosphere was suffocating and the floor was always wet. There was no toilet – we were only given one small bucket to share for the whole night. If anyone had stomach problems, they had to use the bucket also, so the container smelt awful because there were so many of us using it.

At first there were only Christians in the container, including some we had met in Adi Abeito. Then more Christians arrived who had been arrested in other raids. Eventually some non-Christian women were also placed in the container.

Conditions were very harsh. We were always tortured. If you refused to sign a paper abandoning your faith they did many terrible things to you.

I continued to refuse so they got fed up with me and wanted to teach me a lesson. I was put in a container with a woman who had severe mental health problems. She was the sister-in-law of the late General Wuchu, who was one of the president's inner circle. I do not know what she had done to be put in a container, but was told she had been in that condition for 23 years.

This poor lady kept me awake day and night as she screamed and jumped around the container. At night she would bang against the metal walls. She was violent and

unpredictable, so I had to keep alert even though I was exhausted. She beat me many times. If I tried to eat she would knock the plate out of my hands, so I lost a lot of weight at that time.

I was imprisoned with this lady for 10 months. At first we were the only two in that container. I had no rest, and little food. It was terrible. Slowly more women were imprisoned with us and she kept us all awake. She continued to jump around the container, which was particularly awful during her monthly cycle. There was not enough water and she would soil our blankets because she could not take care of herself properly.

The lady did not sleep so her body was deteriorating. She desperately needed medication, but was not getting any. Today I work with people with special problems and those who can't sleep are given medicine to help them. However, in the 10 months I was with her I saw the guards beat her many times without mercy to force her to be quiet. They used to pour water over her and beat her with plastic sticks. I am not sure if she is still alive – few people can survive regular torture like that.

I kept going only because of my faith – we prayed three times a day and three times at night. I have seen and experienced terrible things, but because of my faith on the inside I had peace and kept smiling. That angered the guards. They would shout “she’s foolish; she’s laughing all the time - why aren’t you depressed?” Then they would torture me even more.

The last time I was tortured was because they found one of the letters of encouragement that I had been writing regularly to encourage fellow prisoners. The person I had written to used to be a guard but had been caught escaping to Sudan. Unknown to me he had been told his sentence would be reduced if he helped the authorities. He gave the letter to the guards and I was taken out of the container. They made me sit on the ground, surrounded me and asked me where the bible was that I was using to research the scriptures in the letter. I said I did not have one and that the words were “in my head”.

They replied, “OK so we can destroy it then.” They began to attack my head with their feet, fists, hands and anything else they had, and I became very dizzy. As they were hitting me, prisoners who saw what was happening screamed at them to stop, but couldn’t help because they were locked in. They eventually stopped and threw me back into the container. I had a terrible headache all night.

The next morning I was chained and taken to a room for more torture even though I was already badly hurt from the previous beating. The guard who tortured me began by saying, “I knew you were teaching prisoners, but now you are teaching guards? You must stop!”

I replied “I am in prison for this. If someone asks me, I must tell them.”

He beat me countless times with all his might, taking five minute breaks to regain his strength. He specifically targeted my hands and fingers, saying “these are the ones that do the writing”. My entire body was swollen and shook involuntarily. He was shouting as he beat me, while I kept silent. During one of the five minute breaks he said “Helen you must stop saying ‘Jesus’”. I said “No. I accept Him until death”.

He continued to torture me until he had no more strength. As he sat exhausted he said "Helen, what do you think? You did your job and I am doing my job. Both of us have done well". He then called the guards and shouted "Get her out of my sight".

I was dizzy. My body had been beaten until it was deep red and blue. I was completely unable to walk, so they dragged me back to the container. They tried to chain me but my hands were too swollen to fit. It is only recently that I have begun to walk again after receiving treatment in my adopted home Denmark.

In total I was imprisoned for 32 months.

Today I am free and when I see a shipping container it is hard for me to imagine how I survived. However because of my faith my experiences made me stronger. I am not afraid of anything now. I have seen real hardship and my God was with me. So now, when life is easy, I am not afraid to speak out on behalf of the hundreds of others who still are in that awful situation and cannot speak for themselves. Some have been detained for more than 11 years. I am hearing that some of the pastors who have been detained since 2004 are very ill and their condition is worsening.

Proverbs 31:8

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves

1 Corinthians 12:26

If one member suffers all the member suffer with it

Hebrews 13:3

Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them