



BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE EDELSTAM PRIZE LAUREATE 2024: DAWIT ISAAK

Mr. Dawit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean citizen, has spent 23 years in prison without a trial in Eritrea, together with his Eritrean colleagues **Seyoum Tsehaye**, **Temesgen Ghebreyesus** and **Amanuel Asrat**.

They are the longest-detained journalists in the world.

Mr. Dawit Isaak was born on the 27th of October 1964 in Asmara in Eritrea, at the time occupied by Ethiopia. Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa, had at the time fought a decades-long war of independence from Ethiopia.

Already as a young boy, Dawit Isaak had a passion for history and literature, being inspired by his mother. And already in high-school he wrote a play about censorship that was banned for challenging the political status quo.

In his early years, Dawit was deeply influenced by the social and political changes sweeping through Eritrea. Although he eventually moved to Sweden in 1985, fleeing the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, his ties to Eritrea and its people remained strong. In Sweden, he initially settled in Gothenburg, where he quickly became an active member of the Eritrean diaspora community. There, he began to make his mark, not only as an advocate for Eritrean independence but also as an artist and playwright. In his new homeland, he grew more convinced of the power of free speech and the role of the media in shaping a just society. Sweden offered Dawit a safe haven, a place where he could freely express his ideas. However, he always kept Eritrea's struggle in his mind. Further, he was engaged in the Eritrean National Union and held a position as the editor of the Union's magazine, *Dimitsi Eritrawian*.

Dawit Isaak was granted a Swedish citizenship. However, he applied for Eritrean citizenship in order to be able to participate in the referendum on national independence. After a brutal liberation struggle from 1961 to 1991, the country declared its independence in 1993, raising hopes for democracy and national rebuilding.

The birth of a new nation held the promise of freedom and self-determination for Eritreans, and Dawit Isaak travelled regularly between Sweden and Eritrea, believing that journalism could help strengthening Eritrea's emerging democratic ideals. In Eritrea he met his wife, Sofia Berhane, and they married in 1992 and had three children.

In June 1996, a new press law was passed in Eritrea allowing the establishment of free, independent newspapers. The publication *Setit* was founded in 1997 by Aaron Berhane. A few months later, Dawit Isaak became a co-owner of the newspaper. *Setit* became a vital voice in Eritrean media, offering a space for open discussion. Dawit's work on *Setit* reflected his unwavering dedication to truth, accountability, and the hope of a free press in Eritrea.

But the political climate grew harsher and, in 1998, a war between Ethiopia and Eritrea flared up again and Isaak returned to Sweden. Despite promises of a constitution and free elections, a one-party state was established, concentrating political power in the hands of a small elite. In the spring of 2001, Isaak travelled back to Eritrea to continue writing for the newspaper.

Despite initial enthusiasm, the political climate in Eritrea turned hostile under President Isaias Afwerki's regime. What began as a liberating moment for the Eritrean people quickly morphed into a repressive environment. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, it became increasingly clear that the country was drifting toward a dictatorship, where dissent was neither tolerated nor safe. *Setit*, along with other independent newspapers, began to publish articles that questioned the government's direction and demanded greater political freedoms. Dawit, committed to holding the government accountable, was among the writers and editors voicing these concerns. This outspoken stance on governance and human rights marked him as a target.

In September 2001, Dawit Isaak's wife and their three children joined him in Asmara – a week later Dawit Isaak was arrested. The Eritrean government launched a brutal crackdown on dissent, shutting down independent media outlets and arresting journalists and political reformists. Dawit was arrested without trial, detained alongside other journalists, and held incommunicado. His arrest was part of a wider government purge targeting those who challenged the state's authoritarian direction - among them the so-called G15, a group of influential political figures who had written an open letter calling for democratic reforms, which was also published in *Setit*. Dawit Isaak, all journalists, and the G15 group were subsequently branded as traitors and accused of being involved in an attempted coup d'état.

Dawit's younger brother, Esayas, contacted the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was told that as Dawit Isaak had a dual citizenship, the Ministry could do nothing. At that time, Sweden had no Embassy in Eritrea. Esayas also contacted Swedish media, but the interest was low.

Shortly after the arrest, the Swedish Honorary Consul in Eritrea tried to visit Dawit. But the requests were denied. Attempts were later on also made by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Eritrea's Embassy in Stockholm for the Consul to visit Dawit Isaak, in accordance with the Vienna Convention. In January 2003, the Eritrean Ambassador in Sweden had a meeting with the Head of the Africa Unit at the Swedish Ministry of Affairs. But there was no advancement, due to the fact that Dawit Isaak is an Eritrean citizen. Meetings between Swedish representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and representatives of the Eritrean regime came and went. The response was also the same: the regime did not accept the Swedish citizenship and considered the Swedish interest in Dawit Isaak to be meddling in their internal affairs. This was contradicted by the fact that Dawit had used his Swedish passport several times when travelling to and from Eritrea, including when he entered, the last time, in April 2001.

The dual citizenship complicated the situation from the Swedish side.

On 19th November 2005, Dawit Isaak called his wife Sofia in Sweden and told her that he had been released. He also called Mr. Leif Öbrink, with whom he had, at the time, started the *Free*

Dawit support committee in Sweden. Öbrink contacted Swedish media. According to an article by Elisabeth Löfgren, in Swedish PEN's country report 2022, "Swedish Citizens Abroad – Prisoners of the Dictatorship, Sweden's actions are described: "This time there was considerable interest from media which also reached Eritrea via the exiled Eritrean news station *Eritrean Voices*. Sweden's Eritrean Ambassador Bengt Sparre, who had succeeded the retired Folke Löfgren, was interviewed on 21 November on Swedish Radio. He spoke of having "built up personal relations with those in power in Eritrea, and mentioned, in particular, the Eritrean Defence Minister, who had relatives in Sweden, and whom Bengt Sparre visited on several occasions. Bengt Sparre stated that his actions had played a major role in the release of Dawit Isaak. On the same day, Dawit Isaak was arrested again and taken back to Karsheli prison."

In the same article In Swedish PEN's country report 2022 it says: "The Swedish government's actions in connection with the "release" of Dawit Isaak have been strongly criticized. It was very clear that there was no plan in place for how Dawit Isaak would be brought out of the country in the event of his release. The public outcry and statements by the Ambassador, Bengt Sparre, are cited by many as a likely cause of Dawit Isaak's re-arrest."

Since Dawit was imprisoned in 2001, Sweden has had eleven foreign Ministers. Initially, the focus was on the consular work, i.e. getting permission to visit Dawit Isaak in prison, which has been met with a total refusal from the Eritrean side. In the 23 years that have passed, no Swedish representative has been allowed to visit Dawit Isaak. Sweden has chosen not to put pressure when the EU negotiated a new aid package with Eritrea, Dawit Isaak's name was not mentioned even once in the instructions given to the negotiation delegation.

Sweden's relation to Eritrea has been frozen. But since 2014, a softer diplomacy was implemented after previously direct confrontations. The silent diplomatic efforts applied have proven to be in vain and are widely criticized.

Further, according to the article in Swedish PEN's country report 2022, Reporters without Borders (RSF), has been advocating in favor of holding the Eritrean government accountable. They have submitted a legal opinion to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission and the European Parliament, arguing that Sweden not only has a right, but also an obligation, to help Dawit Isaak. Next, they worked on a *habeas corpus* petition, which was sent to Eritrea's Supreme Court in 2011. No response from the court has yet been received.

Domestic options were thus exhausted and RSF contacted the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. In 2016, the Commission reaffirmed its findings in Communication 275/03: Article 19 v Eritrea that the respondent State should: a) release or bring to a speedy and fair trial the 18 journalists (including Mr Dawit Isaak) detained since September 2001, and to lift the ban on the press; b) grant detainees immediate access to their families and legal representatives; and c) take appropriate measures to ensure payment of compensation to the detainees. The Commission further strongly urged the Respondent State to take all necessary measures to implement its decision in the said Communication without further delay. Eight years have now passed, and none of the above has been implemented.

In 2014, Dawit Isaak's Swedish-French legal team charged Eritrea's President, his Special Adviser and several ministers with, among other things, crimes against humanity.

However, according to the prosecutor, the case could not be investigated as Eritrea was not expected to cooperate. After a review, the Swedish Prosecutor General stated that there were suspicions of crimes against humanity and that the case could be investigated in Sweden. Yet he never opened an investigation. After discussions with the Swedish Foreign Ministry, he concluded that an investigation would risk harming their negotiations for Isaak's release. Also, this decision has also been severely criticized.

In 2020, a new complaint was filed, signed among others, by several internationally prominent human rights lawyers including: Irwin Cotler, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Antoine Bernard, lawyer and Senior Adviser for International Litigation (RSF), David Matas, Canadian Human Rights lawyer, Navi Pillay, former judge of the High Court of South Africa, former President of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and former judge of the International Criminal Court and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Pansy Tlakula, former Chairperson of the African Commission, Bernhard Docke, criminal defence and human rights lawyer and member of the Human Rights Committee of the German Federal Bar, Judge Shirin Ebadi, Noble Peace Prize Laureate, and Philippe Sands, former President of English PEN.

In September 2024, RSF made a fourth notification to the Swedish Prosecution Authority about crimes against humanity by Eritrean leaders – including President Isaias Afwerki – against imprisoned Dawit Isaak. The notification was made together with the Swedish legal team, consisting of Percy Bratt and Jesús Alcalá.

Since his detention, Dawit Isaak has become one of the world's most famous prisoners of conscience. He remains imprisoned in Eritrea, held without charge or trial for over two decades. Over the years, activists, human rights organizations, and international governments have campaigned for his release, recognizing Dawit as a symbol of the fight for press freedom and free speech. The Swedish government has made numerous diplomatic efforts to secure his release, but the Eritrean regime has remained resistant to external pressure. Eritrean officials have claimed, without evidence, that Dawit's case is a "national security issue," refusing to allow international observers access to him or to provide any substantial information about his condition.

The Eritrean government considers Dawit Isaak a traitor, and he is now living under harsh conditions with reports suggesting he has been subjected to torture and deprived of basic medical care. His condition remains largely unknown. Despite these hardships, Dawit's story has resonated globally, bringing attention to the plight of journalists in repressive regimes.

Today, free speech is still severely limited in Eritrea and the free press is still forbidden – it remains one of the world's most repressive states, with no free elections and severely restricted freedom of speech.