

PRESS RELEASE

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World's Longest-Imprisoned Journalist Honored on the Eve of World Press Freedom Day

"JUSTICE WALL" IN LONDON CALLS ON THE WORLD TO SAY HIS NAME: DAWIT ISAAK

On the eve of World Press Freedom Day, Human Rights Solidarity, a London-based organization committed to defending civil liberties and free expression, will host a public demonstration on Friday, 2 May, from 11:00 AM to 1:30 PM outside The Guardian headquarters at Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU. The event, open to media, NGOs, rights groups, and the public, will spotlight one of the gravest injustices in modern media history: the prolonged imprisonment of Mr. Dawit Isaak — a Swedish-Eritrean journalist, playwright, and father who has been held incommunicado in Eritrea for 24 years, without charge, trial, or access to a lawyer.

The initiative is co-sponsored by the Edelstam Foundation, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR), Eritrea Focus, and the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI).



The event is published on UNESCO's list of celebrations around the world: Celebrations around the world: <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/press-freedom-2025/around-world>

At the heart of the demonstration stands the "Justice Wall" — a powerful five-meter-long banner honoring 11 imprisoned journalists from around the world. At its center: Dawit Isaak, the world's longest-imprisoned journalist, detained for his unwavering belief in truth and freedom. "He is not just Eritrea's prisoner. He is the world's responsibility."

Some of the other imprisoned journalists included in the banner are:

- Free Reza Valizadeh (Iran) – Jailed for 816 days
- Free Maria Ponomarenko (Russia) – Jailed for 1106 days
- Free Pham Doan Trang (Vietnam) – Jailed for 1669 days
- Free José Rubén Zamora (Guatemala) – Jailed for 1008 days
- Free Katsiaryna Andrejeva (Belarus) – Jailed for 1629 days

Bethlehem Isaak, Dawit Isaak's daughter, will share a powerful public statement during the event, in which she calls on the global community to move from silence to action:



“It has been 24 years since my father last saw freedom. He dared to believe in a democratic Eritrea one where journalists speak truth to power. For that, he was silenced. There is no evidence he committed a crime. He’s never been charged. Never been tried. We have not heard his voice in decades. But he is not forgotten. His voice lives on in every act of remembrance, every call for justice. Silence is not neutrality. Silence is complicity.” – *Bethlehem Isaak*

The Man Behind the Silence

Dawit Isaak was born in Asmara, Eritrea, and fled the brutal Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict in 1985, eventually settling in Sweden. Inspired by Sweden’s democratic values and media freedom, Isaak became a prominent advocate for press freedom, human rights, and democratic reform. He returned to Eritrea after its independence in 1993, co-founding Setit, the country’s first independent newspaper, and using his pen to challenge authoritarianism.

In September 2001, during a government crackdown on journalists and reformist politicians — known as the “G15 purge” Dawit Isaak was arrested, accused of no crime, and hidden from the world. Since then, no trial has been held, and his whereabouts remain unknown.

Burak Batuhan Karakus, Head of Legal Affairs at *Human Rights Solidarity*, said: “Mr. Dawit Isaak’s courage should be written into history books — not buried in a prison file. His story is not isolated. It echoes the injustice faced by many brave truth-tellers across the globe.

Journalists like Maria Ponomarenko, jailed in Russia for over 1,100 days for reporting on war crimes, and Katsiaryna Andrejeva, imprisoned in Belarus for more than 1,600 days simply for broadcasting a peaceful protest — these are not just personal tragedies, they are symbols of global press oppression.

The same applies to Mr. Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen abducted and imprisoned by China. Both he and Dawit Isaak reflect a shameful pattern of enforced disappearance, denial of due process, and disregard for international law. We call on Sweden and the broader international community to show the same principled resolve it has expressed in other high-profile cases, and to relentlessly fight for the freedom of both Mr. Dawit Isaak and Mr. Gui Minhai.”

A Laureate in Chains

In 2024, Dawit Isaak was awarded the Edelstam Prize, recognizing his “outstanding courage in the defense of human rights.” As he remains unlawfully detained, the prize was received by his daughter in Stockholm.

Caroline Edelstam, President of the *Edelstam Foundation*, commented:

“Mr. Dawit Isaak is the longest detained journalist in the world. His exceptional courage in standing up for freedom of expression and in the defense of human rights comes with a very high price to pay. He is the world’s longest arbitrarily detained journalist, together with his colleagues, and is being held incommunicado without charge or access to legal counsel, for 24 years.

Given his prolonged disappearance and the total lack of contact for over two decades, the Edelstam Foundation also emphasizes the urgent need for proof of life — a basic humanitarian obligation that must be fulfilled without delay. Three of Mr. Isaak’s colleagues — Mr. Seyoum Tsehaye, Mr. Temesgen Ghebreyesus and Mr. Amanuel Asrat — are also still alive and arbitrarily detained. The demand for proof of life applies equally to them.



It is critical to find ways to enforce national and international law and demand accountability. No one is above the law. Enforced disappearances are criminal acts, regardless of war, emergency, or national security. Democratic nations must pressure the perpetrators.

The Edelstam Foundation calls on the international community to act, since the Eritrean and Swedish governments are failing to protect their own citizen, Mr. Dawit Isaak, in a humanitarian, security, and human rights perspective, and are not fulfilling their obligations under international law.

Further, the Edelstam Foundation respectfully asks the authorities of the State of Eritrea to free Dawit Isaak together with other still imprisoned journalists and members of the G-15, and in any case, to immediately reveal Dawit Isaak's whereabouts, and to respect without delay his right to be visited and assisted by a lawyer and by Swedish Consular authorities."

"Dawit Isaak was arrested for doing what we are free to do every day — ask questions, publish truths, and challenge power," said Karakus. "We owe it to him to be louder than the silence."

Director of the *International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute* (IBAHRI), Baroness Helena Kennedy, stated:

"Dawit Isaak stood for the protection of human rights through press freedom. His courage in speaking truth to power has resulted in his being targeted, imprisoned without charge, and disappeared, all intended to silence him. The world must take a stand whenever a journalist is arbitrarily detained. Their being silenced impacts upon everyone's right to know. His voice would have provided a necessary view into ongoing crimes committed in Eritrea over the last 24 years. Dawit Isaak is the longest-arbitrarily detained journalist worldwide, and so his case is emblematic of the pervasive problem of rising cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists, attacks on press freedom, and the lack of political will of democratic nations globally to stand up for these journalists effectively. This is even so when it concerns a country's own citizen, as is the case for Dawit Isaak being not only an Eritrean citizen, but a Swedish citizen. The IBAHRI implores further action to secure his release and push forward accountability for his detention with no trial for 24 years, and the failure of the Eritrean Government to uphold the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's decision in his case."

On behalf of Mr. Dawit Isaak, the ***Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights*** (RWCHR) is leading a coalition of prominent international human rights organizations — including the Eritrea Focus and the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI). **Professor Irwin Cotler, RWCHR Founder and International Chair**, together with **Judith Abitan, RWCHR Executive Director**, stated:

"Mr. Dawit Isaak, whose case is emblematic of the global assault on media freedom, has been subjected to incommunicado detention for nearly 24 years—denied all contact with his family, legal representation, consular access, and any appearance before a competent, independent, and impartial tribunal.

Deprived of all forms of human contact, Mr. Isaak is, under international law, a victim of enforced disappearance and prolonged arbitrary detention, in clear violation of both Eritrea's domestic legal framework and its binding international legal obligations.

We therefore reiterate the [opinion](#) rendered by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which reaffirms the unlawful nature of Mr. Isaak's detention and underscores the systemic and egregious human rights violations committed by the Eritrean authorities.



The opinion marks a critical step toward justice and accountability and casts a much-needed international spotlight on Mr. Isaak and his fellow detainees. We reaffirm our urgent call on the Government of Eritrea to immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Isaak and all others arbitrarily detained, and we urge the international community to take all appropriate measures to ensure compliance with international law and to hold the perpetrators accountable. Justice must be served without delay, as it is long overdue, crucial for protecting fundamental rights, and essential to upholding the rules-based international order.”

Eritrea Focus is a think tank and research organization who is monitoring the Mr. Dawit Isaaks case – **Habte Hagos, Chairman Eritrea Focus**, stated: “Eritrea is a country located in the Horn of Africa. It gained its independence from neighboring Ethiopia in 1993 after 30 years of war. Since then, President Isaias Afewerki has ruled the country as his fiefdom. He has turned the country into a gulag where grotesque crimes are committed on its citizens with impunity and its youth enslaved in perpetuity. Eritrea can only be described as a prison state and hell on earth for its people. It is the most repressive country. This has resulted in mass exodus of its citizens making it the fastest emptying nation on earth.

It is against this background Dawit Isaak advocated for justice that led to his incarceration and subsequent disappearance. At the time of writing, Dawit has been in prison for **8,602** days and counting. The Eritrean government refuses to disclose Dawit’s whereabouts in another cruel twist of the regime’s depravity. On 26 May 2009, during an interview with Swedish TV4 the President of Eritrea dismissed Dawit’s case saying: “We will not have any trial, and we will not free him. We know how to handle his kind. To me, Sweden is irrelevant. The Swedish government has nothing to do with us”. This is an unequivocal response, if one is needed, from the President to the Swedish Authorities’ “silent diplomacy”.

Dawit was arrested along with several other journalists who dared to speak out. Almost all of them were freedom fighters who fought heroically for their country’s independence in gruesome conditions. They include Saleh Idris Sa’ad (Adams newspaper), Said Abdelkadir (Admas), Fesseha Yohannes (Setit), Amanuel Asrat (Zemen), Yousif Mohammed Ali (Tsigenay), Seyoum Tsehaye (TV Eritrea News), Medhanie Haile (Keste Debana), Idris Abu’Are (A-Hadis), Dawit Habtemichael (Mekalih), Mathewos Habteab (Mekalih), Hamid Mohammed Said, Milkias Mihreteab (Keste Debana), and Sahle Tsefezab (Hadas Eritrea Journal). These journalists have been languishing incommunicado in undisclosed prisons across the country. Their loved ones have not seen or heard from them since they were incarcerated in September 2001.

It is clear the Swedish “silent diplomacy” has failed. But the Authorities seem to have closed their eyes on one of their nationals who has now been incarcerated for almost a quarter of a century. It should be abundantly clear that the Eritrean government does not care about any form of diplomacy, nor does it care what is said or written by the international community. All the regime understands is economic action. This is why Eritrea Focus along with its partners has been advocating for punitive and targeted sanctions against the Eritrean Government. We urge the International Community to join us in this endeavor and for the Swedish Government to proactively lead this initiative so that the long detained and still alive journalists may one day see daylight.

Since September 2021, Eritrea focus has held exhibitions on the imprisoned journalists and parliamentarians across the UK, Switzerland and virtually at the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the AU Human Rights Forum. These exhibitions will continue and accelerate with the unwavering support of our partners. We demand freedom and justice for Dawit and his colleagues.”



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THE EDELSTAM PRIZE



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