

Her Excellency Margot Wallström
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Sweden

Re: Dawit Isaak

Your Excellency,

My name is Aaron Berhane, and I am the former editor-in-chief and co-founder of Setit, the first and once the largest newspaper in Eritrea. I am writing this letter to urge your government to advocate more strongly for the release of my friend and former colleague Dawit Isaak, a Swedish citizen who has been imprisoned without due process in Eritrea since 2001.

Sweden is the object of great respect within the world community. It is an esteemed leader in the protection and advocacy of human rights domestically and internationally. The tremendous financial contributions your country makes to global organizations for the sake of promoting human rights is a clear reflection of your dedication to such causes.

However, after many years without any change to Dawit Isaak's circumstances, I am forced to ask what role Sweden now plays in securing the release of one of its citizens – one who has languished in unspeakable conditions for more than 17 years. I would like to know why you continue to tread softly in your diplomatic advocacy of Isaak's release. Why have you not more strongly demanded it?

Dawit, like thousands Eritrean prisoners of conscience, is not allowed visitation by his family, the Red Cross or any human rights organization. He has not been brought to court or even charged with any crime. His family and anyone who advocates for him are not allowed to know his whereabouts.

I know you are aware of these facts, but you nonetheless after many years do not appear to have changed your approach in this matter. With all due respect, you still seem reliant on polite diplomacy, and expect to see a change of heart occurring spontaneously on the part of the Eritrean dictatorship. You may explain this as patience, but to most people who watch Dawit's case closely, it appears as indifference – even neglect.

Everything should have a limit, including polite diplomacy. I believe it is time to change your tactic and to take such concrete actions as closing the Eritrean consulate in Sweden, severing diplomatic relations, and stopping the fundraising activities for the regime which are conducted under the guise of cultural activities of the Eritrean community in Sweden.

Such actions will impact the Eritrean regime which relies heavily on the 2% tax its consulate collects from its nationals residing in your country, as well as on the funds raised through its so-called cultural activities. Such strong actions will also send a message to all Swedish citizens of Eritrean descent who have started to doubt whether they truly belong in your country. Through your show of solidarity in advocating for Dawit, they will see there are no classes to Swedish citizenship, and that their rights – no matter their ethnic origin – will always be defended by their country.

Dawit was a proud Swede. I learned a lot from him about Sweden and Swedish values. He used to speak often about the transparency of the Swedish government, the dedication of the members of your parliament in advocating for their constituencies, and your values which adhere to freedom of the press

and inalienable human rights. Dawit's dream was to one day see Eritrea adopt those values. That is why he often used Sweden as a standard by which other nations were measured when discussing such matters. I am not sure what he would say about your country now.

Dawit and his family need your help badly.

Thus I respectfully ask that you change your diplomatic approach towards Eritrea for the sake of Dawit's family and friends. They have suffered enough, thinking about their imprisoned loved one who has been absent from their lives for so long. They read now what initiatives are being taken by Reporters Without Borders, The Swedish Writer's Union, the Swedish chapter of Pen International, The Swedish Magazine Publishers Association, Expressen, Swedish Union of Journalists, Swedish Media Publishers' Association and many other international organizations in order to keep Dawit's story alive and put on the forefront of people's minds. I am sure they are grateful in seeing how organizations that support the 'Free Dawit Isaak' movement are doing their best to increase public awareness and to put pressure on the Eritrean government.

I frankly doubt they feel the same way about the activities of your government with regard to Dawit's case. They do not see your way of diplomacy is working. They cannot say for certain whether you are actually doing anything to obtain proof of his life. If you actually have concrete plans, there is no way for them to know. They simply would love to see you act quickly and decisively before it is too late.

The violation of Dawit's basic human rights is an ineradicable stain that is sure to spread. It will not stop with him. Unless he is vociferously defended today, you put the rights of other Eritreans in Sweden with dual citizenship at risk. Indeed, the Eritrean regime is counting on the indifference of your government toward Swedes who hold dual citizenship. You and your government must prove that this assumption is misguided by standing vocally in solidarity with Dawit and by making his case your highest priority.

Thank you for taking time to read my letter.

Sincerely,

Aaron Berhane
Stockholm
April 24, 2019