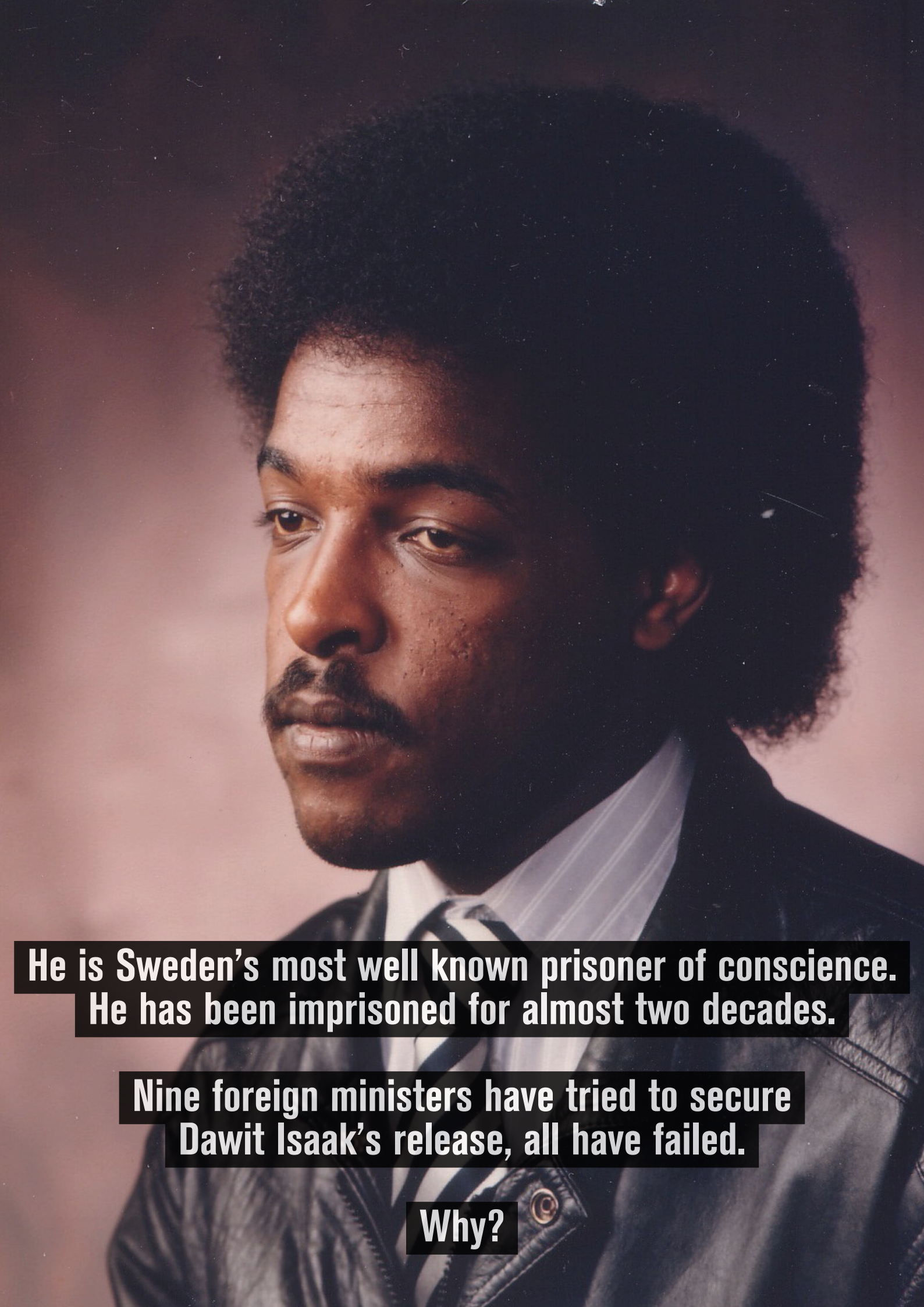
PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE SINCE 2001

WHY HAS SWEDEN NOT MANAGED TO SECURE DAWIT ISAAK'S RELEASE?

RSF REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS


He is Sweden's most well known prisoner of conscience.
He has been imprisoned for almost two decades.
Nine foreign ministers have tried to secure
Dawit Isaak's release, all have failed.
Why?

IMPRISONED SINCE 2001

Since Dawit Isaak was arrested in the Eritrean capital Asmara on September 23, 2001, nine Swedish foreign ministers have been responsible for the government's hitherto unsuccessful attempt to free him.

During his almost two decades of captivity, Swedish diplomats have been denied access to the Swedish citizen Dawit Isaak. Since 2005, no independent party has been allowed to meet him and confirm that he is still alive. It is uncertain whether Dawit Isaak has even been told what he is being accused of. He has never been given a chance to defend himself in a court of law.

Over the years, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) has received harsh criticism, including from RSF Sweden, for not doing enough to get Dawit Isaak released.

Criticism has also been leveled at the fact that there was no plan for how Sweden would get Dawit Isaak out of Eritrea when he was unexpectedly released on November 19, 2005. Instead, he was arrested again on November 21.

The MFA has also been criticized for preventing a group of lawyers who, with the support of RSF Sweden, tried to get the Swedish justice system to initiate an investigation against Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki and several of his ministers for violating Dawit Isaak's human rights.

Furthermore, Sweden's decision not to demand that the EU condition its development aid to Eritrea against Dawit Isaak's freedom has been questioned. On at least one occasion, the MFA has advised a delegation from the European Parliament not to mention Dawit Isaak's case during an official visit to Asmara.

The MFA has also advised the Swedish development agency Sida against providing financial support to Radio Erena, Eritrea's only independent radio station which broadcasts from France.

This report is an attempt to account for what the Swedish MFA has – and has not – done in order to persuade Eritrea to release Dawit Isaak, or at the very least allow him his day in court. As a compilation of the undertaken diplomatic efforts it is incomplete, since RSF Sweden's request to obtain the documents relating to the case has been rejected.

The Swedish MFA does not grant access to any documents, not even with sensitive parts redacted. This includes documents which the ministry has previously made available.

According to the decision of July 9, 2020, signed by foreign minister Ann Linde, the documents are classified. Partly because they concern "Sweden's international relations," but also because Dawit Isaak or his close relatives can suffer harm should their content be revealed.

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Instead, RSF Sweden has sought answers from the foreign ministers who, since his imprisonment in 2001, have had the ultimate responsibility for getting the Swedish citizen Dawit Isaak released.

Two of them, Anna Lindh and Jan O. Karlsson, are deceased.

Of the remaining seven, two – Laila Freivalds, foreign minister during 2003–2006, and Bosse Ringholm, who was acting foreign minister for less than a week after Freivald's resignation – have chosen not to respond.

Carl Bildt, who served as foreign minister during 2006–2014, has responded via email.

Carin Jämtin and Jan Eliasson, who both served for shorter periods in 2006, Margot Wallström, who was foreign minister from 2014–2019, and the current foreign minister Ann Linde, have given interviews.

All of Swedens foreign ministers during this time – with the exception of Bildt, who belongs to the conservative Moderate Party – have been Social Democratic Party members.

Former state secretary Annika Söder and Per Enarsson, former Swedish ambassador to Eritrea, have also answered our questions. Sweden's current ambassador, Svante Liljegren, has declined to be interviewed.

A LOUSY START

The MFA's first reaction to the news that a then 36-year-old Swedish citizen and father of three named Dawit Isaak has been arrested in Eritrea is one of disinterest. Dawit Isaak's younger brother Esayas Isaak is met with indifference when he calls the ministry a few days after the arrest.

"I called through the switchboard. I asked whom I should speak to and reached the consular section. The woman who responded said that if Dawit has dual citizenship, then there is nothing that the MFA can do," says Esayas Isaak, who lives in Sweden.

In fact, the MFA is legally obliged to do whatever it can in order to secure the release of a Swedish citizen who has been imprisoned on dubious grounds, regardless of whether he or she is also a citizen of the country that has incarcerated him or her.

This is pointed out in a legal opinion commissioned by RSF Sweden in 2010, which analyzed the circumstances pertaining to Dawit Isaak's case.

"But I accepted what they said. I had never dealt with them before. I figured that it was good that they at least knew he was detained. After that, I didn't really know what else to do," says Esayas Isaak.

Swedish authorities never contact Dawit Isaak's wife Sofia Isaak. When she calls the Swedish honorary consul in Asmara, she is told that there is nothing the consulate can do.

Esayas Isaak can't make any headway with the authorities either. No one at the MFA asks for his contact information or offers to get in touch should the ministry hear any news.

Among those who have participated in the efforts for Dawit Isaak, many argue that the MFA took advantage of the fact that Esayas Isaak had little experience in dealing with officials and government authorities.

"If Dawit had been a white Swede named David, we wouldn't be sitting here 19 years on," says Swedish-Eritrean journalist Meron Estefanos.

Disappointed with the lack of interest shown by the MFA, Esayas Isaak instead turns to the media, only to be met with a similar reaction. In the autumn of 2001, after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, no one is interested in reporting about a jailed journalist in Eritrea.

"I remember quite well that when I called *Göteborgs-Posten*, my local daily, they said that they had already written about Eritrea. 'This is not of interest for us', that's what they said," says Esayas Isaak.

He doesn't want to mention names, but several of the Swedish journalists who will later protest against the imprisonment of their colleague initially choose not to report the story.

"A couple of them have apologized. But it's not me they should be apologizing to, it's Dawit," says Esayas Isaak.

Asked about what it might have meant that the MFA did not act more decisively immediately after his brother's arrest, Esayas Isaak says:

"I believe Eritrea thought that Sweden does not care so much and that the government here accepted that he was an Eritrean citizen, as Eritrea has claimed ever since, and that therefore Sweden has nothing to do with Dawit's case."

That Dawit Isaak is an Eritrean citizen and that Sweden has neither reason nor right to intervene in his case, has been the standard reply from the Eritrean government and its representatives since the arrest.

Only several years later, after media outlets have begun paying attention to the fact that a Swedish journalist, adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, is imprisoned in Eritrea, after RSF Sweden has awarded him it's Press Freedom Prize 2003 and the support committee Free Dawit was formed in 2004, does the MFA invite Dawit Isaak's family.

"I attended some meetings at the MFA from time to time. They gave updates on what they were doing. As I recall, they spoke to Eritrean ministers they had met. But nothing new emerged and nothing happened," says Esayas Isaak.

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In 2009, when the EU decides to give Eritrea more than 100 million euros in aid without making any demands regarding Dawit Isaak, Esayas Isaak writes a letter to the Eritrean president Afwerki. In it, he personally pleads for his brothers release.

"I asked a delegation from the EU to read it out loud when they met with the Eritrean regime. But when the delegation said it had a letter from Dawit Isaak's brother, the Eritreans became so angry that they got up and just walked away."

The pattern is recognizable. Several other sources describe having received the same

DAWIT ISAAK

Dawit Isaak is born on October 27, 1964, in Asmara, which is then part of the Ethiopian Empire. He grows up with his parents and five siblings. The family runs an Italian deli.

While still in school, Dawit Isaak starts writing and directing plays. He later goes on to produce several novels and receives awards for his writing.

In 1985, Dawit Isaak flees to Sweden. He resides in Lerum, outside Gothenburg on the west coast of Sweden, and works as a janitor. In 1992 he becomes a Swedish citizen. Throughout this time, Dawit Isaak participates in the Eritrean diaspora movement, where dreams of a free and democratic Eritrea thrive.

When Eritrea becomes independent in 1993, Dawit Isaak returns to Asmara. He marries and has children, writes plays and sets up a children's theater group. Dawit Isaak is recruited to write for Setit – Eritreas first independent newspaper – where he also becomes co-owner.

In 1998, only five years after Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, a border war breaks out between the two countries. In 2000, Dawit Isaak relocates his family to Gothenburg. In april of 2001, he returns to Asmara. The family follows a few months later.

For Setit, Dawit Isaak reports on the demands of the democracy movement and the criticism against Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki.

On September 23, 2001, Dawit Isaak is arrested by security officers. With the exception of a few days in 2005, he has been imprisoned ever since. No formal charges has been brought against him, he has not been granted a trial and Swedish diplomats are not allowed to meet him.

In the summer of 2020, Dawit Isaak's daughter, Betlehem Isaak, confirms that she had reliable information that her father is still alive.

reaction when attempting to raise the issue with Eritrean representatives and officials.

"In the end there was no meeting. Despite the fact that many people had spent several months, maybe a year, setting it up," says Esayas Isaak.

He believes that there are historical reasons why Dawit Isaak's case is so sensitive to the Eritrean leadership.

"Eritrea is a small nation and we managed to defeat the giant Ethiopia. Now we do not want to take orders from anyone else. Eritrea wants to run its own race. But just because that's what the regime wants, it doesn't mean you can accept it," says Esayas Isaak.

THREE DAYS OF FREEDOM

Gothenburg is still shrouded in darkness when the phone rings on the morning of November 19, 2005. The moment Sofia Isaak has spent more than four years waiting for has suddenly arrived. It's Dawit calling!

He asks to talk to the children. To the twins Bethlehem and Yoran, who were seven years old when he was arrested, and to their little sister Danait, who was not even a year old at the time of the arrest and has no recollection of her father.

Dawit Isaak says that he is free, that he'll be home soon. Then everything goes wrong.

Leif Öbrink, chairperson of the support committee Free Dawit, calls the Swedish news agency TT. Suddenly, journalists from all of Sweden's major news outlets want to interview Sofia Isaak and the kids.

Öbrink gathers the Isaak family at his place. They celebrate with alcohol-free cider and eat pastries. From the MFA, foreign minister Laila Freivalds calls to congratulate.

Sofia and Betlehem Isaak are interviewed by public service television channel SVT. Asked about her thoughts during her father's years of imprisonment, Betlehem Isaak replies:

"Will I ever see him? Or will he just remain there for the rest of his life?"

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SVT also interviews Bengt Sparre, Sweden's ambassador to Eritrea. The ambassador didn't receive any notification about the release through diplomatic channels; instead he was informed by the support committee Free Dawit. But in the interview, he appears to take credit for the release.

"I used my method. It's better to have friends than enemies. Now there has been a positive result a lot faster than I would have expected," says Sparre.

But on November 21, Dawit Isaak is arrested again. Today, opinions vary about why, and what part the actions of Swedish representatives played.

"I suppose it was that people couldn't keep quiet. That there were too much attention before he managed to get to safety. What happened is terrible," says former foreign minister Margot Wallström.

Her state secretary Annika Söder elaborates further.

"My guess is that some people in Asmara felt that enough is enough, it'll do us more

good to release him. So when ambassador Bengt Sparre failed to keep his mouth closed, despite Dawit Isaak still being in the country, others among the political leadership probably intervened."

"That's what I think, there are other theories as well. That his release was unintended, or that he was just supposed to get a chance to get some air and show that he was still alive."

Ambassador Bengt Sparre, who passed away in 2018, received harsh criticism for having openly spoken about how his "method" had resulted in the release.

"It's important that the counterpart does not lose face. It has to appear like they have made the decision, without external pressure," says former foreign minister Jan Eliasson.

"Anything else is a fundamental error of diplomacy, and in this case, a tragedy beyond belief."

Per Enarsson, Swedish ambassador to Eritrea 2015–2018, says that there is now preparations in place should Dawit Isaak be released again.

"We saw to that. If he was released in the same manner today, we wouldn't act like last time."

A PERSONAL TOUCH

When Laila Freivalds resigns in March 2006, she is succeeded by Jan Eliasson. Suddenly, Sweden has a foreign minister who has at least a nodding acquaintance with Eritrea's dictator Isaias Afwerki.

For a couple of days in the early 90's, Jan Eliasson and Isaias Afwerki are seated next to each other during a United Nations aid conference in Geneva.

Jan Eliasson is chairperson and Isaias Afwerki, newly appointed as the first president of independent Eritrea, is vice chairperson.

At that time, most believe that Afwerki is soon to announce free elections and that Eritrea is on the verge of becoming a democracy.

"It was a two-day conference and we had a good connection. He had been having back problems, and as I had had the same, I helped getting his X-rays analyzed by a doctor," says Jan Eliasson.

As president of the UN General Assembly in 2005 and 2006, Eliasson has spoken about Dawit Isaak with Eritrea's ambassador to the UN. But it is only after the Swedish general election in 2006, when Eliasson leaves his post as foreign minister, that he has a chance to use his personal relationship with Isaias Afwerki.

As UN special envoy to Darfur, Sudan, Eliasson meets with president Afwerki in Eritrea, where many have sought refuge from the violence in Darfur.

"It must have been in 2007, so 14–15 years had passed since we last met. But Afwerki came up to me with a big smile and said: 'How is your back?'"

Eliasson is well versed in Dawit Isaak's case and has previously visited Sofia Isaak and her children in Gothenburg. A visit which Esayas Isaak also attended.

"I had some hopes at that time. But then bugger all happened. Eliasson was from Gothenburg himself and a really big player in the UN, and I thought: 'Get it done.' I had expected more from him," says Esayas Isaak today.

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When Eliasson meets Isaias Afwerki, he seizes the opportunity.

"I did something unconventional. I asked my staff to leave so that we could have a private conversation. I said: 'Now I'm stepping out of my UN shoes, now I am speaking to you as an ordinary Swede,'" says Eliasson.

"I brought up Dawit Isaak and he became crossed, his body language turned really dismissive. I think he even said something like: 'How can you bring that up, you're supposed to be my friend?' I said that's exactly why I brought it up, and that he should listen to his friends and that he was making a huge mistake."

According to Afwerki, Sweden has no right to make demands on Dawit Isaak's behalf.

"His position was that Dawit Isaak had been part of a coup against him, that the issue therefore was strictly internal. That doesn't matter, said I. Dawit Isaak has the right to a fair trial. I told him to show us that Eritrea is a state that we can cooperate with, but he just got angry," says Eliasson.

In the summer of 2008, Eliasson and Afwerki meet once more.

"I brought it up again. He was less testy, but simply said something along the lines of: 'You have already gotten your answer.'"

More than twelve years have passed since. Asked why Dawit Isaak is still not free, Eliasson replies:

"Generally speaking, sovereignty and national integrity are sacred things for countries with a history of colonialism. Many also consider human rights issues to be internal matters, they view comments about how they treat their own citizens as an interference."

An important key to understanding why Afwerki has so stubbornly refused to release Dawit Isaak is that the president considers him a traitor.

In an interview, published in journalist Martin Schibbye's book *Looking for Dawit*, the Eritrean minister of information, Yemane Gebremeskel, sums up the regime's position:

"Isaak's crime is not his journalism or his opinions, but that he was a part of the group which we are accusing of treason. He can't be separated from the group."

THE CRACKDOWN OF 2001

Dawit Isaak is not the only proponent of democracy that is arrested in Eritrea in September of 2001.

A couple of days prior to his arrest, most members of the G-15 have been detained. The G-15 was made up by high ranking members of the ruling party People's Front for Democracy and Justice. It had demanded that the constitution from 1997 be implemented and had criticized president Isaias Afwerki.

On the September 18, all independent media are banned. Several journalists are arrested, Amnesty International puts the number at 17, including Dawit Isaak's colleague Fessehaye Yohannes from Setit.

Most of those arrested in the crackdown have since passed away in prison.

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS FROZEN SOLID

During Carl Bildt's eight-year tenure as foreign minister, 2006–2014, he often refers to the silent diplomacy which is said to be taking place between Sweden and Eritrea.

Considering that Dawit Isaak has been released, and arrested again, in the year before Bildt's appointment, possibly due to the media attention, it is initially understandable. But as time passes, journalists and activists start becoming disgruntled with not receiving any information. There are suspicions that not enough is being done.

What we know for a fact is that Bildt chooses not to raise the issue when, in 2009, the EU is negotiating a new, and substantially larger, aid package of 112 million euros to Eritrea.

Björn Tunbäck of RSF Sweden obtains the instruction that the MFA has sent to the development agency Sida, which represents Sweden during the negotiations in Brussels. Nowhere in the instruction is Dawit Isaak's name to be found.

"It is incomprehensible to not even mention that a EU citizen and journalist is imprisoned. It shows indifference," says Björn Tunbäck.

Commenting on the decision today, Carl Bildt writes:

"It is true that we did not demand that the EU condition the aid. We had need of a relationship with Eritrea that allowed us to keep working on the case. That's why we decided to keep it separate from the development aid."

Among the efforts that receive media attention during Carl Bildt's tenure is an attempt in 2011 to have Libya's military intelligence service, which has good contacts with the Eritrean intelligence agencies in Asmara, raise the issue.

Bildt's conclusion is that the Libyan intelligence service does what it can, but fails.

"That's pretty much our assessment," he says to Swedish daily *Expressen*.

"But most of it stumbles on the Eritrean leadership."

Not until June of 2013, when he has been foreign minister for seven years, does Carl Bildt personally meet with an Eritrean minister for the first time.

The meeting with Eritrean foreign minister Osman Saleh takes place in Brussels and the support committee Free Dawit describes it as "a small breakthrough".

But a year later, relations between Sweden and Eritrea reach rock bottom. An infamous meeting in Finland ends in a shouting match.

And in the beginning of September 2014, an Eritrean diplomat is expelled from Sweden, a highly unusual occurrence.

As time passes, journalists and activists start becoming disgruntled with not receiving any information. There are suspicions that not enough is being done.

"I can confirm that a foreign diplomat has been asked to leave the country, but I can't comment on the why," says the MFA's press officer Charlotta Ozaki Macías to the news agency TT.

According to Swedish-Eritrean journalist Meron Estefanos, the subject of the expulsion is none other than the chief diplomat of the Eritrean embassy in Stockholm.

He is given 48 hours to leave Sweden.

COOPERATING WITH A DICTATOR

Foreign minister Margot Wallström assumes office after the Swedish general election in 2014. Her version of how Dawit Isaak's case has hitherto been handled differs from the established one.

According to Wallström, her predecessor Bildt, contrary to popular belief, had applied so much pressure on the Eritrean regime that president Isaias Afwerki got vexed and wanted nothing to do with Sweden.

"When we took over, the relations with Eritrea were frozen solid, there was no communication whatsoever. It could not have been worse," says Margot Wallström.

Wallström decides a change of strategy is needed.

"We had tried to play hardball, now we wanted to change tracks, to try and establish good relations through diplomatic methods. For that to work you need to be reasonably consistent and give it time."

The Swedish MFA now stops asking foreign heads of state, ambassadors and EU officials to plead for Dawit Isaak's release.

The new strategy is based on the analysis that Eritrea considers Dawit Isaak to be part of the reformist group G-15.

Instead, there are to be more direct communication and more Swedish visits to Eritrea.

The new strategy is based on the analysis that Eritrea considers Dawit Isaak to be part of the reformist group G-15, whose members, due to their criticism of President Afwerki, are considered traitors. Henceforth, the Swedish MFA makes sure only the "proper" agents raise Dawit Isaaks case with the Eritrean regime.

"The premiss was that Eritrea views Dawit as a member of the group of 15 persons that they imprisoned, and that one possibility was the simultaneous release of several of them. Of course, we also insisted that he is Swedish and on our right to act in his case," says Annika Söder.

From his appointment as Stockholm-based ambassador to Eritrea in January 2015, Per Enarsson is trying to establish personal relationships with important Eritrean politicians.

He bonds with foreign minister Osman Saleh and drinks several glasses of the local liquor zibib with Afwerki's advisor Yemane Gebreab.

During UN summits, Wallström and Söder make a habit of always meeting with Eritrean representatives. In addition, Wallström and Söder also meet with the Eritrean ministers who travel to Sweden every summer to participate in the annual festival that the Eritrean embassy arranges north of Stockholm.

To approach a dictatorship, that keeps a Swedish citizen imprisoned without trial, in this fashion is naturally controversial. Especially as critics consider the festival to be an opportunity for the embassy to keep track of which members of the Swedish-Eritrean community support the regime, and which do not.

Wallström's new strategy also means anchoring the MFA's new modus operandi with the other parties of parliament, as well as with Dawit Isaak's family and volunteer organizations committed to his cause.

"We openly told them what we did so that they would understand why we chose a completely different path, that we wanted to use intensified contacts," says Wallström.

The change of direction seeks to establish new collaborations between Sweden and Eritrea, a process that proves to be slow and cumbersome.

It takes ambassador Per Enarsson a year to negotiate a list of possible collaborative projects. When the list is eventually sent from Stockholm to Asmara as a diplomatic note, the Swedish MFA receives no answer. Finally, ambassador Enarsson makes an unannounced visit to the Eritrean MFA and receives the blessing of the foreign minister to go ahead with the projects.

When state secretary Annika Söder travels to Asmara, she gets to meet "everyone" except the president. A dialogue on human rights, migration and economic development is initiated. There are hopes that Eritrea's dissatisfaction with the fact that so many people are fleeing the country can be used to persuade the regime to respect human rights, and release political prisoners.

To approach a dictatorship, that keeps a Swedish citizen imprisoned without trial, in this fashion is naturally controversial.

These hopes are dashed.

Similarly, all the efforts to achieve collaborations end up being in vain. After 1.5 years of diplomatic work, there is to be no Swedish support for local NGOs working with war widows, nor any scientific exchange between the Swedish marine biologists and their Eritrean colleagues.

"It took some time before we realized that the encouraging words we received from members of the government or the president's advisors were not rooted with the president himself. Either they attempted to keep us in a good mood, or they tried, but failed," says Annika Söder.

There are discussions about whether Wallström or prime minister Stefan Löfven should travel to Asmara to meet with president Afwerki in person.

"We tried to set up a meeting with the president. But we didn't want to do it in a way that risked not bringing about anything. If we were going to do it, we wanted results, and that didn't happen," says Wallström.

Another idea that is deliberated is whether Sweden should open an embassy in Eritrea, instead of having an Stockholm-based ambassador.

"We have made that request several times. We have said that we will open an embassy if Dawit Isaak is released. But it was politically impossible. We never received any promises," says Annika Söder.

ERITREA

After a 30-year war of liberation, Eritrea declared its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Its territory was previously an Italian colony, but ended up under British rule during World War II, before being incorporated in a federation with the then Ethiopian Empire in 1952.

After independence, the leader of the liberation movement, Isaias Afwerki, becomes Eritrea's first president. But instead of fulfilling the promises of democratization, Afwerki concentrates power in his own hands.

During 1998–2000, a border war is fought between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It will take until 2018 before a peace agreement is signed.

Thousands of Eritreans flee the country each month to avoid compulsory "national service" conscription, which is supposed to last 18 months but can go on indefinitely. It is estimated that around one million Eritreans live abroad today. By comparison, Eritrea has a population of about 4.5 million people.

Eritrea is an authoritarian one-party state. The human rights situation is among the worst in the world. Neither political opposition nor independent media are allowed.

Eritrea ranks 178th out of 180 countries and territories in the RSF World Press Freedom Index.

UN SANCTIONS LIFTED

In 2015, the EU decides to almost double its development aid to Eritrea. Like last time, Sweden chooses not to make any demands concerning Dawit Isaak.

"We have tried to find other ways than being openly critical. We know how the president would use that. It would just make him a martyr. And that would risk all the progress that we have made," says Annika Söder.

"Eritrea isn't even all that interested in EU aid, so combining aid with demands is difficult."

Wallström is also responsible for stopping what could have been an indictment for crimes against humanity, linked to Eritrea's treatment of Dawit Isaak, after a group of lawyers, supported by RSF Sweden, file a complaint against president Isaias Afwerki and several of his ministers.

The Swedish prosecutor-general concludes that there are "relatively strong reasons" to launch a criminal investigation, but refrains from doing so.

In the spring of 2015, the Swedish prosecutor-general concludes that there are "relatively strong reasons" to launch a criminal investigation. But the prosecutor-general refrains from doing so, in accordance with the wishes of the MFA, whose position is that an investigation would reduce the chances of securing Dawit Isaak's release.

Since 2009, Eritrea has been the subject of UN sanctions, including an arms embargo, based on suspicions of Eritrean support for the Islamist terrorist group al-Shabab in Somalia.

In 2017–2018, when Sweden is a member of the UN Security Council, there are several votes on the sanctions.

Sweden twice votes with the majority to keep the sanctions in place, as Eritrea has not cooperated with UN experts.

"We encouraged Eritrea to acquit themselves so that the sanctions could be lifted. The reasoning was that if external threats and sanctions disappeared, they could release the political prisoners without losing face," says Annika Söder.

In 2018, a peace deal is signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This raises hopes of a political thaw in Eritrea, with democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners. Many observers believe that Eritrea has used the war as an excuse to keep Dawit Isaak and other journalists imprisoned.

In the Security Council, Sweden, alongside previously reluctant Ethiopia, is leading the effort to lift the sanctions. But the positive signals the Swedish MFA believes it has received, that it might be possible to discuss Dawit Isaak's case once the business with the sanctions has been resolved, come to naught.

"They have kept us between hope and despair all along," says Margot Wallström.

When Wallström leaves office in 2019, Dawit Isaak is still imprisoned. Sweden has still not received any confirmation that he is alive and there are still nothing indicating that he will receive a trial. Looking back, Wallström admits that the countless high-level meetings did not yield any progress.

"When not even the peace agreement can unlock the situation, then it's hard to know what to do", she says. "There are no contacts we haven't reached out to."

As an example, Wallström mentions an impromptu meeting with Ethiopia's then newly appointed president Abiy Ahmed, who, unlike long term ruler Meles Zenawi, does not

belong to president Isaias Afwerki's arch-enemy, the liberation movement Tigray People's Liberation Front.

”Once, I approached Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia, at an airport. I took him aside. He had excellent contacts with president Isaias and said that there wouldn't be any issues. But he had also underestimated Isaias Afwerki.”

According to Wallström, the main reason that her efforts have been unsuccessful is the fact that political power in Eritrea is concentrated to one person.

“Because all roads lead to the president. It is entirely up to him.”

Asked if Sweden has a moral obligation to take a tough stance against Eritrea, she says:

”That had been tried, causing all relations to break down. We have always assumed that Dawit Isaak is alive and that we will get him out.”

CONTINUING ON THE SAME DIPLOMATIC PATH

Margot Wallström's new tactics towards Eritrea were partly based on utilizing the contacts that Social Democratic Party colleague and former foreign minister Carin Jämtin, today the director general of the aid agency Sida, had previously established.

“The Eritreans were noticeably annoyed with Carl Bildt, they felt he had a colonialist attitude. Either he wanted to buy Dawit's freedom using aid, and bluntly said so, or he just scolded them,” says Jämtin.

From her time as minister for international development cooperation (2003–2006), and onwards, Carin Jämtin regularly meets with Eritrean ministers who visit the embassy's annual festival outside Stockholm.

“It was often good meetings. We had coffee and spoke about this and that. Urban development, gender equality...”

The meetings always finished in the same fashion.

“I may not have said: 'For the record, I think Dawit Isaak should be released.' But that was about the sum of it. Honestly, it was the same conversation over and over again.”

Jämtin believes the situation can change if the Swedish-Eritrean community speaks up.

"I think the best thing would be if the diaspora in Sweden could unite against the regime. I've noticed that when the mood was a bit uneasy among Eritreans in Sweden, there was a change of tone from the Eritrean ministers I met. Sweden is an important country, there are several Eritreans here who have done well for themselves, several members of parliament with Eritrean background and Eritreans involved in political parties."

But many of these do not dare raise their voices for Dawit Isaak.

"They are afraid of reprisals against relatives in Eritrea. They can disappear, be harassed, go to prison," says Jämtin.

In the fall of 2019, Ann Linde is appointed foreign minister. The MFA's work for Dawit Isaak, however, continues along the same familiar paths.

"We'll keep working in the same way," says Linde.

"We make continuous proddings in Eritrea and have meetings on different levels."

Linde herself has met with Eritrea's foreign minister in the UN. In May, she was supposed to travel to Asmara, but the pandemic meant that the plans had to be postponed.

According to Linde, Sweden is pushing for the EU to proceed with what she calls a two-track policy towards Eritrea.

"An unconditional development aid and a political dialogue with tough demands for the release of Dawit Isaak and the other political prisoners."

Asked whether Sweden has received any positive signals from Eritrea since she was appointed foreign minister, Ann Linde replies:

"No, I wouldn't say so. Eritrea continues to show reluctance to comply with our demands to release Dawit. They do not comply with international law."

"CULTURAL NAIVETE"

The last few years, Dawit Isaak's oldest daughter Betlehem Isaak, who was seven years old when she opened the door for the men who arrested her father on September 23, 2001, has gained increased influence over how the MFA handles the case.

"They have wanted new ideas and have listened to what we have said," she says.

She hires an anonymous adviser to help her develop proposals on what the MFA can do to build relationships with Eritrean universities, companies and organizations.

"We've known each other for a long time, and three years ago, I asked if he wanted to work for me as an advisor. He knows a lot about this and he has done a great job."

According to Betlehem Isaak, they have been able to push the MFA in the right direction.

"The MFA wouldn't have the relations that they have with Eritrea today, had it not been for me and my advisor," she says.

"It's much more about building relationships now, looking at what Eritrea needs and what Sweden can offer. But also that Sweden must start acting like we are the stronger country, like we are a player to be reckoned within the international community."

Betlehem Isaak deems that the MFA's previous work has been simplistic, utilizing the

same old diplomatic playbook despite the apparent lack of any genuine progress.

"I think it has been very narrow. Someone once said that the greatest weakness of diplomacy is the belief that diplomacy always works. And that's true," she says.

As time passes, the lack of results become all the more troubling for Sweden, says Betlehem Isaak.

"It's apparent that it's starting to look bad for the Swedish government, that much is obvious when I meet the MFA. That they have been unable to bring a citizen home. This sends signals to other countries. Why can't Sweden solve this? What's missing?"

So what is missing, in Betlehem Isaak's opinion? What is the MFA doing wrong?

"They have to understand how Eritrea works. The cultural naivete that exists in Sweden also exists at the MFA. The don't know enough about other cultures, traditions and customs. There is a great lack of knowledge that is bad for the MFA and bad for Sweden."

Betlehem Isaak describes the earlier contacts with the MFA as "strange".

"In the sense that they didn't take the issue seriously. Some ambassadors didn't care at all. I don't want to mention names, but they know who they are."

Today the situation is different.

The MFA has emphasized that the relationship with her and the advisor is appreciated.

But being appreciated is of little importance, says Betlehem Isaak.

"I don't care, as long as they listen to us and bring home my dad, a Swedish citizen. I want them to do what they are paid to do."

JACKPOT FOR ERITREA?

How should the MFA's work be assessed? What does Sweden have to show for its efforts to free Dawit Isaak?

Initially, it should be noted that Eritrea has, for the better part of two decades, benefited in several respects from keeping Dawit Isaak imprisoned.

One method that the Eritrean regime has used is to occasionally give Sweden false hopes that Dawit Isaak will be released, which has repeatedly forced Swedish foreign ministers and officials at the MFA to a precarious balancing act.

The last few years, Dawit Isaak's oldest daughter, Betlehem Isaak, has gained increased influence over how the MFA handles the case.

This seems, for example, to have led the MFA to refrain from pressuring Eritrea via the EU as the country has been granted hundreds of millions of euros in development aid.

The MFA has, twice, recommended that the Swedish prosecutor-general shouldn't initiate an investigation into crimes against humanity against Eritrean president Afwerki. Sweden has also refrained from financially supporting the independent Eritrean radio station Erena, which broadcasts from Paris and is sponsored by RSF.

Are there financial incentives for Eritrea to keep Dawit Isaak behind bars? It is not

implausible that the MFA's reluctance to clash with Eritrea is part of the reason why Sweden – unlike, among others, Canada and the Netherlands – has not heeded the UN's call to stop Eritrea's "long arm" – the practice of tax collection from the Eritrean diaspora.

According to several sources, Sweden has also chosen to look the other way when Eritreans in Sweden, or their relatives in Eritrea, are being harassed for refusal to pay the tax or for other protests against the regime in Asmara.

One of those who has been involved in Dawit Isaak's case the longest, Björn Tunbäck, board member of RSF Sweden, argues that the MFA could and should have done more.

"Obviously, a lot of people at the ministry have worked hard to secure Dawit's release, but I don't believe that they have done everything in their might. Other countries have been more robust both in statements and measures taken against the Eritrean regime, even though it is in fact Sweden that has a prisoner of conscience in Eritrea. Sweden could have reached out for more help from the EU as well as from other countries. Above all, Sweden could have done so long ago."

Tunbäck has personally followed the proceedings concerning Dawit Isaak's case in the African Union's human rights body.

"I have met officials from the MFA of other Nordic countries there, but never from Sweden," he says.

Incumbent foreign minister Ann Linde correctly notes that it is not Sweden, but Eritrea, that is holding Dawit Isaak imprisoned without trial. The blame for violating his human rights rests with president Isaias Afwerki and his regime.

However, the foreign minister is reluctant to comment on what concrete steps Sweden is taking. Sweden's current ambassador to Eritrea has declined to be interviewed. Documents relating to the case are classified. Many people are following Dawit Isaak's case, and there is a great public interest in knowing how the government handles situations where the human rights of Swedish citizens are violated abroad.

Therefore, RSF Sweden is of the opinion that a parliamentary inquiry should immediately be set up to investigate the MFA's efforts for Dawit Isaak.

"The abuses against Dawit Isaak and his family has been going on for more than 19 years. It is criminal, which means you have to try everything," says Björn Tunbäck.

Such an investigation would review what the MFA has done – and has not done – and examine whether Sweden has fulfilled its obligation to try all available legal and diplomatic means to bring Dawit Isaak home.

It should be noted that Eritrea has, for the better part of two decades, benefited in several respects from keeping Dawit Isaak imprisoned.

The inquiry's conclusions could also guide Sweden's future work. In recent years, the MFA has had to deal with an increasing number of cases in which Swedish journalists, authors and publishers – including Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye, Gui Minhai and Hamza Yalcin – have been imprisoned abroad.

The unfortunate reality is that, even though Dawit Isaak is the Swedish prisoner of conscience who has been detained the longest, there is no reason to believe that he is the last journalist who will be imprisoned for exercising his freedom of expression and believing in democracy.

WHAT RSF HAS DONE

For many years, on its own as well as in collaboration with other organizations, RSF has worked tirelessly for the release of Dawit Isaak. Here are a few examples of what has been done.

December 2003: Dawit Isaak is awarded RSF Sweden's first ever Press Freedom Prize. The jury's motivation reads: "He chose to write independently and encouraged others to do so, and for that he lost his freedom."

January 2010: RSF calls on the UN Special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment to do everything possible to improve the conditions of journalists imprisoned in Eritrea.

September 2010: At the initiative of RSF Sweden, the anthology "Hope: The Tale of Moses and Manna's Love", is published is collaboration with several organizations and publishing companies. The anthology collects both fictional and journalistic writing by Dawit Isaak.

October 2010: Commissioned by RSF Sweden and Dawit Isaak's brother Esayas Isaak, lawyer Percy Bratt writes a legal opinion about the case. It concludes that Sweden and the EU are obliged to assist Dawit Isaak using all available legal and diplomatic means. The legal opinion is submitted to the Swedish MFA as well as EU development commissioner Andris Piebalgs.

July 2011: Supported by RSF Sweden, the lawyers Jesús Alcalá, Percy Bratt and Prisca Orsonneau submit a habeas corpus petition to the Supreme Court of Eritrea. The legal principle of habeas corpus states that a person deprived of liberty has the right to hear and respond to the accusations against him or her, something that Dawit Isaak has been denied. The Supreme Court refuses to process the documents.

October 2012: As Eritrea does not acknowledge the petition, the case is handed over to the African Union's human rights body which, following a multi-year investigation, demands that Eritrea release Dawit Isaak. RSF Sweden is granted observer status within the human rights body, with the task of monitoring the case.

June 2014: Supported by RSF Sweden, lawyers Alcalá, Bratt and Orsonneau report Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki, along with several of his ministers, for crimes against humanity regarding the treatment of Dawit Isaak. The prosecutor quickly announces that no investigation will be launched, on the grounds that Eritrea is not expected to cooperate. The lawyers appeal, but the prosecutor-general decides, on the advice of the Swedish MFA, not to initiate a criminal investigation.

June 2016: After a UN commission calls on all countries to prosecute suspected Eritrean human rights violators, RSF Sweden and the lawyers file a new police report. The prosecutor-general once again declines to initiate an investigation, despite stating that there are legal grounds for doing so.

May 2018: RSF Sweden participates in the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day in Ghana and launches a French-English translation of the anthology "Hope".

April 2019: RSF Sweden invites Aaron Berhane, Dawit Isaac's editor-in-chief at Setit, who now resides in Canada, to Sweden. Berhane meets with members of parliament and visits the MFA.

November 2019: RSF Sweden distributes a copy of the anthology "Hope" to all 751 members of the European Parliament. In connection, the support committee Free Dawit organizes a seminar for the parliamentarians.

October 2020: RSF files a new crimes against humanity complaint for Dawit Isaak with Swedish prosecutors, signed by twelve international human rights lawyers, including Nobel Peace Prize laurate Shirin Ebadi, former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler and Navi Pillay, former United Nations High commissioner for human rights.

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