

PRESS RELEASE

Stockholm, 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2024



EDELSTAM  
FOUNDATION  
THE EDELSTAM PRIZE

## **WORLD'S LONGEST ARBITRARILY DETAINED JOURNALIST RECEIVES THE EDELSTAM PRIZE**

*The Edelstam Prize 2024 is awarded to Mr. Dawit Isaak for his outstanding contributions and exceptional courage in standing up for freedom of expression, one's beliefs, and in the defence of Human Rights. The prize will be awarded during a ceremony at the House of Nobility in Stockholm, Sweden, on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2024. As Dawit Isaak is a prisoner of conscience and the longest held detained journalist in the world, he cannot be present. His daughter, Betlehem Isaak, will receive the prize on his behalf.*



*Photo: private*

Mr. Dawit Isaak, an Eritrean-Swedish journalist and advocate for human rights, co-founded *Setit*, Eritrea's first independent newspaper. Openly criticizing the Eritrean government and advocating for human rights, democratic reform and free speech, led to his arrest in September 2001, during a crackdown on independent journalists and politicians calling for elections.

### **Defending human rights and democratic principles**

Because of his work with defending human rights and advocating for a democratic reform, Mr. Dawit Isaak, will be unable to accept his prize in Sweden, as he is the world's longest-

detained journalist, together with his colleagues, and is held incommunicado without charge or access to legal counsel, nor trial, for more than 23 years.

“Mr. Dawit Isaak has through his outstanding courage continued to write and criticize the Eritrean government and showed great commitment to freedom of expression and information, despite the government harassing and threatening him with continued interrogations. Mr. Dawit Isaak continued his advocacy, beyond his personal interest for the principles of human rights and democracy. His punishment, his perpetual unlawful detention, never charged with a crime, defenseless and deprived of his basic rights without a trial, his *de facto* status of civil death, is untenable,” says Caroline Edelstam, Chair of the Edelstam Prize Jury and co-founder of the Edelstam Foundation.

**“Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe. Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”** Thomas Jefferson, 1816.

### **Impunity and Enforced Disappearance**

The Edelstam Foundation calls on the Eritrean authorities to release Dawit Isaak and other prisoners of conscience, imprisoned journalists and reformist politicians. Furthermore, the Foundation urges the Eritrean government to immediately disclose Dawit Isaak’s whereabouts and respect his legal rights, including access to consular support and legal representation.

“Mr. Dawit Isaak is the longest detained journalist in the world. We are very concerned about his health and his whereabouts is unknown, he is not charged with a crime, and he has been denied access to his family, consular assistance, and the right to legal counsel – effectively, it is an enforced disappearance. Eritrea systematically curtails a wide range of fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, association, assembly and information, which is handled with censorship, arbitrary arrests, detentions without trial and systematic and pervasive torture. Mass roundups and arbitrary arrests as well as the detention of journalists and human right defenders without trial are unexceptional,” says Caroline Edelstam, Chair of the Edelstam Prize Jury.

### **The International Community’s Duty in putting Pressure on Eritrea and Sweden**

The international community has a duty to act in prevention of genocide and other egregious abuses when domestic authorities collapse or fail to respect and ensure fundamental human rights. 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.

“It is important to find ways to enforce national and international law and to promote accountability for serious abuses of human rights. Where violations have occurred, states must be held accountable. The international community also has a responsibility for establishing justice, ensuring the protection of victims, and upholding the principle that nobody is above the law. Democratic countries should put pressure on the perpetrator, in this case Eritrea, which is essential and could have a noticeable effect. Enforced disappearances

and persecution of journalists are grave human rights violations. As James Joyce taught us, we must insist praying: *Give us this day our daily press*. These abuses are criminal acts, without exception and regardless of circumstance, including state of war, emergency, or national security. According to international law, family members of the disappeared are recognized as victims of enforced disappearance as well,” says Caroline Edelstam, Chair of the Edelstam Prize Jury.

### **The Edelstam Prize Jury’s Motivation**

Mr. Dawit Isaak is an Eritrean-Swedish citizen. He was born in Eritrea under Ethiopian occupation, and developed a passion for history and literature inspired by his mother. In high school, he wrote a play about censorship that was banned for challenging the political status quo. At the age of 21, he fled to Sweden seeking safety during Eritrea’s liberation war, and was received as a refugee. The reason that he fled to Sweden was that he had references from other exiled Eritreans and that he admired Sweden's free society, media and people’s ability to freely express their opinions without being punished for it.

After Eritrea gained independence in 1993, Dawit Isaak, in spite of having received Swedish citizenship in the meantime, decided to return to Eritrea to help rebuild his homeland. He became an editor of Setit, Eritrea’s first independent newspaper, which criticized the government and advocated for human rights and democracy. His work led the government to harass and threaten him with continued interrogations. However, he continued his advocacy, beyond his personal interest, for the principles of human rights and democracy.

He did not give up, and for being a courageous journalist daring to publish open letters calling for democratic reform in Setit, he ended up being arbitrarily arrested in 2001. He was held incommunicado without trial, and denied access to family, consular assistance, and the right to legal counsel – effectively, an enforced disappearance – during a crackdown where ten other independent journalists were arrested in September 2001 together with eleven reformist politicians, members of the Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki’s government, known as the G 15, urging the government to hold open elections and implement a newly drafted Constitution.

Dawit Isaak went on writing about human rights, open and free elections, and criticizing the government for not providing free elections. He has continued to influence the Eritrean people to care about their fundamental rights.

Today, Dawit Isaak is still in unlawful detention and is considered to be one of the world's longest continuously detained journalists. He has been held in prison since 2001 without a trial, he has not been charged with a crime, and he has not been permitted to talk to his lawyer.

Amnesty International has listed Dawit Isaak as a prisoner of conscience.

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.

### **The Edelstam Prize**

The Edelstam Prize is a Sweden-based international monetary award, administered by the Harald Edelstam Foundation. The Edelstam Prize is awarded for outstanding contributions and exceptional courage in standing up for one's beliefs in the Defence of Human Rights.

The Edelstam Prize is named after, and awarded in memory of, the Swedish diplomat and Ambassador, Harald Edelstam (1913-1989). Harald Edelstam distinguished himself as a diplomat by his professional competence, his bravery, and his civic courage in the fight for Human Rights. His memorable acts contributed to saving more than a thousand lives.

The winner of the Edelstam Prize can be a private person or a person who serves in Government, international or national organizations. The winner shall be an individual who has acted in Ambassador Harald Edelstam's spirit in a country/countries where Human Rights, according to international law, have been violated. The laureate must have shown outstanding capabilities in analysing and handling complex situations and in finding ways, even unconventional and creative ones, to defend Human Rights. The candidate has, presumably in a complex situation, been able to take a decisive role in helping threatened people or directly saving human lives. Civic courage is a central parameter in the selection of the successful candidate.

### **Members of the Jury**

The international jury is chaired by **Ms. Caroline Edelstam**, Harald Edelstam's granddaughter and co-founder of the Edelstam Foundation. Other members are the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2003 **Judge Shirin Ebadi**, who represents Asia. Africa is represented by **Dr. Fatou Bensouda**, former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC). **Ambassador Eileen Donahoe**, Executive Director of Global Digital Policy Incubator at Stanford University's Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law and the former US Ambassador to UN Human Rights Council represents North America. **Professor Philip Alston**, former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, represents Oceania. Latin America is represented by **Magistrate Patricia Linares Prieto**, former President of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). Europe is represented by former **Judge Baltasar Garzón**, who served on Spain's central criminal court, who is known for having indicted the Chilean dictator, General Augusto Pinochet for the deaths and torture of thousands of victims from Chile and other countries.

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*For further information, please contact:*

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

Tel: +46 (0)706 98 72 23, e-mail: [caroline.edelstam@edelstam.org](mailto:caroline.edelstam@edelstam.org)

Website: [www.edelstamprize.org](http://www.edelstamprize.org) / [www.edelstam.org](http://www.edelstam.org)

**Further information on the Seminar, November 20<sup>th</sup> at 1 P.M. discussing the Laureate's case, please see [HERE](#).**