



**EDELSTAM
FOUNDATION**
THE EDELSTAM PRIZE



PRESS RELEASE

Stockholm, 22nd of September 2025

"IF MY FATHER IS ALIVE, HE MUST BE RESCUED NOW"

Betlehem Isaak, daughter of Swedish journalist **Dawit Isaak**, calls on Sweden and the international community to act decisively to secure his release



September 23 marks the 24th anniversary of the unlawful detention of Mr. Dawit Isaak – a Swedish-Eritrean citizen, journalist, playwright, and the Edelstam Prize 2024 Laureate. He remains the world's longest-detained journalist, together with his Eritrean colleagues. He has been held in incommunicado detention for 24 years – denied due process and consular access, as well as all contact with his family and legal counsels.

The Edelstam Foundation, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR), and the Global Liberty Alliance strongly support Bethlehem Isaak's call for the Swedish government to take decisive action on Dawit Isaak's behalf before it is too late.

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 it gained independence in 1993, co-founding *Setit*, the country's first independent newspaper, 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 and hidden from the world. He was never charged with a crime and his whereabouts remain unknown.

Statement by Betlehem Isaak, daughter of Swedish journalist Dawit Isaak

On September 10, 2025, I forwarded a set of questions to the Swedish Ambassador for Eritrea, Jenny Ohlsson. They address the most pressing issues that currently persist in my father’s case. (Enclosure 1). So far, neither the Ambassador nor the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs have responded to my request.

My father has been imprisoned in Eritrea since September 2001. He is currently the longest imprisoned journalist in the world.

Through the years, Eritrean officials have repeatedly told Swedish authorities that my father is “fine” and remains detained in Eritrea. [See link](#). They have offered no proof for their assertions.

In response, Swedish officials have stated publicly that – in the absence of any contrary information – they continue to assume him to be alive. They also emphasize that “the work continues undiminished to secure the release of Dawit Isaak.” [See link](#).

Nevertheless, Swedish officials refuse to share detailed information about his case, including when exactly they last demanded a verifiable proof of life, consular access, proper medical care or his immediate and unconditional release. They claim that any public advocacy on his behalf could jeopardize their efforts to secure his freedom. However, for nearly a quarter century now all efforts to resolve the case through silent diplomacy and behind-the-scenes negotiations have failed.

This state of uncertainty must end. If my father is alive, he must be rescued now.

For twenty-four years, Dawit Isaak has been held incommunicado, with no contact to the outside world - conditions that meet the legal standard of torture, enforced disappearance and crimes against humanity.¹ My father has never been charged with a crime and has yet to be presented to court of law. For more than two decades, our family has been left in a constant state of anxiety about his health, while my two siblings and I were forced to grow up without him. In all that time, the Eritrean regime has never incurred a serious cost for the horrendous crimes it has committed and continues to commit against my father, our family and the whole country.

Both the Swedish and Eritrean governments retain legal obligations of care under international law, as stipulated, a. o., by the *Vienna Convention on Consular Relations* (1963); the *Covenant Against Torture*; and *Customary International Law*. All guarantee essential rights, such as the right to life, fair judicial proceedings, protection from torture, consular visitation and access to legal representation. Similarly, they confer a clear obligation on the Eritrean authorities to inform the Swedish government if my father were to be deceased or incapacitated in some form.

I, therefore, strongly urge the Swedish government to contact Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki without delay and request the following:

¹ These are jus cogens violations, fundamental, universally binding principles of international law that no state can violate or contract out of, even through treaties (no derogation allowed)

- Dawit Isaak's immediate and unconditional release and repatriation to Sweden.
- Pending his release, disclosure of his exact current location.
- Immediate access by independent medical professionals to assess my father's physical and mental health and prepare for his safe return.
- Immediate consular access and the ability to communicate with his family.

If Eritrea fails to comply by a specific date –

- Seek assistance via third parties, such as the European Union, United Nations, African Union and other stakeholders to secure Dawit Isaak's immediate release and repatriation to Sweden.
- Be prepared to invoke all available international mechanisms, including punitive measures like the imposition of targeted (Magnitsky) sanctions, asset and account freezes, suspending the levying of Eritrea's coercive 2% expatriate tax, vetoing the appointment of Eritrean officials to international bodies, suspension of aid, and initiation of criminal investigations (under the principle of universal jurisdiction).
- Publicly escalate my father's case in light of Eritrea's continued criminal violations

Sweden must demonstrate that it has the political will to act decisively.

After more than two decades, the Swedish government has the legal and moral duty to exhaust all bilateral, regional, and multilateral remedies to secure my father's release.

Failing to act with urgency not only prolongs his cruel ordeal but also constitutes a serious diplomatic and moral failure which undermines Sweden's credibility as a global human rights leader.

Betlehem Isaak
Gothenburg, September 22, 2025

Please find the letter sent to Sweden's Ambassador to Eritrea September 10, 2025, enclosed below.

Enclosure

Letter dated September 10, 2025, to Sweden's Ambassador to Eritrea, Jenny Ohlsson, from Betlehem Isaak (translated from Swedish and lightly edited to protect witnesses).

Betlehem Isaak

Gothenburg, 10 September 2025

Ambassador Jenny Ohlsson
Sweden's Ambassador to Eritrea
Ministry for Foreign Affairs
SE-103 39 Stockholm
Sweden

Dear Jenny,

As we were unable to have the promised meeting, I would instead like to receive written answers to the questions below. Kindly respond no later than 18 September.

Thank you in advance for treating this matter with the seriousness and urgency the situation requires.

1. When can we schedule a new meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs? The last time we met was in April, and at that time, an update was promised within a few weeks. It has now been nearly five months.
2. What happened with the new Eritrean Ambassador to Sweden (based in Rome)? When was the Ministry for Foreign Affairs last in contact with him, and when can a meeting be arranged, as previously promised?
3. When did Sweden last demand consular access to Dawit Isaak? What was Eritrea's response, and how has Sweden acted in the aftermath?
4. When did Sweden last request the immediate release of Dawit Isaak? And which Eritrean representatives were involved in these communications?
5. Given that no sign of life has been received: Sweden has access to intelligence information from 26 countries through bilateral cooperation within the EU and alliances, as well as from the United States and Israel. Has Sweden requested information from allied intelligence services to help locate my father? If so, when and from whom? If not, why not? After 24 years, do you or any of your contacts know where my father is?
6. Since 2015, the Swedish Prosecution Authority has repeatedly refused to initiate a criminal investigation against members of the Eritrean regime for the serious crimes committed against my father. In December 2020, Carl Magnus Nesser, then the head of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs's legal department, informed the Prosecution Authority that "active efforts are ongoing in order to achieve progress regarding Dawit Isaak, and the Ministry's assessment is that a potential preliminary investigation could risk interfering with these efforts." What actions has the Swedish government taken since then to obtain proof that our father, Dawit Isaak, is still alive? What contacts have been made, with whom, and when?

Given that Sweden's efforts to secure my father's release have not led to any meaningful results, and that serious violations against him continue – will you now recommend that the Swedish Prosecution Authority open a criminal investigation against those responsible for his unlawful detention?

7. If Sweden and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs know or assume that my father is alive, what concrete plans do you have to secure his rescue? Please provide specific facts.
8. Is Sweden willing to publicly demand proof of life for my father? If not, why? It is not unreasonable to assume that my father may live under extremely harsh conditions – held in isolation, subjected to inhuman treatment, and denied appropriate medical care. When was this last raised with Eritrean authorities, and with whom?
9. Is Sweden willing to set a deadline for Eritrea to provide a verifiable proof of life? If that deadline passes, are you then prepared to implement the “serious consequences” that you and other officials have repeatedly warned Eritrean authorities about if they fail to comply with Sweden's demands? Is Sweden prepared to impose travel-, residency-, and visa bans, and to consider restricting the mandatory two-percent diaspora tax, as part of these promised consequences? Are you considering freezing Eritrean accounts and assets in Sweden?
10. What concrete measures is Sweden taking to hold the Eritrean regime accountable? Sweden has long demanded consular access to my father – a demand that has been systematically denied by the Eritrean authorities, in direct violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. As early as 2013, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt, repeatedly stated that this constitutes a breach of international law. What legal or diplomatic actions has Sweden taken in response to these violations of the Vienna Convention? Why have there been no consequences for Eritrea's repeated breaches of such a fundamental international agreement?
11. Does Sweden challenge the nominations of Eritrean officials to key positions in international organizations? If so, which ones? If not, why? Is Sweden prepared to request that the U.S. and the EU deny visas to members of the Eritrean leadership ahead of travel to the UN and other international summits?
12. Is Sweden prepared to request that the EU impose sanctions on the Head of State of Eritrea under the European Union's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime ((EU GHRSR). An official sanctions proposal has been under consideration within the EU since 2023.
13. Is Sweden prepared to propose and implement a separate sanctions regime against Eritrea — similar to the one Sweden supported in the case of Russia following the death of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny – in order to protect civil society and political prisoners?
14. During discussions between Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Eritrea's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2013, it was made clear that Sweden's relations with Eritrea were limited, and that the question of opening a Swedish Embassy in Asmara could only be considered once bilateral issues – such as the detention of Dawit Isaak – had been resolved. Despite this, Eritrea was allowed to open an Embassy in Stockholm without any progress in Dawit Isaak's case. Why was the release of Dawit Isaak – or at the very least, consular access – not made a condition for permitting Eritrea to open an Embassy in Stockholm? *Despite this, Sweden requested to open a mission office in Asmara in 2018 without any progress in Dawit Isaak's case. Why was the release of Dawit Isaak – or at the very least, consular access – not made a condition for

Sweden's decision to open a diplomatic office in Asmara and for Eritrea to continue to maintain an Embassy in Stockholm?

15. Sweden maintains relations with both the EU and the African Union (AU), including through the Rome Process, the Global Gateway Initiative for Africa, the Regional Strategy for Africa (2022–2026), and the EAC Business & Investment Forum, among others. What contacts have been made with African and Eritrean officials within the framework of these collaborations? Was my father's case raised during any of these discussions?
16. Has my father's case been linked to any of Sweden's planned projects and engagements, including potential contributions to the African Development Bank? If so, in what way – and what contacts have been taken, and when?
17. How does Sweden intend to apply pressure on Eritrea regarding my father's case while simultaneously seeking cooperation on irregular African migration and economic development? How does Eritrea's growing strategic role in the Horn of Africa affect these objectives?
18. President Donald Trump recently signed an Executive Order designating wrongful detentions of U.S. citizens abroad as the government's responsibility, with consequences at the national level. A new designation – State Sponsor of Wrongful Detention – was introduced, enabling measures such as visa bans, travel restrictions, economic sanctions, and export controls against states that systematically detain Americans or other foreign nationals in cases where the U.S. has a national interest. Is Sweden prepared to request that the U.S. make a formal representation to Eritrea in the case of Dawit Isaak, referring to the fact that the new Executive Order also covers foreign nationals?
19. Is the Swedish government considering implementing a similar framework to protect Swedish citizens who are wrongfully detained abroad? Is Sweden willing to take a leading role within the European Union to advocate for an EU-wide adoption of such a designation? If not, what other measures is the Swedish government taking to establish a fully coordinated approach together with its EU partners against the illegal and arbitrary detention of Swedish citizens?
20. Has Sweden explored the possibility of a prisoner exchange with another country holding an Eritrean prisoner? If yes – what contacts have been made and when? If no – why not?
21. In the Parliamentary Commission's report on the Review of Efforts to Secure the Release of Dawit Isaak and Gui Minhai (SOU 2022:55), it is mentioned that a high-level dialogue was initiated by Sweden in 2017 together with Norway, Switzerland, and Germany, known as the Four-Nations Dialogue. Within this framework, a Swedish delegation led by Cabinet Secretary, Annika Söder, traveled to Asmara in March 2017. During 2018–2019, this Four-Nations group, together with Eritrean government representatives, conducted dialogue seminars on, among other things, migration and human rights. Were any demands for the immediate release of my father made at that time? What was the exact outcome of this Four-Nations Dialogue? I hereby request access to all documentation related to these discussions.
22. In the same report from the Review Commission, it is mentioned that Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, spoke in December 2020 with Eritrea's Minister of Foreign Affairs about Dawit Isaak. Linde asked if the Foreign Minister could provide any new information regarding the case and "if he could confirm that Dawit Isaak is alive and in good health." Why did the Foreign Minister not then demand proof of life? Why did Ann Linde not demand the immediate release of my father on that occasion?

23. What exactly does the government's repeated claim that it "continues its efforts to secure the release of Dawit Isaak" mean? What do these efforts consist of in practice? Please provide names, dates, contacts, and how the effectiveness of these efforts is measured.
24. How has Sweden's so-called "silent diplomacy" in the Isaak case been complemented with public statements or pressures – if at all? If not: why not?
25. What diplomatic contacts have been made with Eritrean representatives since January 2023? Has the Swedish Embassy in Addis Ababa or other diplomatic channels been in contact with Eritrea on this matter – and if so, when, with whom, and in what form (e.g., meetings, conversation, notes, etc.)?
26. Has the government or the Ministry for Foreign Affairs requested support from international actors (EU, UN, AU, U.S.A.) in this matter during the current parliamentary term? Which organizations or countries? What responses have been given?
27. Sweden has an Ambassador for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law – what role does the Ambassador play specifically in my father's case?
28. I also request access to the interviews that you have conducted with witnesses and other individuals who have provided information in my father's case, during the period from September 2001 to September 2025.

I would be grateful to receive written answers to these questions no later than 18 September.

Kind regards,

Betlehem Isaak

*Amended text.

Press Contacts

Photos:

- 1) Betlehem Isaak at the Edelstam Prize ceremony, November 19, 2024, Photo: Arne Hyckenberg
- 2) Private photo of Dawit Isaak with his wife and children, Photo: Milvi Olander

More press photos can be found at www.edelstam.org/international-press-room/

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

Jason I. Poblete

International Human Rights Lawyer, Attorney & Counselor at Law

Global Liberty Alliance

E-mail: jpoblete@globallibertyalliance.org

Judith Abitan

Executive Director | Directrice exécutive

Susanne Berger

Senior Fellow

Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights | Centre Raoul Wallenberg pour les droits de la personne

Tel: +1 (514) 735 8778

Email: media@rwchr.org

About our Organizations

The Edelstam Foundation

The Edelstam Foundation administrates the Edelstam Prize awarded biannually for exceptional courage within the defence of human rights. Further, the Edelstam Foundation encourages civic courage in Ambassador Harald Edelstam's spirit, works with formation of opinion and advocacy, education and information, research, and observation within the defence of human Rights.

www.edelstamprize.org | www.edelstam.org

The Global Liberty Alliance

The Global Liberty Alliance is a US-based legal defense fund that works to strengthen and educate about the importance of individual fundamental rights, free enterprise, and the rule of law with like-minded advocates in the U.S. and other nations.

www.globallibertyalliance.org

The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR)

The RWCHR takes on the most pressing struggles for justice, freedom, and democracy around the world. Founded and led by Irwin Cotler, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, we mobilize and engage a non-partisan, global coalition of parliamentarians, scholars, jurists, NGOs, activists, and students to take a collective stand for international justice and human rights.

www.raoulwallenbergcentre.org