



19 August, 2019

BOKMÄSSAN

GÖTEBORG BOOK FAIR

Welcome to Göteborg Book Fair, Dawit Isaak

Dear Dawit,

We are pleased to invite you to the Göteborg Book Fair 26–29 September 2019. A debate on the worrying situation in Eritrea is planned, and we hope you will be able to attend. We would like to listen to you and hear your story. Many of us are trying to understand what is going on – the signing of the peace treaty between Eritrea and Ethiopia over a year ago inspired hope.

But little has changed despite open/more open borders. Instead, we hear of developments that continue to raise concerns. Human Rights Watch recently reported that young people and small children are forced to do military service even before they have finished their education, and Eritrea is still at the bottom of the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index.

There is just one problem. Dawit, you are now the journalist and author that has spent the longest period in prison without a trial on account of exercising your freedom of expression. Many years have passed – eighteen this September. You are probably unable to decline our invitation, even if you wanted to. The way things are, you cannot even communicate with your closest family.

We often ask ourselves if we are doing enough and what else our organisations, media outlets and the Book Fair can do. We also wonder what means the Swedish Government can use to ensure your imminent release. We are of course wondering whether using the same methods year after year has any effect at all, since there appears to be little improvement on your situation. That is why we have also invited the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, to participate in the debate. Unfortunately, she will be travelling and is not able to attend.

Aaron Berhane, who you were working for when you were arrested, has given a gripping account of what happened at the time. He says he sometimes blames himself, although those of you who were imprisoned would never think of blaming him. Through him, we have got to know your work as a journalist. Your brother Esayas Isaak is convinced that the regime is about to fall, he is constantly feeding us links, updating us on the situation in Eritrea. A few years ago, Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, one of Eritrea's foremost poets, was released after six years of arbitrary arrest. She is able to tell us what it is like inside an Eritrean prison. The journalist and author Martin Schibbye has interviewed people close to you, and in his book we get to know you, your background and your struggle. However, we wish we could hear your voice.

Dawit, you are sometimes used as a symbol for freedom of expression. We have great respect for your passion for the free word. At the same time, many of us would like to know you better, beyond your symbolic persona. We would like to learn from you and your work, so this is a standing invitation to the Gothenburg Book Fair until the day you will be able to attend – or decline if you so prefer. We are looking forward to your release, Dawit. Until that day, there will be a permanent seat for you at the Book Fair. That seat will remain empty pending your release.

Frida Edman, Director, Göteborg Book Fair
Jesper Bengtsson, Chair, Swedish PEN
Grethe Rottböll, Chair, the Swedish Authors' Union
Ulrika Hyllert, Chair, the Swedish Union of Journalists
Erik Halkjaer, Chair, Reporters without Borders, Sweden
Karin Olsson, Arts editor and acting editor-in-chief, *Expressen*