still, I speak

Good evening, everyone.

I am so grateful to be here today.

I want to begin by thanking CPJ for giving me the opportunity to speak about the disappeared journalists and writers of Eritrea. I'm especially grateful that you have chosen to bring their stories to the heart of this conference.

I also want to thank CPJ for its remarkable work in highlighting their suffering through this year's International Press Freedom Award. This recognition helps keep their stories alive and reminds the world that they must never be forgotten.

In February this year, I had a chance to attend at the African Media Festival here in Nairobi. I was really surprised and deeply concerned to learn that people knew little or nothing about these journalists and writers.

Today, I am here again and ask you to stand in solidarity with these journalists and their families.

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When I fled my country, Eritrea, I was thinking about only one thing: safety. But when I arrived in Kampala, I started thinking about something else: speaking up. A few months later, I began writing and posting about the abuse I had experienced and the suffering of many others who were still disappeared. People from different parts of the world advised me to stop. They warned me that I was putting my own life at risk. Honestly, I was afraid, but I did not stop. At the same time, I continued searching a way to leave Africa and find a safer place.

Through the network of PEN centres; PEN International, PEN Eritrea in Exile, and PEN Germany, I got an opportunity to travel to Germany as a fellow "writers in Exile" program of PEN Germany. As you may know, we Eritreans once we flee Eritrea, there is no easy way to return. Unless we sign so called a "regret form" at the embassy, pay 2% of our salary and promise not to criticise the regime, not even with a single word.

So here I am, carrying a deep anguish that I can travel wherever I want, except to Eritrea - my own homeland. Because I tell these stories: stories of pain, stories of torture, stories of disappearance, stories of injustice, but also stories that deserve to be heard. To understand why these stories matter so much, we need to remember what Eritrea was like before so many voices were silenced and disappeared.

A quarter of a century ago, when I was a high school student, Eritrea had several private newspapers, literary clubs, courageous writers and journalists. People were writing, discussing ideas, and creating.

In 2001, those newspapers and literary clubs were shut down. Many of their founders, writers, and journalists forcibly disappeared. For more than twenty-five years, no one knows their whereabouts.

About 8 years later, almost the same thing happened to many other writers & journalists, and I was one of them. So, let me take you back where my story of detention started.

In 2008, I collected my poems into a book and submitted it to the censorship office for publication. I never received a response. But a few months later, on 19 February 2009, in the afternoon, almost all the staff of Radio Bana were in a meeting. After about forty minutes, the meeting ended and we went back to our offices. We didn't know that our compound was surrounded by armed soldiers . Shortly afterwards, We were taken to Adi-Abieto military prison without any explanation.

I was thrown into a large overcrowded room with about eighty female prisoners, Among them pregnant women, children, the elderly, and an entire family. Some of them were imprisoned because they were accused of being aware that their children were planning to flee Eritrea. Others were imprisoned because they couldn't pay money because their children had already fled.

After three months, I was moved to a secretive military prison of Mai Serwa and I found myself in a two by two metres concrete cell. no visitors, no pen, and no paper.

The prison was shipping containers and small concrete cells. In cold weather, the containers were freezing. In hot weather, they became like an inferno.

15 months later, I was tortured. The interrogators printed my writings. They asked me, "Why I didn't write about the good side of the regime instead?" they beat me with sticks until they were exhausted. The next day, they tied my hands and legs together with a rope, stuffed my mouth with my scarf, and continued beating me. I lost consciousness. I spent five months in the hospital, and then back to prison.

I was fortunate to be freed after another four years. In December 2016, I tried to escape Eritrea. but I was captured and detained for another four months. in 2018, I finally fled my country.

Today, I stand here speaking on behalf of those who have been silenced, disappeared and those who continue to suffer just because they try to exercise their human and professional rights.

I had the privilege of knowing some of the journalists personally. I sat, I talked, and even I shared a cappuccino with some of them. They were never just names on a list. They were people I knew, people I shared moments with. and also professionals who became mentors of my career.

Amanuel Asrat, a poet, writer, founder and editor-in-chief of *Zemen* newspaper, was my mentor. Five years ago, on his 50th birthday, I wrote him a letter, a letter I knew he would not receive and read. I'm going to be reading a few paragraphs from the letter.

"...The last time I saw you was at the police station, a few weeks after your arrest. You were standing by the door, holding a cigarette. Awet Fissehaye and I were together, again. We waved at you from a distance. We thought they had allowed you out for a smoke.

"What were you thinking at that moment? And what are you thinking now? Do you blame yourself for being unable to predict that the threats against you could lead to decades-long disappearance?

The image of you holding a cigarette in my mind never been updated in the past 20 years.

I believe I'm better placed than most to imagine what your life might be like. Yes, I can imagine yours from my own experiences. I was detained in Mai Srwa Prison for six years. Whenever the guards wanted intimidate us, they would say "You will be taken to Eiraeiro!" at those moments, I would think of you and your comrades. I would try to imagine how hard your life would be.

I imagine you sitting in one corner of your cell, trying to move your legs after spending so many hours sitting in the same position. I imagine you sitting quietly, not knowing what to say or what to do. I imagine you knocking the door when you feel sick or cant longer bear the situation. I imagine you lying on the floor, lost in thought, looking up at the roof of your cell. It is so low you can touch it with your head when you stand up. How many times have you done these things over the past 20 years?

Does your cell have a small hole that lets fresh air and sunlight in? In Mai Serwa, there were small holes on either side of the door.

What have you heard about Eritrea and the rest of the world over the past twenty years? Have you ever heard the guards talking about the news or what is happening outside? Do you know who your neighbours are? I understand how difficult it can be to know who's who when every prisoner is a number.

I knew prisoners in Mai Serwa who eventually lost their voices. Do you talk to yourself out loud? Can you still speak normally without difficulties?

I heard that you are kept handcuffed. In 2010, when I was in cell no. 22, it was painful seeing handcuffed prisoners being taken to relieve themselves. One day, I decided to try it myself. I made a rope from the threads of a sack and tied my hands together. It was difficult to do anything. How is it possible to live for decades in such a condition? I can only imagine the agony: trapped in a box while still alive

when these thoughts are too painful, I try to imagine what would have happened, if you were not disappeared. You would have been a university lecturer. You would have organised countless literary events. You would have become known and applauded for your work, and for the writers you had influenced. You would have received awards for your writings in person, rather than for your sufferings in absence.

I ruminate about the life you wanted to have. I think of you becoming a father, of your children going to college. How many children did you want? Girls, or boys, or both? The family that produced you is thrown into grief and worry; the family you were to have is absent. What destruction!? …"

It is profoundly sorrowful that Eritrea has become a country where people die many times before their natural deaths, while families live with grief, fear and uncertainty for decades, until hope begins to fade.

I invite each of you to take a moment to imagine what it means to spend 25 years in a tiny cell. Imagine not seeing your family, not knowing what is happening outside, and waking up every morning without knowing when you will be freed. Imagine asking yourself, every single day: "Does anyone still remember me?"

Please use your voices and your professional platforms to demand proof of life and call for their immediate release. **let's make sure they are not forgotten!**

I thank you all!