

ERITREA – Summary of Concerns and Recommendations

1. Summary of Concerns

The Eritrean regime remains one of the most repressive on the African continent. It continues to be one of the foremost global abusers of religious freedom, and is the world's worst abuser of the media.¹ The country was recently identified as one of five countries with extremely alarming 2011 Global Hunger Index scores², particularly worrying in view of persistent reports of manipulation of food distribution in favour of government supporters. Despite government denials there is increasing evidence that the nation has been adversely affected by the current drought in the Horn of Africa, and has contributed towards fomenting unrest in the Horn of Africa. A July 2011 UN report detailed an Eritrean-inspired bomb plot against the African Union (AU) summit. According to the report, the regime recruited, trained, planned and funded Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) fighters to bomb the event in Ethiopia.³ Eritrea is also accused of assisting the al Qaeda-linked Islamist militia *al Shabaab* in Somalia. Eritrea attempted to end its self-inflicted diplomatic isolation by rejoining the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an organisation it had earlier left. However, on 24 August 2011 its delegation was asked to leave an IGAD meeting, and IGAD subsequently proposed further UN sanctions to combat the country's negative role in the Horn of Africa.

1.1 Repression of political opposition, of the press, and of civil society

The prospect of a third war with Ethiopia is used to justify extreme societal control. In 2001, all independent media outlets were closed. Independent journalists and eleven ruling party members who sought faster and greater democratisation were indefinitely detained in remote purpose-built camps, where temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius (122F). According to a former guard, a number have died following torture and privations.⁴

Arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention in life-threatening conditions are now commonplace. Fundamental freedoms are non-existent, the judiciary is compromised, the national assembly has not met for years, and democratic elections are overdue.

Only six non-governmental organisations (NGOs) currently operate, compared to nearly 40 in 2001. International aid is viewed with suspicion, with the government increasingly controlling distribution to entrench societal control. In 2005, USAID, which provided most of the food needed by Eritrea, was asked to cease operations. Also in 2005, the government confiscated over 100 United Nations vehicles, severely hampering the organisation's operational capacity. In 2010, after suffering numerous and increasing restrictions, the British organisation Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) ceased operations.

¹ Reporters without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index, <http://en.rsff.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012.1043.html>.

² The 2011 Global Hunger Index, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), report by Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/2011-global-hunger-index>.

³ Letter dated 18 July 2011 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) concerning Somalia and Eritrea addressed to the President of the Security Council, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/433.

⁴ <http://www.asmarino.com/news/625--eraero-prison-guard-revels-his-shocking-account->.

1.2 Repression of religious activity

The first religious community to suffer repression was the Jehovah Witness movement. Its members effectively lost citizenship rights after refusing to participate in the national referendum on independence, and in active military service. Many were detained and tortured; some still remain in jail. A January 2012 report lists 48 imprisoned Jehovah Witnesses, most of who were detained for conscientious objection to the armed services or unspecified religious activity.⁵ Next, the government moved against the Muslim community. A government-approved Imam was installed, hundreds of religious teachers and others deemed hostile to this move were detained, and an unknown number were reportedly executed extra-judicially.

While Muslims and Jehovah Witnesses still experience periodic harassment and incarceration, they are no longer the primary focus of repression. On 15 May 2002, all churches that were not affiliated to the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox denominations were effectively closed, and all other religious practices except Sunni Islam were ended. The government claimed religious groups could apply for official registration, but requirements were stringent, intrusive, and discriminatory, since they did not apply to government-sanctioned groups. Arrests of Christians have continued since that time.

Between 2,500 and 3,000 Christians are currently detained indefinitely at any given time. Although some were initially released after pledging to renounce their faith, none have been formally charged or tried and all are held pending similar denials of faith. Reports persist of prisoners dying after torture, or after being denied life-saving medication for refusing to deny their faith.⁶ Torture is rife in these centres, with prisoners being held in such inhumane conditions as metal shipping containers, underground cells, and in the open air in desert areas where they are surrounded by barbed wire or thorns. Female Christian prisoners are regularly beaten on the soles of their feet and their wombs, allegedly to prevent them from bearing children.⁷ In her autobiography, prominent former prisoner Helen Berhane vividly describes the condition of a lady beaten so severely that her uterus prolapsed and hung from her body.⁸

Authorised denominations also suffer repression. Most significantly, in a series of government-initiated punitive measures from 2005-6, the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church Abune Antonios was driven from office, replaced by a government-approved priest in violation of canonical law, and placed under house arrest, where he remains to date. The pontiff is an insulin-dependent diabetic and according to recent reports his health is declining.⁹ The government is effectively in control of the Church's finances, and priests seen as sympathetic to the legitimate patriarch are detained and harassed. A 2011 report indicates that since the removal of Patriarch Antonios, around 1700 Orthodox clergy of all ranks have been forced out of the church; 1350 have been forcibly conscripted, 23 are known to be detained, fourteen have been banned from entering the compound of any church, seven are not allowed to leave the confines of Asmara and a number of others have fled the country, including 49 lay workers, 32 monks and five nuns.¹⁰ In addition the government has confiscated the Church's historical artefacts, and around 1500 churches are reportedly slated for closure in the near future.¹¹

⁵ <http://www.jw-media.org/eri/20120131rpt.htm>.

⁶ "Religious Freedom in Eritrea", Dr Khataza Gondwe, Team Leader, Africa and Middle East, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Post-UPR Hearing, UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, 30 November 2009.

⁷ CSW interviews with refugees, 2005-2011.

⁸ Cited in: "Song of the Nightingale", Helen Berhane, Authentic Press, 2009.

⁹ Concern grows over Eritrean Abune Antonios's Health, <http://www.dailyethiopia.com/index.php?aid=1127>.

¹⁰ The Eritrean Church: the Church that suffers silently, http://www.inchainsforchrist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=74:the-eritrean-orthodox-church-the-church-that-suffers-silently&catid=37:press-releases&Itemid=56.

¹¹ The Detained Patriarch and a dying Church, 19 January 2012, <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/2012/01/the-detained-patriarch-persecuted-christians-and-a-dying-church/>.

1.3 Arbitrary detention, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment

Continuing large-scale detentions without charge or trial have created the maze of detention centres. Sheet iron warehouses, villas, metal shipping containers, fenced off open-air spaces in military camps and even caves currently function as makeshift detention facilities. The government's burgeoning security apparatus acts with impunity, utilising a legion of torture techniques that have been extensively documented. There are growing reports of prisoners dying in detention following torture, or due to malnutrition or lack or denial of medical attention. There are also reports of prisoners being used as forced labour in development projects or on farms owned by officials or government sympathisers.¹²

1.4 A heavily militarised society

Eritrea allocates around 25 percent of its budget for military use, and of a population of around five million, 300,000 are in military service. The only university was closed down, and colleges and high schools serve as military boot camps. By law military service should last eighteen months; however, it is in reality open-ended, with many serving (and receiving minimal payment) until they are well over 50 years of age. Despite not having engaged in open warfare since 2000, the government refuses to demobilise the army in an attempt to maintain control over Eritrea's youths. In addition, conscripts are also used as forced labour, and the sexual, emotional and physical abuse of female conscripts is rampant.¹³ The harsh military regime can cause psychological damage; symptoms include walking backwards, involuntary choking, and stress-induced blindness.¹⁴

1.5 Refugee crisis

Comprehensive repression has occasioned a mass exodus, particularly by Eritrean youths. Unable to acquire the mandatory exit visas, tens of thousands cross without permission into Ethiopia and Sudan, some travelling as far afield as Latin America, South Africa, and the United States in search of refuge. Between 1300-1500 reportedly cross the Ethiopian border each month, including an increasing number of unaccompanied minors¹⁵, while another 1700 enter Sudan each month.¹⁶ An unknown number have died while traversing the heavily mined and policed border into Ethiopia, crossing the Sahara into Sudan, moving onwards into Libya, or crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. Several have been killed by Egyptian border guards while crossing into Israel. En route, many are abused physically and sexually, and exploited financially, by people traffickers.

In 2010 information began to emerge of the mistreatment of refugees by Bedouin people traffickers in purpose-built containers in the Sinai desert in an effort to extort money. Refugees, who now pay upwards of US\$ 10,000 for safe passage to Israel or Europe, are severely mistreated in order to elicit thousands more from their friends and relatives abroad. They are bound, deprived of adequate food, given salty water to drink, and tortured using extreme methods, including electric shocks and branding while friends and relatives are made to listen to their screams. Women are particularly vulnerable to severe abuse, including gang-rape. Some are also subjected to slave labour.¹⁷ When payment has not been forthcoming, several have been deprived of vital organs by illegal organ harvesters, often in unhygienic conditions. Many have died, and their bodies have been left in the

¹² [Eritrea: Edited Testimonies of Detainees](#), CSW, April 2012

¹³ [Eritrea- Sexual Violence against Female Army Conscripts](#), CSW, December 2008

¹⁴ "Religious Freedom in Eritrea", extracts from interviews with refugees during CSW Visit to the Horn of Africa 2010.

¹⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e483986>; <http://asmaraonline.com/eritrea-silent-crisis-as-more-eritreans-flee/>

¹⁶ <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2012/01/un-refugee-chief-visits-eritrean-camp-in-sudan/>

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiXijqqvN4&feature=related>

desert.¹⁸ There have been consistent reports of refugees receiving marginally better treatment by claiming to follow Islam.

There are also increasing reports of refugees being kidnapped from the UN's Shagarab camp in Sudan and sold to smugglers. As one refugee put it "People catch us, sell us like a goat". In addition, during the Libyan upheaval, Eritreans feared both the National Transitional Council (NTC) and Gadaffi loyalists, since each group targeted sub Saharan African migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. At the height of hostilities, many drowned in an attempt to flee Libya on unseaworthy vessels, including some who could have been rescued, had the international will to do so existed.²⁰ For its part, the Eritrean Government has responded to this refugee crisis by instituting its own shoot-to-kill border policy for escapees. It also imprisons the oldest member of escapee families pending payment of a fine of approximately US\$ 3000. There are also several reports of hostage releases following payments of ransom to nefarious contacts in Asmara, and allegations of a degree of official collusion in the trade in humanity.²¹

Government agents and supporters also harass refugees in third countries. In Sudan, Eritrean agents regularly conduct round-ups and forced returns in cities and refugee camps. Egypt has forcibly repatriated over 1,000 refugees. On 3 January 2010, and allegedly at the behest of the Eritrean Embassy, government supporters broke into the residence of an Orthodox priest in Nairobi, Kenya, removing all his belongings. In February 2010, Libya allowed Eritrean officials to select twelve high-profile refugees for forcible return. Following the institution of UN sanctions, the newly-opened Eritrean Consulate in Uganda reportedly attempted to intimidate refugees into signing anti-sanctions petitions. In May 2010, the publisher and editor of a monthly Tigrinya newsletter, was assaulted by government supporters in Houston, Texas as he attempted to participate in a public seminar on UN sanctions.²²

1.6 Insufficient action at international level

There is disappointment in all but pro-government circles that current UN sanctions focus solely on ending Eritrea's obstructive actions towards Djibouti and Somalia, and make no mention of ensuring an end to the appalling mistreatment endured by the Eritrean people. In addition, despite human trafficking being an international crime run by syndicates that span national borders, there has been no discernible international effort to secure the release of well over 1000 hostages currently estimated to be facing abuse by traffickers in the Sinai Peninsula,²³ or to press the Egyptian authorities to take effective action to control this reprehensible trade.

With regard to the European Union (EU), although human rights lie at the core of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the rule of law and good governance are key tenets of European development cooperation and are embodied in Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement, development aid was granted to Eritrea despite its egregious human rights violations. Along with other human rights NGOs, CSW has repeatedly underlined the importance of aid delivery being subject to stringent monitoring regarding its use and disbursement; without this it would probably fail to reach

¹⁸ <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/2011/11/08/death-in-the-desert/>.

¹⁹ "Eritrea: People traffickers stalk Eritreans in Sudan desert"; Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 12 January 2012; <http://allafrica.com/stories/201201161946.html>. In addition, during a 2011 visit to the Horn of Africa CSW interviewed a refugee who had had this experience.

²⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2012/mar/29/migrant-boat-tragedy-refugees-europe?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>.

²¹ Wikileaks, <http://leaks.hohesc.us/?view=06ASMARA323> Subject: Camel Airways: Is there human smuggling in Eritrea? 2006-04-06

²² <http://www.asmarino.com/press-releases/691-the-association-of-eritrean-journalists-in-exile-aeje-strongly-condemns-the-vicious-attack-on-tedros-mengistu->.

²³ "Violation of rights of Displaced Persons and Refugees", email appeal for assistance from Agenzia Habeshia, received 14 May 2012

those who truly need it, while projects funded by the EU may even be accomplished with the use of forced labour. In November 2011, the regime effectively suspended the delivery of this aid itself by stating its intention to close all ongoing programmes under the 10th European Development Fund, ostensibly so that it could review and finalize the country's five-year National Development Plan prior to cooperating with the EU within the framework of the next European Development Fund cycle in 2013. This decision was reportedly publicised within hours of a scheduled EU-Eritrea Human Rights Dialogue meeting.²⁴ Neither the offers of development aid nor the human rights dialogues appear to have yielded any tangible improvements in the daily lives of Eritrean citizens, or in the country's overall political or human rights situation.

In March 2012, a statement signed by 44 countries expressing concern regarding human rights in Eritrea at the Human Rights Council²⁵ marked the most significant recognition so far at international level that a human rights crisis is currently underway in Eritrea. However, this dire situation calls for further action as a matter of urgency.

2. Recommendations

Christian Solidarity Worldwide calls on members of the international community to urge the Eritrean Government to ensure:

- The immediate granting of unlimited and unhindered access to long-term detainees for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and/or any other competent international body, to assess their wellbeing and the conditions in which they are held, ensuring that the latter meet with UN minimum standards;
- Access for all detainees to immediate family members, medical treatment and legal representation;
- The implementation of Eritrea's ratified constitution and the return of all rights enshrined within it, including the freedoms of conscience, religion, expression, opinion, movement, assembly and organisation;
- An end to the indefinite extension of the legally stipulated 18-month term of military service, and the use of military conscripts and detainees as forced labour;
- The demobilisation of those who have served excessive tours of duty within the army;
- The urgent demarcation of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border in line with the international ruling in order to eliminate a justification for continued repression;
- Access for relevant UN special mechanisms and credible human rights organisations to carry out a thorough, independent and impartial investigation into all serious violations of human rights in the country;
- The right to conscientious objection, and an end to underage conscription, to the indefinite extension of the stipulated term for military service, and to the use of conscripts as forced labour;
- An end to arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention without charge or trial. The Eritrean Government should be urged to bring detainees immediately before recognised courts of law, in the presence of international observers, or release them;

²⁴ "Eritrea closes European Union programmes" Daniel Berhane's Blog ,
<http://danielberhane.wordpress.com/2011/12/09/eritrea-closes-european-union-programs/>

²⁵ <http://www.humanrights.gov/2012/03/14/human-rights-situation-in-eritrea-joint-statement-to-the-human-rights-council/>

- The signing and ratification of the United Nations Convention against Torture (CAT). Eritrea has already acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter, both of which prohibit this practice.

CSW also urges members of the international community:

- To support efforts to mandate a Special Procedure to monitor and report on the human rights situation in Eritrea as a matter of priority;
- To review the activities of Eritrean diplomatic missions within their borders, specifically the collection of tax from local Eritrean communities, in order to determine whether this practice is in breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations;
- To thoroughly investigate any reports within their borders of harassment of members of the Eritrean Diaspora;
- For signatory states to the UN Refugee Convention, to honour the non-return advisory regarding Eritrean refugees issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; and for signatories to the African conventions relating to refugees to assist and protect refugees in accordance to the stipulations contained therein.