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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High
Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Elizka Relief Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

Introduction

Despite the increased engagement at the regional level, the human rights situation in Eritrea remains dire. The Eritrean government remains one of the world's most repressive governments, subjecting its population to unabated abuse of human rights. Impunity for past and ongoing human rights violations is widespread. The following report presented by Elizka Relief Foundation is a review of the human rights situations in Eritrea since the last reporting period.

External Actor Interventions

In February 2020, a human rights dialogue took place between the Government of Eritrea and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), providing a window of opportunity for the country to act on its commitments to confidence-building measures and technical cooperation.¹ In addition, on May 11, 2020 the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea established five benchmarks to represent minimum human rights standards and aim to help the government in developing its human rights agenda.² However there have been limited signs of progress on human rights in this regard as violations continue unabated. Furthermore, on October 8, 2020, the lack of progress in cases of political prisoners was acknowledged by the European Parliament in a resolution adopted which focused on the case of Dawit Isaak, a Swedish Eritrean and referred to the pervasive practices of arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances in Eritrea.³

Restriction of civil rights and liberties

Eritrea continues to severely constrain civil liberties. Political opposition groups, and the right to demonstrate peacefully continues to be restricted; independent human rights defenders and many non-governmental organizations remain expelled from the country; and independent journalists are severely restricted in conducting their duties. Those who dare to express dissent and opinion are arrested and held incommunicado in detention centers, sometimes indefinitely, and subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment and punishment often without any due process. In addition, Eritrean authorities continue to impose restrictions on religious communities, particularly those belonging to unregistered denominations. In June 2020, 30 people that were attending a wedding ceremony held in the capital, Asmara were arrested.⁴ In August 2020, there were more arrests of Christians including of four pastors who were taken from their homes by security forces in Asmara; in

¹ Civil Rights Defenders, "Extend the Mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea", published on the Civil Rights Defenders Website on May 6, 2021. Retrieved 23/01/2021 from <https://crd.org/2020/05/06/extend-the-mandate-of-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-eritrea/>.

² Statement of Ms. Daniela Kravetz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, published on the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) website on October 26, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26439&LangID=E>.

³ European Parliament Resolution of 8 October 2020 on Eritrea, notably the case of Dawit Isaak, published on the European Parliament website on October 8, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0258_EN.html.

⁴ Eritrea Hub, "News of further arrests at wedding" published on the Eritrea Hub website on July 7, 2020. Retrieved on 24/01/2021 from https://eritreahub.org/news-of-further-arrests-at-wedding?fbclid=IwAR3f_qQvNiKFPPhqQFB8J7Lawn-9QWTiEx8ntxIDzHpD4KA-RtG2bxDJcl_s.

September 2020, at least five Christian women were reportedly arrested in Dekemhare, south-east of Asmara, in September.⁵

Arbitrary arrests and Enforced disappearances

Eritrea remains an unsafe place for those who are perceived as critical of the government. Mass arrests and indefinite detentions without trial or appeal remain common. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience and other prisoners, including journalists, former politicians and practitioners of unauthorized religions, remain held incommunicado. Among them are Dawit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean journalist who has been held for over 19 years without charge or trial;⁶ Ciham Ali Abdu, an American-Eritrean woman who has been held incommunicado since December 2012 at the age of 15;⁷ and Berhane Abrehe, former finance minister and critic of the president, who has remained in incommunicado detention since September 2018.

Inhumane Prison Conditions

It has been reported that tens of thousands of Eritreans are currently detained without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in more than 300 sites across the country.⁸ The conditions in these facilities are unsanitary and unsatisfactory, and access to food, water, sanitary products and medical attention is insufficient and often withheld as punishment.⁹ These conditions have been exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions which has denied many detainees vital food supply and sanitary products which would have been provided by their families.

Forced Labor

Despite calls to reform the country's national service system, government continues to conscript young Eritreans, both men and unmarried women, indefinitely into military or civil service for low pay and with no say in their profession or work location. In September, the government ignored its own restrictions on movement, its ban on public transport, and its school closures, by sending busloads of school students to the infamous Sawa military camp where all secondary school students must complete their schooling and simultaneously undergo military training.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The Eritrean government is reportedly the worst offender of violence against women in the country as young women are forcibly taken to military camps to serve in the military or civil service.¹⁰ Like the young men, teenage girls in Sawa are assigned to military

⁵ Statement of Ms. Daniela Kravetz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, published on the OHCHR website on October 26, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26439&LangID=E>.

⁶ European Parliament News, "Human rights breaches in Eritrea, Nicaragua and Saudi Arabia", published on the European Parliament website on October 8, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20201002IPR88448/human-rights-breaches-in-eritrea-nicaragua-and-saudi-arabia>.

⁷ Statement of Ms. Daniela Kravetz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, published on the OHCHR website on October 26, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26439&LangID=E>.

⁸ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), "Arrests at Christian gatherings amid concerns of increasing food insecurity", published on the CSW website on July 9, 2020. Retrieved on 23/01/2021 from <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/07/09/press/4726/article.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International, "Eritrean Women call for an End to State-Sanctioned Rape", published on December 10, 2020. Retrieved on 24/01/2021 from

commanders who force the girls to wait on them 12 hours during the day, then often turn them into sexual slaves at night.¹¹

Recommendations

As a result of the aforementioned, Elizka Relief Foundation presents the following recommendations to be considered during the current and upcoming period regarding the promotion of the human rights situation in Eritrea. We call on the Government of Eritrea to:

1. Fully and constructively cooperate with the Special Rapporteur by granting access to the country, in accordance with its obligations as a Council member; as well as to develop a comprehensive strategy to meet the progress benchmarks established by the Special Rapporteur;
2. Provide proof of life and detailed information on the whereabouts and fate of prisoners deprived of physical liberty; conduct fair trials for those accused and indefinitely detained; effect immediate and unconditional release of any prisoners not charged with any crimes; as well as abolish the death penalty in line with the recommendations presented in the United Nations Human Rights Council Annual Report 2020;
3. Uphold its obligation to address all human rights violations, including by conducting extensive investigations into the extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.
4. Take necessary measures to open civic spaces for independent civil society organizations; in this regard, we remind the Government of Eritrea of its obligations under the International Labour Organization conventions, with particular regard to the right of civil society organizations and trade unions to organize, peacefully demonstrate, participate in public affairs and campaign for better workers' rights;
5. Reform the national service system and desist from recruiting its citizens for forced labour.

<https://www.tassc.org/news-blog/2020/12/10/eritrean-women-call-for-an-end-to-state-sanctioned-rape>.

¹¹ Ibid.