



General Assembly

Distr.: General
1 June 2022

English only

Human Rights Council

Fiftieth session

13 June–8 July 2022

Agenda item 2

**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 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 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.

[23 May 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



The situation of human rights in Eritrea

1. CSW is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all through research and advocacy.

2. This submission draws the Council's attention to concerns regarding the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

Detentions of religious adherents

3. Article 19 of Eritrea's constitution, ratified in 1997, states that every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Article 14 articulates the right to equality without discrimination, including on the basis of religion. However, this document has not been implemented and Eritrea's ruling party claims to be drafting a new one.

4. Since effectively outlawing religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian denominations, or Sunni Islam in 2002, thousands of adherents of non-recognised religious communities have been detained without charge or trial in inhumane, life-threatening conditions, where they may experience torture or death. The permitted religious communities also experience repression.

5. CSW remains concerned for 20 Jehovah's Witnesses who are detained indefinitely. Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered severe mistreatment due to doctrinal exigencies that prevented them from voting in the 1993 independence referendum, and obliged them to only participate in non-military aspects of national service. They were stripped of citizenship rights by presidential decree. Any meeting clandestinely risk detention and harassment, including children and the elderly.

6. The number of Christian prisoners is more difficult to ascertain; however, in September 2020 CSW's sources confirmed over 300, including 39 children were detained. In March 2022, security forces arrested 17 women and 12 men during a raid on prayer meeting in a house in Asmara, who were taken to Mai Serwa prison camp.

7. Particularly notable is the case of Abune (Father) Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church who died on 9 February 2022 following 16 years under house arrest. He had been removed from office in 2006, in violation of canon law, for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs and refusing to excommunicate members of the Orthodox renewal movement.

8. In July 2019 five pro-government bishops accused him of heresy, effectively excommunicating him. In May 2021 the government announced a second illegal replacement, and unconfirmed reports in 2021 alleged that since 2017 Patriarch Antonios was forcibly injected on occasions with an unknown substance which affected him adversely.

9. Five Orthodox priests from the Debre-Bizen Monastery arrested in June 2019 for supporting Patriarch Antonios and protesting government interference in the Church remain detained, and reports indicate further arrests at several monasteries following his death.

Compulsory military service

10. By law, military service should last 18 months; in reality, it is indefinite. Recruits receive minimal wages and are subject to forced labour. Young female recruits can face sexual harassment and assault from senior officers.

11. Random military round-ups continue to occur. Reports indicate young people, including minors, were seized from homes, streets, and marketplaces and forcibly conscripted in the lead up to and during the war in Tigray, Ethiopia. Pictures circulating on the internet in May 2022 of the 34th Round of National Service recruits leaving Sawa training camp to participate in the 24 May Independence Day celebrations in Asmara show these conscripts wearing uniforms similar to Ethiopian forces.

12. Four Jehovah's Witnesses who were detained in 1998 after declining active military service, were finally released in 2021. CSW remains concerned for the welfare of other conscientious objectors.

13. In its June 2016 report, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) "found reasonable grounds to believe" that crimes against humanity, "namely enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder" have been committed in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991.¹ These crimes were deemed to have been committed largely but not exclusively within the context of the military service regime.

Tigray crisis

14. Since the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region began in November 2020, over 52,000 people have died, and an estimated 1.7 million have been displaced internally.

15. Credible reports continue to emerge of severe human rights violations perpetrated particularly by Eritrean soldiers, who were involved from the beginning, by Amhara militia, and by Somali government forces sent to Eritrea for training, but transported to Tigray clandestinely.

16. There are now legitimate concerns that atrocity crimes may have taken place in the region, with violations, including rape as a weapon of war and ethnicity-based massacres of men and boys. Other violations include indiscriminate bombing of civilians and civilian objects, and attacks on sites of religious and historical importance.

17. Eritrean soldiers are implicated in the murders of Eritrean refugees, the destruction of two camps and the forced return of tens of thousands who sought refuge in Ethiopia, some of whom were forcibly conscripted. They also embarked on extensive looting. Anything not transported to Eritrea was destroyed, including crops, grain stores and livestock.

18. Tigray has remained under an intensified de facto siege since the withdrawal of Ethiopian and allied forces on 28 June 2021, facilitating the continued use of starvation as a weapon of war. On 21 January 2022, the UNHCR reported that aid teams which had been able to reach remaining refugee camps in recent weeks found Eritrean nationals had died of preventable diseases, while others lacked food, medicine and clean water, as food distribution in region was at an all-time low.² Thousands of refugees fled Barahle Camp in Afar in February 2022 following an attack in which five were killed and several women were kidnapped.³ Additionally, refugees in the Amhara region recently alleged they are being targeted between 19.00 and 20.30 by Amhara militia (FANO) and are facing abductions and refoulement.

COVID-19

19. A stringent and extended COVID-19 related lockdown, often enforced violently, not only provided the government with an additional means of curtailing freedom of movement, which was already severely restricted; it also provided cover for mass mobilisation and troop movement in the run up to the war on Tigray. The lockdown damaged the already fragile economy, amid reports of widespread hunger, including in the capital Asmara, where a water shortage persists, and people are reportedly cooking with firewood due to an erratic electricity supply.

20. Eritrea is the only country in the African Union that has not launched a COVID vaccination programme. Credible reports indicate a rise in infections, raising serious concerns for the wellbeing of tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience, who remain detained in unsanitary, ill-equipped, and generally overcrowded facilities where conditions are life-threatening, and where there is insufficient access to potable water, food or medical facilities.

Recommendations to Eritrea

21. Implement the ratified constitution and facilitate all rights enshrined within it.
22. End arbitrary arrest, irregular and incommunicado detention, indefinite detention without charge or trial, and the use of torture.
23. Release all prisoners of conscience, including those detained on account of their religion or belief, immediately and without precondition.
24. Compensate government officials and journalists detained since September 2001 in accordance with two African Commission for Human and Peoples Rights decisions.
25. Respect the separation of religion and state.
26. End underage conscription and the indefinite extension of the legally stipulated term of military service; institute a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment and assault; ensure the demobilisation of those who have served excessive tours of duty; terminate the use of military conscripts and detainees as forced labour.
27. Use its term on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) to engage genuinely with special procedures to improve the human rights situation, commencing by:
28. Issuing a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures and allowing unhindered access to all parts of the country and every detention centre.

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council

29. Renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, requesting the mandate holder to, inter alia, report on progress in the implementation of the five benchmarks and other recommendations contained in previous reports by the rapporteur and the COIE.
30. Call for the immediate withdraw of all Eritrean military from Tigray and Oromia, and act swiftly to ensure an immediate cessation of hostilities and unimpeded access to all of Tigray for local and international aid agencies.
31. Should Eritrea fail to illustrate consistent, discernible, and irrevocable progress in implementing all of the recommendations above, then in view of the grave international crimes documented in the COIE's report and confirmed to have occurred in Tigray, initiate the process of its removal from the HRC, as occurred in the case of the Russian Federation;
32. Urge Ethiopia to ensure refugees and asylum seekers within its borders are treated in accordance with regional and international refugee legislation, and that their rights and persons are protected.

1. United Nations, Human Rights Council, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, 2016 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coi-eritres/2016-report-coi-eritrea>

2. United Nations news, Tigray: Eritrean refugees 'scared and struggling to eat' amid aid obstacles, 22 January 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110252>

3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UK, Thousands of Eritrean refugees displaced in clashes in Ethiopia's Afar region, 18 February 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/2/620f63574/thousands-eritrean-refugees-displaced-clashes-ethiopia-afar-region.html>