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## Human Rights Council

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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 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.

[29 May 2023]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



# Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

## Preface

The human rights situation in Eritrea is declining, especially after rejecting cooperation with the UN human rights mechanisms. Eritrea Government opposes the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, which increases the human rights challenges Eritrea faces and increases patterns of pre-existing violations, including violation of civil and political rights, arbitrary detention conditions, forcible disappearance and arbitrarily detained Eritrean journalists, political opposition, and clerics, in addition to forced recruitment of children and women alike, which violate human rights in Eritrea in general (1).

## 1. Violation of Civil and Political Rights

There is no space for civil society in Eritrea, and no national elections were held since independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The 1997 Constitution calls for an electoral committee whose chairman is appointed by the president and approved by the National Assembly has not been established to date nor allowed to date multi-party elections. The president's ruling party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), is the only legal party in Eritrea and has not allowed opposition groups any chance to compete or enter government. In addition, on September 21, 2021, the authorities detained dissidents and arrested prominent dissidents and their family members; nine dissidents died in custody. In addition, the government shut down all independent media, and 16 journalists are still detained as of 2022; Because of their work in Eritrea (2).

Although the right to freedom of religion is in Article (18) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; however, the government restricted religious practice. In January 2006, Patriarch A.A, the Eritrean Orthodox Church patriarch, was deposed and arrested after he protested the arrest of priests and refused to exclude nearly 3,000 members of the Sunday school movement. On February 9, 2022, A.A died after being held under house arrest for 16 years. In March 2022, the government arrested 29 evangelical Christians (12 men and 17 women) while praying in a private home in Asmara, and it moved them to Mai Sirwa, although it released many religious prisoners in 2020 and 2021. The authorities arrested a Catholic bishop and two priests for unknown reasons in October 2022. In addition, followers of other denominations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, face severe persecution, such as arbitrary detentions and deprivation of citizenship.

## 2. Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detention

Hundreds of Eritrean prisoners of conscience and other prisoners, including journalists, former politicians, and clerics, were arbitrarily detained without charge or access to lawyers or family members, many of whom have, unfortunately, for nearly two decades, and others have been victims of enforced disappearance, all in a context of complete impunity. Until now, the former Finance Minister, B.A, is still forcibly disappeared, following his arrest in September 2018, after he published a book criticizing the policies of the president and the government. In addition, S.A, the daughter of the former Minister of Information, Ali Abdo, defected from the government and requested political asylum in Australia. S.A. was 15 years old when she was arrested while trying to flee Eritrea through the Sudan in 2012; their whereabouts are still unknown (3).

In addition, thousands of arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared persons, and the fate of 11 members of the (J-15) group is unknown to this day. In September 2001, they were arbitrarily arrested by the Eritrean security forces after they wrote an open letter to the Eritrean president calling for elections. In addition, 16 journalists were working with the Group of 15, and their whereabouts are still unknown. On February 10, 2022, 11 followers of Patriarch Anthony were arrested during the burial of his body after four days (4). In October 2022, the Eritrean authorities arbitrarily arrested four clerics in separate incidents.

On December 28, two of them were released, and two others remained detained, despite their belonging to Christian denominations that are allowed to work in the country. (5)

### **3. Forced Conscription (Imposing Military Service Arbitrarily for Unlimited Periods)**

Eritrean government arbitrarily exploits its citizens. It imposed national military service on citizens compulsory; including girls and minor children. It enrolled them in compulsory training camps for an indefinite period. According to reliable reports, the Eritrean authorities continue to recruit high school students, round up young men from the streets and forcibly take them to training camps. Most students under 18, during their last year of high school, are transferred to the "Sawa" military camp, where they are subjected to corporal punishment that amounts to torture. There are also allegations of Eritrean officers sexually exploiting or raping girls in the camp, and they forced these students to complete indefinite military service after graduating from high school (6).

Students who try to avoid compulsory conscription are arrested in the streets, sent to army camps forcibly, and then sent to fight in the front lines in Eritrea's war with Tigray, which contradicts the text of Article No. (22) Of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), which states that "States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child (defined as under 18 years of age) takes a direct part in hostilities. In particular, all States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any child into their armed forces."

In confirmation of this, R.E., a high school student, was arrested outside his home in Asmara on December 15, 2020, a month after his 16th birthday, and was taken to Barentu and then to a military training camp in Kormini, where he received training for two months, with other recruits. His family members could not communicate with him after February 2021. Most of these students are sent to Tigray to participate in the fighting between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. His family was sure that R.E was sent to fight in Tigray; after international radio mentioned his full name, the Tigray People's Liberation Front arrested him. In addition to that victim, thousands of other children and youth are sent to fight in a deadly battle in violation of all international and regional laws and conventions.

### **Recommendations:**

- Cooperating with international human rights mechanisms, and developing a national action plan that includes the implementation of the recommendations issued by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.
- Stop all human rights violations, including allowing citizens to exercise all their civil and political rights without any restrictions.
- Immediate, urgent, and unconditional release of all unlawful and arbitrary detainees, particularly those detained based on their political opinions or religious beliefs.
- Putting an end to forced conscription and reducing the length of national/military service to 18 months.
- Immediately investigate allegations of human rights violations in the context of national/military service, in particular sexual violence and rape in the Sawa training camp, and bring those responsible to justice.

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(1) No end in sight: International community continues to fail Eritreans says UN Expert, OHCHR, 27 Oct 2022. <https://cutt.us/6l2mN>

(3) Africa Yearbook Volume 16, Eritrea, 21 Sep 2020. <https://cutt.us/mBQEE>

(4) Catholic Entity Mourns Death of Eritrean Christian Leader after Prolonged Captivity, AciAfrica, 17 Feb 2022. <https://cutt.us/ZhiD6>

And: A/HRC/50/20: Situation of human rights in Eritrea - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, OHCHR, 10 June 2022. <https://cutt.us/KYYVt>

(5) CSW and Human Rights Concern Eritrea call for release of arbitrarily detained clergymen, CSW, 19 Oct 2022. <https://cutt.us/g6aec>