



# General Assembly

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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.

[3 February 2024]

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



## Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

### Background:

Eritrea still faces numerous challenges in establishing itself as an independent state, particularly in light of the ongoing deterioration of the human rights situation and the climate of fear that suppresses opposition. Additionally, Eritrea has failed to cooperate with international human rights mechanisms and has not enacted laws to adequately protect human rights in line with the treaties it has ratified. In this context, Elizka Relief Foundation aims to discuss the human rights situation in Eritrea, with a particular focus on economic, social, and cultural rights. The foundation concludes with a set of recommendations to protect these rights and prevent their violation.

Eritrea's economic and social landscape paints a grim picture, as it is considered one of the most closed countries in the world, grappling with extreme economic conditions, a sharp decline in remittances, environmental challenges such as droughts and locust invasions, inadequate infrastructure, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

### 1. Right to Work:

Eritrea continues to rank among the ten poorest countries globally, with an unemployment rate of 8.05% among the total labor force in 2021. The majority of those employed fall into the category of working poor, accounting for 75.2% of total employment. The national minimum wage for employees of state-owned companies and government workers falls below the poverty line, and there is no national minimum wage for those employed in the private sector. Published standards for occupational safety and health are non-existent. Workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous situations without jeopardizing their employment. Roughly 80% of the population works in the informal sector, engaged in subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing, or small-scale retail trade. However, labor laws do not extend to the informal sector.(1)

### 2. Right to Health:

Eritrea is one of the poorest countries globally, with 66% of its population living below the poverty line. The country's economic indicators do not offer much hope for alleviating poverty soon, which has severe implications for the healthcare system and its basic facilities. The health sector in Eritrea faces numerous challenges, such as the scarcity of healthcare professionals, with approximately 6 doctors and 75 midwives per 100,000 people. Healthcare services are primarily concentrated in urban areas, leaving around 80% of the rural population underserved. Malaria is the second biggest challenge after poverty, 70% of populations live in impoverished areas lacking proper healthcare facilities, resulting in high costs and limited access to treatment.(2)

Furthermore, Eritrea's immunization and health coverage capacity has significantly declined. In 24 out of 62 districts, immunization coverage is below 80%, leaving approximately 31,000 unvaccinated children under the age of one. Tragically, child mortality rates remain high, with up to 50% of deaths occurring within the first 24 hours of a child's life and 75% within the first week. These deaths are primarily preventable and treatable, emphasizing the urgent need for a stronger healthcare infrastructure. Only 9 out of 22 hospitals in Eritrea have neonatal intensive care units.(3) Alarming, in 2021, Eritrea was the sole African country and one of the few worldwide that did not report on its COVID-19 vaccine administration. It did not participate in COVAX, the global mechanism for the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.(4)

### 3. Right to Education:

The state of education in Eritrea presents similar challenges. Article 21 of the Eritrean constitution guarantees the right to education, and the country has developed development plans, such as the second plan for the period 2018-2022. Primary school enrollment rates stand at approximately 39-57%, while secondary school enrollment is only around 21%. Additionally, the rates of literacy are low, with only 67.8% of the population being able to read and write, and an overall illiteracy rate of 30%, including 10% among women. Eritrea also violates the right to education through practices such as the training and forced recruitment of high school students in the isolated Sawa camp, as well as the weak state of educational infrastructure. The teacher-student ratio is imbalanced, with a ratio of 77:1 for primary schools and 99:1 for secondary schools. Furthermore, children with disabilities face significant barriers to education, with only three boarding primary schools available for them, two for the deaf administered by religious organizations, and one for the blind administered by the government in Asmara and Keren. These schools can only accommodate approximately 183 students, and they are predominantly located in urban areas, making access difficult for people with disabilities in rural regions.<sup>(5)</sup>

Moreover, there are approximately 300,000 children (152,000 girls) and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 17 who are out of school, and around 17% of primary school-age students remained out of school in the 2022-2023 academic year.<sup>(6)</sup> Early marriage is a significant factor contributing to the denial of the right to education, as 69% of girls and 39% of boys between the ages of 15 and 29 drop out of school due to marriage.<sup>(7)</sup>

### 4. Women's Rights:

The Eritrean state continues to violate the rights of women across various domains, including political, civil, economic, social, and cultural spheres, both in formal and informal settings, disregarding its obligations under international agreements. Domestic violence is not criminalized by law, and there is no specific legislation against sexual harassment. Rural areas lack adequate healthcare services during pregnancy, and the availability of skilled healthcare during childbirth is limited. Only 34% of births were monitored for completion of care between 2010 and 2019 due to barriers related to education and transportation. The maternal mortality rate is estimated at 480 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>(8)</sup>

Although the government has established a steering committee within the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Welfare to combat harmful practices like female genital mutilation and underage marriage, the country still faces high rates of teenage pregnancy, with 76 births per 1,000 girls and women aged 15 to 19. Furthermore, there is a significant gender disparity in secondary education, as only 45% of girls are enrolled compared to 50% of boys.<sup>(9)</sup> Additionally, in 2023, the Eritrean Defense Forces continue to commit crimes against humanity in Tigray, including rape and sexual slavery of women. Between November 2020 and January 2023, a total of 160 cases of sexual violence were reported in the Kawkab Tsebe region.<sup>(10)</sup>

### Recommendations:

- Elizka Relief Foundation urges the Eritrean government to fulfill its human rights obligations by strengthening the institutional structure for human rights, modernizing the legal and legislative system, and ensuring equal application of the law. It is crucial to revise legislation that is inconsistent with international agreements, particularly laws concerning freedom of opinion and expression.
- Elizka Relief Foundation draws the attention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the limited prospects for social and economic rights in Eritrea. It calls for technical and technical support to address the challenges faced in these areas.

- Elizka Relief Foundation also urges the Eritrean government to adopt a transparent budget based on public dialogue, particularly involving children who experience educational deprivation or vulnerability. Such children are often exposed to forced labor, necessitating the implementation of positive social measures.
- In addition, the Eritrean government should reform the social protection system, with a particular focus on marginalized groups such as children, women, and children with disabilities. Improving their access to services, especially in rural and remote areas, is crucial.
- Moreover, Elizka Relief Foundation calls on the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to exert pressure on Eritrea, a member state of the Human Rights Council, to allocate sufficient human, technical, and financial resources to the bodies responsible for coordinating the implementation of ratified international agreements.
- Elizka Relief Foundation also urges the Eritrean government to establish follow-up committees in all remote areas. These committees would provide a platform for victims of violations among marginalized groups to report their cases and receive appropriate care, including physical and psychological examinations until their full recovery.
- In conclusion, Elizka Relief Foundation hope that the Eritrean government will expedite its transition away from the transitional government tunnel and achieve national reconciliation and accountability. This can be accomplished through fair democratic elections, the establishment of political parties, and the promotion of the rule of law.

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(9) UNICEF, Eritrea: Key demographic indicators, Access date 2 October 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/59c2fzjf>

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