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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.

[4 February 2023]

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



## **A Reform Vision of Child Recruitment, Sexual Violence and Early Marriage in Eritrea**

### **Introduction:**

Eritrean children, whether on their land or outside it, are exposed to many types of violence and violations that undermine their freedom and impede their full access to their rights. On top of these violations comes the recruitment of children at an early age. The Eritrean government forcibly recruits children under the legal age of 18 years for indefinite periods of up to approximately a decade, despite international and local efforts to put an end to this violation.

In addition, children are sent to conflict zones to fight and sacrifice on the front lines, while girls who join Eritrea's military conscription are exposed to many harassments as well as violence and sexual abuse. Eritrean refugee women in Tigray are also exposed to sexual violence, as it is already widespread in the Ethiopian conflict zone. Eritrean women face multiple challenges, as they receive less health care and protection.

Young girls in Eritrea are also exposed to one of the most common practices prevalent on the African continent, especially in customary societies such as early marriage, which is directly due to many causes, most notably poverty and low economic status, which lead families to marry their girls at a very early age and is often enforced.

This intervention attempts to highlight many violations forms of the rights of young children, girls, and boys in Eritrea, to call for urgent reform of these violations.

### **First: Prevalence of child recruitment in Eritrea:**

Over the past two years, the Eritrean government has been forcing children under the age of 18 to join its armies and send them to fight on the front lines of the war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in contravention of international law on the inhuman and inappropriate treatment of children. The children are often arrested at the age of 15 or 16, then they are taken to a military training camp and receive training there for at least two months with other conscripts, and are disconnected from their families. Eritrea maintains a military conscription system of National Service through which all young persons, male and female, are forced to participate in the state's fighting forces, with no official time limit or date for demobilization(1).

Men and women over the age of 18 are the only ones having the duty of national service, but an increase in patterns of forced conscription of children was noticed. As previously mentioned, children are arrested, sometimes as young as 14 years old, and some children have been deployed for military combat with limited training, a large number of children were allegedly injured or killed during the early stages of the conflict, and dozens were seriously injured, causing disabilities(2).

Children face food shortages, forced labor, and harsh punishments during the period of conscription. Many female students are also exposed to sexual abuse, especially those girls who join the army. Therefore, many girls and young women choose early marriage and motherhood as a way to evade conscription.

### **Second: Sexual violence Against Eritrean Girls In Tigray:**

Intelligence received by Elizka Relief Foundation reveals that the Eritrean refugee women and girls living in the Tigray area are exposed to sexual violence. Eritrean women have been gravely affected by the conflict and have been victimized, including rape, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Armed men from all warring factions have assaulted, raped, and committed other dehumanizing abuses against women in Tigray, including against Eritrean refugees.

However, the reporting of gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated against Eritrean women in Tigray is limited. Nearly 2,204 survivors reported experiencing sexual violence in health facilities across the Tigray region, 90% were underage girls, and these figures are an

understatement of the true extent of GBV being committed, as it is not reported. Cases are severely under-reported due to fear, stigma, and the inability to access health or support centers(3).

The needs and risks of Eritrean refugee women in Tigray are multifaceted. Severe food insecurity and lack of access to resources and cash are leading to the sexual exploitation and abuse of women in Tigray. Female-headed households are at greater risk of GBV and sexual exploitation due to their limited access to livelihoods and financial resources.

The blockade denies survivors access to GBV services and keeps women in circumstances that intensify and prolong their risks. Moreover, services to respond to GBV are almost non-existent. Healthcare facilities in Tigray have been severely damaged amid the conflict.

In 2021, only 10% of health clinics were functioning, 20% were occupied by armed soldiers, and 70% were looted. Even when hospitals and health clinics were functioning, lack of medicine and understaffing kept survivors from getting adequate service(4). From 2021 until today, women in Tigray have had few options for care under these circumstances. Eritrean refugee women have even fewer options because they are exposed to further risk if they try to access services at healthcare facilities where any armed forces are present.

### **Third: High Rates Of Early Marriage Of Children In Eritrea:**

Legally, early marriage is prohibited in Eritrea before the age of 18, and it is assumed that there are legal and financial penalties for those who violate this law, up to imprisonment. Despite these measures, many cultural customs deprive girls of their voice and their ability to reject these customs, most prominent of which is early marriage, 41% of girls in Eritrea are married before the age of 18, and 13% of girls are married before the age of 15(5).

One of the leading causes for early marriage in Eritrea is poverty and the low economic conditions that drive parents to alleviate the burdens by marrying their girls at an early age. As mentioned above, cultural customs in many areas of Eritrea encourage this action.

### **Recommendations:**

In light of the above-mentioned, Elizka Relief Foundation makes a set of recommendations as follows:

First: In light of the high rates of child recruitment of girls and boys in Eritrea by government forces, Elizka Relief Foundation recommends that the Human Rights Council demand that the Eritrean government conduct urgent investigations into the recruitment of children by the country's armed forces, and take the necessary steps to prevent the recruitment and deployment of children.

Second: In the context of what above-mentioned the deployment of children under the age of recruitment in different regions, such as the war in Tigray, Elizka Relief Foundation calls on the Human Rights Council to pressure the Eritrean government to issue a reform strategy for the issue of child recruitment, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations working in this field.

Third: about sexual violence against refugee girls from Eritrea in Tigray, Elizka Relief Foundation recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea cooperate with international organizations working to provide the needs of refugees, provide the necessary protection and material and moral support for refugee girls who have been subjected to violence sexual.

Fourth: Elizka Relief Foundation recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea cooperate with humanitarian organizations to develop programs to prevent, mitigate and respond to gender-based violence that meet the specific needs and unique circumstances of Eritrean refugee women, as well as prioritizing sexual, reproductive health services, and mental health services.

Fifth: In light of the prevalence of early marriage and its high rates in Eritrea, Elizka Relief Foundation recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea cooperate with civil society organizations operating in Eritrea to implement awareness campaigns in remote areas where early marriage is widespread.

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- 1) Human Rights Concern in Eritrea, Eritrean Underage Boys “Press-Ganged” into Military and Sent to Tigray to Fight, March 30, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3kRIAKI>
- 2) Vaticannews, UN rapporteur: Eritreans forcibly recruited as soldiers for Tigray war, 22 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3WILNI7>
- 3) news.un, Rights experts call for end to violence against women in Tigray conflict, 3 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Do8DxY>
- 4) Refugeesinternational, Eritrean Refugee Women Face Sexual Violence in Tigray, May 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/40e3530>
- 5) esaro.unfpa, Family arranged for me to marry my primary school teacher three times my age, 11 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3HdIcME>