

U.N. Eritrea inquiry finds clear patterns of rights violations

By Tom Miles

GENEVA (Reuters) - A United Nations investigation into human rights in Eritrea has found "very clear patterns" of violations and an absence of rule of law, an interim report said on Monday.

Eritrea's poor human rights situation has been blamed for a huge exodus of migrants from the Horn of Africa nation. Eritrea is the second largest source of migrants after Syria making perilous trips across the Mediterranean to Europe.

"Most Eritreans have no hope for their future," the chairman of the investigative team, Mike Smith, told the U.N. Human Rights Council to which the report was delivered, adding that it was no wonder so many people wanted to leave.

"Detention is an ordinary fact of life, experienced by an inordinate number of individuals - men and women, old and young, including children."

Eritrea's Ambassador Tesfamicael Gerahtu rejected the report, telling the Council it was based on "unreliable, unproven and sensational" information.

Smith said Eritrea, which declared independence from Ethiopia in 1993, was using long-simmering tensions with its much bigger southern neighbor as a pretext to ignore human rights law and to remain on a military footing, characterized by

pervasive state control and ruthless repression.

"Hence the creation of a network of spies that goes so deep in the fabric of social life that a man employed by national security might not know that his daughter is similarly employed.

"Hence the extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances and incommunicado detentions aiming at silencing all perceived critics and teaching a lesson to them and others – because you are never really told why you are arrested ... for how long you will be detained and where," Smith said.

The U.N. refugee agency UNHCR says that by July 2014, about 357,000 had fled Eritrea, roughly seven percent of a population previously estimated at five million. The numbers of those making the risky journey to Europe have increased since then.

Smith said that in the first four months of their work, his team had interviewed about 400 people in five countries and had received 140 written submissions.

"While we continue to travel, to collect testimonies and to go through information gathered to corroborate individual cases and incidents ... we can already report on very clear patterns of human rights violations and on our systemic understanding of them," Smith said.

The investigation will present its final report in June.