

## **UN Inquiry reports gross human rights violations in Eritrea**

**GENEVA (8 June 2015)**

The Government of Eritrea is responsible for systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations that have created a climate of fear in which dissent is stifled, a large proportion of the population is subjected to forced labour and imprisonment, and hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled the country, according to a UN report released Monday. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity.

Citing an array of human rights violations on a scope and scale seldom witnessed elsewhere, the report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea describes a totalitarian state bent on controlling Eritreans through a vast security apparatus that has penetrated all levels of society.

"Information gathered through the pervasive control system is used in absolute arbitrariness to keep the population in a state of permanent anxiety," the 500-page report says. "It is not law that rules Eritreans – but fear."

The release of the report comes as the international community, particularly governments in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, struggles to cope with a growing exodus of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants across the Mediterranean and along other irregular routes. Many of them are Eritreans, a significant proportion of whom fall victim to human traffickers while trying to reach Europe. The UN refugee agency placed the number of Eritreans under its concern outside the country at more than 357,400 in mid-2014.

The report strongly urges continued international protection for Eritrean refugees fleeing human rights violations, and warns against sending them back to danger in a country that punishes anyone who tries to leave without permission.

"Faced with a seemingly hopeless situation they feel powerless to change, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans are fleeing their country," the report says. "In desperation, they resort to deadly escape routes through deserts and neighbouring war-torn countries and across dangerous seas in search of safety. They risk capture, torture and death at the hands of ruthless human traffickers. To ascribe their decision to leave solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire situation of human rights in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people. Eritreans are fleeing severe human rights violations in their country and are in need of international protection."

The commission of inquiry was established by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2014 to conduct an investigation of all alleged violations of human rights in Eritrea, including: extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and inhumane prison conditions; violations of freedom of expression and opinion; freedom of association and

assembly; freedom of religion and belief; freedom of movement; and forced military conscription.

The three-member commission is chaired by Mr. Mike Smith (Australia), with Mr. Victor Dankwa (Ghana), and Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth (Mauritius), who also serves as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, as commissioners.

Announcing the release of the report Monday, Ms. Keetharuth urged renewed commitment from the international community to help end the climate of fear in Eritrea.

"With the end of the commission's investigations and the publication of this report detailing our findings on human rights violations in Eritrea, I look forward to a renewed commitment by the international community to address the justice deficit and to support our call for a restoration of the rule of law," she said. "Rule by fear – fear of indefinite conscription, of arbitrary and incommunicado detention, of torture and other human rights violations – must end."

The commission is scheduled to formally present its report to the UN Human Rights Council on June 23 in Geneva.

Eritrean authorities ignored repeated requests by the commission for direct access to the country as well as for information. The commission travelled to eight other countries and carried out some 550 confidential interviews with Eritrean witnesses who had fled the Horn of Africa nation. In addition, it received some 160 written submissions.

The report says fear of reprisals, even among witnesses now in third countries, was a major challenge.

"Many potential witnesses residing outside Eritrea were afraid to testify, even on a confidential basis, because they assumed they were still being clandestinely monitored by the authorities and therefore feared for their safety and for family members back in Eritrea," the report says.

The report notes that the initial promise of democracy and rule of law that came with Eritrea's independence in 1991 has been extinguished by the Government under the pretext of national defence.

"The commission finds that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that there is no accountability for them," it says. "The enjoyment of rights and freedoms are severely curtailed in an overall context of a total lack of rule of law. The commission also finds that the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour may constitute crimes against humanity. The commission emphasizes that its present findings should not be interpreted as a

conclusion that international crimes have not been committed in other areas.”

The report lists the main perpetrators of these violations as the Eritrean Defence Forces, in particular the Eritrean Army; the National Security Office; the Eritrean Police Forces; the Ministry of Information; the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Defence; the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ); the Office of the President; and the President.

The report describes the repressive systems used by the Government to control, silence and isolate individuals, including a pervasive domestic surveillance network in which neighbours spy on neighbours and even family members mistrust each other.

“As a result of this mass surveillance, Eritreans live in constant fear that their conduct is or may be monitored by security agents and that information gathered may be used against them, leading to arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, disappearance or death,” it says.

The judicial system in the country lacks independence and the administration of justice is “completely deficient,” the report says. Arbitrary detention is ubiquitous and conditions of detention in the country’s vast network of jails are extremely harsh. Holding prisoners incommunicado is a widespread practice, and many detainees simply disappear. In addition, many detainees have no idea why they are being held, nor of the length of their imprisonment.

“The commission finds that the use of torture is so widespread that it can only conclude it is a policy of the Government to encourage its use for the punishment of individuals perceived as opponents to its rule and for the extraction of confessions,” the report says. “Monitoring of detention centres is non-existent and perpetrators are never brought to justice.”

The report also describes how the Government, under the pretext of defending the integrity of the State and ensuring national self-sufficiency, has subjected much of the population to open-ended national service, either in the army or through the civil service. When they turn 18 or even before, all Eritreans are conscripted. While national service is supposed to last 18 months, in reality conscripts end up serving for an indefinite period, often for years in harsh and inhumane conditions.

Thousands of conscripts are subjected to forced labour that effectively abuses, exploits and enslaves them for years. Women conscripts are at extreme risk of sexual violence during national service.

Many others – detainees, students, members of the militia – are also subjected to forced labour: “The use of forced labour is so prevalent in Eritrea that all sectors of the economy rely on it and all Eritreans are likely to be subject to it at one point in their lives,” the report says.

“The commission concludes that forced labour in this context is a practice similar to slavery in its effects and, as such, is prohibited under international human rights law.”

[Full report and supporting documentation](#)

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