

Eritrea faces day of reckoning as UN weighs choice between sanctions or aid

UN security council to assess expert report on alleged support for subversive activity as EU moots possibility of increasing aid to tackle migration problem



The UN security council will meet on Friday to consider a report on Eritrea's alleged support for subversion across the Horn of Africa. The report, by the [UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia](#), will play an important part in the global body's decision on whether to continue sanctions against the Eritrean regime.

Relations between President Isaias Afwerki's government and the international community are at a crossroads. The UN and the EU may decide to embrace the regime despite its dire human rights record, ploughing aid into the country and attempting to crack down on the smugglers who have enabled [tens of thousands of Eritreans](#) to flee their homeland.

Equally, diplomats may conclude that until abuses in Eritrea end, people will continue to cross state borders at the rate of [5,000 a month](#). Should this be the case, pressure on Afwerki could be stepped up, with the UN adopting a wider range of sanctions and the EU refusing to consider Eritrea a suitable partner in its continuing African dialogue.

Eritreans make up one of the largest groups of refugees arriving on European shores – in April alone, more than 5,300 came ashore in Italy, according to UN figures.

EU governments are [attempting](#) to come up with a battery of policies aimed at sealing off “Fortress Europe” from unwanted migrants and increasing the speed and volume of deportations for refused asylum seekers.

According to 10 pages of draft decisions prepared for a meeting on Thursday of this week, the European institutions and national governments are to make a show of deporting refused asylum seekers in what looks like a vain attempt to try to discourage others from making the journey.

Eritreans are named among those against whom these measures could be taken.

The EU has also started [Operation Sophia](#), under which a naval taskforce headquartered in Rome will work to halt operations smuggling people across the Mediterranean.

Six ships – including Britain’s HMS Bulwark – will be used to “start to dismantle this business model by trying to apprehend some suspected smugglers”, Rear Admiral Hervé Bléjean [told the BBC](#).

This is what the Eritrean government, which is acutely embarrassed that so many of its citizens are fleeing their country, has been calling for. In December last year, Eritrea’s minister of foreign affairs, Osman Saleh, [told an EU–Horn of Africa conference](#) that his country was “determined to work with the EU and all European countries to tackle irregular migration and human trafficking and to address their root causes”.

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Dan Connell

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European ministers have been discussing bolstering these efforts by increasing aid to Eritrea by [€200m](#) (£147m), in the hope that this might relieve the poverty that could drive migration.

If Britain and its allies appear close to an accord with Eritrea, there are also [strong pressures](#) in the opposite direction.

In June, a UN commission of inquiry into human rights in Eritrea published a [report](#) accusing the regime of abuses so severe that they “[may constitute crimes against humanity](#)”.

The commissioners said it was these atrocities – rather than underdevelopment and poverty – that were behind Eritreans’

decisions to risk all to leave their country.

There have since been further allegations that the Eritrean government is continuing to destabilise its neighbours and nearby countries – the issue that triggered the UN sanctions against it in the first place.

Afwerki is reported to have trained and equipped Houthi rebels in their drive against the Yemeni government. The Eritreans [are said to have allowed Iran to use the Danakil islands](#) in the Red Sea as a base from which to arm and train the Houthis. Eritrea's foreign ministry has strongly denied these claims.

The UN security council will be well aware of these various issues when it considers the report from its team of monitors. A great deal will depend on what evidence the experts have been able to amass concerning Eritrea's undermining of its neighbours.