

Written by Administrator  
Friday, 12 June 2015 16:50 -

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Geneva, 8 June 2015



Good morning and thank you for coming to this briefing on today's publication of the report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea.

We decided to make the report publicly available today -- a fortnight before its formal presentation to the Human Rights Council -- in part to afford member States time to familiarize themselves with its contents before the Council discussions.

We also know there is considerable media interest in the report. So I am here as a member of the commission to brief you and take any questions you may have. The other two commissioners -- Mr. Mike Smith and Mr. Victor Dankwa -- will be here for the official Council presentation and discussion now scheduled for June 23. We will all be happy to brief you again then.

Meanwhile, I assume most of you have had a chance to look at the advance information we sent you and have some questions. Before I take your questions, however, I would like to go over some of our conclusions and recommendations.

First, the commission found that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed with impunity in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity. Our investigation identified specific patterns of systematic human rights violations, based on several factors. They included:

- The high frequency of occurrence of violations documented and corroborated;
- The number of victims and the replication of the violation over a certain period of time;
- The type of rights violated;

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- And the systemic nature of these violations, meaning that they cannot be the result of random or isolated acts by the authorities.

We seldom see human rights violations of the scope and scale we see in Eritrea today. It is not surprising to us that these days a large proportion of those crossing the Mediterranean and using other irregular routes to reach Europe are Eritreans.

They are fleeing a country ruled not by law, but by fear. As our report says, young Eritreans in particular face a seemingly hopeless situation they feel powerless to change. Hundreds of thousands are fleeing their country, risking capture and torture by Eritrean authorities and death at the hands of ruthless human traffickers.

They deserve international protection.

This is why one of our key recommendations in the report is aimed at the international community, urging it to continue to provide protection to all those fleeing Eritrea; to respect the principle of non-*refoulement*; and to end bilateral and other arrangements that jeopardize the lives of those who seek asylum. To ascribe their decision to flee solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire human rights situation in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people.

In the end, the Government of Eritrea is responsible for these human rights violations. The report states that the main perpetrators are: the Eritrean Defence Forces; 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.

Therefore, most of our recommendations are aimed specifically at the Government. I will go over just a few of them, which will give you some insight into the huge array of human rights violations that are detailed in the report.

We recommend, for example, that the Government immediately acknowledge and halt all of these human rights violations and ensure accountability for them, including but not limited to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence and forced labour. And we call on the Government to henceforth respect all of its obligations under the human rights treaties to which Eritrea is a party.

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The Government should establish an independent and impartial mechanism to investigate and where appropriate bring perpetrators to justice. Victims should also receive adequate redress.

We call on the Government to ensure the separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary; and to allow the creation of political parties and hold free, fair and transparent elections.

Eritrea should bring its national laws and regulations into line with international human rights standards, and restore respect for the rule of law through an independent and transparent judiciary.

It must cease with immediate effect the practice of enforced disappearance and all forms of extrajudicial executions, including by discontinuing the shoot-to-kill policy wherever it may be applicable in border areas.

The Government should immediately and unconditionally release all unlawfully and arbitrarily detained persons, including members of the so-called G-15 reform group, journalists and members of religious groups. It should set up an effective mechanism to establish the whereabouts of those who have disappeared; put an immediate end to incommunicado detention and close all unofficial and secret places of detention.

It must put an immediate end to the use of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. The punishment of innocent parties for alleged unlawful acts committed by third persons, including relatives, must stop.

The Commission recommends that the Government immediately enable freedom of movement within the country by dismantling checkpoints and removing the need for travel permits; and that it take measures to facilitate the lawful movement of persons in and out of the country.

Immediate measures should be taken to allow the operation of independent media and to

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protect journalists from arbitrary interference and arrest.

All religious persecution should end and the freedom of all faiths should be respected.

Forced evictions and seizures of property, including from minorities, should stop.

The Government should discontinue indefinite national service by limiting it to the statutory 18 months. It should establish and apply lawful procedures for the apprehension of draft evaders and deserters. It should adopt a military code that forbids and punishes ill-treatment, exploitation and harassment of conscripts. And it should stop the forced recruitment of children under the age of 18 years. The widespread sexual abuse of female recruits must stop and the Government should implement a zero tolerance policy for acts of harassment within the national service and defence forces.

The practice of using conscripts, detainees, students and militia members as forced labour must end.

Legislation protecting and promoting the equality of women in Eritrea must be strengthened. Immediate measures should be taken to ensure de facto gender equality and address all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, and sexual and gender-based violence by State and non-State actors, specifically within state institutions.

These recommendations underscore the enormous challenges ahead for Eritrea and the international community. We look forward to presenting our report to the Council in the hope it will contribute to the restoration of human rights and the rule of law in a country that has suffered for far too long.

Now I will take your questions.

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## **Statement to media by Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea**

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- See more at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16055&LangID=E#sthash.GvgGjh2p.dpuf>