

Eritrea - European Union walks on a tightrope

Indian Ocean Newsletter

How can democracy be fostered in Eritrea but without imposing international sanctions on the Asmara regime? The must tread carefully.

The European Commission is planning to make a € 35 million grant to Eritrea out of the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) resources, which total € 122 million. The proposal will be put before a future EDF committee. To be sure, the Commission has been authorised to enter into deals of this kind since it signed an agreement with Asmara in September 2009 for a cooperation strategy with Eritrea. This agreement had already been approved by the European Union (EU) Council of Ministers in May 2009.

According to information The Indian Ocean Newsletter obtained in Brussels this week, the decision to offer this € 35 million grant to fund projects in the food security area that may transit via UNICEF had been difficult to reach. The matter was particularly delicate for Sweden, which has held the rotating EU presidency since July, because the Eritrean born journalist with Swedish nationality Dawit Isaak is still being held in prison in Asmara. Moreover, the Swedish Members of the European Parliament, including the Liberal Olle Schmidt, criticised the decision of the EU Council of Ministers to allocate these funds to Eritrea. In fact the decision had been made following Asmara's threat to take the Council and the Commission to the European Court of Justice if the cooperation agreement signed in September was not executed.

During a conference funded by EuropeAid held in Brussels this week by the Belgian NGO Europa External Policy Advisors (EEPA) entitled Joining up EU and US Policy towards Eritrea and the Horn for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights, several officials considered that excessive diplomatic isolation of Eritrea would be counterproductive. Roger Moore, the Horn of Africa director of the European Commission DG for Development, Robert Houdek, the former American Ambassador to Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the former Prime Minister of Norway, Kjell Magne Bondevik each in turn stated that international sanctions were unlikely to be effective against Eritrea's human rights violations and infringements of the rule of law. But a level of consensus came out of the meeting on the need to prepare for the future and political change by supporting the Eritrean opposition.