

The lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea

Address by Alf Hansen, The Oslocenter for Peace and Human Rights

“Joining EU and US Policy towards Eritrea and the Horn for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights”

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Thank you, Mirjam, for organising this important conference at an important point in time for Eritrea. Eritrea is now running the risk of being sanctioned by the UN based on an African Union initiative. At the same time the country is severely hit by the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

As president Bondevik mentioned earlier, our HR report written by professor Tronvoll gives an in-depth analysis of the political context and the historical background for today’s difficult human rights situation in Eritrea.

Disposition

1. What is the situation today
2. What can explain the current state of affairs
3. How can we influence the situation

1. What is the situation today

Democracy

Eritrea has no democracy. Since coming to power in 1991, the EPLF has not allowed any organised political opposition to emerge within Eritrea. Eritrea today is a one-party state under siege by its own government.

The pretext of external enemies is used as an excuse to deny people their basic rights and freedom of opinion and expression, to organise and assemble, and to practise their religious beliefs.

The Eritrean government does not allow any alternative voice or opinion to be heard, all resources and people are mobilised and canalized into maintaining the country’s totalitarian and militaristic structure.

Civil society

In the aftermath of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000), an internal dissent movement within the government party started to question the authority and decisions of the President.

Newspapers and civil society representatives joined in to challenge the monopolisation of power. In September 2001 the President ordered a nation-wide clamp-down, arresting hundreds of critics, closing down all private media-outlets.

By the end of 2001, all dissenting voices demanding democratic reform were quelled; either arrested, driven into exile, or cowed into silence.

In Eritrea today it is forbidden for any group of more than seven to assemble without approval by the government.

Prison conditions, torture and extrajudicial killings

As we speak here today, thousands of Eritreans are living in secret detention camps; government critics, veteran liberation fighters, civil servants, peasants, students, journalists, and religious believers alike.

No group or individual is unaffected. All are liable to be regarded as a threat to the regime, arrested, and tortured.

Estimates of the number of political prisoners vary between 10,000 and 30,000. Shocking figures, knowing that Eritrea has a population of about 4 – 5 million.

Our report describes how the political prisons, detention centres, and labour camps are scattered throughout the country. They are under the control of the military or the internal security service. No outsiders are permitted access – not even family members and ICRC.

There are also numerous reports of summary executions and people being tortured to death, carried out by military personnel. Extrajudicial killings take place not only in detention centres and prisons, but also in the context of everyday life in rural and urban areas.

Reportedly, detainees of over 80 years of age and in poor health are held under rudimentary conditions in prisons. Children, too, are liable to arrest and detention in Eritrea. Reportedly, children as young as eight or nine years of age have been detained.

Particularly vulnerable groups

Certain groups may be identified as particularly vulnerable to arrest and government harassment. According to our study these are:

National service personnel, members of forbidden churches, individuals from the Kunama minority group, forcibly returned refugees, journalists and other human rights defenders as well as government party dissenters.

2. What can explain the current state of affairs?

Key to understanding: The feeling of being alone against the world, acquired through

- Eritrea's history of foreign domination
- The poor treatment by other states as well as by the UN in the 50s
- The liberation struggle

Opposition to Isaias during the liberation struggle was met in a brutal way – like in most countries in a state of war. The problem for Eritrea is that this “state of war mentality” did not seem to disappear after the fighting ceased.

Further; The Marxist Leninist Ideology emphasizing self reliance has led to isolation, mismanagement, an oversized army and systematic HR abuses. To put it short: The current HR situation grew out of a Marxist-Leninist inspired militaristic tradition inherited from the liberation struggle. Only the “front” could make the right decisions for the country. Your Human Rights must be deserved; acquired by your own struggle.

3. How can we influence

Simply exercising pressure is not likely to succeed in this context. In our view, we therefore need to balance a direct and frank approach with a more in depth analysis and a better understanding of the situation in Eritrea. We must be clear on who's to blame – it is the current regime in Asmara. But at the same time we need to sharpen our analytical tools and our understanding of the Horn.

Firstly - We need to bring the HR abuses in Eritrea higher on the international agenda

- The people of Eritrea is to a large extent a forgotten people – we need to change that
- We need to refocus on HR – not only on War on terror (er ikke det begrepet slutt med Bush?)
- The international community should explain its expectation that Eritrea will abide by its commitments under international law, while offering support to help achieve these goals.
- The situation in Eritrea should be followed closely by the UN Secretary-General, through his good offices, including the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to Eritrea (or the Horn of Africa), who should report to the Human Rights Council on a regular basis.
- The UN should also appoint a group of experts to investigate and report to the General Assembly on Eritrea's violations of international human rights law and whether these violations constitute crimes against humanity.

Secondly - We must try to contribute to ending Eritrea's isolation

- Western countries have tended to chose Ethiopia as their ally in the Horn, based on the logic of a so-called war on terror.
- The war on terror has led to radicalization, polarisation and escalation of violent conflicts in the Horn and contributed to a cold war like situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This has contributed to Eritrea's isolation.
- It has legitimized and overlooked violations of Human rights by some, whilst focusing on the violations of others.
- Human Rights abuse in Eritrea is first and foremost the responsibility of the government of Eritrea, but:
- We need to have a regional focus: The Horn constitutes a regional security complex. Security of one country impacts on the security of others.
- Improving the HR conditions for the people of Eritrea is dependent on countering the isolationist approach taken by the Eritrean government
- We need to recognise the implications of support to some of the actors in the Horn and how this is perceived by their adversaries.
- Our goal should be a stable region; we therefore need to find ways to work with all stakeholders in the Horn.
- We need a political process.

Thank you for your attention