

# The lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea

Opening address by Kjell Magne Bondevik

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

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today, and to take part in the joint effort to improve the dire situation for the people of Eritrea.

After serving as Prime Minister of Norway for several years, I founded the The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights in 2006. The Oslo Center is an independent foundation committed to promoting Human Rights, Democratic development and dialogue.

In 2006 I was also appointed as UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa by Kofi Annan.

When serving as Special Envoy for two years I met President Isaias several times to discuss the food crisis in Eritrea; a crisis which is repeating itself as we speak. At the same time I developed a strong commitment to the people of the region during these years. I have decided to follow up on this commitment.

In view of the very difficult situation for the people of Eritrea the Oslo Center has launched a report on the human rights situation in the country.

The report provides an in-depth analysis of the political context and the historical background for today’s difficult human rights situation in Eritrea and the Horn of Africa.

The evidence and analysis contained in our report are deeply disturbing: the Eritrean authorities are actively committing grave human rights violations in a systematic and widespread manner.

Mr. Hansen from the Oslo Center will elaborate on our report later, but it is no exaggeration to say that the findings are disheartening in almost all areas.

The first time I met Isaias Afworki was in Oslo in the 1970ies, when I was a Member of Parliament. Back then, Isaias was an ambitious and charismatic opposition leader. I was impressed by his great aspirations for a free and democratic Eritrea. I think we all were impressed.

The People of Eritrea – and the international community - had great expectations when President Isaias assumed power in 1991 and promised to lead Africa’s youngest state on a path towards democracy and respect for human rights.

Our hope from 18 years back is in a glaring contrast to today’s Eritrea – one of the world’s most human rights abusing and oppressive regimes.

So, how can we contribute to change this situation? I suggest a twofold approach:

1) We have to raise the human rights situation in Eritrea higher on the international agenda. We urge the UN to appoint a special rapporteur and an investigation commission on the human rights situation in Eritrea, or on the Horn as a whole.

2) We need to start a political dialogue aimed at ending Eritrea's isolation.

In recent years key actors have to a high degree been analysing the Horn from an anti terror perspective. Unfortunately, this has led to polarisation of actors on the Horn of Africa, and further isolation of Eritrea.

In my view, it is time for the international community to put more emphasis on the humanitarian and human rights situation in the Horn of Africa. These are major concerns for peace and development in the region.

Improving the respect for Human Rights in Eritrea might seem far away – and it is true that the situation is complex and difficult. But we cannot close our eyes and pretend that this is none of our business. We have to keep trying.

If we are going to succeed, we need political will to engage in the situation and to raise the situation of the Eritrean people on the agenda.

We all know there are very few regimes that have proved more difficult to work with than Eritrea. But we cannot give up.

A dictator's dream is isolation and silence. And Isaias has proven to be good at resisting external pressure. We need to find ways to engage the regime in a political dialogue. Eritrea has to come out of its isolation if we are going to help the Eritrean people in their lasting struggle for freedom.

Thank you for your attention.