

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **High-level conference on Horn of Africa calls on EU and US to strengthen civil society as way to peace**

#### **Cohesive and comprehensive regional approach needed**

*BRUSSELS* – An international conference, held November 9 – 10, 2009 in Brussels, Belgium on the promotion of democracy and human rights in the Horn of Africa called on the European Union and the USA to strengthen civil society actors, including political parties, as a way to end the regional humanitarian crisis and to foster a transition towards democracy.

High-level representatives of the Eritrean civil society, the European Commission, EU member states, the US Department of State, academia and African and Northern NGOs as well as African ambassadors attended the two-day conference, organized by Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA).

“To find a sustainable way to put an end to the appalling human suffering and ongoing political crisis in the Horn, the region needs a cohesive and comprehensive approach by the international community”, said Mirjam van Reisen, Director EEPA. “A state-by-state strategy is doomed to fail when problems are as intertwined as in the Horn”

“One precondition for peace and stability would be the unconditional implementation of the final and binding decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission”, she added.

The conference discussed a broad range of topics from human rights violations in Eritrea, one of the world’s most oppressive dictatorships, to droughts and famine in Somalia and the regional refugee crisis.

“By bringing together politicians, activists and scholars from the North and South the conference provided a unique platform for debate”, said Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Prime-Minister of Norway and President of the Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights. Bondevik stressed the need to refocus on human rights, and called for a direct

and frank approach towards all countries on the Horn of Africa, combined with a more in depth analysis of the Horn as a regional security complex.

The Oslo Centre's much praised report "The lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea" analyses the regime's totalitarian character and urges the international community to hold the Eritrean government accountable for widespread human rights abuses.

Members of the Eritrean civil society reiterated their call to the EU to rethink her engagement with the regime in Eritrea.

"We are grateful for the EU's hard work to alleviate poverty in Eritrea, but they have to accept the reality that their quiet diplomacy of the last years has had no impact on the regime", said Abdulrahman Sayed from Citizens for Democratic Rights in Eritrea. "To ensure that European taxpayers' money will reach the needy and not be wasted in propping up a dictator, the EU needs to make sure that development aid is implemented strictly in accordance with the Cotonou Agreement's essential clauses on human rights".

The conference urged the Swedish EU Presidency to put effective pressure on the Eritrean regime to immediately release the Swedish Citizen Dawit Isaak and all political prisoners.

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**Attached:** final statement

**Eritrea**

After a 30-year struggle against Ethiopia, Eritrea, Africa's youngest nation, gained independence in 1991. The country with its population of 5 million, suffering from hunger and oppression, is one of the world's poorest, ranking 164 out of 179 countries in the 2008 UNDP Human Development Report. In one league with the authoritarian regimes of North Korea and Burma (Myanmar), Eritrea's political system is, according to Freedom House standards, one of the most repressive in the world: a one-party state with no democratically elected parliament, no elections and no independent judiciary.

No civil society, NGO or opposition activities are allowed. Democracy and human rights activists and journalists have been harassed, arbitrarily arrested, tortured and detained indefinitely without due process - and basically disappeared. The regime

refuses to grant international rights groups access to prisons. Some sources indicate that there are currently more than 20.000 victims of detention without trial.

In its 2008 Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has ranked Eritrea last, unseating North Korea. In 2006 at least four journalists have died in prison as a result of torture and ill treatment. Since 2001 all free press has been shut down and the government maintains a complete monopoly over access to information by controlling all media.

Eritrea is one of the most militarized societies in the world due to forced enlistment and has, in terms of percentage of its GDP, the 3rd highest military budget worldwide (after North Korea and Angola). The period of enlistment in the army and national service is currently being extended indefinitely.

The Eritrean government has been accused by the US, Israel and its neighbors of sponsoring and arming Islamist terrorists and rebels in Somalia and Ethiopia. Furthermore, Eritrean forces have invaded Djibouti in April 2008 and have been occupying the border territory ever since.

*The Lasting Struggle For Freedom In Eritrea, Human Rights and Political Development, 1991–2009*, the recent report published by The Oslo Center, available at [http://www.oslocenter.no/images/stories/eritrearapport\\_2\\_endelig\\_versjon.pdf](http://www.oslocenter.no/images/stories/eritrearapport_2_endelig_versjon.pdf)

*Service for Life, State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea*, the report of HRW on Eritrea, available at [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/eritrea0409webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/eritrea0409webwcover_0.pdf)

*Press Freedom Index 2009* of Reporters Sans Frontières, available at <http://www.rsf.org/en-rapport15-Eritrea.html>

*The Eritrea - European Community Country Strategy Paper And National Indicative Programme for the Period 2009-2013*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/scanned\\_er\\_csp10NEW\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/scanned_er_csp10NEW_en.pdf)

A critical article on US Policy towards Eritrea by Dan Connell (Distinguished Lecturer in Communications and Political Science/International Relations at Simmons College in Boston), *Eritrea and the United States. The 'war on terror' and the Horn of Africa* <<http://www.danconnell.net/sites/default/files/%20%20Eritrea%20&%20US%20policy%201-30-09%282%29.pdf>>

**Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA)** is a Brussels-based centre of expertise on the EU's external policies. The conference was organized in partnership with leaders of the Eritrean Civic and Diaspora community and **the Italian Institute of International Political Studies (ISPI)**.