

Report Round Table on Eritrea 14 September 2009

Round table on Eritrea, Human Rights Watch Brussels, 10 September 2009

Panellists:

- **Elisabeth Chyrum**, Director of Human Right Concern - Eritrea
- **Hassan Shire Sheikh**, Executive Director East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project
- **Leslie Lefkow**, Researcher on the Horn of Africa at Human Rights Watch

Elisabeth Chyrum started by giving an update on the current humanitarian situation in Eritrea. She underlined the terrible human rights situation in Eritrea: the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia is still ongoing, there is no freedom of press or freedom of speech, there exist no freedom of religion, no freedom of assembly and judiciary independence has disappeared. Any form of protest is forbidden and civil society in Eritrea does not exist. Ten thousands of people are detained and the conditions in which they live in prison are horrible. Prisoners are brutally beaten and tortured. People are suffering from famine, but the government does not want to get food aid from other countries. In 2005 it has asked the United States Aid Office (USAID) to cease its operations in Eritrea.

Eritrea has the highest number of people working in the military service in the world. The consequences are that villages and cities are emptied of their population and that education has become completely militarised. Children are sent to military boot camps straight after they have finished high school and the only university in the country has been shut down. A lot of young (under age!) people have to do forced labour. In 2008, 78% of the recruits were under age. Female conscripts are forced to have sex with soldiers which results in them getting pregnant or getting sick (HIV/AIDS).

There is an enormous amount of refugees. They are fleeing to countries in the region, in the Middle East, in the US or in the EU. Officially citizens are not allowed to cross the border and when they do flee the country it is common government policy to punish family members, notably parents and spouses. The family members are fined and when they cannot pay the fine, they are detained indeterminately.

The food security in Eritrea is very low and the food production for years has been below normal. The Eritrean people suffer from famine and only people with enough money can buy food on the (black) market.

Religious freedom is extensively restricted. Since the 1990s Jehova's and Christians suffer from repression. Eritrea is one of the most paranoid and repressive states in the world.

Since last month the government has started advertising and facilitating the exportation of poor women to Kuwait for exchange of hard currency. The women are forced to work abroad and will not receive a lot of money in return. They have to sign a contract with the Eritrean government that denies them the right to receive hard currency. They are only allowed to cover their costs of food, the rest will go to banks in Eritrea and the government will distribute the money to their families at a much lower exchange rate than the market exchange rate. The women are forced to leave their children and these children often become orphans while

their parents are still alive, because their mother has to work abroad and their father is absent because he is tied up in the national service. The only beneficiary from this scheme is the Eritrean government.

Hassan Shire Sheikh underlined the difficult situation of human rights defenders. They are simply not present in Eritrea, because the freedom of speech and press are nonexistent. So the human rights defenders have to live in exile. The government fails to respect human rights and the constitution still hasn't been implemented.

People are thrown in prison where the living conditions are terrible: most of them haven't seen the light of day in years. In 2001, the increasing restrictions on freedom of press led to the arrest and detention of a significant number of journalists. Amongst them is Swedish journalist Dawit Isaac, whose fate is still unknown. The president has said that he doesn't have to explain why Dawit has been arrested and Dawit will get no trial.

Hassan Shire Sheikh feels that the utmost concern of the EU regarding Eritrea must be the promotion of human rights. The EU is the major donor of aid to Eritrea. On 7 September, the EU and the Eritrean government signed a 122-million Euro agreement for the implementation of development programs in Eritrea for 2009 to 2013. Instead of just giving money, the EU should make more demands regarding human rights.

Elisabeth Chyrum showed a video of an interview with President Isaias Afewerki. To watch the interview, go to <http://www.eepa.be/wcm/content/view/696/184/>

Leslie Lefkow added that the 2010 elections in Ethiopia can be a key moment for Eritrea as well. She also feels that the EU in particular has a very important role to play regarding the human rights situation in Eritrea. There are a growing number of Eritrean refugees and UNHCR has put out recommendations. The refugees cannot be sent back to Eritrea.

Questions and Discussion

- Why can't the EU only give food aid or medicines? Money only goes to the government, maybe even to Al Shabaab in Somalia.
- What is the relation between the EU and Eritrea? Are there meetings between EU officials and the Eritrean government?
- Why not declare (former) Eritrean officials persona non grata? Some of them are even living in western countries.

There were two representatives of the European Commission present and they underlined the presence of the EU in Eritrea. The EC does not want to dictate policy, but just exercises pressure and is monitoring the situation in Eritrea. There has been no dialogue for two years and the new dialogue is just getting started. Both the EC and the Member States are concerned about the Human Rights situation in Eritrea and they are waiting for response on the Eritrean side so they can get start the dialogue with the Eritrean government on human rights, free elections and constitutional rights. The EC would like to take into account the issues raised at the meeting, but they need more detailed information and exact data. An EU meeting regarding Eritrea is scheduled for the near future and maybe NGO's can be debriefed.