

Press Release
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Eritrea showing contempt for international community by inviting al-Bashir -
EU about to give 122 million euro to the regime**

BRUSSELS – The European Union is about to grant 122 million euro in development aid to Eritrea despite its appalling human rights record and leading role in fuelling deadly conflicts in the Horn of Africa region.

‘That the EU is considering this the very day Eritrea shows brazen contempt for the international community by inviting the Sudanese President can only be called ridiculous’, said Simon Stocker, Director of Eurostep, a Brussels-based NGO network.

Three weeks ago the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, The Netherlands has indicted the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity and issued an international arrest warrant. Yesterday, Tuesday 24 March, the Eritrean regime under President Isayas Afewerki welcomed him to the Eritrean capital Asmara calling the EU backed ICC "irrelevant".

Although the EU's European Development Fund (EDF) Committee has postponed its decision on the 122 million euro in development aid to the Eritrean regime today for technical reasons, the confirmation is still on the agenda.

‘The Cotonou Agreement has a clause on cooperation towards the International Criminal Court and therefore the visit of Bashir to Eritrea today makes things even more complex’ said Mirjam van Reisen, Director of Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA).

While the US has just stopped short of putting Eritrea on the list of states supporting terrorism, the European Union has remained one of only a few donors still providing a lifeline to the regime.

‘Our people, who are suffering in the hands of the dictatorial regime led by President Isaias Afwerki, are outraged by the fact the EU seems to have no regard for the gross human rights violations and absence of rule of law in the country. If the EU does approve this so called "development aid," it is immoral at best and criminal at worst as it would be in direct conflict with the spirit of the Cotonou Agreement’, said Daniel R. Mekonnen, Eritrean post-doctoral researcher at the Human Rights Centre at Ghent University.

Background

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 neighbours 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.

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