

Stop the abuse in Eritrea! Respect basic rights!

A global plea for action

Twenty years ago Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia after a 30-year struggle. At that time, Africa's newest nation inspired great hope. Today, it arouses only fear.

The enthusiasm of most Eritreans in 1991 was enormous. In a short time the country made great progress toward democratic development, ratifying a new Constitution in 1997 after a three-year popular consultation process. No longer isolated, it enjoyed a high international reputation as a largely crime- and corruption-free state determined to avoid international dependency. But renewed war with Ethiopia over border issues in 1998-2000 wiped out this success.

In May 2001, leading members of the ruling party, the parliament and the army—the so-called G15—published an “open letter” to President Isaias Afwerki asking him to implement the Constitution, permit other political parties, and conduct democratic elections. They also criticized his failure resolve the conflict with Ethiopia.

The president's response on 18-19 September was to jail those identified with the G15 for “crimes against the sovereignty, security and peace of the nation” and to shut down all independent newspapers. In the days following, numerous high civil servants and government employees were also arrested.

For the past ten years these political prisoners have been locked away in unknown places without legal process or contact to the outside world. Unconfirmed reports in 2006 indicated that four members of the G15, three journalists and a several highly placed functionaries had died.

Meanwhile, thousands more Eritreans have been arrested without charges or legal proceedings. According to leading human rights agencies, many have perished as a result of inadequate medical treatment and torture, without their families having been informed.

Throughout the past decade, the political, economic and human rights situation in Eritrea has steadily worsened, scarcely noticed by the world at large. The Constitution has not been put into force, and there are no democratic parties or civil society organizations, as President Isaias Afwerki has ruled through the only legal party (derived from the liberation movement he led), the secret service and the army.

All Eritreans between 18 and 54 years of age are required to undertake “national service,” without any time restrictions, leaving tens of thousands in conditions of indefinite indentured servitude. Today, the final year of secondary school is conducted on military bases to make certain none avoid conscription.

As a consequence, more than 250,000 people (from a total population of 5 million) have fled Eritrea, according to United Nations figures. Hundreds have drowned while crossing the

Mediterranean by boat in the attempt to reach Europe. Here the inhuman domestic policy of Eritrea and the anti-immigration policy of the European Union play into each others' hands.

We are calling on the holders of power in Eritrea to respect human rights, to free political prisoners and to put the democratic Constitution into force, in particular to legalize political parties, civil society organizations and independent media and to hold free and fair elections.

We call on the international community, governments, the United Nations, the African Union, the EU and other multilateral institutions, as well as on the world's civil society organizations, to support all Eritrean institutions that speak out for these demands. We also request governments to grant asylum to Eritrean refugees and to forbid the compulsory contributions that the Eritrean government raises from migrants to other countries.

Should Eritrea allow for a democratic opening, we will do everything in our power so that the country again finds its way out of international isolation and receives all necessary political and material support.

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