



9.16.2010

ERITREA CSW calls for targeted sanctions on perpetrators of human rights abuses

On the ninth anniversary of the nationwide crackdown on the independent media and political opponents in Eritrea, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on the international community to impose targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions found to be complicit in human rights abuses in Eritrea.

In mid-September 2001 the Eritrean government shut down all independent media outlets and several journalists were indefinitely detained in remote areas along with eleven ruling party members who had called for democracy. At least six political prisoners are thought have perished in the harsh conditions, along with several journalists.

A joint CSW UK and Nigeria team has just returned from a visit to East Africa where they met Eritrean refugees, most of whom were former prisoners.

One person described being beaten, stamped on and kicked in or around the vital organs, a technique designed to cause maximum internal damage while leaving minimal external evidence. Female prisoners are reportedly beaten on the soles of their feet and about the womb.

Another former prisoner was caught attempting to flee the country and held for three years in eight different detention centers. He described being imprisoned with underage children as young as eight and being forced to work on plantations owned by army commanders, demobilized soldiers and prison guards, as well as for a construction company owned by the Ministry of Defense. The CSW Team also met a former prisoner whose eyes were damaged when he was suddenly exposed to sunlight after being held in chains for nine months in a dark, underground cell.

The team also learned of the damage caused to young female conscripts traumatized by the harsh, compulsory and open-ended military service regime. CSW was informed of such symptoms of psychological damage as walking backwards, involuntary choking, and stress induced blindness.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The treatment meted out to the Eritrean people by their own government is a disgrace. Of even more concern, however, is the apparent failure to address these appalling abuses effectively at international level. We therefore call on the key international actors to urgently initiate sanctions against individuals and institutions that are complicit in human rights abuses, or benefit from the forced labor of prisoners. In addition, we call on the EU in particular to ensure that in future, aid to Eritrea is linked to progress in the area of securing unlimited and unhindered access to long-term detainees for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the EU Delegation in Asmara or any other competent international body."

Notes to Editors:

1. Eritrea, in north-east Africa, is one of the most repressive countries in the world. Fundamental freedoms are non-existent, the judiciary lacks independence, the national assembly has not met for years, and democratic elections are long overdue. It is also rated the second worst abuser of religious liberties on the African continent after Somalia, a failed state. Thousands of Eritreans have been detained arbitrarily in the country's notorious prison system in life-threatening conditions.
2. The independent media outlets were closed on 18 September. The arrests of journalists and political opponents began on 18 September and continued for over a week.
3. The international sanctions currently in place against Eritrea are concerned with ending tensions with Djibouti and curtailing the supply of arms by Eritrea to anti-government militias in Somalia.