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ERITRA Human rights record raised with State Department

Representatives from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRC-E) and Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change- Eritrean Youth for Change (EYSC-EYC) met with officials from the US State Department on May 29 to discuss the continuing human rights crisis in Eritrea.

The meeting covered a range of issues, including the plight of refugees and asylum seekers held hostage in the Sinai Desert by Bedouin people traffickers, and focused primarily on Eritrea's taxation of members of the Eritrean Diaspora. The group pointed out that while the US collects taxes from citizens residing abroad in a transparent and accountable manner, Eritrea can be described as exercising "threats and extortion". The tax is often collected by agents affiliated with the government and Eritrean Embassies. There is no accountability regarding the use of these finances.

The meeting at the State Department followed a weekend of Eritrea-related events held in Washington DC and organized by the EYSC-EYC, including a demonstration outside the Eritrean embassy on May 25, and a two-day youth conference entitled "Eritrean Solutions to Eritrean Problems."

Elsa Chyrum, Director of HRCE, said, "It is encouraging to see the willpower, commitment and readiness of the Eritrean youth to liberate their people from oppression and suffering. HRC-E will continue to work with CSW, EYSC-EYC and others to defend and promote human rights of Eritreans".

Eritrea is one of the world's most repressive regimes, often likened to North Korea. It is a single party state dominated by a dictatorial president. The military pervades every aspect of society, including education and the economy. Military conscription, which can last indefinitely, is mandatory for all citizens aged between 18 and 48, and conscripts are often used as forced labor in development projects and farms.

Tens of thousands of Eritreans languish in the country's maze of detention centers without having received, and with no hope of receiving due process. Thousands more flee their country every year, risking a government shoot-to-kill border policy. Some fall into the hands of abusive traffickers, and are held hostage in torture camps in the Sinai Desert pending payment of exorbitant ransoms, or the forcible removal of organs. The Eritrean security services have been known to pursue or harass refugees in foreign countries through their agents abroad, while countries such as Sudan and Egypt have been known to forcibly return Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers despite evidence of the severe mistreatment of returnees.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is pleased to join with the Human Rights Concern-Eritrea and Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change- Eritrean Youth for Change to put the human rights violations perpetrated by the Eritrean regime under the spotlight in Washington. We will continue to work in solidarity with Eritrean citizens as they seek to reclaim the rights and freedoms enshrined in the nation's constitution."

Notes to Editors:

1. An estimated 400 people attended the demonstration outside the Eritrean Embassy, where several protestors were given calling cards to transmit the proceedings live to predetermined telephone numbers in the Eritrean capital Asmara to show solidarity.

2. The two-day youth conference, entitled "Eritrean Solutions to Eritrean Problems", drew in participants from around the world. Many attendees described the conference as "inspiring", expressing renewed hope for the return of freedom and justice to Eritrea in the near future, and pledging to work towards achieving this change non-violently.