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ERITREA | Targeted Sanctions Called for on Anniversary of Arrests

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) have called for the imposition of targeted sanctions on key Eritrean officials in order to secure the release of prominent politicians and journalists who have been detained incommunicado for the last 12 years.

On Sept. 18, 2001 the Eritrean government closed all independent media outlets, detaining several journalists and 11-of-15 prominent ruling party members who had called for democracy, along with their family members. None of the detainees have been charged or tried. Members of the ruling regime have denied all knowledge of named detainees on several occasions, unwittingly transforming these cases into enforced disappearances. Regime apologists often attempt to portray the lack of due process as protection against certain death sentences.

Credible reports indicate the detainees are held incommunicado in life threatening conditions in Era Ero, a purpose-built remote prison, where they are subjected to privations and inhuman and degrading treatment. Their hands are reportedly cuffed in front of their bodies during the day and behind their backs at night. They are held in indefinite solitary confinement, have not been allowed to see other prisoners, have no access to family or legal representatives, are referred to by a number, and receive no form of mental stimulation. Guards are ordered not to converse with them. They are also subjected to torture. At least 15 prisoners are reported to have died as a result of the harsh conditions, while nine are said to be suffering severe health challenges.

In a 2003, ruling on the cases of 11 of the detained politicians, the African Commission found Eritrea to be in violation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, and urged the government to free the individuals immediately and pay them compensation. In a 2007 ruling, the Commission stressed that “no political situation justifies the wholesale violation of human rights”, and called for detained journalists to either be released or brought “to a speedy and fair trial.” The Commission also called on Eritrea to lift its press ban, to grant the detainees immediate access to their families and legal representatives, and to ensure they received compensation. The Eritrean government has ignored both decisions.

Elsa Chyrum, HRCE Director said, “The treatment meted out to the innocent prisoners in Era Ero is barbaric and inhumane. No government should be allowed to subject its people to treatment that amounts to a crime against humanity. Twelve years is too long. Given the severity of the situation and Eritrea’s continued flouting of the African Commission rulings, it is time for the international community to seriously consider imposing targeted sanctions on the President and his close political allies as pressure for the release of these detainees.”

Khataza Gondwe, CSW’s Africa and Middle East Team Leader said, “The treatment meted out to these prisoners is an affront to human dignity and a violation of Eritrea’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter. These people peacefully requested a free and democratic Eritrea where the rule of law was upheld, yet for the last 12 years they have been held in deliberately life-threatening conditions where 15 may have died, and others are reportedly close to death. Time is of the essence. CSW echoes the call for sanctions targeting key individuals within the Eritrean government with a view to securing compliance with the African Commission decisions that stipulate the immediate release of these prisoners.”