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ERITREA | Commission Report Alleges Possible Crimes Against Humanity

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, released June 8, and commends its finding that some of the “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” underway in Eritrea “may constitute crimes against humanity.”

The three-person Commission of Inquiry, established in June 2014, is chaired by Mike Smith (Australia), and includes Mr. Victor Dankwa (Ghana), and Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth (Mauritius), the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. In its report, the Commission identified “specific patterns of systematic human rights violations,” including “ubiquitous” arbitrary detention, pervasive torture, the “prevalent” use of “conscripts and other members of the population” including the elderly, as forced laborers; rape and other forms of sexual violence against female conscripts, particularly those from the Afar tribe; and an arbitrary and “pervasive control system” that keeps the population in “a state of permanent state of anxiety.”

The 500-page report also draws attention to comprehensive and continuing violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief: “adherents were arrested, ill-treated or subjected to torture during their detention; prisoners were coerced to recant their faith; many religious followers disappeared and were killed.” While highlighting those violations “in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labor may constitute crimes against humanity,” the Commission also emphasizes its current findings “should not be interpreted as a conclusion that international crimes have not been committed in other areas.”

The report concludes with comprehensive recommendations to the Eritrean authorities, including “that the Government immediately acknowledge and halt all of these human rights violations and ensure accountability for them.”

The Commission also found “the situation of human rights incites ever increasing number of Eritreans to flee their country,” with an estimated 5,000 leaving each month. Commenting on the unprecedented exodus in a statement to the media Keetharuth emphasized the fact that Eritrean refugees “are fleeing a country ruled not by law, but by fear. They deserve international protection.” Consequently, one of the report’s key recommendations urges the international community “to continue to provide protection to all those fleeing Eritrea; to respect the principle of non-refoulement; and to end bilateral and other arrangements that jeopardize the lives of those who seek asylum. To ascribe their decision to flee solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire human rights situation in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people.”

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW pays tribute to the extraordinary work of the Commissioners, who have produced a comprehensive, detailed and authoritative documentation of Eritrea's appalling human rights violations, ensuring that the suffering of Eritreans at the hands of their government can no longer be sidelined or forgotten. It is deeply regrettable that 24 years after a heroic independence struggle, the nation still awaits the dividends of a hard-won freedom, and our fervent hope is that this report will mark the beginning of the end of the suffering of the Eritrean people. We urge all UN member states to support this report and ensure that Eritrea acts on its recommendations and ends impunity by holding all those responsible for perpetrating crimes against humanity to account."