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ERITREA | Event Highlights Refugee Crisis, Crimes Against Humanity

The gross and systematic abuse of human rights in Eritrea and the implications of current United Kingdom and European Union asylum policy were discussed at an event in parliament Oct. 20 hosted by Lord Alton of Liverpool and jointly organized by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE).

Eritreans constitute the second largest group crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. Efforts to address the current migration crisis prompted changes in UK and EU asylum policy, some of which risk sending Eritreans back to harassment, repression and even death. The EU is reportedly considering granting Eritrea around \$230 million in development aid to encourage development and generate jobs, in the hope this will stem the exodus. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetharuth, said that Eritrean refugees “are fleeing a country ruled not by law, but by fear. They deserve international protection.”

At Wednesday’s event, entitled *Eritrea and the refugee crisis; crimes against humanity*, attendees heard first-hand testimonies from Eritreans who have fled a country which has one of the worst human rights records in the world. A young lady whose father has been detained since 2001 for demanding democratic reform and who was herself been imprisoned and punished for trying to escape in 2009 said, “In Eritrea, you don’t have the right to leave an area, let alone the country.”

All of those who testified described the deplorable conditions, malnourishment and widespread use of torture in Eritrea’s prisons. A former prison doctor said, “I have seen many type of torture done to fellow human beings that I did not think would have been possible.” He added, “We had many female patients in prison ward. I cannot find words to explain what kind of torture they faced in the prisons.” As a result of torture, many inmates suffer stress, insomnia and hallucinations, or attempt suicide. In many cases, prisoners do not know why they have been imprisoned or why they are being tortured.

According to the report by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, some of the systematic and extensive human rights violations committed in Eritrea may amount to crimes against humanity.

A joint statement released today by CSW, A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, Open Doors UK & Ireland and the Refugee Highway Partnership includes recommendations for a more comprehensive and long term response to the on-going refugee crisis. In particular, it calls for the principle of non-refoulement to be respected so that refugees are not returned to countries where their life or freedom may be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality,

membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

In an oral statement to the UN Human Rights Council on June 16, CSW commended the proposal of the Special Rapporteur on Migrants and EU border management for the establishment of a human rights-based migration framework. CSW also raised concerns about the lack of commitment of certain countries to provide asylum to Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers fleeing persecution.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "From the testimony of the courageous Eritreans who spoke yesterday and the research of the Commission of inquiry and organizations including HRCE and CSW, it is clear that returning Eritreans to their country puts their lives and those of their loved ones at risk from a regime that has normalized torture and inhumanity. Development aid and jobs will not address the Eritrean refugee crisis and will only give a lifeline to a regime that has institutionalized the mistreatment of its people. The flow of refugees will not end until the government ends the egregious violations underway in that nation and respects and protects the rights and freedoms of Eritrean citizens. The UK and EU must urgently review current policy on Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers and establish a human rights-based migration response that respects the human dignity of all who seek safety within our borders."