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ERITREA | Commission Permitted to Report Back to General Assembly

On Oct. 14, the Third Committee of the General Assembly approved a decision to invite the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, to present an oral update on the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) during the 71st session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York.

The Commission had been omitted from the provisional agenda of UN human rights experts and bodies due to present oral updates Oct. 27, ostensibly because its mandate ended after its second report was adopted by the Human Rights Council (HRC).

On Oct. 5, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRCE) called for the COIE to be allowed to update the General Assembly and highlighted the spurious grounds on which it was being excluded from the agenda. In a letter to UN officials, the organizations underscored the importance to Eritreans of allowing the Commission to report to the General Assembly, stating that the COIE report had raised hope amongst victims of Eritrea's repressive regime that their plight was finally being recognized and addressed "at the highest international level."

In its second report on June 8, the COIE concluded there were "reasonable grounds to believe" that crimes against humanity, "namely enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder" have been committed in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991, and continue to occur, in Eritrea.

As controversy surrounding the omission of the COIE grew, the Chair of the Third Committee submitted the matter to the legal affairs department of the UN to decide whether or not the COIE could present its update. The new decision, which was approved without a vote, allows the

Special Rapporteur, who was a member of the Commission, to make a presentation on behalf of the COIE before presenting her own report, with additional time allocated if necessary.

Following the decision, the Eritrean representative said his government had accepted the proposal in the interests of moving forward, but lamented the alleged politicization of human rights, claiming that human rights could only be promoted through dialogue.

Elsa Chyrum, Director of HRCE, said, “We welcome the decision by the UN Third Committee to allow the Special Rapporteur to present the oral update on behalf of the COIE. We also hope the General Assembly will submit the report and the oral updates of the COIE without delay to the Security Council for its consideration and appropriate action, to hold those responsible for committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea to account.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We commend the Third Committee for this decision, which ensures the voices of victims can be heard at the highest International level and brings justice one step closer. However, to ensure accountability for the severe human rights violations underway in Eritrea, the oral update must be followed by a General Assembly resolution mandating further action by the Security Council.”