

To: Permanent Representatives to the UN Human Rights Council

31 May 2013

RE: Renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea

Excellencies,

We are writing to call on members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) to take action during the current 23rd session of the HRC to **renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea**, in response to the continued appalling situation of widespread and systematic human rights violations in Eritrea and the lack of cooperation demonstrated by the Eritrean government towards international and regional human rights mechanisms.

We noted with appreciation the adoption by consensus of resolution A/HRC/RES/20/20, presented by Djibouti, Nigeria and Somalia, on the human rights situation in Eritrea at the 20th session of the UN Human Rights Council in July 2012. The UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, whose mandate was established by the July 2012 resolution, will present a report highlighting the human rights situation in Eritrea to the 23rd session of the Council in June 2013.

In her report, the Special Rapporteur denounced “the appalling human rights situation in Eritrea, which in one way or another touches the life of almost every family” and stated that “real change would require a fundamental reform process transforming the current culture of rights denial into one anchored in the rule of law and in respect for and the realization of all human rights and human dignity.” She expressed her concerns on extrajudicial killings; the shoot-to-kill policy; enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention; arbitrary arrests and detentions; widespread torture, both physical and psychological, during interrogation by the police, military and security forces; inhumane prison conditions; compulsory national service of an unspecified and extended duration; no respect for civil liberties, including the freedoms of expression and opinion, assembly, association, religious belief and movement; discrimination against women, and sexual and gender-based violence; violation of child rights, including conscription, and its profound impact on education; and precarious living conditions. The Special Rapporteur also noted that these violations were “cited as reasons pushing a constant stream of Eritreans to cross the borders”.

Many hundreds of political prisoners have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial for over a decade; hundreds have been arbitrarily detained for nearly 20 years. The government officials and independent journalists arbitrarily arrested in September 2001 remain either in incommunicado detention or have since died. Thousands of Eritreans have been arrested and imprisoned without charge or trial for years upon end merely for being critical of the government, practicing a religion not recognized by the state, or refusing to comply with the system of indefinite

national service imposed on all Eritreans over the age of 18 years. National service is compulsory, and is frequently extended indefinitely, a system which amounts to forced labour. Children are forced to undertake their final year of schooling in a military training camp, a system that effectively constitutes the conscription of children into the military. Thousands of Eritreans have been detained for trying to evade or desert national service, including by attempting to flee the country. The use of torture is widespread. Further detention conditions are appalling and in themselves amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. No independent civil society organizations have permission to operate inside Eritrea, and since 2001 there has been no independent domestic media.

At the regional level, the case of Eritrea has been raised repeatedly at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which adopted a resolution in 2005 condemning human rights violations in Eritrea. In two separate decisions in 2003 and 2007, the Commission also found the government to be in violation of fundamental rights contained in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and requested the release of the government officials held incommunicado since September 2001 (250/02 Liesbeth Zegveld and Mussie Ephrem vs. Eritrea) and for at least 18 journalists also held incommunicado to be given access to their lawyers (275/03 Article 19 vs. Eritrea). Although these decisions have been adopted by the African Union, to date Eritrea has not provided any concrete response or acted to implement them.

Excellencies,

We therefore call on your delegation to support the adoption by the HRC of a resolution that:

- Condemns abuses documented by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and urges the Government of Eritrea to implement the recommendations contained in her report;
- Renews the mandate of the Special Rapporteur;
- Urges the Government of Eritrea to allow access to the country for the special mechanisms of UN Human Rights Council and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

We thank you for your attention to these concerns. We remain available to provide further information as may be useful.

Sincerely,

African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies
Amnesty International
Article 19
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria

Christian Solidarity Worldwide
CIVICUS
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
Human Rights Concern – Eritrea
Human Rights House Foundation
Human Rights Watch
International Service for Human Rights
Reporters Without Borders
Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
West African Human Rights Defenders Network