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Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Human rights violations in Eritrea

Despite its entry into the United Nations Human Rights Council and the peace-treaty with Ethiopia in 2018, the human rights situation in Eritrea remains dire. Society for Threatened Peoples is concerned with the violations of human rights in Eritrea, especially concerning the freedom of the press and religious freedoms. The long term president Isaias Afewerki, from the „People's Front for Democracy and Justice“ (PFDJ), who has been in office since the independence 1993, often used the absence of peace with Ethiopia to justify the authoritarianism in his country, and especially the mandatory military service. However, this line of reasoning became redundant with the recent peace treaty. Eritrea remains one of the most repressive nations on earth, where human rights violations happen on a daily bases.

Freedom of the press in Eritrea

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Eritrea is the world's most censored country. The media serves as a mouthpiece of the state, and any independent journalism is conducted from exile. The Eritrean Government restricts independent media and intimidates journalists into silence with imprisonment, digital and physical surveillance, and other forms of harassment. It is also top of the list when it comes to imprisoning journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa, with at least 16 journalists behind bars as of today. In September 2001, officials shut down a large part of the country's free press. Seven newspapers were closed in the crackdown, and numerous journalists faced arrest. Some remain imprisoned to this day with their whereabouts unknown. A prominent examples is Dawit Isaak, a Swedish journalist who has been imprisoned since 2001, despite global press coverage and diplomatic efforts by the Swedish Government. Another example is Seyoum Tsehaye, who has been held in solitary confinement for almost two decades. As many as seven journalists may have perished in custody, according to reports that CPJ has not been able to confirm due to the climate of fear and tight state control. Without an independent press, it is incredibly difficult for Eritreans to obtain neutral information. Furthermore, citizens cannot express their views or question government policies affecting them. This poses a clear violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which grants everyone the right to seek and receive news and express opinions.

Religious freedom

According to Pew Research, a non-governmental opinion research institute, Eritrea is the country with the most restrictive laws and policies towards religious freedoms in the world in 2017. Hundreds of individuals are believed to be imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea. More than 171 Christians were arbitrarily detained in waves of arrests last May with an additional 80 people arrested for practicing their religion in August. Some prisoners, such as leaders of the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church, have been in prison for more than 15 years. The Eritrean Government recognizes only four religious denominations: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches. People belonging to other religions face imprisonment, raids of their property and might be subjected to torture. A release would require a written renunciation of their belief. The Government has not permitted any other groups to register as an official religion since the requirement to do so went into effect in 2002. The registration laws are not published and it is not made transparent on what conditions the Eritrean State decides. The Jehovah's Witnesses are especially targeted by religious prosecution since their members did not participate in the independence referendum of 1991. Not only are they denied the right to freely practice their faith, but they are also denied basic citizenship rights. 52 Jehovah's Witnesses remain imprisoned to this day for observing their religion, in ways such as participating in religious meetings, preaching, or conscientiously objecting to military service.

Even the officially recognized religious denominations are not protected from attacks by the Government. During the last year, religious freedom conditions worsened with increasing restrictions and a crackdown on the members of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Government deposed the patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios in 2007, and he remains under house arrest to this day. After he criticized the fact that the church was run by a government-appointed layman, he was expelled from the church, being accused of heresy. The expulsion letter threatens punishment for mentioning his name. Five priests were reportedly arrested in June for supporting Antonios.

Crackdown on the Catholic Church and the spread of COVID-19

There was also a crackdown on the Catholic Church in Eritrea in the summer of 2019 after the four Catholic bishops of Eritrea had called on the authorities to adopt a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan to promote dialogue and strengthen peacebuilding. In the letter, the bishops urged the Eritrean authorities to implement reforms so that Eritreans would stop fleeing their country. On June 12, the Eritrean authorities seized all health centers managed by the Catholic Church. Soldiers were posted outside the health facilities and patients were thrown out of their beds. Medical staff was threatened. The UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea expressed concern that their seizure "will negatively impact the right to health of the affected populations, in particular, those in remote rural areas." This poses a massive threat to the well-being of the Eritrean population, since the hospitals run by the Catholic Churches frequently are the only providers of

healthcare, in particular in rural areas. Especially in these daunting times, with the Coronavirus starting to take foot in Eritrea, it is of the utmost importance, that all resources are mobilized to fight COVID-19. Even though Eritrea is one of the most isolated countries in the world, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported on March 21, 2020. As of now, there are 39 confirmed cases in the country, of which 38 have recovered according to the Ministry of Health. Society for Threatened Peoples is worried that Eritrea's healthcare system is not able to handle a deadly and highly infectious disease like COVID-19.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the State of Eritrea to:

- unconditionally release all detainees held on account of their religious activities and all other political prisoners, or journalists who remain arbitrarily detained to this date,
- release the tens of thousands of prisoners who have long been languishing in overcrowded and unsanitary prisons in order to stop the spread of COVID-19,
- improve the living conditions of the students that are currently in the Sawa military training center,
- release all journalists who have been imprisoned solely for doing their job; reopen independent news agencies,
- publish the registration law for religious groups along with clear guidelines for applying for or appealing decisions,
- end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses,
- immediately stop the crackdown and the seizure of hospitals run by the Catholic Church; especially in these hard times, they are undoubtedly vital to ensure that health coverage for all Eritreans can be provided,
- ensure that all people receive a fair trial, and that people currently in jail are held in accordance with the Nelson Mandela Rules on the treatment of prisoners,
- abolish the compulsory military service or restrict it to the 18 months prescribed in the constitution; accept and follow the rules of the International Labour Organization.