



General Assembly

Distr.: General
3 June 2021

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda item 2

**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 Elizka Relief Foundation, 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.

[30 May 2021]

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



Human Rights in Eritrea

Preamble

Civilians in Eritrea and the Tigray region, in which Eritrea has been involved in a military intervention, continue to suffer from violations by the Eritrean authorities. Eritrea continues to raise human rights concerns about incommunicado detention of prisoners of conscience and the persecution of religious minorities, among other violations. These problems are exacerbated by the failure of Eritrea to comply with human rights charters and conventions, and the compulsory, indefinite conscription into National Service. In this intervention, we highlight the violations practiced by the Eritrean authorities against civilians since the 46th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC).

First: Violating economic and social rights in Tigray

Throughout March and April 2021, Eritrean soldiers, were witnessed disguising themselves in old Ethiopian military uniforms, obstructing and occupying critical aid routes, roaming the halls of one of the region's few operating hospitals and threatening medical staff. Eritrean forces had blocked roads into central Tigray for over two weeks and in the northwestern part of the region for nearly one month, impeding the access of aid items to the most critical cases.¹

In April 2021, Eritrean soldiers blocked and looted food relief in multiple parts of Tigray, including in Samre and Gijet, southwest of Mekele, according to a leaked document from the Emergency Coordination Centre of Tigray's Abiy-appointed interim government. This document revealed that the Eritrean soldiers have also started showing up at food distribution points in Tigray, looting supplies after terrorizing the people.²

As a result of the violations committed by the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, between 4.5 million and 5.2 million people of Tigray's total population of 5.7 million are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance. Famine is probably occurring already, and undoubtedly in the coming months Tigrayans will be starving on a scale rarely witnessed in the modern world.³

Second: The right to development

The European Commission plans to remove more than \$120 million of development assistance originally designated for Eritrea citing human rights violations in Tigray, where the Eritrean military is implicated in massive human rights abuses and possible war crimes, including the massacres of hundreds of civilians, the destruction of public and private properties as well as the targeting of heritage areas.⁴

The European Parliament's Development Committee also plans to take a decision on nine projects that were designated for development in Eritrea, of which only one, a road building scheme, has begun to be implemented, while the other eight projects are still awaiting clearance from the Eritrean government.⁵ Therefore, the grave violations committed by the Eritrean government are impeding the development efforts of the Eritrean people.

1 CNN, Eritrean troops disguised as Ethiopian military are blocking critical aid in Tigray, May 13, 2021 <https://cnn.it/2SoRlMu>

2 *ibid*

3 Opiniojuris, Pandemic of Hunger Symposium: The Ethio-Eritrean Hunger Plan for Tigray and the Failure of Resolution 2417, May 18, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3p1Idtp>

4 Hrc- Eritrea, EU Removes Development Assistance Funding from Eritrea, Citing Human Rights Abuses in Tigray Conflict April 27, 2021 <https://bit.ly/2RKAgfS>

5 *ibid*

The United States of America has imposed wide-ranging restrictions on economic and security assistance to Ethiopia after parties to the conflict in Tigray have "taken no meaningful steps to end hostilities," and also announced visa restrictions for Ethiopian and Eritrean government officials in connection with the crisis. On May 24, 2021, the United States imposed the sanctions, and declared the Eritrean forces' involvement in extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and indiscriminate bombing of some towns in the Tigray region. Eritrean forces have also been accused of committing mass killings and widespread attacks on civilians.⁶

Third: freedom of belief

Since Eritrea closed most of its churches in 2002, Christians have been persecuted by the Eritrean government. On March 21, 2021, 35 Christians have been arrested for conducting prayer meetings. The army raided a prayer meeting held by 23 women in the capital Asmara, and later 12 others were arrested in Assab.⁷

The two raids on prayer meetings dampened hopes that the government was easing its harsh repressive policy against Christians in the country. Since September 2020, at least 160 Christians have been released from Eritrean prisons, including more than 70 freed from three jails in January 2021.⁸

Before the latest arrests, it was thought at least 165 believers were still detained in the country's jails, often enduring inhumane and brutal conditions; however, the exact figure is not known.⁹

Eritrea remains one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution. Since the introduction of religious registration policies in 2002, only three Christian denominations are legally permitted – Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam.

Eritrea continued to detain 345 church leaders and officials without charge or trial, while estimates of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000 for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith.¹⁰

22 Christians have reportedly been released in 2020 and at least 69 Christians in September. The released prisoners were not allowed to leave the country. The released in September had been in prison between two and 16 years without charge or trial prior to their release.¹¹

It is worth noting that since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Fourth: Arbitrary detention

On Monday night, May 24, 2021, Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers forcibly detained more than 500 young men and women from four camps for displaced people in the town of Shire in the northern region of Tigray. The soldiers surrounded the camp at night, broke the main

⁶ U.S. Imposes Restrictions On Ethiopia And Eritrea Over Tigray Conflict, May 24, 2021 <https://n.pr/3vtbnUD>

⁷ releaseinternational, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM HOPES DASHED IN ERITREA AS 35 MORE CHRISTIANS ARRESTED, 31 Mar 2021

⁸ barnabasfund, Eritrean authorities release all but one of 23 Christians arrested at prayer meeting, 13 April 2021 <https://bit.ly/3fkCU4Y>

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ state.gov, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Eritrea <https://bit.ly/3bWTUMS>

¹¹ ibid

gate and started to beat every man using sticks, they hit a 70-year-old and kidnapped a blind one.¹²

On the same day, Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers rounded up around 200 displaced civilians during a violent nighttime raid on camps in Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region. They detained more than 100 civilians at the Tsehay camp and at least 76 at a second camp known as Adiwonfeto, beating them and snatching their phones before forcing them onto trucks. It is worth noting that the displaced population in Shire mostly comes from farming families forced out of western Tigray, which threatens that an ethnic cleansing is unfolding.¹³

In light of the above, Elizka Relief Foundation raises a number of recommendations

1. The Eritrean government must immediately withdraw its forces from the Ethiopian Tigray region, to stop the recurrent grave violations against civilians in the region.
2. The Eritrean government must open an urgent investigation into the violations committed by the Eritrean forces against civilians in the Ethiopian Tigray region.
3. The Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea should intensify requests for visits to Eritrea to assess the human rights situation there.
4. The Eritrean government must immediately release those arbitrarily detained.
5. The Eritrean government must not violate the citizens' freedom of belief, and immediately release those detained for religious affiliation.

¹² Reuters, Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers detain hundreds in Tigray, May 25, 2021
<https://reut.rs/3yA5sPP>

¹³ barrons, Soldiers Arrest Hundreds From Camps In War-hit Tigray, May 25, 2021
<https://bit.ly/2SAOdgr>