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Dire human rights situation in Eritrea persists, UN Special Rapporteur warns

GENEVA (29 September 2014) – United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, today warned that human rights violations continue to be committed on a large scale, compelling hundreds of Eritreans, many of them very young, to leave their home country in search of safer havens where they can enjoy their fundamental human rights.

“The dire human rights situation in Eritrea persists,” Ms. Keetharuth stressed at the end of her five-day mission to Italy, from 22 to 26 September 2014, to collect first-hand information from Eritrean refugees and migrants.

By September 2014, Italy registered about 135,000 new arrivals, with a majority rescued through the Mare Nostrum operation. The 32,000 Eritreans constitute the predominant group among these arrivals.

“Many of those I spoke with arrived in Italy after braving unimaginable dangers along the escape routes in the desert and at sea,” the Special Rapporteur said. “I appreciate the courage of those who spoke with me despite their fear of reprisals against themselves and their families back in Eritrea.”

On 3 October 2014, the expert recalled, the world will remember those who died during the tragedy in Lampedusa last year. Many more have lost their lives since then. An estimated 3,000 people, including many Eritreans, are feared to have died since the beginning of the year while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

“Eritreans are escaping systematic and widespread human rights violations, namely indefinite forced conscription, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and inhumane prison conditions, as well as political repression,” Ms. Keetharuth said.

She also noted that the economic situation is deteriorating and many families would find it difficult to survive without support from relatives and friends in the diaspora. Poor health care and lack of adequate medication leaves treatment in nearby countries as the only option, not affordable for most. Power cuts, fuel and water shortages are common occurrences.

“The creation of my Special Rapporteur’s mandate has increased international awareness about the large-scale violations of human rights in Eritrea. Concrete steps are urgently needed to address such violations to bring about a decrease in the numbers leaving,” Ms. Keetharuth stated.

On Friday, the Human Rights Council announced the appointment of Mike Smith (Australia) and Victor Dankwa (Ghana), who will join the Special Rapporteur to serve as the members of the Commission of Inquiry to investigate all alleged human rights violations in Eritrea. It is a historic moment for the thousands of victims of human rights violations in Eritrea. The Council responded to their call for justice when it established the mandate for the Commission of Inquiry during its 26th session.

“The Commission will investigate the most egregious human rights violations, including cases of extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention, torture, and lack of freedom of expression and opinion, assembly, association, religious belief and movement,” Ms. Keetharuth said.

“I hope the Commission of Inquiry would pave the way to establish accountability for these violations, especially in view of the continued non-cooperation of Eritrea with my mandate and other UN mechanisms,” she said.

The Special Rapporteur called on the Eritrean Government, the Eritrean people, in and outside of the country, as well as the international community, to cooperate with both the Commission’s and her mandate.

“I remain fully committed to continue delivering on the mandate entrusted to me by the Human Rights Council in a constructive, transparent, independent and impartial manner and look forward to starting work as a member of the Commission of Inquiry.”

(*) Check the Special Rapporteur’s report to the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/26/L.6): http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=201

Sheila B. Keetharuth was appointed as the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea during the 21st Session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2012. She took her functions on 1 November 2012. As Special Rapporteur, she is independent from any government or organization and serves in her individual capacity. A lawyer from Mauritius, she has extensive experience in monitoring and documenting human rights violations, advocacy, training and litigation in human rights in Africa. Learn more, log on to: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/CountriesMandates/ER/Pages/SREritrea.aspx>

UN Human Rights, country page – Eritrea: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/ERIndex.aspx>

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