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Statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, after her visit to Tunisia and Malta (11 - 20 November 2013)

(GENEVA 25 November 2013) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, expressed great concern about rampant human rights violations in Eritrea which caused hundreds of thousands to leave their country for an unknown and precarious future.

“I call on the Eritrean Government to respect its human rights obligations and to put an immediate stop to human rights violations that are committed in the country”, Ms. Keetharuth stressed after interviewing Eritreans during an official mission to Tunisia and Malta from 11 to 20 November 2013. Her findings will be presented in her second report to the Human Rights Council in June 2014.

The Special Rapporteur indicated that the indefinite national service was quoted as the main reason inciting Eritreans to leave their home country. “The open-ended national service is a system which keeps Eritreans captive in a situation of despair, forcing them to take unimaginable risks in search of freedom and a safe haven”, the Expert stated. Many interviewed during the mission said they agreed in principle with national service in support of development and reconstruction of the country for a period of 18 months as it was originally envisaged.

Indeed, Article 8 of Proclamation 82/1995 calls for 6 months of military training and 12 months of active military service and development tasks in military forces for a total of 18 months. However, the Eritreans interviewed strongly rejected the current mandatory national service which has been extended indefinitely. No comprehensive demobilisation has been conducted to date, causing many to flee.

Young Eritreans, both women and men, often before reaching 18 years, are recruited into a compulsory national service characterised by severe human rights abuses. Punishment amounting to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, as well as detention in inhumane conditions, is routine in the military. Women explained they were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuses by officers. “These violations are committed with complete impunity, without any structures and procedures in place for victims to bring the perpetrators to justice”, the Special Rapporteur said.

Education is a human right; however, in the current educational system only those who complete military training at the Sawa Military Training Camp after 11th grade are allowed to continue their schooling. One interviewee said: “What we endure at Sawa prepares us to face the dangers while crossing the desert and the sea. I don’t agree with the military training and national service because of its harsh and indefinite nature, as well as its inflexibility, all of which make it inhumane.”

The Special Rapporteur added that those with religious or other conscientious objections are also forced into the military and the practice of one’s religion while in service is strictly prohibited. Conscripts and soldiers are granted leave on a discretionary basis, which can be arbitrary, with periods often longer than 12 months without permission to visit home.

Regular round-ups, the ‘giffas’ carried out by the military police are aimed at rounding up those considered fit to serve in the military, those who escaped from military service or draft evaders. Reprisals against family members of deserters are severe, requiring the payment of 50,000 Nakfa (approximately USD 3,350), a sum most Eritreans find unaffordable, or detention of a family member for an undefined period of time until the amount is paid.

While in the national service, Eritreans are assigned to jobs in various fields, including public administration, teaching, health services, agriculture and construction. The pay during the national service is so low that recruits are unable to support their families.

While those interviewed also described difficult economic and social conditions in their home country, they noted that the daily struggle for access to food and water, the lack of adequate health care and electricity had not motivated their departure. “It is the complete deprivation of the freedom and security of the person, a fundamental human right also recognised by Eritrea that drives entire families to leave their country in the hope of finding a place where they feel protected”, Ms. Keetharuth explained.

Many Eritreans she met during her mission were rescued at sea. Since September 2012, UNHCR Tunisia had registered 677 new arrivals rescued from boats in distress in the Mediterranean. Since the beginning of the year, 2008 asylum seekers have arrived in Malta on 21 boats, out of which 23 % were Eritreans. The Special Rapporteur acknowledged strengthened efforts by both countries to rescue asylum-seekers at sea, thus protecting the right to life and freedom from bodily harm of those shipwrecked.

The blanket disrespect of fundamental human rights in Eritrea is pushing between 2,000 to 3,000 people to leave the country monthly, although the risks along the escape routes are of a life-threatening nature. In 2012, the total Eritrean population of concern to UNHCR amounted to 305,723.

Those rescued at sea underlined that they knew how dangerous their journey across the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea would be. Despite the life-threatening conditions, they had decided to take the risk as they felt

they had very little to lose. One young man told the Special Rapporteur: "We are aware of the risks associated with crossing the desert and the sea. Nobody in his right mind would take such a decision. We do it because there is no other choice."

Ms. Keetharuth called for the protection of those fleeing from risking their lives by undertaking highly dangerous journeys to reach a place they feel is safe.

The Special Rapporteur said that the extremely difficult decision to leave behind one's family and home can only be understood in light of the unbearable human rights conditions in the country. She called on the international community to address the root causes of the refugee situation by listening to the voices of victims of human rights violations in Eritrea who reach the conclusion that their only option is flight.

She also reiterated the importance to end bilateral and other arrangements between Eritrea and third countries that would provide for Eritreans to be returned to their home country where they risk facing persecution, torture, inhuman treatment, and forced recruitment into indefinite military service.

Since her appointment in November 2012, the Special Rapporteur has made several requests to visit Eritrea, which have so far not been granted. Consequently, the Expert resorted to gathering first-hand information from those who have left Eritrea. She reiterates her call for access to the country to assess the human rights situation.

The Special Rapporteur thanked Tunisia and Malta for supporting her mandate and having allowed her to interview Eritreans on their territories. Last, but not least, the Special Rapporteur expressed her thanks to all those who shared their personal and sometimes very harrowing stories and experiences in their search for safety and enjoyment of their human rights.
