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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016 - CHAPTER VI: Human Rights Priority Countries - Eritrea

Human rights concerns persisted in Eritrea throughout 2016, with little improvement. Eritrea is a one party state with no political opposition; there is no anti-discrimination legislation to protect LGB&T rights; citizens are subject to arbitrary extensions to periods of already prolonged national service; and severe constraints persist on freedom of religion or belief and freedom of the press. Of grave concern in 2016 was the final report delivered on 21 June by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, which stated that there were “reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed by the Government of Eritrea”. The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea continues to be denied access to the country.

However, there were small signs of increased engagement. The Government of Eritrea showed an enhanced willingness to cooperate on human rights by working with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) who visited Eritrea in early 2016. The Government of Eritrea also signed a four-year implementation programme with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to take forward the 92 recommendations from the 2014 Universal Periodic Review (UPR). We welcomed these developments. There continues to be no evidence to suggest that modern slavery exists in Eritrea and women in Eritrea remain protected by law with Female Genital Mutilation being banned.

In 2016, the UK continued to focus on three areas we consider essential for human rights improvement in Eritrea. Firstly, clarification of the conditions of national service and an end to arbitrary extensions; secondly, full implementation of the constitution; and thirdly, enhanced cooperation with international human rights bodies to implement the UPR recommendations. The UK worked with the Eritrean authorities and with our international partners in the EU and the UN to encourage Eritrea towards implementation of these improvements. In 2015, the Government of Eritrea had already committed to limiting national service to 18 months. However, by the end of 2016 this had still not been officially implemented and the service period continued to be extended arbitrarily. Furthermore, the government said that work on drafting a new constitution was under way; but we saw no evidence of this in 2016. Whilst cooperation with human rights bodies was increasingly taking place, there had been no substantive implementation of any UPR recommendations by the end of 2016. Eritrea remained one of the top sources of irregular migration to Europe and we made clear to the Government of Eritrea that the poor human rights situation was one of the main drivers. In 2016, Eritrea continued to engage with international partners through the African Union/EU Khartoum Process which aims to tackle forced migration and human trafficking.

In 2017, the UK will continue to press the Government of Eritrea to improve its human rights record and to work with international partners. The UK will work with Eritrea to stem the flow of irregular migration and put in place sustainable projects where human rights objectives and preventing trafficking will be the core components.

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