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We know how many Eritrean children reach Europe on their own, but not how many die trying – UN expert

NEW YORK (28 October 2014) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, expressed alarm about continuing human rights violations in the country resulting in mass departures. She warned the UN General Assembly about the high number of children fleeing from Eritrea without their parents.

“By mid-October, more than 4,000 Eritrean minors had arrived in Italy since the beginning of the year, including more than 3,200 children travelling without their parents,” Ms. Keetharuth said, quoting recent data collected by the UN Refugee Agency.

“The numbers provided only reflect those who make it to Europe. We do not know how many children perish along the flight,” the human rights expert stressed. “In all circumstances, unaccompanied minors require special protection.”

The children risk their lives, travelling on their own or with friends, to escape from looming military training and conscription amounting to forced labour, to join family members or in the hope of finding their rights protected across borders. They are very vulnerable and run the risk of exposure to abuse and violence, including falling in the hands of traffickers and smugglers who ask for ransoms from their families.

Eritreans are escaping systematic and widespread human rights violations, such as indefinite forced conscription and violations in the context of the national service, arbitrary arrests and detention, incommunicado detention, inhumane prison conditions, extrajudicial killings, disappearances and torture.

“In recent months, we have seen a considerable increase in Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees crossing into neighbouring countries with almost 4,000 fleeing on a monthly basis,” she said. Significantly higher numbers of Eritreans are arriving in Europe. Between January and September 2014, 32,537 Eritreans arrived in Italy by boat. With Syrians, Eritreans constitute the largest group of arrivals.

The Special Rapporteur noted that the situation has deteriorated in the context of the attempted coup in January 2013, dubbed as the ‘Forto incident’. An unknown number of people, though the numbers quoted are as high as 800, including public figures, were reportedly arrested and detained, with no information as to their whereabouts, nor have they appeared before any court of law.

“The violations described are committed with impunity. No perpetrators have been brought to justice,” Ms. Keetharuth stated. “This is why I welcome the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry by the Human Rights Council to investigate all alleged violations of human rights in Eritrea, as outlined in my reports.”

The expert 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,” she said.

The Special Rapporteur welcomed Eritrea’s accession to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in September, which was long overdue. “I hope this is an indication of Eritrea’s willingness to comply with the prohibition of torture under international law,” she said.

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>

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

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

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