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ERITREA

OBSERVATORY FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
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In 2010-2011, denouncing and reporting about the widespread and massive human rights violations remained impossible inside Eritrea. In particular, no independent human rights organisations or unions were able to operate in the country. Journalists willing to cover issues perceived as sensitive by the regime were obliged to, as in the past years, practice self-censorship or to flee the country as issues perceived as sensitive for the regime survival – such as human rights and democracy – continued to be censored. 2010-2011 was also marked by severe restrictions to the activities of the few international organisations still present in the country.

Political context

Since independence in 1993, the unelected President Isaias Afewerki has continued to repeat that “this is not the right time” for elections and as of April 2011, none were planned¹. Under his highly authoritarian regime, the 1997 Constitution was never implemented and Mr. Isaias Afewerki acts as the Head of State as well as the Chairman of the sole political party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). No dissenting opinion is tolerated and publicly questioning Government policy continued to be a reason for suspicion, arrest and endless incommunicado detention. As of April 2011, eleven of the fifteen senior officials who were arrested in September 2001 after publicly calling for democratic changes and the implementation of the Constitution, including the holding of multi-party elections, remained in incommunicado and arbitrary detention – without access to a court – though some of them reportedly died in jail due to horrendous conditions of detention². Many others arrested during and after the 2001 crackdown on dissenting voices, including journalists, were facing the same fate and new arrests were regularly reported.

Since the closure of all independent media outlets in September 2001 and the consecutive arrest of numerous journalists and editors³, newspapers, radio stations and TV channels are all State run and there is no

1/ See International Crisis Group Report, Eritrea: *The Siege State*, Africa Report No. 163, September 21, 2010.

2/ See Declaration by the European Union High Representative, Ms. Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union on political prisoners in Eritrea, September 17, 2010.

3/ According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in 2010, there were at least 29 journalists detained incommunicado and without trial or charges being brought against them, for some of them, for up to almost ten years.

independent or private media. As a consequence, information perceived as sensitive for the regime survival and particularly the ones linked to human rights and democracy continued to be censored⁴. Internet, in addition to being one of the sole means to obtain independent information, was also a vector of expression for the few people who could access it. It was consequently closely monitored⁵.

Despite the ban to leave the country opposed to many, particularly the youth, and the shoot-to-kill policy for attempt escapees, around 3,000 people continued to flee the country to Sudan and Ethiopia each month⁶. In addition to oppression, many attempted to escape endless mandatory national service. Those caught were sent to the multiple secret places of detention across the country which are full of citizens perceived as critical toward the Government, religious minorities and conscription evaders⁷. In those places of detention, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment was commonplace⁸.

Impossibility to report on human rights violations

Denouncing and reporting about the widespread and massive human rights violations remained impossible inside Eritrea. In particular, no independent human rights organisations or independent unions were able to operate in the country⁹. Thus, organisations representing women, youth and workers that were mentioned by the Government during its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2009¹⁰ are controlled by the Government, headed by the President's closed allies and merely aim at promoting Government policies and ensure that its propaganda is conveyed to all groups of the society. In such a context, the exercise of the legitimate right to peaceful assembly is also impossible. Eritrean journalists willing to cover issues perceived as sensitive by the regime were obliged to, as in the past years, practice self-censorship or to

4/ There was for instance an almost complete blackout about the January 2011 referendum on the independence in Southern Sudan, or the protests for democracy launched at the beginning of 2011 in several countries including neighbouring countries like Yemen and Sudan. See Human Rights Concern - Eritrea.

5/ See RSF Report, *Internet Enemies 2011: Countries under surveillance - Eritrea*, March 11, 2011.

6/ See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *2011 Regional Operations Profile - East and Horn of Africa*.

7/ It is impossible to know the exact number of people held since the Government never provided any information on the reasons for arrest, their place of detention and their fate.

8/ See Human Rights Watch (HRW), *2010 Annual Report, January 24, 2011 and Report, Service for Life State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea*, April 2009.

9/ According to Human Rights Concern Eritrea, the last NGO working on human rights that operated in the country, the Regional Centre for Human Rights and Development, was closed down in 1993.

10/ See UN Human Rights Council, *Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, National Report of Eritrea*, UN Document A/HRC/WG.6/6/ERI/1, November 26, 2009.

flee the country. For instance, Mr. **Eyob Kessete**, a journalist for the radio *Dimtsi Hafash*, was arrested in July 2010 as he was trying to escape the country for the second time. As of the end of April 2011, his fate remained unknown¹¹. Several were reportedly released but others were still detained as of April 2011, without charge, including one of the few female journalist in the country, Ms. **Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu**, who was arrested in February 2009¹².

Severe restrictions to activities of the few international organisations still present in the country

Likewise, international human rights organisations continued to face restrictions to their activities. In order to fully isolate the population and to prevent an outside look on its policy, the Government progressively reduced the number of humanitarian NGOs entitled to work in the country and in the meantime imposed more and more restrictions to the ones still present, thereby preventing most of them from carrying out any effective activities. As a result, in 2010, only four international humanitarian NGOs were still carrying out operation in Eritrea though their operations were severely restricted¹³. Arrests of Eritrean staffs, denial of entry visa for foreign staffs, restrictions on diesel fuel as well as obligation to obtain Governmental authorisation to travel outside Asmara were among the tactics used to incite international organisations to restrict, if not stop, their activities. In addition, though still present in the country, the activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were severely restricted in 2010. It has been, for instance, denied since 2009 authorisation to continue its visit of detainees of Ethiopian origin, including prisoners of war, and as of October 2010 was still seeking to regain access¹⁴. The United Nations agencies still present in the country faced similar restrictions, as did the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)¹⁵. On January 26, 2011, the Ministry of Finance, relying on self reliance, informed the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator that, starting from June 2011, the Government will deal only with a few selected UN agencies, thereby, probably, paving the way for a reduction of the UN agencies entitled to work in the country¹⁶.

11 / See RSF Press Release, September 17, 2010, and RSF 2011 Freedom of the Press Barometer - Journalists Imprisoned.

12 / See RSF and IFEX Joint Urgent Appeals, February 19 and May 13, 2010.

13 / See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre Report, *Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2010 - Eritrea*, March 23, 2011.

14 / Since 2009 the Government has denied travel authorisation to ICRC expatriate staff. See ICRC, Annual Report 2009, May 2010 and ICRC, *The ICRC in Eritrea: Overview*, October 29, 2010.

15 / See OCHA website, www.unocha.org/where-we-work/eritrea.

16 / See Letter from the State of Eritrea Ministry of Finance, January 26, 2011.