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Co-Chair



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One Hundred and Fifteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

November 14, 2018

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

As Co-Chairs of the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, we write to urge you to ensure that any reset in relations between the United States and Eritrea, or any easing of sanctions imposed on Eritrea by the United Nations, be tied to concrete human rights objectives that are in the best interest of the Eritrean people as well as the international community.

We welcome the groundbreaking peace measures initiated by the leaders of both Ethiopia and Eritrea in recent months. Like the rest of the world, we were gratefully surprised to see the countries' twenty-year conflict resolved with the signing of peace accords and the opening of diplomatic relations. Eritrea's entry into the regional and global community is a welcome development with the potential to bring significant benefits to the Horn of Africa. These recent advances also present an important opportunity for the warming of the U.S.-Eritrean relationship, including strengthening security and economic partnerships that benefit both nations.

However, though President Isaias Afwerki and the Eritrean government have made great strides engaging with other countries in the region, we remain deeply concerned by the ongoing gross human rights violations that the government perpetrates against its own people. In a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on Eritrea earlier this year, we heard testimony from individuals who described, or who had themselves experienced, torture as a systematic policy of the government, and the brutal suppression of their most basic rights. Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press are non-existent in Eritrea. Indefinite conscripted military and civil service is a fact of life for Eritreans and has created a mass exodus of people trying to leave the country. For these reasons, the small nation of Eritrea has disproportionately contributed to the global refugee crisis, particularly in countries bordering the

Mediterranean Sea. Since the signing of the peace agreement there has been no evidence of human rights reforms.

As Eritrea normalizes relations with the world, we ask that you continue to address these concerns in your ongoing diplomacy with the Eritrean government. In support of human rights and norms of international behavior, we ask that you specifically press for four concrete steps.

First, Eritrea should immediately release all military and civil conscripts who have served for more than 18 months and officially proclaim that new conscripts will not be required to serve for more than 18 months. The Eritrean people should no longer be subjected to indefinite national service that amounts to forced labor on behalf of the government.

Second, Eritrea must end religious persecution against all religious faiths in the country, particularly against those who do not belong to one of the four permitted religious groups. Jehovah's Witnesses should again be granted full Eritrean citizenship along with the opportunity to fully participate in the country's institutions and worship freely according to their conscience. In addition, at least 50 Jehovah's Witnesses are reported to be incarcerated. Eritrea should provide explanations for the charges against these individuals and others in prison, release any who have not been criminally convicted, and ensure due process for all detained persons.

Third, President Afwerki should release the many hundreds of prisoners of conscience including Patriarch Abune Antonios and journalist Dawit Issak. At the very least, the United States should be allowed a visit with Patriarch Antonios as the U.S. Embassy has repeatedly requested. In addition, family members should be allowed to visit prisoners of conscience including those incarcerated for their religious beliefs, and the International Committee of the Red Cross should be given access to provide humanitarian aid and medicine to prisoners.

Lastly, Eritrean citizens should be granted the freedom to travel in and out of their own country. In the past, those seeking to leave the country were often shot at the border, or were captured, imprisoned, and tortured in underground prisons.

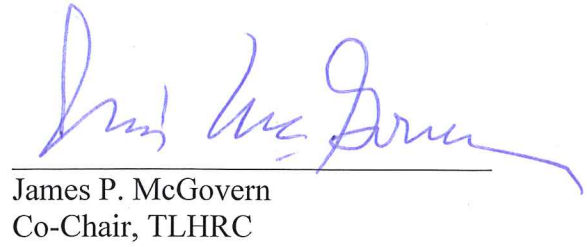
On September 17, 2018, only a day after President Afwerki signed the peace accord with the Ethiopian government, Berhane Abrehe, a former minister in the Eritrean government, was arrested in Asmara for writing a book critical of Afwerki. His family reports that he remains incommunicado. We find the Eritrean government's discourse in support of peace and economic development inconsistent with its ongoing human rights violations which we believe will continue to destabilize the region. The government's actions are not in-line with its stated intention to rejoin the international community.

We ask that you convey this message in your discussions with the Eritrean government and ensure that any lifting of sanctions is tied to these clear and measurable outcomes.

Sincerely,



Randy Hultgren
Co-Chair, TLHRC



James P. McGovern
Co-Chair, TLHRC

CC: The Honorable Nikki Haley, United States Ambassador to the United Nations