

**Statement of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights situation in
Eritrea, Ms Daniela Kravetz
43rd Session of the Human Rights Council
Update on Eritrea
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Esteemed Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to present my oral update to the Council during this interactive dialogue on Eritrea. Since my last update in July 2019, I have continued to monitor the progress made in relation to the five benchmarks set out in my previous report. These benchmarks concern: (1) progress in rule of law, (2) reforms to the national service, (3) progress in promoting civil liberties, (4) progress in promoting women's rights and gender equality, and (5) improvement in the operating environment for international agencies in Eritrea.

Since my last update, I have seen no concrete evidence of progress in any of these areas. While Eritrea has increased its engagement with regional and international actors, this engagement has so far not led to an actual improvement in the human rights situation in the country. A telling sign is that Eritreans continue to flee the country in large numbers.

Several recent developments illustrate the lack of progress. Since my last update, the arrests of Christians who worship without government approval have continued. Last year was particularly harsh for non-recognised Christian congregations. According to reports, last August, more than 80 Pentecostal Christians were arrested, the majority of them in Asmara. In my last update, I reported the arrests in May and June of around 200 Christians in separate incidents in Asmara and Keren, primarily women and children who were participating in prayer gatherings. Many of those arrested remain in jail. The Muslim community has also recently been targeted. In late November, security forces arrested at least 20 Muslim men in Mendefera and in neighbouring localities. Those arrested included local businessmen, religious teachers, and community leaders. Security forces carried out these arrests days after these communities had celebrated a traditional Muslim holiday. Based on available information, most of these men remain unaccounted for. A concrete step the authorities could take to show progress in human rights is to release those arbitrarily detained and to allow persons to practice their faith freely.

Church-based organisations have also experienced restrictions. In September, the authorities closed and confiscated three secondary schools run by the Catholic Church and five schools run by Protestant and Muslim congregations. I had previously reported that, last June, the Eritrean authorities seized all health facilities run by the Catholic Church. Additionally, as of this year, the development NGO Finn Church Aid no longer has a presence in Eritrea. It was supporting a programme aimed at building teacher capacity, which is now on hold due to lack of necessary support from the authorities and slow implementation. By easing the restrictions for charity and church-based organisations to operate in the country, the authorities would be demonstrating progress.

Regarding the national service, the Eritrean authorities have indicated that they will introduce reforms when the economic conditions allow for the creation of jobs for conscripts and for an increase in salaries. There are however immediate measures that the authorities could take that do not depend on economic reforms, such as stopping the ongoing round-ups of youth for forced conscription, separating secondary education from military training, and putting in place mechanisms to monitor and prevent abuses against conscripts, in particular against female conscripts. Such measures would indicate that the Eritrean authorities are committed to improving the human rights situation.

Turning to the issue of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, here again there has been no progress. This September will mark the 19th year of incommunicado detention of Dawit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean journalist, and of ten of his colleagues. This September will also mark the 26th year of imprisonment of Paulos Eyasu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam. The three men are part of a group of 52 members of Jehovah's Witnesses held at Mai Serwa prison because they are conscientious objectors. And this April, Ciham Ali Abdu, an American-Eritrean dual national and daughter of a former Information Minister, will turn 23 in an Eritrean prison. She has been held incommunicado since the age of 15. The release of these and other individuals depends solely on the Eritrean authorities. Their release would be a positive step towards building trust in the international community regarding Eritrea's commitment to human rights.

Finally, there has been no cooperation by the Eritrean authorities with my mandate. Since March 2019, my various requests to meet with Eritrean officials have gone unanswered.

There is a way forward. The Eritrean authorities should seize the opportunities presented by peace and implement much needed reforms. OHCHR has offered technical support, including on the implementation of the UPR recommendations accepted by the Government, but the Government has yet to respond. Various international donors are willing to assist the Eritrean authorities in creating jobs outside the national service, in promoting fair working conditions and in building up its economy. A year on from joining the Human Rights Council, it is time for Eritrea to show that it is willing to take concrete steps towards upholding its international commitments. As always, I remain willing to work together with the Eritrean authorities on issues related to my mandate, and I am willing to meet with the Eritrean delegation this week, including immediately after this session.

Thank you.

