**Statement of Dr. Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea**

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Honourable chair, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen; it is my honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur to present my report and oral update on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

Since I presented my report before this Committee in October 2022, there has been no progress in the human rights situation in Eritrea. I welcome the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front in November last year. However, the agreement has not had the positive impact that could be expected on the internal human rights situation in Eritrea.

In fact, I have observed a deterioration linked to the system of indefinite national military service, further compounding the already dire internal human rights situation in the country. Eritrean troops have not been demobilised, and the roundup of men, women and children for military conscription continues unabated. I have continued to document the use of coercive practices that include applying collective punishments on entire families and communities, to force individuals to join the Eritrean Defence Forces. This includes detaining family members, including vulnerable persons such as elder parents or pregnant women, evicting the families of those who refuse to fight and even destroying their homes, starving and killing their cattle, leaving families destitute and in a highly vulnerable situation. When neighbours or relatives attempted to help them, they were threatened.

Thousands of Eritreans are estimated to have lost their lives in the Tigray conflict. No official information has been provided regarding the number of fatalities or the identities of those deceased. Almost a year after the signature of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrean families are still waiting to hear from their loved ones. I call on Eritrea to urgently notify their families about their fate. They deserve to know.

It is yet unclear how the incipient transitional justice efforts in Ethiopia may ensure accountability for crimes committed by the Eritrean Defence Forces in Tigray. So far, I have not received any information about any measures devised to this effect. Considering the central role of Eritrean forces in the commission of human rights and humanitarian law violations in Tigray -including the perpetration of large-scale massacres, sexual and gender-based violence, looting, obstruction of humanitarian assistance, destruction of humanitarian infrastructure, and kidnapping and attacks against refugees-, it is crucial for the sustainability of peace in Ethiopia and in the region that these crimes do not remain in impunity.

I continue to receive information regarding human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by Eritrea in Tigray after the cessation of hostilities, including the kidnapping and enforced disappearance of civilians, extra judicial executions, sexual violence, and looting. The continued presence of the Eritrean Defence forces in disputed areas in Ethiopia, as well as the presence of a large contingent of Eritrean Defence Forces alongside the Eritrean – Ethiopian border is of great concern.

As documented in my report, the repression of freedom of religion or belief has escalated, with renewed waves of mass arrests of people of faith and attempts to control and interfere in all aspects of religious life, both in Eritrea and in the diaspora. As of September, an estimated 400 Christians, including 32 Jehova’s witnesses remain arbitrarily imprisoned. Members of authorised religious communities are also under pressure. In October 2022, three Catholic priests were arbitrarily detained, and released in late December. Three Orthodox priests, including Dr Futsum Gebrenegus, Eritrea's only psychiatrist at the time of his arrest, have been detained for almost 19 years. 44 Orthodox monks, supporters of the late Patriarch of the Orthodox Church Abune Antonios were arbitrarily detained in April 2023. Abune Antonios had resisted attempts by the Eritrean government to control the Church, and as a result he was detained in house arrest for over 16 years until his passing in 2022. His followers are still being persecuted today, both in Eritrea and abroad, as the authorities seek to solidify their control over the Orthodox Church.

Civic space remains completely closed. Eritrea is a single party state, where no political groups or movements or civil society are allowed to organise. President Afwerki has ruled for over 30 years with no elections, no rule of law or separation of powers. Eritreans have no avenues to participate in decision-making in their own country.

As documented in my previous reports, hundreds of journalists, political opponents, artists, people of faith, draft evaders are subjected to grave human rights violations including enforced disappearance, torture, and arbitrary detention in inhuman or degrading conditions, in some cases over prolonged periods of time spanning several decades. I urge the Eritrean authorities to promptly release them, to inform the families of victims of enforced disappearance of their whereabouts and state of health, to facilitate visits and let families hear their voices.

I take this opportunity to highlight the plight of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, who face perilous journeys to safety, and are often subjected to grave human rights violations along the way. According to UNHCR, over 577,000 Eritreans had sought asylum as of end of 2022. There were over 130,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan at the onset of the conflict on the 15th of April this year. A large proportion of them have been displaced again, facing violence, heightened difficulties to move safely, and an increased activity of human trafficking networks in the region. I have received several reports about missing Eritrean refugees, raising alarms that they may have been kidnapped by traffickers or by the Eritrean authorities. I call on all host countries to adequately protect Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, and ensure their access to and enjoyment of human rights. I urge the international community as a whole to exercise solidarity.

I emphasize the serious risk that Eritrean asylum seekers may be subjected to grave human rights violations at their return to Eritrea, namely to arbitrary detention, torture and inhuman or degrading conditions, and indefinite conscription in the national service, a practice analogous to slavery. Despite my calls for information, little is known about the fate of the hundreds of Eritreans summarily and collectively deported from Ethiopia at the end of June, in violation of the non-refoulement principle. I call on the Eritrean authorities to provide information on their whereabouts and to ensure they have access to their families and lawyers.

Finally, despite its membership of the Human Rights Council, Eritrea continues its policy of non-cooperation with the Council’s own Special Procedures and with other human rights mechanisms, including UN treaty bodies. Eritrea also refused to co-operate and implement decisions and recommendations by the African human rights mechanisms. Eritrea’s policy of non-cooperation stands in stark contrast with the responsibility of Council members, as set out in General Assembly resolution 60/251, to ‘uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights' and fully cooperate with the Council and its mechanisms.

Once more, and with the only agenda of making progress in the difficult human rights situation of the Eritrean people, I call on the Government of Eritrea to cooperate with my mandate. I also urge Member States to exert maximum pressure on Eritrea to implement the recommendations made by Special Rapporteurs and by the Commission of Enquiry on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, as well as to consider all available measures to ensure access to justice for the Eritrean People.

Thank you.