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**UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea**

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen; I am honoured to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur and to present my report.

The human rights situation in Eritrea remains dire. Patterns of gross human rights violations, including the widespread use of arbitrary and incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance persist unabated. The authorities continue to enforce a system of indefinite military / national service that amounts to forced labour and has been consistently linked to torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. Fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and freedom of religion or belief, are systematically repressed. These are all issues that have been raised time and again by my mandate, former mandate holders, by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, as well as by other international and regional human rights mechanisms. Nevertheless, there are no indications of any measures taken to improve the human rights situation in any of these areas. The Eritrean authorities have shown little willingness to address these ongoing violations and have chosen to maintain policies and practices that perpetuate the human rights crisis in the country. If these persistent violations are not addressed, including by ensuring redress for victims, the cycle of suffering and repression will continue, stifling Eritrea’s potential for peace and development.

Two years on from the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, of which Eritrea was notably not a party, Eritrean forces remain present and continue to be involved in human rights and international humanitarian law violations in parts of the Tigray region of Ethiopia, including extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and forced labour. This situation places peace in the region at risk and contributes to the re-traumatisation of victims and the ongoing commission of grave human rights violations. I urge Ethiopia and Eritrea to respect the terms of the 2002 decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, as agreed by both States as part of the 2018 Peace Agreement, and stress that in this context, the rights of residents and original peoples from contested areas must also be duly protected and prioritized.

Today, the government of Eritrea celebrates its annual commemoration of “*martyr’s day*”. However, the families of thousands of Eritreans who have been disappeared since the onset of the Tigray conflict are still waiting to hear about their fate. I call on the authorities to provide official information to their families. I also recall the situation of hundreds of Eritreans subjected to enforced disappearance for years or even decades, their families also deserve to know.

Due process rights continue to be systematically violated. Cases considered politically sensitive are handled extrajudicially. Hundreds of detainees including dissidents, government critics, human rights defenders, religious leaders, journalists and draft evaders continue to be arbitrarily detained for indefinite and prolonged periods without ever being charged or tried, and in conditions that violate their human dignity. I call for the immediate release of all those currently arbitrarily detained, and for the establishment of proper due process safeguards.

Civic space continues to be completely closed in Eritrea, characterized by the severe curtailment of freedom of expression, association and assembly. The Government tightly controls all aspects of public life. There is no independent media, no independent civil society organizations, and no political opposition parties operating within the country. Dissent is systematically suppressed, including through the arbitrary detention or enforced disappearance of real or perceived government critics.

Religious repression has continued to escalate in Eritrea over the past year, with renewed waves of arrests of religious leaders and people of faith, persistent violations of the right to worship and to manifest one’s religion or belief and ongoing actions to control all aspects of religious life in Eritrea and in the diaspora. Several prominent religious leaders have remained arbitrarily imprisoned for extended periods, some for almost 20 years. Some have died in detention, such as Reverend Ghirmay Araya, a founding member of the Full Gospel Church, who reportedly passed away in May after being detained for three years without charge or trial. I am also concerned over the Government’s interference in the affairs of religious institutions, in particular of the Orthodox Church, both in Eritrea and in the diaspora.

The stifling of civic engagement and suppression of critical voices by the Eritrean authorities also extends to Eritrean communities worldwide. Eritrean authorities have reached across borders in efforts to control diaspora politics and silence pro-democracy activists, journalists, political opponents and human rights defenders. Over the years, my mandate has identified evolving patterns of transnational repression, including through methods such as kidnappings and enforced disappearances, surveillance, violence, threats, harassment, smear campaigns, social isolation and the refusal of consular services. This situation has perpetuated fear, self-censorship and mistrust among diaspora members, obstructing constructive dialogue and the free exchange of ideas in Eritrean communities abroad. In recent years, increased efforts by civil society to organise, protest, and engage in activism, have been met with pressure and intimidation from the Eritrean diplomatic and consular outposts, and structures linked to the governing party.

Over the past year and a half, we have witnessed an escalation of violence and polarization in the diaspora, which is hurting Eritrean communities and society at large. Clashes between Eritrean government supporters and detractors in dozens of cities across the globe have resulted in several Eritreans killed, hundreds injured, dozens arrested, and public property being destroyed. Just since September 2023, five Eritreans have been killed in Israel. This violence must stop. I condemn any and all forms of violence and urge protestors to express their views peacefully. Eritrea should refrain from exercising undue interference in the lives of Eritreans in the diaspora and respect their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. I also call on Member States to ensure the protection of the rights of demonstrators, as well as those of festivalgoers, and to effectively address transnational repression and protect Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers.

Eritreans continued to flee the grave human rights situation in the country, with an estimated 17 per cent of the population of Eritrea having sought asylum abroad as of 2024. Amid the overall deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in the Horn of Africa, the situation of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers has become even more precarious and dangerous, compounding their vulnerability to trafficking in persons, kidnapping and extortion. The situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia has deteriorated severely, with roundups, mass detention of Eritreans and summary expulsion to Eritrea. The conflict in Sudan has caused internal displacement as well as onwards displacement to neighbouring countries of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers. Eritrean refugees and migrant women and girls were also subjected to grave violations in Khartoum and in areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, including sexual violence, kidnapping, domestic servitude and sexual slavery. Further, asylum and migratory policy trends in host countries are increasingly placing Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers under pressure, exacerbating their vulnerability and resulting in the infringement of their rights. I call upon Member States to exercise solidarity and ensure their protection in accordance with the provisions of international law governing asylum, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

I also call upon Member States to maintain international scrutiny of Eritrea and facilitate access to justice for Eritrean victims of human rights violations, including by supporting civil society and exercising universal jurisdiction according to their national legislation. The international community must not forsake Eritrean victims of violations. A brighter future for Eritrea hinges on ensuring justice for victims, this requires sustained international pressure to hold perpetrators accountable.

Eritrea has expressed that the Universal Periodic Review is its preferred avenue for engagement on human rights issues. I welcome Eritrea’s participation in its 4th UPR cycle review in May this year. However, the vast majority of the recommendations of its 3rd cycle review that had been accepted by Eritrea remained unimplemented. Particularly significant gaps and grave concerns remain in the areas of impunity; conditions of detention; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of opinion and expression; and administration of justice and fair trial. Beyond its participation in the Universal Periodic Review, there was no new engagement or cooperation with international and African human rights mechanisms during the reporting period, including with my mandate.

Finally, I reiterate my willingness to engage constructively with the Eritrea and to provide technical assistance. I urge the Eritrean government to take decisive and immediate action to address the pressing human rights issues facing the country. By taking meaningful steps towards reform, Eritrea can pave the way for a society where human rights are respected, and every individual can thrive.

Thank you.