



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis**

**Wednesday, April 18, 2018**

**2:30 – 4:00 p.m.**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and Co-Chair Congressman Hultgren in welcoming you to this hearing on the root causes of the refugee crisis in Eritrea. I especially thank the witnesses for their presence today.

We are living in a world in which we are bombarded by disturbing news on a daily basis.

On the human rights front, we constantly hear of brutal human rights abuses in places like Syria, China, Burma and the Middle East – credible reports of restrictions on freedom of expression and religion, arbitrary detention and torture, repression against minority communities and political opponents.

Still, it is shocking to hear about the human rights situation in Eritrea.

In part that's because, unlike the other countries I just mentioned, Eritrea is not in the headlines.

But it's also because I cannot think of another country not at war where people are fleeing at such a high rate. As much as 10% of Eritrea's population has left the country since 2000.

If that were happening in the United States, we'd be talking about 32 million people. It's a huge percentage.

As we will hear today, Eritrea is one of the world's top sources of refugees. So far this year, it ranks first among source countries of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean. Of the unaccompanied children arriving in Italy, more are Eritrean than Syrian.

We know that many Eritreans who flee are exploited by smugglers and traffickers, or find themselves in slave markets subjected to forced labor.

Some victims of this exploitation, after gaining their freedom, have said they would rather endure the experience of slavery all over again than to be sent back to their native country.

So what is going on?

The Eritrean regime is authoritarian – a “one-man dictatorship” that has not held elections since the country gained independence in 1993.

Authorities restrict freedom of speech, press, assembly, religion, internal movement and foreign travel. People have been detained for years without trial.

And it gets worse: a UN Commission of Inquiry alleges that crimes against humanity – including enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, torture, persecution, rape and murder -- have been committed in Eritrea in a “persistent, widespread and systematic” way since 1991.

The government's own policy of indefinite forced conscription for national service amounts to a form of enslavement. What is supposed to be 6 months of military training and 12 months of active service can be made to last for as long as a decade, at very low rates of pay. This alone is a major reason that people flee.

You will probably not be surprised to hear that government officials are not held accountable for these abuses. Impunity is the norm.

The failures of governance in Eritrea extend to the economy. In a country in which 80% of the population depends on subsistence farming, the government prioritizes spending on defense over agriculture.

It is likely that there is food insecurity and hunger, but there is too little data to measure the extent. The regime bars the entry of UN and humanitarian agencies, and in the past has denied food shortages.

Even so, in 2017 UNICEF reported national data suggesting that half – **half!** – of Eritrean children exhibited stunted growth, indicating malnutrition.

No wonder the remittances sent by Eritreans abroad are a lifeline for those who stay in the country.

So my question today is what we in Congress can do about all of this.

That's always my question, but in this case, we have tried many of the usual tools.

Diplomatic relations are restricted; there has been no U.S. ambassador in the country since 2010. We no longer provide aid, and several Eritrean officials are subject to U.S. sanctions – although not on human rights grounds.

The country is essentially isolated. Is this the best policy?

I am eager to hear recommendations from our panel for steps that could increase protections for the Eritrean people.

I want to close by mentioning Dawit Isaak, a prisoner of conscience in the Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

Dawit is an award-winning writer and journalist. He was detained in 2001, ostensibly for demanding democratic reforms in a series of letters. He has never been charged, nor tried for anything. We do not even know for sure if he is still alive.

The Eritrean president seems to delight in this arbitrary injustice. In 2009, he publicly declared "We will not have any trial and we will not free him."

I urge everyone here today to join me in calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Dawit Isaak.

Thank you.