



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

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

**April 18, 2018**

**2:30 – 4:00 PM**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

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

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on Eritrea and Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis.

I would like to thank our esteemed witnesses for coming to testify today. You are each doing important, demanding work, and we appreciate your presence here.

The global refugee crisis, for the most part, has been sparked by people fleeing countries embroiled in violent armed conflict, but this is not the case for Eritrea. Though it has ongoing border disputes with its neighbors, Eritrea is not at war or experiencing largescale terrorism.

Yet, to date in 2018, Eritrea ranks first among source countries of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean: over 1,500 Eritreans have arrived in Italy in just the past three months. By some estimates, as much as 10 percent of Eritrea's population has fled the country since 2000. The rate of Eritreans crossing to Italy from Egypt and Libya was at an all-time high in 2015, when almost 39,000 people made the dangerous Mediterranean crossing. Of the unaccompanied children arriving in Italy, Eritreans are the largest nationality.

For those that leave Eritrea, the dangers they face are almost unimaginable. Many of these asylum seekers are exploited by smugglers and human traffickers, or find themselves in Libyan slave markets enduring detention, torture, and forced labor. Some, after gaining their freedom, expressed they would rather endure the experience of slavery over again than to be sent back to

their native country. In the absence of armed conflict, why are so many people leaving this country?

As you will hear from our witnesses today, most of these migrants are in search of something more fundamental than economic prosperity. They are trying to secure basic human rights and safety for themselves and their families.

President Isaias Afwerki has ruled Eritrea since 1993, and the country has not held elections since that time. Civil society groups, religious communities, independent journalists, and opposition political parties are marginalized, and many times are criminalized, imprisoned, and tortured. Military conscription is mandatory and indefinite beginning at the age of 18. In 2016, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry stated that the manner in which Eritreans were treated in detention facilities and military training camps amounted to crimes against humanity. The Eritrean government interferes and controls the internal affairs of registered religious groups, and bans the activities of unregistered religious groups.

Perhaps no group has been more harshly treated than Jehovah's Witnesses. Eritrean Jehovah's Witnesses were stripped of their citizenship in 1994, meaning they are denied permission to engage in most occupations and all higher-level education. They regularly face imprisonment for taking part in religious activities, and Human Rights Watch reports that more than 50 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in 2017. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that four of their members have died in custody in the last twenty years, and that they have no way to start a dialogue about their treatment with the Eritrean government, as the government has refused to meet with any representatives of the group from within Eritrea or overseas.

In 2006, the leader of Eritrea's Coptic Orthodox Church, Patriarch Abune Antonios, took a stand against state interference in religious activities. Motivated by his faith, his actions landed him in prison, and he has only been seen once in the last 12 years. On the wall of my office I am placing pictures of human rights defenders unjustly imprisoned for exercising their freedom of expression, and Patriarch Antonios is included in that group. Now in his 90s, he is also listed in the Lantos Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

The purpose of today's hearing is not to condemn the Eritrean government, but to understand the human rights conditions causing the people of Eritrea to flee in such large numbers, particularly as it affects journalists, religious groups, and those forcibly conscripted into the military. Witnesses will also talk about the life-threatening dangers that these asylum seekers face on their journey, including human trafficking and forced labor.

I look forward to hearing their policy recommendations for how Congress and the international community can more strategically address these complex issues.

###