

ERITREA: ROOT CAUSES OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

APRIL 18, 2018

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ERITREA: ROOT CAUSES OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18, 2018

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C.

The commission met, pursuant to call, at 2:30 p.m., in Room 2255 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. James P. McGovern and Hon. Randy Hultgren [co-chairmen of the commission] presiding.

Mr. HULTGREN: Good afternoon. We can go ahead and get started if that is all right. It is a busy day with a lot of committees going on. So I know some other members will be joining us and coming in and out. We do want to get started. We have votes later on this afternoon.

Good afternoon. Welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on "Eritrea: The 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 large scale 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 all 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 far more fundamental than economic prosperity. They are trying to secure basic human rights and safety for themselves and their families.

President Isaias Afwerki -- excuse me -- 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 international -- 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 20 years, and that they have no way to start a dialog about their treatment with the Eritrean Government, as the government has refused to meet with any representatives of the group from which Eritrea or overseas -- within Eritrea or overseas.

In 2006, the leaders 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 nineties, 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 the hearing today and look forward to hearing policy recommendations for how Congress and the international community can more strategically address these complex issues.

We have two panels this afternoon. First, I am grateful to have Jana Mason, a Senior Advisor for External Relations and Government Affairs in the Washington, D.C.

Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She represents the agency's interests with the U.S. Government, particularly with the State Department and Congress, with non-governmental organizations.

I am grateful that you are here today. And with that, we will give it over to your testimony.

[The prepared statement of Co-chair Hultgren follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE RANDY HULTGREN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF ILLINOIS AND CO-CHAIRMAN OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION



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.

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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.

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

**STATEMENT OF JANA MASON, SENIOR ADVISOR, EXTERNAL
RELATIONS AND GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS HIGH
COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES**

Ms. MASON: Thank you, Chairman Hultgren. And I would like to thank the Commission in general, all the members.

Is it not on? Okay, let me start again.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HULTGREN: Can you pull it nice and close to you.

Ms. MASON: And I would like to thank the Commission in general, all the members, all the staff for the work that you do, not only on this issue but on behalf of humanitarian crises and refugees around the world.

As noted, my name is Jana Mason. I am with the D.C. Office of the technically called the United -- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It is a big name. We tend to refer to ourselves as the U.N. Refugee Agency, which is a bit more descriptive. I have been in my position for ten years. And in that time I have had the opportunity to see first-hand the work of the Commission in highlighting not only human rights but refugee-specific issues around the globe. So, so I thank you for that and for this opportunity.

As you are aware, refugees are persons who are persons who are defined under international law and under U.S. law as well as persons who are outside their home country, so they have crossed an international border, and they can't go home because they fear persecution. That is the key word. And that persecution can be on behalf of one of five things: their race; their religion; their national origin; their political opinion, political views; or their membership in a particular social group. And all those categories are very relevant, as you have said, to the situation of Eritreans.

In my written testimony I go into some detail about the situation of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in neighboring countries and elsewhere. So today in the brief oral statement I would like to focus on just a few key points and key messages regarding the challenges faced by these refugees and the response of my organization and our partners.

First I would like to emphasize that the situation in Eritrea is one of the most underreported crises in the world today. I think that is very important to make that point. In January, the International aid group CARE, which is one of our partners in many parts of the world, launched a report called "Suffering in Silence." And this report highlights what they call the ten most underreported humanitarian crises of 2017. It sounds like one of those Facebook, you know, list of ten things. But this one I, I would really

recommend to you, because in this report Eritrea is ranked at number two. And they went in order. Number two of the second most underreported crises in the world.

So, to quote very briefly from that report. "The prolonged military service obligation and forced labor coupled with ongoing conflict" -- they mention the border dispute -- "and poor economic conditions continue to fuel migration of young Eritreans. Eritreans constitute one of the largest groups of refugees in Europe and Africa."

These facts in that report are bared out in a report that my organization did last year. Every year we issue our Global Trends Report. And the most recent report from last year in fact shows Eritreans to be the ninth largest refugee group in the world. And I think that would probably surprise a lot of people. And yet my colleagues and I here in the Washington Office of UNHCR can bear witness to the fact that we are rarely asked to provide a briefing on Eritrea.

We talk about Syria. We talk about the Rohingya. We talk about many, many critical crises around the world. Rarely do we get asked about Eritrea. So that is another reason that we really appreciate this opportunity today.

My second point after how hidden a crisis it is is to give you a little more specificity on the numbers. My second point is to say that we are very, very concerned by our estimate of current figure of about half a million Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers globally. As of last month, there were about 168,000 registered Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Ethiopia, one of the main neighboring countries. Most of the people in Ethiopia are in camps in the Shire region in the north and Afar in the northeast. Some 14,000 in about five camps, mostly in the capital of Addis.

Another 115,000 Eritrean refugees were estimated to reside in Sudan as of the end of last year. And these are based on Sudanese Government figures.

Sudan, it should be mentioned, has hosted Eritrean refugees in its camps in the east and in Khartoum for more than 40 years, which makes this one of Africa's most protracted refugee situations, again, not getting much attention because it has gone on for so long.

Another estimated 140,000 Eritrean refugees resided in Europe as of the end of 2016, the most recent year we have those stats. In Europe the major host countries are Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. Last year an additional 500 Eritrean refugees were resettled to Europe through formal third country resettlement programs, while about 1,100 resided or were resettled to the United States. The U.S. has continued over the years to resettle relatively small numbers of Eritrean refugees.

Another 27,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are living in Israel. My written testimony goes into a little bit more detail about the situation in Israel. It is something that we have been very engaged on recently.

Less certain but of tremendous concern is the number of Eritrean refugees who have left a neighboring country and undertake a treacherous journey via the Sinai or Libya to reach Europe. I know the Commission is very interested in this situation.

Which really leads to my third point, which is that refugees who undertake this onward journey experience numerous horrors and abuses along the way. Refugees fleeing Eritrea, just like refugees fleeing from other countries in the region, are exposed to extortion, kidnaping for ransom, imprisonment, torture, rape, trafficking, and even death at sea crossing the Mediterranean. I know that some of the other witnesses will give more detail on that. But these individuals are extremely vulnerable and require urgent international protection.

Of particular concern are the high numbers of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean refugee children who are extremely vulnerable to violence and exploitation. And I will say, despite the lack of widespread attention to this crisis that I mentioned before, there has been some very good, very compelling reporting done on the situation of people taking the migration routes through the Sinai into Israel, into Libya. And there is a very good video. There are some very good press reports. You probably have access to them. I could commend some of them to the Commission if needed. In fact, last night I re-watched a video that really tells the very emotional story of this journey.

Which brings me to my fourth and second-to-last point, which is that UNHCR is stepping up our efforts to combat trafficking and smuggling of Eritrean refugees, and others from other countries, refugees and asylum seekers. We undertake these efforts with a variety of partners, including governments and other U.N. agencies, including the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime, and UNICEF as well.

These activities have included awareness campaigns aimed at refugees and asylum seekers, efforts to support the criminalization of smuggling, of trafficking, capacity building for local border officials and, when needed, offering direct support to victims of trafficking and smuggling. And I will say when we talk about trafficking, smuggling, and what is generally referred to as a mixed migration, a mixed slow, it is important to emphasize the distinction between refugees and migrants. While both groups are clearly vulnerable in this context, migrants, especially economic migrants, are people who choose to move in order to improve their lives.

Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom. It is not a choice. They often or sometimes take the same routes to a better life or to freedom. Obviously we believe both groups should be treated with human dignity and with respect for their human rights. But as the U.N. Refugee Agency, our mandate is for the group fleeing persecution, and Eritreans clearly fall into that group.

My final point is that Eritrean refugees, like all refugees globally, require long-term solutions. In the case of Eritrea, this would ideally take the form of a resolution to the domestic challenges that have led so many to leave the country in the first place, like the forced conscription and the forced labor that we talked about. If these issues were resolved, this could in turn allow for a large-scale voluntary return to Eritrea from Ethiopia and elsewhere that my agency would be happy to assist.

That doesn't seem to be happening any time soon, though. So while we are waiting for that we really need to strengthen refugee protection and solutions, both in the neighboring host countries and along the transit routes. That is critical. So we and our partners are working to ensure that these vulnerable refugees receive appropriate legal status as well as the assistance that they need. However, the problem is that these lifesaving protection efforts remain not only out of the public eye but underreported and, unfortunately underfunded by the international community. So we need greater attention. Which just brings me back to my first point which is that this hearing can go a long way towards bringing attention to this. We know the Commission often focuses on underrepresented, underreported crises. So we thank you for that. And, hopefully, this will be a step in regalanizing some attention to this, this important crisis.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Jana Mason follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JANA MASON



Written Testimony of:

Jana Mason
Senior Advisor, U.S. Government and External Relations
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Regional Representation for the USA and Caribbean

at a hearing on

“Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis”

before the

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

April 18, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, and members of the Commission, on behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss UNHCR's ongoing work assisting Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers.

My name is Jana Mason, and I am the Senior Advisor for External Relations and Government Affairs at UNHCR's regional office in Washington, D.C., a position that I have held since 2008. During my tenure, I have repeatedly seen the critical role of the Commission in shedding light on numerous human rights and humanitarian crises around the globe. Our office has enjoyed an excellent working relationship with the Commission, and we look forward to continued collaboration.

OVERVIEW OF UNHCR

UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, is mandated by the international community to ensure refugee protection and to identify durable solutions for refugee populations. UNHCR has nearly 470 offices in 130 countries around the world. More than 85% of our staff serve in deep field and in hardship locations, working tirelessly to assist the world's most vulnerable people.

UNHCR's mandate and international law define a refugee as a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While refugees and asylum seekers (people whose claims to refugee status have not yet been determined) are our core constituency, UNHCR's populations of concern also includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons.

The vast number of forcibly displaced persons around the world—currently at more than 65 million—and the growing complexity of displacement make our work and that of our partners both more challenging and more needed than ever before. We recognize and greatly appreciate this Commission's ongoing support of UNHCR and your concern for vulnerable people worldwide.

KEY MESSAGES

- UNHCR remains highly concerned about the half a million Eritrean refugees who have left their country in search of international protection. As part of **one the largest refugee groups on the African continent**, many Eritrean refugees have fled to the neighboring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan, with some continuing on treacherous journeys via the Sinai or Libya to reach Europe. Of particular concern to UNHCR are the **high numbers of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean refugee children who are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation**.

- Along the way, **refugees fleeing Eritrea are exposed to extortion and the horrors of kidnapping for ransom, imprisonment, torture, rape, trafficking, and even death at sea.** These individuals are extremely vulnerable and require urgent international protection.
- **UNHCR has been increasing its efforts to combat the trafficking and smuggling of refugees and asylum seekers. We undertake these efforts with a range of partners, including governments, UNICEF, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), IOM, and other partners.** Activities have included awareness raising campaigns for refugees and asylum seekers; efforts to support the criminalization of smuggling and trafficking; capacity building for local authorities, immigration officials, and border guards; and offering support to victims of trafficking and smuggling in certain contexts. **When speaking about trafficking, smuggling, and the broader context of mixed migration, it is also worth emphasizing the distinction between refugees and migrants.** Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives. **Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom.** Despite this distinction, however, migrants and refugees are both at risk of trafficking and related human rights violations.
- **Eritrean refugees, like all refugees who endure difficult circumstances during their displacement, require long-term solutions.** In the case of Eritrea, this would ideally take the form of a resolution to the domestic challenges that have led so many to leave the country in the first place, which would in turn allow for the voluntary repatriation of Eritrean refugees. In the meantime, while awaiting such a resolution, some Eritreans—particularly the youth—decide to move onwards because of a lack of hope and prospects for the future. For example, in many refugee camp situations in Africa, there is limited access to quality primary and secondary education, and there is little access to skills training or job opportunities. Smugglers are tempting refugees with the promise of a better future elsewhere. UNHCR and its partners are working to ensure that these vulnerable refugees receive appropriate legal status and assistance they so desperately need. **However, broader solutions are needed for Eritrean refugees—including more resettlement and family reunification—so that refugees have a legal pathway to improve their lives, without having to turn to unscrupulous human smugglers.** These life-saving protection efforts remain severely underfunded by the international community.

SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW

UNHCR has a small presence—14 staff total—inside Eritrea, with our office based in Asmara, the capital. Inside the country, we work to assist and try to find solutions for the roughly 2,400 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries. Most of them—some 2,300—are camp-based Somali refugees, and the remaining 100 are urban refugees from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and

Sudan. Among the solutions that we pursue for this group are third-country resettlement and, for some, voluntary return to their home country.

UNHCR estimates that there are currently about half a million Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers globally. Of these, young adults make up a significant percentage; for example, in one camp in Shire, Ethiopia, 75% of the Eritrean refugees are under 25 years of age. Tight restrictions on the issuance of passports and exit visas from Eritrea result in many being forced to violate the law when fleeing the country.

As of March 2018, about 168,000 registered Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are in Ethiopia, a nation that hosts over 900,000 total refugees and asylum seekers. About 115,000 Eritrean refugees were estimated to reside in Sudan at the end of 2017, based on Sudanese government figures. However, in both countries it is difficult to know for certain how many Eritreans have departed for subsequent locations. Since 2016, we've seen a steep decline in the number of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers crossing into Ethiopia and Sudan. Refugees report that this decline has been due to increased border monitoring inside Eritrea. However, since the beginning of 2018 there has been a noted increase, with over 3,700 Eritreans entering Ethiopia and almost 2,000 entering Sudan during this time.

In Ethiopia, most Eritrean refugees reside in camps in the Shire and Afar regions, while some 14,000 Eritreans are benefiting from Ethiopia's generous out-of-camp policy and mainly reside in Addis Ababa. There is a high percentage of unaccompanied minors and separated children in the camps, and with limited access to basic services, there are few opportunities available to them. Sudan has hosted Eritrean refugees in its camps in the Kassala and Gedaref regions in the east for more than forty years, which makes this one of Africa's most protracted refugee situations. UNHCR, together with the Government of Sudan, also assist Eritrean refugees in urban areas, particularly in Khartoum, where there are ongoing challenges to legal and physical protection as well as to basic services including education and health.

Approximately 140,000 Eritrean refugees resided in Europe at the end of 2016, the last year for which such statistics are currently available. Major host countries include Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. In 2017, an additional 500 Eritrean refugees were resettled to Europe, while over 1,100 arrived in the United States.

The Eritrean refugee situation is particularly notable for the secondary movement of those who flee. In most cases, Eritreans first cross the border into Ethiopia or Sudan. However, as noted earlier, many Eritrean refugees, especially children and young adults, proceed to travel to third or fourth countries or even beyond that, motivated by a desire for better educational services, to reunite with relatives abroad, and/or to improve their living conditions or economic prospects. Many refugees consider reaching Europe to be their sole option for achieving a lasting solution. For example, some Eritrean refugees entering through the eastern part of Sudan first travel to Khartoum before pursuing a northern migratory route to Libya, and from there they travel onwards—with the help of people smugglers—to try to reach Europe.

Some have taken even less direct routes. Approximately 27,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are living in Israel, along with nearly 8,000 Sudanese—although Israel has not received any Eritreans or Sudanese since May 2016. Since Israel took over refugee status determination from UNHCR in 2009, only ten Eritreans (and one Sudanese) have been recognized as refugees. In contrast, the asylum approval rate for Eritreans in European Union member states, for the period 2008-2015, was over 90%. Recognition rates for Eritrean asylum seekers in the United States are close to 70%.

Earlier this year, Israel began deportations of many of Eritreans and Sudanese, offering them either indefinite detention or a \$3,500 cash grant and relocation to a country in Africa that is not their home country—widely reported to be Rwanda. Those who chose the latter experienced security threats following the relocation and were then smuggled through Uganda and elsewhere to try to reach Europe. UNHCR identified 80 cases of Eritrean refugees or asylum seekers who were relocated by Israel and subsequently risked their lives by taking dangerous onward journeys to Europe via Libya. We interviewed these individuals in Rome and learned that they had traveled hundreds of kilometers through conflict zones in South Sudan, Sudan, and Libya after being relocated by Israel. Along the way, they suffered torture, extortion, and other forms of abuse before risking their lives once again by crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. Some of them said that people traveling with them had died en route to Libya. UNHCR is currently working with Israel and the international community to find alternative solutions for protection of asylum seekers, in line with international standards.

THE REFUGEE JOURNEY AND UNHCR's RESPONSE

In 2011, UNHCR issued new *Eligibility Guidelines* to assist decision-makers, including UNHCR staff, governments, and private practitioners, in assessing the international protection needs of asylum seekers from Eritrea. These guidelines are legal interpretations of the refugee criteria based on the social, political, economic, security, human rights, and humanitarian conditions in Eritrea.

The guidelines for Eritrea were issued against a backdrop of continuous high numbers of asylum applications by Eritreans, which required an update on the particular profiles for which international protection needs may arise. Claims lodged by asylum seekers from Eritrea, whether on the basis of the refugee criteria contained in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) and its 1967 Protocol and/or the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention), will generally need to be considered on their own merits according to fair and efficient status determination procedures and up-to-date and publicly available country of origin information.

UNHCR considers that individuals with the profiles outlined below require a particularly careful examination of possible risks. These risk profiles, while not necessarily exhaustive, include (i) persons avoiding military/national service; (ii) members of political opposition groups and

government critics; (iii) journalists and other media professionals; (iv) trade unionists and labor rights activists; (v) members of minority religious groups; (vi) women and children with specific profiles; (vii) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals; (viii) members of certain minority ethnic groups; and (ix) victims of trafficking.

Making the decision to leave one's country, whether alone or with family, is never a choice taken lightly. This is especially true for families that include vulnerable individuals such as children or the elderly. Often, conditions at home pose such great challenges, with little hope of rapid improvement, that facing danger and leaving for the unknown presents a better opportunity. This has been in the case in Eritrea, where hundreds of thousands have left, risking their lives and livelihoods.

More than 116,000 people from a variety of countries, including refugees, crossed the sea to Italy in 2017 alone. Since January 2018, nearly 6,000 refugees and migrants have reached Italian shores, with the large majority of sea arrivals having departed from Libya. Top nationalities include Eritrean, Tunisian, Nigerian, Pakistani, and Libyan. As of mid-March 2018, more than 3,000 refugees and migrants have been disembarked in Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard.

The long, challenging journeys through multiple regions and countries that I mentioned previously pose great risks to the refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR continues to be concerned about the potential for trafficking, kidnapping, and smuggling of individuals, along with extortion and violence. Eritreans and others who make this journey often lack legal and physical protection and have little choice but to submit to their abusers' demands.

People in need of international protection often make their journey without being aware, able, or willing to avail themselves of refugee status determination options and protection services that may be available along the way. In Libya itself, people of concern are living with host communities but, because of the security situation in the country, have restricted freedom of movement. Others are currently out of reach, detained in official detention centers run by Libyan authorities, or in warehouses or "connection houses" operated by smugglers or traffickers. As noted above, UNHCR and our partners in government, the wider UN, and the private sector are undertaking a variety of efforts to combat trafficking and smuggling.

UNHCR values the efforts and shares the legitimate interest of governments to combat trafficking in persons, a crime that may entail serious violations of the human rights of its victims, and we specifically draw attention to the humanitarian consequences of this crime. We urge countries to adopt a human rights-based approach to human trafficking, calling them on them to not only identify and prosecute the perpetrators but also include measures to address the protection needs of victims or individuals who are or who have been at risk of being trafficked.

In Europe, UNHCR works with those who make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. Given the scale and complexity of the needs, UNHCR is stepping up its response to help government authorities respond to the many challenges they are confronting. It is UNHCR's field-based assessment that many of those who attempt the dangerous journey to Europe through

Libya would not risk it if they were better informed of the perils involved. Nor would they risk their life if adequate protection, assistance, and solutions were available and effective across the various African countries they cross prior to reaching Libya, and in Libya itself. Rescue at sea, in line with international maritime law and human rights standards, remains imperative. Support to Libyan border management authorities, including the coast guard, must be accompanied by building adequate reception and asylum systems. UNHCR has also made specific recommendations that could help tackle trafficking, including the freezing of assets, travel bans, disrupting the supply of revenues and materials, robust prosecutions, and sanctions against known senior figures and companies engaged in trafficking.

It is crucial to emphasize that the risks involved in these journeys are not limited to adults. Many children have suffered from physical and psychological cruelty on their journey, including sexual and gender-based violence. UNHCR recently heard the story of an Eritrean boy known as “Solomon.” He is fourteen now but was just ten years old when he fled his home. He was repeatedly bought and sold by traffickers on his journey. At one point, held by captors in Libya, he lived for a month in a room with hundreds of other people, was given little food, and suffered almost daily beatings. He was then crammed on a boat for Europe with 900 other refugees and migrants on a journey in which many people died. Luckily, and unlike so many others, he arrived safely in Italy. However, to this day he has not been able to reunite with his aunt in the Netherlands. Stories like Solomon’s are all too common.

To help raise awareness and combat trafficking, UNHCR supported an information campaign, “Telling the Real Story,” which highlighted concerns related to trafficking, smuggling, and kidnapping in Sudan and Egypt by reporting on torture, hostage-taking, and very high ransom payments. While many refugees know that the journey is dangerous, they often do not understand the full extent of the risks and the suffering that may lie ahead, and they may have unrealistic expectations about life in other parts of the world. “Telling the Real Story” includes a collection of authentic stories, told by the refugees and asylum seekers themselves. They speak to their own communities and share their experiences, good and bad. Through these testimonies, those who might choose to embark on the journey are informed of the full scope and perils that they may encounter, in order to help them make an informed decision.

CONCLUSION

UNHCR continues to provide life-saving protection and assistance in countries where Eritrean refugees, along with refugees and asylum seekers from other nations, have sought safety. Our humanitarian response, and that of our multiple partners, includes food, medicine, water, sanitation, and shelter, among other forms of assistance. We have also responded to the situation of Eritreans and others facing danger in Libya by providing vulnerable individuals with lifesaving evacuations to Niger, where they temporarily reside while UNHCR secures a permanent solution in a third country. UNHCR resorts to this evacuation model in situations where asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in life-endangering circumstances. This is a last resort option and requires extraordinary levels of support from all parties involved; we’d like to particularly recognize the government of Niger for being a close partner for UNHCR in this endeavor.

UNHCR hopes to be able to carry out more evacuations throughout 2018 to provide solutions to refugees and asylum seekers from a range of countries including Somalia, Eritrea, and Yemen. Since November 2017, UNHCR has evacuated over 1,300 refugees and asylum seekers out of Libya to third countries. However, let me stress that our efforts will remain limited in scale as long as resettlement commitments remain insufficient. I would like to reiterate the High Commissioner's urgent call for 40,000 resettlement places for refugees located in 15 countries along the Central Mediterranean route.

These refugee evacuations and relocations must be part of broader asylum-building and migration management efforts to address the complex movement of migrants and refugees who embark on perilous journeys across the Sahara and the Mediterranean. There is a clear need to create more regular and safe opportunities for refugees to find safety and international protection, and to address the root causes and drivers of displacement.

UNHCR has also continued its engagement with the government of Eritrea on family reunification for a number of unaccompanied and separated children in countries in the region, in accordance with international standards. And, in several countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan, we have provided legal counseling and assistance, as well as capacity building support to government authorities, to ensure effective protection of children.

The Eritrean refugee crisis presents a number of protection challenges for a highly vulnerable population on the move throughout a large geographic region. The international community must remain vigilant about both the causes and the impacts of this crisis, and must increase its political and financial engagement to meet these challenges.

I thank you again for convening a hearing on this important issue, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you for your testimony. And I apologize for the noise. I see they are working on the doors, so had to go shut the doors.

But hopefully we will speak loudly in class so people in the back can hear.

But thank you again for your work. And thank you for the information in your testimony.

Maybe if you could just talk a little bit more in detail. You touched on this in your testimony, but to what extent do you think the people of Eritrea understand the dangers they may face as they emigrate, whether it is through Libya, or Egypt, or Sudan, or Yemen, or the Mediterranean? You talk about significant dangers that they face there. Is there any way for them to be made aware of this before they feel like they are forced to leave?

Ms. MASON: That is a good question. Because, as I mentioned, we are undertaking with partners awareness raising campaigns to try to make them aware of the dangers that they could face.

I think there may be two issues that explain why so many of them undertake this journey anyway. One of them is the experience that they have had in Eritrea, the fears of what they will experience if they get returned home, and the lack of opportunities in the host countries. Even though they are safe in the host countries, because of a lack of funding, for example food rations in Ethiopia are about to be cut down from 2,100 calories a day to 1,200. I can't even live on 1,200 calories a day. When you have children who are growing and you have people that are already on the brink of malnutrition, this is very critical.

They are losing hope, not unlike the Syrians, who in 2015 we started seeing large numbers of Syrians and others going across the Eastern Mediterranean even though they were ostensibly safe in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon. They were losing hope for themselves, for their future, for their kids. So when things are so bad at home and they see no resolution to their plight in the host country, they make the decision to flee.

The second thing I think that might explain somewhat why they're willing to take these risks is just the youth. You know, we all know from this country, you know, young people often take chances that the older people might not take because they are just not aware, don't have the experience to know what is likely to be ahead of them. And this is a situation that, although it is a refugee crisis, it is a very much children's refugee crisis. In part because of the national service that targets young people, and in part just because of other factors, there's probably a higher proportion of minors, and very young minors, in these situations than in other refugee situations.

So, they are young, they are willing to take a chance while not being fully cognizant of what they could face, and they are desperate. So youth and desperation can

be part of it. But we, nevertheless, we are trying to step up our efforts to try to, number one, explain what they could risk and, number two, maybe give them other, other opportunity.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks. The U.N. also provided assistance to Sudan to combat human trafficking that works at facilitating Eritrean migration to Libya and ultimately to Europe. What impact has this effort had?

And there have also been allegations that Sudan has forcibly repatriated Eritrean refugees to Eritrea. Are these allegations credible? And what happens to those refugees who are repatriated?

Ms. MASON: Yes. Although we do have a small office in Eritrea itself -- we have about 14 people, we have worked there for many years -- our biggest role in Eritrea is to assist locally 2,400 or so refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries in Eritrea. So we do maintain a presence there for that purpose.

We don't, however, have enough offices, nor do we have a mandate to do human rights monitoring necessarily. So maybe some of the other witnesses can talk to that.

But we are aware of what we believe are probably credible reports of returns of Eritreans from other countries. We are usually not in a position, unfortunately, to stop these returns. And unless we can have access to the individual at the time, it is hard to know what category of person they fall under. If they are somebody that is already registered with us as a refugee, then we -- or as an asylum-seeker if we haven't decided their case yet -- then we would intervene and probably put a stop to it.

So others may have more information, but I would say that I do believe there definitely have been credible reports over the years, including recent years, of returns to Eritrea that probably would not be viewed as fully voluntary, given the conditions that they are fleeing.

In terms of what role the assistance has had, I think any efforts to counter trafficking are useful. But I am probably not in a position yet to talk specifically about Sudan and whether that has been very effective.

Mr. HULTGREN: Okay. In your testimony you talked about the increase in unaccompanied minors that are fleeing and making the journey out of the country, and oftentimes as far away as Europe. I wonder what your perspective, of from your work what has attributed to this significant increase of unaccompanied minors?

Ms. MASON: Again, I know you have human rights organizations testifying later. They can probably give more detail. But we are aware, for example, I didn't get a chance to mention in my oral testimony but we have issued, UNHCR has issued something that we call eligibility guidelines to assess the refugee claims of people from

Eritrea. We do this for other populations as well to give guidance to our staff if they are interviewing a refugee.

And even though each case has to be considered on its own merits, we have identified certain profiles of Eritreans whose cases require a particularly careful examination of the facts and potential risks. And one of the categories that we recognize is women and children with specific profiles, as well as persons avoiding military national service. The military service has come up. You have mentioned it, we have mentioned it, I am sure other panelists will, as a major driver of people leaving.

Obviously many countries in the world have national service. I think it really bears looking deeply into this form of national service and comparing it with others. The reports that we hear are that this national service is prolonged. The salaries are not sufficient to provide for the needs of the individual as well as their families. That despite a minimum age, statutory minimum age for national service, that at times children much younger than that are forced into such service.

So it is understandable that if parents want to avoid what they see as something that could be an abusive situation for their children they will send them out of the country. Sometimes children, we have heard, are crossing the borders totally on their own unaccompanied as well. So it is the age of national service and it is the conditions as well. Again, people that are reporting on the ground from Eritrea can go into more detail. But we do believe that this is one reason that we have a lot of youth who have made this journey.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks. Last couple questions, if that is all right. One I am not sure if you would have much comment on, and I will ask the other panelists on this as well.

But we heard from many people as we prepared for this hearing today on all different sides of this issue. There was some discussion, especially those of you maybe more supportive of the current administration in Eritrea, of blaming much of this on Ethiopia and the battle there. Could you from your perspective what is happening there? What is the hope, I guess, for a possible solution? And is that real as far as the impact it has on human rights?

And then the last question, I guess, would be any recommendations you would have to, to myself, to Co-Chairman McGovern, or my colleagues of what we can do here in Congress to better protect people who are in Eritrea and the hope, again, for them to be able to remain in their country and to be, to have a safe place there. But if they are looking for a place of refuge, what else should we be doing or should we be aware of?

Ms. MASON: Yes, absolutely. On the first one, on the impact, you know, both the roles of the government and the impact of Ethiopia, that is definitely better addressed by some other panelist.

I will say that, as I mentioned, we do work in Eritrea. We do have an open dialog with the government both in terms of trying to find solutions for those 2,400 refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries in Eritrea, we are trying to get them either resettled in other countries or, in some cases if they are more migrants than refugees, they want to return home, you know, return to home with voluntary return. We have had a very good, constructive dialog with the government in terms of the eligibility guidelines that I mentioned. You know, clearly they take exception to some of what we have written there.

We rely on a variety of human rights sources when we come up with these guidelines, including some witnesses that will testify later, as well as the State Department's Country Reports. But we are always open to revising those guidelines. I think dialog, whoever the government is, dialog is always key.

On your second question, I mean I think the first thing you can do is what you are doing here which is just raise attention. Because, you know, you mention Eritrea and they are like, What? Where? So I just think keeping it on the forefront is good.

There are a few recommendations. I mean, one would be, as I mentioned, for those, you know, few hundred thousand who are in Ethiopia and Sudan, you know, most crises in Africa tend to be more underfunded than the ones, say, the Syria crisis, the Iraq response, ones that are viewed as more, more strategic interest to the U.S. and are more in the news. Our responses in Africa tend to be woefully underfunded.

The U.S., of course, is one of the major funders for humanitarian assistance in general. We would encourage you to keep that up.

And specifically with respect to WFP, you know, the Food for Peace account, is funding that. And as I said, we are at risk of severe malnutrition if WFP has to keep cutting food rations.

Second, because there are so many children, unaccompanied children involved in this situation, even in the camps in Ethiopia and elsewhere, one recommendation that my colleagues on the ground gave to me is as you are having bilateral discussions with the Ethiopians and others, giving them assistance in developing a foster care system and a better approach. Because a lot of these kids are so incredibly young but they are basically on their own in the camps, or they are being taken care of by brothers and sisters one or two years older than them. So a functioning foster care system, guidelines on how to implement that would be very effective.

But, finally, what is really needed, even though the ultimate solution is to make their journey safer -- of course the ultimate situation is, you know, a better situation at home -- but in the meantime we really need more legal pathways, as we call them for

people to escape violence and try to find safety. Putting themselves in the hands of traffickers or smugglers is not the answer.

But if there were more legal or permanent resettlement, it doesn't always have to be permanent if you have, again, the reunion opportunities. You know, for adults, short-term work visas, short-term humanitarian visas, ways that people can travel legally even if it is only meant to be temporary, anything to prevent them from feeling they have no hope but to put themselves in the hands of a smuggler and then try to take a boat across the Mediterranean. So, more support for legal avenues for relocation would be very useful.

Mr. HULTGREN. Thank you, Ms. Mason. Appreciate your testimony and responding to questions as well.

We will transition into our second panel now.

Father REESE: Good to see you again.

Mr. HULTGREN: I know, it is good.

Our second panel is Reverend Thomas J. Reese. Father Tom, thank you. We just worked together a couple hours ago, and it is good to see you again.

Father Thomas Reese was appointed to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom on May 15, 2014, reappointed on May 12, 2016, by then President Obama for a two-year term that goes through May 2018.

Grateful, again, so much for your service and friendship and your work. And with that, I will turn it over to you for your testimony.

STATEMENT OF FATHER THOMAS REESE, COMMISSIONER, UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Father REESE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are very grateful to you for your dedication to religious freedom. And thank you again for participating in our program this morning.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. I am Father Thomas Reese and have served as a USCIRF commissioner since 2014.

In my remarks I will provide just a few points on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea that are more fully developed in my written testimony. And I request that my written testimony be submitted for the record.

Mr. HULTGREN: Without objection.

Father REESE: Eritrea has long been one of the worst examples of state-sponsored suppression of freedom of religion or beliefs anywhere in the world. Since May 2004, USCIRF has recommended annually that the Secretary of State designate Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern, a CPC, for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In September 2004, the State Department designated Eritrea a CPC and it has remained on that list ever since.

USCIRF's 2018 annual report will be released later this month, and in it we will once again document the systematic abuses the government has perpetuated in the past year. The Eritrean Government does not trust or recognize religious communities which are relatively newer to the country, and only officially recognizes and allows activities of four religious groups: the Coptic Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Sunni Islam, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Any groups that are not formally registered -- in essence all but these official four -- are completely repressed.

In the past year, Eritrean authorities conducted waves of door-to-door searches and arrests of individuals for their religious identity. In May 2017 alone, authorities arrested almost 100 Christians, including 49 Evangelicals, at a secret wedding in the capital Asmara. The government still persecutes Jehovah's Witnesses and denies them basic citizenship rights, including access to identity and travel documents. At least three Jehovah's Witnesses are Eritrea's longest serving religious prisoners, having been imprisoned without trial since 1994.

Although it is not possible to know the total number of individuals who have been detained, the State Department reports between 1,200 and 3,000 individuals are held on religious grounds.

Activities of the officially-registered groups, too, are heavily monitored and controlled. The government has appointed its own religious leaders for Muslims and Christians, and arrested and imprisoned those who protest their decisions.

One example is the forced change of leadership of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the largest Christian denomination -- the largest Christian denomination and one of the four officially-permitted religions. Although he was elected as the third patriarch of the church in 2004, Patriarch Antonios was arrested and deposed by the Eritrean Government in 2006 for protesting the interference in the church affairs by the government. At 90 years old, he remains in detention at an undisclosed location and is denied due process. As part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project I have been advocating for the release of Patriarch Antonios, and for his right to resume his leadership position.

Last July Patriarch Antonios was seen in public for the first time in ten years, escorted by Eritrean security forces to a mass in Asmara, and then quickly returned to

house arrest. It was evidence that he was still alive, which is an answer to the prayers of many of his followers.

But let me use this opportunity once more to call on the Eritrean Government to immediately release Patriarch Antonios and allow him to resume his religious duties without restriction.

Freedom of religion or belief is inextricably linked with freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. The Eritrean Government restricts all of these out of fear that they threaten the stability of the country. Yet, the surges we have witnessed in migration and asylum application are a hallmark of unstable conditions. In this tightly-centralized and secure ties to environment, obtaining credible information can be a significant challenge. Yet, we know this, that thousands remain detained because of their religious identity.

We know from reports of those who are released that the religious prisoners of conscience endure horrific conditions. They are denied medical care, kept in solitary confinement, or in over-packed cells, subjected to extreme cold and heat. Every year some do not survive these harsh conditions. Clearly, many Eritreans are willing to risk poverty, enslavement, and even death in order to escape the appalling repression of President Isaias' government.

Given these ongoing trends, it is our recommendation that the U.S. Government strengthen its engagement on religious freedom issues in Eritrea. Specifically, the U.S. Government must use all available channels to press the Government of Eritrea to end the persecution of unregistered religious groups, and to process their registration applications.

We must also never cease in urging the Government of Eritrea to release detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities. As part of this, U.S. officials should constantly request to meet with Patriarch Antonios and other detained religious leaders at every available opportunity.

Finally, the U.S. Government should maintain the existing arms embargo and use the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to sanction specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for religious freedom violations. We must not relent until we have helped to bring about a complete transformation in the human rights and religious freedom conditions within Eritrea.

My thanks again to the Commission and you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this very important hearing. And with that I conclude my remarks.

[The prepared statement of Father Thomas J. Reese follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF FATHER THOMAS J. REESE



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**Testimony by Fr. Thomas Reese, Commissioner
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**Hearing on
“Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis”
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

April 18, 2018
2:30 – 4:00 pm
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Hultgren, Chairman McGovern, and other members of the Commission: Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea.

My name is Thomas Reese, a USCIRF Commissioner and the most recent past chair of the Commission from 2016-2017. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF is led by nine Commissioners who are appointed by the White House and the leadership of both houses of Congress from both parties.

Since May 2004, USCIRF has recommended annually that the Secretary of State designate Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In September 2004, the State Department designated Eritrea a CPC and it has remained on that list ever since. Eritrea remains one of the worst examples of state-sponsored repression of freedom of religion or belief in the world.

USCIRF’s 2018 annual report will be released later this month, and in it we document the systematic abuses the Eritrean government perpetrated in 2017 and offer recommendations for applying increased pressure on the Eritrean government to make reforms and respect the religious freedoms of its people.

Overview

Although Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the two countries remained in a violent border conflict until 2000, and in 2002 the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission issued a decision on the demarcation of the state boundaries. However, relations between the two countries remain poor and President Isaias Afwerki, who has ruled Eritrea since independence, has used the tensions to legitimize Eritrea's highly securitized environment, indefinite military service, and forced labor. The Eritrean government does not trust or recognize religious communities which are relatively newer to the country. In 2002, the government enacted a number of new restrictive laws. They officially banned all political parties other than the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and decreed that all religious groups must apply to be officially registered and cease all religious activities until approved. Laws restricting official registration in a state are an important indicator of the level of freedom for groups to practice their religion or beliefs and are too often a tool of repressive governments to inhibit a range of freedoms.

Eritrea officially recognizes and allows activities of four religious groups – the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church, Sunni Islam, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. While many other religious communities exist, such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Presbyterians, and Methodists, they have been denied registration and are persecuted or face discrimination. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities and Jehovah's Witnesses; over the past year, the Eritrean government increased its persecution of these groups. Security forces arrested followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. The government requires indefinite national service with no alternative for conscientious objectors, and Eritreans who refuse to participate are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated. Religious practice is prohibited in the military and conscripts are severely punished if found with religious materials or participating in religious gatherings. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims. Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios has been held under house arrest since 2007 for opposing government interference in internal church affairs.

Persecution of Non-Registered Religious Groups

Unregistered religious communities have continued to practice in secret at the risk of being arrested and imprisoned. In the past year, Eritrean authorities conducted waves of door-to-door searches and arrests of individuals because of their religious identity, and increased oppression of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities. In May 2017, authorities arrested almost 100 Christians nationwide, including 49 Evangelicals at a secret wedding in Asmara, and in June, police arrested an additional 70 Pentecostals and Evangelicals in house-to-house searches. In August, authorities arrest 23 Christians

in the capital, Asmara. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years.

The government continues to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses and since 1994 has denied them basic citizenship rights, such as access to identity and travel documents, because of their religious beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service, which are aspects of their faith. In 2017, three more Jehovah's Witnesses were reported arrested for their religious activities or unknown reasons, and the government of Eritrea still holds 55 Witnesses in detention. Jehovah's Witnesses Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam are Eritrea's longest-serving religious prisoners. They have been imprisoned in Sawa Prison without trial since September 24, 1994, for refusing military service.

Although it is not possible to know the total number of individuals who have been imprisoned or disappeared, the State Department estimates that between 1,200 and 3,000 individuals are held on religious grounds. Prisoners are also prohibited from practicing their faith or possessing religious books. Released religious prisoners continue to report that they were kept in solitary confinement, crowded conditions, or underground barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of medical care continue. Released Christian prisoners have reported being pressured to recant their faith and sign statements agreeing to no longer practice or engage in religious activities.

Oppression of State Authorized Religious Groups

While permitted to practice their faith and express their beliefs, officially registered groups are heavily monitored and controlled. The Eritrean government has long been acutely concerned about the potential interference of foreign governments and organizations, including in religious affairs, and in 1995 issued Proclamation No. 73/1995 with specific restrictions on relations with outsiders. The Proclamation bars religious groups from being involved in politics, from issuing publications related to political issues, and from hiring foreign employees or receiving foreign funding without approval of the government. This Proclamation also established a department of religious affairs tasked with overseeing the activities of registered religious institutions. The Catholic Church has been afforded some permissions to receive foreign funding from the Holy See and to engage more with international religious actors, but still under government scrutiny.

The government often appoints religious leaders for Muslims and Christians and arrests and imprisons those who protest the decisions. One example is the forced change of leadership of the Eritrean Orthodox Church – the largest Christian denomination and one of the four officially permitted religions. Although he was elected as the third Patriarch of the Church in 2004, Patriarch Abune Antonios was arrested and deposed by the Eritrean government in 2006 for protesting government interference in Church affairs. At 90 years old, he remains in detention at an undisclosed location, and denied due

process. As part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, which was launched last year, I advocate for the release of Patriarch Antonios and for his right to resume his leadership position. Last July, Patriarch Antonios was seen in public for the first time in 10 years – escorted by Eritrean security forces to a Mass in Asmara and then quickly returned to house arrest. It was evidence that he was still alive, an answer to the prayers of his many followers.

Last month, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetharuth, reported that hundreds of people have been arrested this year for protesting the death of Haji Musa Mohamednur, 93, who died in prison. Haji Musa was a senior member of the board of Al Diaa private Islamic school in Asmara who was arrested and imprisoned last year along with other school leadership for opposing the alleged government attempt to take over the school and impose new restrictions – including banning students from wearing the hijab and prohibiting religious teachings. The Eritrean Ministry of Information responded to international reports about protests and the situation by saying that they were sensationalist and false, and that the Ministry of Education is appropriately enforcing its secular system as it has done with other religious schools.

Censorship of the Press and Religious Communities

Freedom of religion or belief is inextricably linked with the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. The Eritrean government restricts all of these out of fear that they threaten the stability of the country, yet the surges we have witnessed in migration and asylum applications are a hallmark of unstable conditions. In this tightly centralized and securitized environment, independent journalism is fully suppressed – Eritrea in 2017 ranked 179 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index – just ahead of North Korea. State-run media has provided minimal and vague information about prisoners. Independent international observers have repeatedly been denied access to the country. This clampdown on the flow of information and unreliability of official news reports presents a significant challenge to human rights work and obtaining credible information on the experiences of persecuted religious groups.

The government of Eritrea surveils the religious services of the four recognized religious groups both in Eritrea as well as in diaspora communities around the world and encourages people to report on one another. The government has also sought to exert control over religious expression even of Eritreans abroad, including reportedly pressuring individuals to only attend government-approved Orthodox churches in the United States. Opposition groups and critics of the Eritrean government are often accused of being highly polarized in their accounts of the human rights and religious freedom conditions in country.

U.S. Policy

United States relations with Eritrea continue to be poor. U.S. officials in Eritrea have been able to attend religious ceremonies of the four official religious groups and meet with both registered and unregistered religious community representatives. However, connections are limited as USAID was expelled from Eritrea in 2005 and U.S. programs in country ended in 2006. U.S. foreign policy is focused predominantly on security concerns.

In 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority to adopt [UN Security Council Resolution 1907](#), sanctioning Eritrea for supporting armed groups in Somalia and failing to withdraw its forces from the Eritrea-Djibouti border following clashes with Djibouti. The sanctions include an arms embargo, travel restrictions, and asset freezes on the Eritrean government's political and military leaders, as well as on other individuals designated by the Security Council's Committee on Somalia Sanctions. In 2011, the United States voted in favor of [UN Security Council Resolution 2023](#), which calls on UN member states to implement Resolution 1907's sanctions and ensure their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities that would destabilize the region. In 2017, the U.S. government voted in the UN Security Council to retain an arms embargo on Eritrea and to renew the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea. The U.S. government also imposed new two-year sanctions as of March 2017, in response to Eritrea's assistance to North Korea.

U.S. officials continually raise religious freedom issues when speaking about Eritrea or with the government, and Eritrea has been designated a CPC by the State Department since 2004. Notably, Eritrea is the only country where a specific sanction for religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) has been imposed. The State Department most recently re-designated Eritrea as a CPC in December 2017, and continued the presidential action of the arms embargo, although since 2011 this has been under the auspices of UN Security Council Resolution 1907.

USCIRF Recommendations

In light of the breadth and scope of the ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations in Eritrea, USCIRF recommends stronger U.S. engagement on religious freedom issues. Specifically, the U.S. government should:

- Re-designate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios;

- End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups;
 - Grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses;
 - Provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards;
 - Bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards;
 - Bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and
 - Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
 - Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Antonios;
 - Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
 - Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council; and
 - Sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution denouncing Eritrea’s gross religious freedom and human rights violations.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you, Father Reese. If I could ask you a few questions just following up on your testimony. I wondered if you could talk -- you touched on this -- but how central it is to the governing philosophy of the Eritrean Government's hostility to religion, I wonder if that is really based on ideological grounds or is it a result of fear or paranoia that most of the leaderships there view the independent civil society groups? What's your position on that?

Father REESE: Yes. I think, you know, if a government claims to be a model of religious tolerance and harmony but in fact we know it isn't, it completely disregards the experience of religious groups that are not then part of this official four groups that are allowed. I think that there is, there clearly is a level of paranoia in the government. It does not like anything that rocks the boat, anything that looks like change.

When President Isaias took power he issued very strict laws governing religious affairs. And he has been enforcing these laws. And he believes that, you know, that there is nothing new after the Bible and the Koran, and therefore any group that wants to come into Eritrea with new ideas should simply be kept out and blocked from spreading their faith or their views.

He, you know, and at the same time he tries to use religious leaders for his own purposes, you know, to support his regime. And this was one of the reasons Patriarch Antonios got in trouble, because he wouldn't excommunicate people who had gotten in trouble with the government. So this is a man who is imposing his own views on religion. He is trying to use religion to sustain his power position, and is not a respecter of religious freedom.

Mr. HULTGREN: You mention in your testimony one of the groups that may just face some more severe abuse are Jehovah's Witnesses, and stripped of their Eritrean citizenship rights. I wonder if you could talk about what does that mean for the day-to-day lives? You talked about inability to travel for them. I wonder if they were singled out for that persecution and, again, how that impacts their day-to-day lives?

Father REESE: It really impacts them very seriously. And, I mean, Jehovah's Witnesses are a classic example of a group that is being persecuted. I mean they, you know, the government will complain they are doing this for national security. This is a very peaceful group, you know, and not a large group. It is absolutely no threat to the government.

But the government doesn't like them because they do not want to be in the armed services. And, of course, he has got this huge drafting system. These are people who are pacifists, who do not -- believe it is against their religion to participate in armed services. So, in fact, they don't even vote in these circumstances. So his response to that, well, if you are not going to do these things then you are not going to be a citizen. And so they can't get I.D. papers. They can't get travel permission. You know, and without I.D.

papers, you know, it is almost impossible to get a job or to do anything. Without travel papers, of course, it is impossible to travel.

So they are treated as non-citizens, despite the fact that they have lived all their lives in Eritrea.

Mr. HULTGREN: You talked earlier about the Roman Catholic Church. It appears that they are still under government scrutiny. They have been afforded some special permissions. How is it that the Catholic Church was able to gain those concessions? And do you think there is any hope from that maybe that other groups might be able to learn from and seek?

Father REESE: No. Well, I think one of the reasons, one of the strengths the Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church has is the fact that it is a large international institution. And the Vatican is always looking out for the religious -- the good of the local churches. They have an embassy, called a nunciature, in Eritrea. They have an ambassador, a nuncio, there. And he argues very strongly to the government, to the president even, you know, for the religious freedom of the Catholics there.

So I think it is an advantage that they are part of a large international organization. They know that there are people all over the world who, who treat these Catholics in Eritrea as their brothers and sisters and are going to be watching and concerned about what they have.

So I think it is -- what is the lesson for other groups? I think it is, the lesson is that we need to work together, all of us, all Christians need to work together, form alliances, form both local and international organizations that, you know, so that we fight for one another and support one another's religious freedom.

Mr. HULTGREN: Last question I have for you. You touched on the idea that it is possible that the Eritrean Government surveils religious groups in the diaspora. Is there anything that the United States can do to prevent this activity?

And I guess the last part of that would be any other recommendations you would have me bring to my colleagues of recommendations of what Congress ought to be doing, again, to protect all people's rights and freedoms there?

Father REESE: Yes. This is, this is very important. Eritrea uses a tax of 2 percent as a tool for controlling the diaspora members. And it uses intimidation and to force the payments of these things.

Just this, earlier this year the Netherlands actually expelled the highest diplomat of Eritrea from the Netherlands because of their activity in trying to force people to pay these taxes and intimidate, using intimidating tactics towards the Eritrean diaspora.

So I think it would be important for the United States Government, Congress, and other agencies within the government to have good contact, good relationships with the Eritrean diaspora in the United States so that they know that they have someone to go to who will protect them and defend them, you know, these people who are being pressured on our own soil here in the United States. We have an obligation to defend them.

Mr. HULTGREN: Father Reese, thank you so much. We appreciate your time and your work. And with that, we will move to our third panel. Thank you.

Father REESE: Thank you again for the opportunity and for your work.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Our third panel is ready. We are grateful for you being here.

First with us there is Maria Burnett who is the Director for the East and the Horn of Africa in the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. She supervises the organization's work on East Africa, with long-term expertise in Uganda, emerging human rights issues in Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. Thank you so much for being here.

I will also introduce our second witness Abraham Tesfalul Zere, Executive Director of PEN Eritrea in Exile. And he is also pursuing his Ph.D. in the School of Media Arts at Ohio University. And grateful that you are here to testify as well. So with that I will recognize Ms. Burnett for five minutes. Please proceed.

STATEMENTS OF MARIA BURNETT, DIRECTOR, EAST AFRICA AND THE HORN, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH; ABRAHAM T. ZERE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PEN ERITREA

STATEMENT OF MARIA BURNETT, DIRECTOR, EAST AFRICA AND THE HORN, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Ms. BURNETT: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. And thank you very much for holding this hearing today. I am honored to be here with my colleague here from Eritrea.

I want to start by saying that Eritrea remains among the most difficult countries that Human Rights Watch works on. It is a country where access to independent information is nearly impossible. And it is a country where we labor quite, quite hard to verify the allegations that we receive and to do research in a way that leaves the people we speak with safe afterwards. We do this in all countries, but where there is an extreme risk of reprisals, if there is concern.

So there is a great deal about the human rights conditions in Eritrea that we wish were doing better I want to start off by saying.

As many have said this morning -- this afternoon, thousands of Eritreans, particularly young people, flee every month. Based on our research over many years, it is very clear that Eritreans seek to escape what is known as national service. And as we mentioned, by the 1995 proclamation Eritreans are subject to 18 months of national service, including six months of military training. And Eritrean law also requires anyone who leaves the country to hold an exit permit which is issued only selectively.

To be clear, the limited terms of national conscription are not actually in and of themselves a human rights violation. But the Eritrean Government disregards the proclamation's time limits. Many conscripts are forced to serve indefinitely. Human Rights Watch has interviewed hundreds of Eritreans who ended up fleeing after serving more than a decade. In some cases, we have one case, for example, of someone who was there for more than 17 years in national service.

And while some fortunate conscripts are assigned to civil service jobs or as teachers, many are placed in military units assigned to work on development projects in agriculture and in infrastructure. But none have a choice about their assignments, their locations, or the length of their service.

Pay is below subsistence. Although there has been some announcement just made it will be increased.

The United Nations Commission of Inquiry in 2015 correctly called Eritreans' national service a form of enslavement. During service, during national service we have documented many instances in which commanders subject conscripts to physical abuse, including many instances of torture.

In the past few years, as others have mentioned, more and more unaccompanied children have fled Eritrea. When we carried out interviews in Europe, many of those children have explained that they feared being forced into possible indefinite military service. Many children told us that they had observed what had happened to their parents, to older siblings, and to other close relatives who had been forcefully conscripted, and they didn't want to suffer the same fate.

An 18-year-old boy who we interviewed summed up what many have told us. He said, "We love our country. But when you finish grade 12 you become a soldier for life. You cannot feed your family. You are the property of the army. And I didn't want that for myself, and so I chose to flee."

The abuses in national service are longstanding and well documented. And recent interviews reveal that, sadly, nothing has changed in recent years. It is one of the things that makes the human rights situation so difficult, it is difficult to get international

attention to something that remains as intractable and as pervasive as national service is in Eritrea.

Citizens in Eritrea cannot express their views about national service or other matters, to question government policy. There is no legislative representation. There is no independent press. There is no independent non-governmental organizations to which citizens can turn. And the government tightly controls the judiciary. In some instances that we have documented, Eritreans who criticized or questioned government policies have been punished without trial or without means to an appeal. An indefinite imprisonment is sometimes the punishment, sometimes accompanied by physical abuse.

Imprisonment can be incommunicado, and relatives are often not told of the whereabouts of a prisoner, much less allowed to visit. In some instances relatives of those who are speaking out have also been punished. They have been denied government ration cards, for example, ration cards which are needed to buy scarce but essential provisions.

And, unfortunately, as we heard earlier, abuses do not stop when people choose to flee Eritrea. Fleeing Eritreans are victimized along the smuggling routes, especially those trying to reach the Mediterranean. We have documented rampant abuses in Sudan, in Egypt, and in Libya, as well as those who have died in the crossing of the Mediterranean.

Those who have survived that crossing have told our Human Rights Watch researchers of horrific stories of the dangers that they encountered during their journey. But many of them have insisted that the risks and the dangers and the abuse that they face were worth it in comparison to the oppression that they faced in Eritrea.

Another young man who we interviewed in Italy after a 3-month journey from Eritrea told us, "I fled my country because of all the problems I had while I was in the army. I don't want to be a soldier. And they beat me, unfortunately, when I was caught trying to escape. But when I finally got out I thought I would be free, but I was beaten and tortured even worse when I was in Sudan and then Libya by the smugglers. Crossing the sea was terrifying for me, but I was so relieved to finally be here."

There are steps that the Eritrean Government could take to stem migration. And, importantly, that will mean addressing the human rights crisis that has wracked the country:

- It could end indefinite national service and respect the 18-month time limit.
- It could begin the process of demobilizing conscripts.
- It could penalize military commanders and security officers who authorize torture and other forms of severe physical punishment.
- It could unconditionally release political prisoners and bring anyone it considers an offender before a truly independent court of law.
- It could stop the interference with all forms of peaceful religious expression.

And it could allow for the establishment of an independent press and non-governmental organizations.

And it could, finally, publicly affirm and enforce rights of free expression, opinion, religion, association, and movement.

But, unfortunately, the Eritrean Government has steadfastly refused to change. And in the absence of a willingness by the government to end these abuses and bring abusers in government to justice, other countries should work to investigate and prosecute individuals suspected of committing serious crimes under the principles of universal jurisdiction.

Countries concerned by the human rights abuses of Eritreans, and Eritreans' efforts at migrating, should work to undercut the Eritrean Government's public excuses for repression and protect Eritreans who have fled from being repatriated and suffer further abuse.

It is important to note that the U.S. has played an important role in the region historically. The United States was a guarantor of the armistice agreement to end the 2-year border war which also established the International Boundary Commission to demarcate the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2002. And while both sides agreed to accept the findings of the International Commission's findings, Ethiopia later refused when the final decision was to award a key piece of territory to Eritrea.

President Isaias uses the border issue of no peace and no war as his principal excuse for his repressive policies. And while both sides have firmly entrenched their positions, there may now be some consideration and an opening for reconsideration as Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed recently expressed his desire to resolve disputes with Eritrea after, in his own words, "years of misunderstanding."

And with a new U.S. secretary of state confirmation underway, we could see some changes in the State Department level. It is particularly important that we find that there is a new assistant secretary for Africa, that that position is filled, and someone competent and capable is nominated to that position quickly. That will help the past to address some of the human rights challenges in the Horn and potentially in Eritrea particularly.

And last September the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the State Department announced an intent to repatriate about 700 Eritrean individuals who are currently here in the United States. The United States and other countries should urgently take steps to protect the Eritreans who have managed to flee their government's oppression and take into consideration the pattern of serious human rights abuses in Eritrea when they are examining their final claims. It is credible for the U.S. to ensure that no one is returned to a threat of persecution or to torture in Eritrea.

By shedding light on what is happening to Eritreans in Eritrea and in countries of potential asylum, the Commission is performing a welcome and important public service. And I look forward to your questions.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Maria Burnett follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARIA BURNETT



STATEMENT BY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Thousands of Eritreans, many of them young, flee Eritrea every month. This means Eritrea is losing a significant percentage of its population – by far the largest of any country not wracked by active conflict. UNHCR reported that at the end of 2016 there were 459,000 Eritreans who had claimed asylum worldwide in African states, in the Middle East, in Europe and here in the United States. Eritrea does not release population statistics, but estimations put that at more than 10% of Eritrea’s current population.

Based on Human Rights Watch research, Eritreans’ most predominant impetus for flight is to escape what is known as “national service.” By a proclamation issued in 1995, all Eritreans are subject to 18 months of national service, including six months of military training. Eritrean law requires Eritreans leaving the country to hold an exit permit which the authorities only issue selectively, severely punishing those caught trying to leave without one, including with jail time.

To be clear, limited terms of national conscription do not, in themselves, constitute human rights violations. But it is not limited in Eritrea. The Eritrean government disregards the proclamation’s time limits. Many conscripts are forced to serve indefinitely. Human Rights Watch has interviewed

hundreds of Eritreans who were forced to serve a decade or more before they decided to flee -- in one recent case, a man had been in forced national service for over 17 years.

While some fortunate conscripts are assigned to civil service jobs or as teachers, many are placed in military units assigned to work on “development” projects in agriculture and infrastructure. None have a choice about their assignments, the locations or length of their service.

In the past few years, more and more unaccompanied children have fled Eritrea. When interviewed in Europe, they’ve explained they feared being forced into possibly indefinite military service. Many children told us they had observed what had happened to their fathers, older siblings, or other close relatives who had been conscripted and didn’t want to suffer the same fate.

It’s not just the length of time that causes so many conscripts to flee. What happens to them during their years of service is also devastating.

Pay during national service is below subsistence, although the Eritrean government has recently announced increases for some conscripts. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry in 2015 correctly called Eritrea’s national service a form of “enslavement.” During service, commanders subject conscripts to physical abuse, including torture.

An 18-year-old boy, interviewed by Human Rights Watch summed up what many have told us: “We love our country, but when you finish Grade 12, you become a soldier for life. You cannot feed your family and you’re the property of the army. And I did not want that, so I was forced to flee.”

The abuses in national service are long standing and well-documented, and recent interviews reveal that, sadly, nothing has changed in recent years.

National service may be the leading cause of the Eritrean exodus but there are others of significance.

Citizens cannot express their views or question government policies affecting them. There is no legislative representation, no independent press, no independent non-governmental organizations to which citizens can turn. The judiciary is tightly controlled by the government. President Isaias has refused to implement a constitution approved by referendum in 1997 that confers some citizens' basic rights.

Eritreans who criticize or question government policies during government-called community assemblies, or in more limited fora, have been punished without trial or means of appeal. Suspicion alone may be enough to lead to arrest; often a prisoner is not told what "crime" he or she has committed. Indefinite imprisonment is a usual punishment, sometimes accompanied by physical abuse. Imprisonment can be incommunicado; relatives are not told of the whereabouts of a prisoner, much less allowed to visit.

Relatives of those that speak out are also punished. They are denied government ration cards to buy scarce but essential provisions.

Eritreans are punished for having the "wrong" religious beliefs. Since 2002, the government has "recognized" only four religious groups: Sunni Islam and the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches.

At times, security personnel raid private homes where devotees of unrecognized religions meet for communal prayer. Arrests and imprisonment of attendees usually follow; so, sometimes, does physical abuse. Repudiation of his or her religion is typically the price of a prisoner's release.

Even adherents and leaders of the "recognized" religions are not necessarily immune from punishment. [as Father Thomas will already have explained to the Commission in detail.]

But unfortunately, abuses do not stop when people leave Eritrea. Fleeing Eritreans are often victimized by their smugglers especially those trying to reach the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe. Abuses are rampant in Sudan, Egypt and Libya en route and hundreds have died trying to cross the Mediterranean. Those who survived have told Human Rights Watch interviewers of

horrific stories about the dangers they encountered during their journey but insisted it was worth their escape from oppression. One boy, interviewed in Italy after his three-month journey from Eritrea, told Human Rights Watch: “I fled my country [Eritrea] because of all the problems I had while I was in the army. I don’t want to be a soldier but they beat me and tortured me when I was caught trying to escape. When I finally got out I thought I would be free, but I was beaten and tortured even worse in Sudan and Libya by smugglers. Crossing the sea was terrifying, but I am so relieved to finally be here.”

There are steps that the Eritrean government could take to stem migration, and importantly address the human rights crisis that has wracked the country. Eritrea could end indefinite national service and begin the process of demobilizing conscripts. It could penalize military commanders and security officers who authorize torture and other forms of severe physical punishment. It could unconditionally release political prisoners or bring anyone it considers an offender before a truly independent court of law. It could stop interference with all forms of peaceful religious expression. It could allow establishment of an independent press and non-governmental organizations. It could publicly affirm – and enforce – rights to freedom of expression, opinion, religion, association, and movement.

Unfortunately, the Eritrean government has steadfastly refused to change. In the absence of willingness by the Eritrean government to end its abuses and bring abusers to justice, other countries should investigate and prosecute individuals suspected of committing serious crimes under the principle of universal jurisdiction and in accordance with their national laws.

Countries concerned by human rights abuses of Eritreans, and their efforts at migrating should work to undercut the Eritrean government’s public excuses for repression and protect the Eritreans who have fled from being repatriated to suffer further abuse.

With a new Secretary of State confirmation underway we expect to see some change at senior State Department levels [and this could mark the beginning of a new approach on Eritrea.] During Mike Pompeo’s confirmation hearing he said he was a “talent hawk.” If that is the case, we hope

he will fill the position for Africa Assistant Secretary quickly and nominate someone who is well versed in issues and challenges related to the Horn of Africa – and not just counterterrorism or security related ones.

In 2002 an international boundary commission was established to demarcate the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The United States was a guarantor of an armistice agreement ending a 1998-2000 border war that established the international commission. While both sides agreed to accept the findings of the international commission as binding, Ethiopia refused to accept the findings when the final decision was to award a key piece of territory to Eritrea. President Isaias uses the border issue – of “no peace, no war” – as the principal excuse for his repressive policies. While both sides have been firmly entrenched in their positions, there may be an opening for reconsideration as Ethiopia’s new prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed recently expressed his desire to resolve disputes with Eritrea after, in his own words “years of misunderstandings.”

The United States and other countries should urgently take steps to protect the Eritreans who have managed to flee the government’s oppression, should take into consideration the pattern of serious human rights abuses in Eritrea in examining asylum claims, and ensure that no one is returned to a threat of persecution or torture.

Last September, the U.S Departments of Homeland Security and State announced an intent to repatriate about 700 Eritrean individuals. The government should take care to ensure that all of those individuals have a genuine opportunity to advance any claims for protection in light of human rights conditions in Eritrea, if they have not done so already.

By shedding light on what’s happening to Eritreans in Eritrea and in countries of potential asylum, this Commission is performing a welcome public service.

Thank you.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks, Ms. Burnett. Appreciate that very much.

Let's recognize our final witness, Mr. Zere.

STATEMENT OF ABRAHAM T. ZERE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PEN ERITREA

Mr. ZERE: Thank you. Thank you, Congressman Hultgren, Congressman McGovern, Commission members, and staff. I am honored to be here today.

In comparison to many Eritreans, I am one of the most privileged. I will tell you why.

I have nine siblings. All of us have served in the Eritrean military. Because of this, ten of us have never met together at any given time. The only family portrait we have now is photoshopped. Seven of the ten members of the family are now in exile.

I was writing for a private newspaper called Zemen while in my final year of secondary school in 2000. I joined the department of journalism and mass communication hoping that I have a bright future in the growing private media. After completing my freshman in year 2001 and returning from the labor camp along with students of the University of Asmara, all the private newspapers were banned. Their editors were taken into custody. For close to 17 years now, the fate of my mentor Amanuel Asrat and of another eleven journalists is unknown.

Later, the only option I had was the state-owned newspaper. I had a weekly column but later I resigned as my articles started to displease the information minister then, Mr. Ali Abdu. Some years later when I wrote one article in the party magazine, Ali Abdu responded in the state newspaper. He identified me as a national security threat and called for my arrest. Since then I completely stopped writing in the country. Three years later Ali Abdu himself fled and sought political asylum in Australia.

In the fall of 2011, I received a scholarship from Ohio University. As travel is controlled by the office of the president, as Maria was explaining, I had to lobby and pull influential contacts for four months. Finally, few days before my planned departure, I was denied an exit visa.

I went in person to the office of the president to discuss my case with the director. In 2012, I was permitted to go to South Africa for a study. I was only able to reach this level because of my connection.

I was very fortunate. Then most of my friends were in prison in connection with the Radio Bana raid. Twenty-nine journalists and staff members of the educational radio station were held in a military prison from four to six years. As Tesfagiorgis Habte, who

studied journalism with me, wrote later, they were forced to defecate in their dishes and later wash them for eating food.

You do not need to commit any offense to be arrested in Eritrea. For example, one person stayed for four years in prison with the Radio Bana journalists only because he was mistaken for another person with the same first name.

Now I write for different media. Still the Eritrean Government attempts to silence me from afar. In July 2017, when I wrote one article for Aljazeera English, the Eritrean ministry of information issued a statement calling me "a notorious author who routinely engages in a smear campaign against the country." I am not sure who did it, but last month my blog was also attacked with malware. Those are on top of the endless trolling and hate messages I received daily. And by now I am sure they are also trolling on Twitter.

However, I am also very much aware of the conditions of state journalists inside the country. As part of the popular army program, journalists have been required to attend military drills and guard government offices since 2012. Now their performance has been measured by the military. If journalists commit the slightest mistake they are being disciplined not as journalists but as soldiers.

As I said in the beginning, mine is a privileged position. If I have little time I can mention two typical examples to show how Eritreans are not afraid of death by living in such deplorable conditions in Eritrea.

My cousin, she is my first cousin, Mibrak Nerayo was killed by human traffickers in Sinai in 2010. Although the ransom was paid, yet her life was not spared. Despite the family tragedy, Mibrak's youngest son, Samuel, has reached Europe last year through Libya.

Or as Shishai Shimondi, a member of PEN Eritrea tells, he decided to flee Eritrea a week after the tragedy of Lampedusa of October 2013 that took the lives of more than 300 Eritreans. After completing his first degree in business administration, Shishai was assigned as a teacher. With a monthly pay of \$25, he was expected to cover all expenses in a remote place from his hometown. With such conditions he has managed to stay for three years. Yet, he was required to carry gun and attend military training on top of his teaching duties. Later he decided to leave.

After being caught and imprisoned for three-and-a-half months in Libya, he succeeded to escape from prison. Near the end of 2014, through the Mediterranean Sea, he managed to reach Europe now.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Abraham T. Zere follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ABRAHAM T. ZERE

Testimony of Abraham T. Zere

Executive Director, PEN Eritrea

Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission—United States Congress

April 18, 2018

Thank you, Congressman Hultgren and Congressman McGovern, Commission members, and staff, for conducting this important hearing. I'm honored to be here.

In comparison to average Eritreans, I am one of the most privileged. I will tell you why.

I have nine siblings. All of us have served in the Eritrean military. Because of this, ten of us have never met together at any given time. The only family portrait we have is photo-shopped. Seven of the ten members of the family are now in exile.

I was writing for a private newspaper in Eritrea, called *Zemen*, while in my final year of secondary school in 2000. I joined the department of journalism and mass communication hoping that have a bright future in the growing private media. After completing my freshman year in 2001 and returning from the labor camp along with students of the University of Asmara, all the private newspapers were banned. Their editors were also taken into custody. For close to 17 years now, the fate of my mentor Amanuel Asrat and of another eleven journalists is unknown.

The only option left for me was the state-owned newspaper. I had a weekly column but later I resigned as my articles started to displease the information minister then, Mr. Ali Abdu. Some years later when I wrote one article in the party magazine, Ali Abdu responded in state newspaper. He identified me as a national security threat and called for my arrest. Then I completely stopped writing. Three years later Abdu fled the country and sought political asylum in Australia.

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I was very fortunate. Then most of my friends were in prison in connection with the *Radio Bana* raid. Twenty-nine journalists and staff members of the educational radio station were held in a military prison from four to six years. As Tesfagiorgis Habte, who studied journalism with me, wrote later, they were forced to defecate in their dishes and later wash them for eating food. You do not need to commit any offense to be arrested in Eritrea. For example, one person stayed for four years in prison with the *Radio Bana* journalists only because he was mistaken for another person with the same first name.

Now I write for different media. Still the Eritrean government attempts to silence me from afar. In July 2017, when I wrote one article for *Aljazeera English*, the Eritrean ministry of information issued a statement, calling me “a notorious author who routinely engages in a smear campaign against the country.” Not sure who did it, but last month my blog was attacked with malware. These examples are on top of the endless trolling and hate messages that I receive regularly.

However, I am also aware of the conditions state journalists inside the country. As part of the popular army program, journalists have been required to attend military drills and guard government offices since 2012. Now their performance is measured mainly by the military. If journalists commit the slightest mistake they are being disciplined not as journalists, but soldiers.

As I said at the beginning, mine is a privileged position, but if I have little time I can mention two typical examples to show how Eritreans are not afraid of death now but living in deplorable conditions indefinitely.

My first cousin Mibrak Nerayo who was killed by human traffickers in Sinai in 2010. Although the ransom was paid, yet her life was not spared. Despite the family tragedy, Mibrak's son, Samuel has reached Europe last year through Libya.

Or as Shishai Shimondi, a member of PEN Eritrea tells, he decided to flee Eritrea a week after the Lampedusa tragedy of October 2013 that took the lives of more than 300 Eritreans. After completing his first degree in Business Administration, Shishai was assigned as a teacher. With a monthly pay of about \$25, he was expected to cover all expenses in a remote place from his hometown with this amount. With such conditions he managed for about three years. Yet, he was required to carry gun and attend military training on top of his teaching duties.

After being caught and imprisoned for three and half months in Libya, he succeeded to escape from the prison. Near the end of 2014, through the Mediterranean Sea, he was able to reach Europe.

Thank you!

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you both so much. If it is all right, I will address some questions to each of you.

Ms. Burnett, has increased involvement of European authorities with Eritrea resulted in any positive impacts or changes in Eritrea? And has Eritrea permitted access by any international human rights monitors as a result of European or other diplomatic engagements? And, if so, what are focal areas of these multi-million dollar assistance programs for Eritrea?

Ms. BURNETT: Yes, thank you so much.

As far as we know it is pretty difficult to find the positive impacts associated with that increased engagement by the European Union, European authorities. As far as we know, no, there has been, there has been no increased access for independent human rights monitors from any institutions, including the U.N. Commission of Inquiry and from the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea.

So that would certainly be a key recommendation as well, you know, for the U.S. and the European Union to work together to provide, you know, joint pressure for access to independent monitors to the detention conditions that various witnesses today have spoken about.

As far as we know, the EU assistance packages have focused on development, particularly on renewable energy and food security. You know, Human Rights Watch doesn't work on those two topics in great depth, so I can't say a great deal about them. I will say that we have a lot of concerns about access to education, particularly in light of the forced military service and the fact that children are fleeing in such large numbers. And we have a real lack of education crisis for, you know, a whole generation of young Eritreans, if not more than one generation of young, of young Eritreans. But we haven't seen, and I am unaware of any explicit assistance from any international donor to the education sector. Though, you know, it is hard to say I think it can be hidden in various budgets, of course, the budget assistance is a beast, of course.

So, yes, I mean in the interviews that we have conducted, development and a lack of development is not one of the issues that people raise. What people raise is national service and the repressive nature of national service. Clearly, development is important, but I think until the national service is dismantled, until the time limits are respected I think there is no amount of development that will, that will make people want to stay and live in Eritrea.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks. I will kind of jump back and forth, if that is all right.

Mr. Zere, I am struck by the fact that you consider yourself privileged in comparison to other Eritreans, yet you describe several tragedies experienced by your

family members inside of Eritrea. Would you say most Eritreans have family members who have attempted to flee Eritrea? And to what extent do people in Eritrea understand the dangers they may face if they emigrate.

Mr. ZERE: I think I would answer most of the countries, they would try to flee the country. But as I said in my testimony, they are not afraid of death now; they are afraid of living in the country. So they can just take any chance to flee the country. Because they don't see any future. They can't work. They can't have a future. They can't establish a family.

So it is not they very much aware of the countries, fleeing the countries, they just decide to flee. Because they see if they flee the country they say, they might say at least we can have a chance of being different than staying here in Eritrea.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you. If I can address this to both of you. And I asked this earlier. But if Eritrea's relationship with Ethiopia were to improve with so many Eritreans there, would that have an impact on human rights conditions in Eritrea, particularly the indefinite nature of national service that we talked about?

What are the prospects for an improvement in relations under the new Ethiopian prime minister?

Is there anything the United States can do to facilitate a thaw in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations?

Would the UAE play a helpful role given its security relationship with Eritrea?

Mr. ZERE: I would say it might have positive outcome. And I expect, for example, U.S. Congress has to put pressure on the demarcated border. If that is demarcated, then Eritrea is going to not have any excuse to subjugate its subject citizens. Then you can say citizenship is using this excuse only to excuse for any abuse, then they do not have any excuse after that.

So I would say they might have and I hope they might have.

Ms. BURNETT: Maybe I'll just add, I mean, I think one of our concerns in this long and ongoing problem between Eritrea and Ethiopia from the U.S. side has been a lack of balance. Right? I mean, what we would argue for as a human rights organization is engagement on the human rights abuses that are taking place in both countries. And what we have seen is obviously a great deal of engagement, particularly on the, you know, military issues with Ethiopia between the United States as a prime partner and the U.S. work in the horn of Africa, and then a very different thing in Eritrea.

There are a huge number of domestic abuses in Ethiopia as well that warrant a great deal of scrutiny. You know, it has been a very tumultuous couple of years in

Ethiopia with protesters being killed and serious problems with free expression and free assembly. So any engagement I think is important, not just for the value of condemning human rights abuses, which obviously is something that we support, but it is important for both countries to see that the U.S. is coming in, you know, committed to human rights enforcement in both countries, and that they care about looking at issues in both countries, that they are not choosing one over the other.

Mr. HULTGREN: That is helpful. Thank you.

Ms. Burnett, and you have already talked about this, but I guess is there anything else that we could be doing? You know, you talked about this relationship with Ethiopia and Eritrea, but also any other things that the United States could be doing to encourage greater respect for human rights in Eritrea more generally?

Ms. BURNETT: Yes. We have mentioned some of them already. And, yes, I do think it is really important that this issue of independent human rights monitors' access to Eritrea and looking at some of the detention remains a really primary issue. And I think it would be important to work through in collaboration with both EU colleagues and, frankly, African Union colleagues as well. There is no reason why these international bodies couldn't come together to work with Eritreans to collaborate on this issue as independent actors.

There are countries that allow independent actors, that allow ICRC for example. And I know there are independent U.N. mechanisms. I think it is important that Eritrea understand the this is, that this is an issue of concern across the board and that it is not individual institution that is being singled out.

I think that the, you know, any issue around development assistance from the EU, I think it is critical that there be, you know, some conditioning on progress on human rights norms. We have seen in a lot of countries that it can function best when the U.S. and European countries work together and are speaking the kind of same language around human rights protections. And so I think it would be important to see that there is conditionality on progress for human rights on assistance as it goes forward.

I think it is also really important that companies that are working in Eritrea don't rely on forced labor and conscripts for their work. You know, there are a variety of companies, not many, but there are some working, and it is an area of concern.

While we support Global Magnitsky as a tool generally and are, you know, keen to see it utilized, right now we don't feel we have enough research to name names. But it is something that we do sort of stay in touch with going forward as our research unfolds. And obviously, you know, you all have a lot of tools for accessing information. So ensuring that all of those channels are open and are feeling as if they can come forward and share within the context of names under Magnitsky I think would be important.

Yes, so I will stop there. But I do think it is really critical that this issue in Eritrea remains on the front burner. I know, you know, we talked about humanitarian problems in Africa can often get short sight. But Eritrea deserves, Eritreans deserve our attention. And this issue deserves our full resolution.

Mr. HULTGREN: Mr. Zere, have conditions for journalists in Eritrea improved at all since you left the country? And is there any reporting inside the country aside from the state-run media? Are all independent Eritrean journalists based outside the country? How does information travel in and out of Eritrea?

Mr. ZERE: Yes. Inside of the country, inside things getting much worse. As I said in my testimony, you must now end up to military training, and they have to go to government offices in the evening. So things are much getting worse than from the time I left the country.

So any information coming from the country just we have different from journalists, so contact in the country are through other channels. Because the government never tries to clarify anything. If there is any issue they just deny it automatically. And then it is difficult to get access to accurate information from inside.

So you have different means of accessing information and, as I mentioned, it is difficult to access anything from the country.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you. And in the midst of any human rights conditions that you talked about getting worse in Eritrea, what message do you think the people of Eritrea need to hear from the international community?

Mr. ZERE: They need to hear that they are supported behind. Because they feel that they are helpless and being thrown in the midst of all that. So I will say, for example, if U.S. could help Eritrean refugees, say, from Sudan, from Uganda and, for example, if U.S. could also stop deporting 700 Eritreans who have been in the country for years, or if you could help Eritreans in Israel who have been waiting indefinitely for any action.

So I would, I would say it is now too late to convince the government, but if you could help the people who are widely dispersed in other countries so that might be helpful.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Ms. Burnett, how successful has Eritrea been at collecting its 2 percent tax on Eritreans' income abroad?

Ms. BURNETT: Yes, it's something that we have tried to figure it out. But to be honest, I don't think that we know. They clearly put quite a bit of effort into it but it is not really clear how successful they have been at it.

So, yes, I wish we know more about it in terms of Italy. But it's really difficult to monitor it consistently anywhere.

Mr. HULTGREN: I would think so.

Mr. Zere, given the level of oppression in Eritrean society do people feel that fleeing the country is really the only option they have for countering human rights abuses of the government?

Mr. ZERE: Sorry?

Mr. HULTGREN: Given the level of repression there is it your sense that people are feeling their only hope really is to flee the country, that they really don't see a hope of things changing inside?

Mr. ZERE: Yes, that is the means, definitely, yes.

Mr. HULTGREN: Yes. Just one last question I could like to put to each of you. First, Ms. Burnett, to your knowledge have any U.S. officials or family members of the former U.S. embassy local staff detained in Eritrea been able to visit them or verify their welfare since they were detained?

Ms. BURNETT: We don't have very recent information on that. But as of the last couple of years our understanding is no.

Mr. HULTGREN: Okay. If you hear anything more, please let us know. And then, Mr. Zere, as you know, our Commission has a Defending Freedom Project that advocates for prisoners of conscience. Among them is Eritrean writer Dawit Isaak who is among many journalists and writers arrested in September of 2001. We still don't know if he is alive or has died in custody. I wonder if you have any update on his condition?

Mr. ZERE: I am just lucky that I just heard he is from different source, otherwise the government has never clarified the fate of him and other 11 journalists and activists. So we just have been waiting for 16 years now.

Mr. HULTGREN: To wrap up, any last suggestions you have for us? First, again thank you for coming and testifying. And I would give both of you just one last chance of other suggestions. The last suggestion sharing with Co-Chairman McGovern but also my colleagues who are very concerned about the situation in Eritrea.

Mr. ZERE: Thank you for conducting this kind of sessions. As I said before in regards to Eritrea, I think as now you can at least do something again for these 700 Eritreans who have been denied their asylum case because it is very unfair to turn them back home. We have seen this with Sudan. Like, Sudan has imprisoned some Eritreans from there and round up them and then they send back them, send back to Eritrea. And they are put in prison for immediately.

So it is never safe to turn Eritreans back to the country to return to the country.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you. Ms. Burnett, any last?

Ms. BURNETT: Yes, I mean I raised several. But I would saying keeping the strength of the State Department and the focus on having filled positions in the State Department for key roles on Africa is something very much, you know, that remains of serious concern. Because without key people in those posts, you know, engagement, weighing of issues, access to information, all of those things are affected.

So I would argue that in the very short term that is an immediate thing that can be, that can be acted upon beyond the greater focus of, you know, keeping Eritrea and the migration problems on the table.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you. Again, thank you both. Thank you to all our witnesses.

With that, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:44 p.m., the commission was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Hearing Notice

Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis

Wednesday, April 18, 2018

2:30 – 4:00 p.m.

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Please join the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) for a **hearing** on human rights in Eritrea.

Migrants from the small east African nation of Eritrea make-up a disproportionate number of those included in the global refugee crisis. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that roughly eight percent of the population, or 525,000 Eritreans globally, were refugees or asylum seekers at the end of 2016. Many of these asylum seekers are exploited by smugglers, and 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. What are the human rights conditions in Eritrea that are causing so many people to leave their homes at the risk of slavery, trafficking, and death?

President Isais Afwerki has ruled Eritrea since 1993 by crushing civil society groups, religious communities, journalists, and opposition political parties. Jehovah's Witnesses were stripped of their citizenship in 1993 and are not allowed to exercise basic rights. Military conscription is mandatory and indefinite beginning at the age of 18, amounting to a form of state-sanctioned slavery. The U.N. Commission of Inquiry in 2016 stated that the Eritrean government's actions amount to crimes against humanity.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended Eritrea be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) since 2004, and the United States has implemented strict sanctions against the country since 2002. What more can Congress do to support the universal rights of the Eritrean people?

Panel I

- **Jana Mason**, Senior Advisor, External Relations & Government Affairs, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Panel II

- **Father Thomas Reese**, Commissioner, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Panel III

- **Maria Burnett**, Director, East Africa and the Horn, Human Rights Watch
- **Abraham T. Zere**, Executive Director, PEN Eritrea

The hearing is open to Members of Congress, congressional staff, the interested public, and the media. The hearing will be livestreamed via the Commission website, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/news/watch-live> and will also be available for viewing on the House Digital Channel service. For any questions, please contact Jamie Staley (for Mr. Hultgren) at 202-226-1516 or Jamie.Staley@mail.house.gov or Kimberly Stanton (for Mr. McGovern) at 202-225-3599 or Kimberly.Stanton@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,

Randy Hultgren, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC

James P. McGovern, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JAMES P. McGOVERN, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF
MASSACHUSETTS AND CO-CHAIRMAN OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION**



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.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED BY THE ORGANIZATION OF ERITREAN AMERICANS



OEA Statement

April 18, 2018

OEA Deplores the Politicization of Refugee Plights

Your Honor,

As you are aware, The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) is holding a hearing titled by “*Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis*” scheduled for Wednesday, April 18, 2018, however, we are afraid it might be one-sided panel that fails to reflect the reality in Eritrea. The root causes of the refugee crisis is not lack of human rights in Eritrea, but Ethiopia’s evil machination. When it comes to human rights, Eritrea, like many developing countries, has its own challenges. However, if these challenges are not taken within their proper context, in this case Ethiopian warmongering and determined desire to destabilize Eritrea, they can only distort the reality and in the process misleading the US Congress. As Eritrea’s culture of religious and ethnic harmony and tolerance is well documented, this august body should not be used to disseminate distortions about Eritrea and its people. Eritrea is a peaceful nation enjoying stability, security and social harmony. Eritrea is also a nation engaged in had work to ensure its population’s human rights, dignity and security. It is a country that has successfully kept at bay religious radicalization, extremism and terrorism. It is also a nation playing a constructive role for peace and security in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa regions. For these reasons Eritrea deserves your support and understanding.

Your Honor,

To serve as a context we would like to bring the following points to your attention:

- Politicization of migration of Eritreans by some organizations and nations is preventing the issue of refugees from being addressed in its proper context. Eritrea is a victim of a politically motivated agenda of draining its human resources-especially its educated youth.
- Eritrea has faced a serious challenge of illegal migration, human trafficking and the willful exploitation of the suffering of Eritrean youth for strategic and political purposes. A distorted picture of the country, far off from the reality on the ground, is presented for political agenda by some quarters, chief among them is Ethiopia and those in bed with the regime. Every narration we hear about Eritrea is tainted by Ethiopian regime’s disinformation. European countries as well as the United States for their own reasons have also been following misguided policies that are inducing unprecedented migration not only out of Eritrea but the Horn of Africa.
- US and European open door policy to Eritrean refugees is also being exploited by Ethiopians (especially Tigrayans, the ethnic group that is dominating Ethiopian politics, military, and economy) to enter the West. This means an overwhelming majority of those claimed to be Eritreans are in fact not Eritreans. For example in November of 2016, Austrian Ambassador to Ethiopia, Andreas Melan, had admitted that 40 percent of Eritrean migrants in Europe are actually Ethiopians. His words: “*thousands of Ethiopians continue to migrate illegally to Saudi Arabia and South Africa, those who fled to Europe usually claim they are from Eritrea as that has a better chance of recognition for asylum. The ‘mass exodus’ of Ethiopians that no one speaks about attracts over 100,000 Ethiopians annually*”.¹ If one includes all the other East Africans who are claiming to be Eritreans to the Ethiopian numbers it is not hard to imagine what fraction of the often quoted numbers are real Eritreans.
- We believe one Eritrean refugee is one too many; however, we urge Congress to conduct its own investigation to find out how many of those recently resettled in the US as “Eritrean” refugees are actually Eritreans. The Ethiopian government is in a serious business of identity theft. It has been stealing Eritrean identities and giving it to its own ethnic Tigrayans and resettling them in Europe, the USA and Canada. Many of the victims that are being “*exploited by smugglers, and traffickers, or find themselves in Libyan slave*

¹ Flüchtlinge - Legale Auswanderung ist für Äthiopier tabu <http://www.tt.com/home/10694454-91/f1/c3%BCchtlinge---legale-auswanderung-ist-P%3%BCt-%C3%A4thiopier-tabu.csp> (Accessed 4/17/2018)

markets enduring detention, torture, and forced labor”, are first and foremost victims of identity theft by the Ethiopian regime. These victims are forced to risk journey through the Sahara Desert, terrorist-infested Libya and the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean Sea, all because they have no legal means of resettling in the West.

- Ethiopia is also benefitting from the trafficking of Eritreans through Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s ARRA (Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs), has set up a lucrative business and the UNHCR is an accomplice in this crime. Since Ethiopia receives millions of dollars for “hosting” Eritrean refugees, it has been massaging refugee numbers at will as a cash-cow. The UNHCR claims 5,000 Eritreans enter Ethiopia every month using numbers supplied by Ethiopia and the UN compensates Ethiopia, in foreign currency, for 5,000 refugees every month. Eritrea has asked the United Nations to conduct an independent investigation into the trafficking of Eritreans, but to this date, the UN has not done so.
- The reasons people give for seeking refugee status are also those lifted from published UNHCR guidelines on how someone qualifies as an Eritrean refugee. Every East African (Ethiopian, Sudanese, or Somali) even West Africans has memorized these guidelines and the information that asylum seekers often provide is verbatim recycling of these UNHCR guidelines. It is like the student who gets access to exam questions and the answer key before a test and gets the answers right.
- Eritrea’s youth have also been systematically lured out of the country, including fresh college graduates, as well as Eritreans who have been sent overseas for higher education. One of the panelists, Mr. Abraham Zere, is one of those who were provided free education by the people of Eritrea, sent overseas to further his education, however, instead of returning home to serve his people, he decided to come to the US because he knows well he is economically better off in the US than in Eritrea. Here he is fleecing US taxpayers through information laundering and disinformation. It is a pity that Mr. Zere has to drag Eritrea’s image through the mud in order to cover the misrepresentation he made to get political asylum in the US.
- As scores of European delegations visit Eritrea, for example the Danish Immigration Service fact finding mission, the Home Office of the United Kingdom, the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Swiss delegations, a more accurate picture of the reality in Eritrea is emerging, including that the majority of refugees out of Eritrea are actually not political, but economic refugees. Here is how a Danish report put it: “*A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that ‘most people who leave Eritrea do so for economic reasons and because of lack of livelihood opportunities and not because of political repression. ... A UN agency in Eritrea confirmed that hardly anyone leaves Eritrea for political reasons.’*”²
- Eritrean current reality has to be taken in the context of what the country had to go through. Next door to Eritrea is hostile Ethiopia that had brought incalculable suffering upon the people of Eritrea. Ethiopia is illegally occupying Eritrea’s sovereign territories, Ethiopia is itching to start another bloody war in hopes of getting access to the sea by force and it is also harboring Jihadists trained with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in hopes of turning Eritrea into another failed state like neighboring Somalia. The US government knows well that Eritrea was the first victim of Bin Laden’s international terrorism when had set shop in the Sudan in the early 1990s.
- Some might want to cry of “religious persecution” in Eritrea, that is not the case. Eritrea, aware of the dangers of religious extremism had only required religious organizations not to seek or receive foreign financing. Many of those religious groups that are often mentioned being in trouble with the Eritrean government, according to US State Department’s own reporting, are those who were unwilling to comply with the law of the land or register with an appropriate government body. There is also the case of a religious group that refused to take an Eritrean Identity in 1992 as the country was in the process of separating from Ethiopia stating they are not interested in temporal identity. Nobody had touched members of that group who claimed their Eritrean identity.

² Eritrea – Drivers and Root Causes of Emigration, National Service and the Possibility of Return, <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/B28905F5-5C3F-409B-8A22-0DF0DACBDAEF/0/EritreareportEndeligversion.pdf> (Accessed 4/17/2018)

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<http://www.eritreanamerican.org>

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- There is no question Eritrea has faced a difficult decade and half and the quality of life of its people has been negatively affected. The US-Ethiopia engineered UN sanctions as well as the 16 year-long Ethiopian occupation of sovereign Eritrean territories, and the prolonged National Service Program have had a negative impact on the people of Eritrea. Nevertheless, Eritrea has been making slow but steady progress in food security, health and educational services and had achieved six of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals on time and is committed to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Its investment in human resources development, agriculture and infrastructure is promising a tangible improvement in peoples' lives. Eritrea's investment on higher education, training, skills and opportunities for its youth, will not only enable Eritrea to overcome economic challenges that are contributing as push factors but also to build a solid basis for a just and prosperous society that will pull all its children back home.

Your Honor,

As Americans of Eritrean origin, we have a vested interest in seeing the plight of Eritrean refugees being addressed properly and refugees no matter where they come from been given all the help they can get. However, this help shouldn't be based on false premises and at the expense of demonizing Eritrea.

As at the root of the problem is Ethiopia's continued occupation of Eritrean territories, warmongering and saber rattling. We hope you will do everything within your power to compel Ethiopia to vacate the sovereign Eritrean territories it is occupying, to end the UN sanctions that are imposed on Eritrea based on Ethiopia initiated fabrications and engage the Eritrean government to further the causes of human rights and human dignity.

Thank you.

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