



## **Brief Report of the Symposium on the Human Rights Situation in Eritrea held in London on 19 September 2005**

The event brought together a number of people from various backgrounds to analyse and discuss the deteriorating human rights situation in Eritrea today and look into the possible causes of the current state of affairs. The Eritrean Ambassador to the UK was invited but declined to respond.

The day started by the reading of a message that outlined the personal testimony of an Eritrean who was forcibly returned from Malta to Eritrea. The paper described the brutality with which prisoners are held and the hardships they endured while in detention.

This was followed by a presentation on the persecution of the minority churches in Eritrea. The presentation traced the roots of religious persecution in Eritrea and mentioned some of the victims currently languishing in unknown detention centres in Eritrea.

The presentation on the persecution of muslims under various pretexts followed. This included a letter that was sent to the Eritrean President in 1994 on the killing of a number of islamic teachers. The presentation also included names of others who have either disappeared or were killed by the government over the years.



The keynote presentation session that followed was chaired by Michela Wrong. Dan Connell presented a paper on Democracy and Human Rights in Eritrea where he started by discussing how the EPLF operated and how that could have contributed to the current state of affairs. He discussed how policy was developed and how decisions were made. He made parallels between decision making during the liberation struggle and after independence. He also outlined the rift between the leaders and the subsequent arrest of the high ranking officials. He concluded by saying how the Eritrean people were betrayed but urged people to work for the realisation of Eritrea that people were dreaming about during the liberation years.

The other keynote speaker was Dr Gaim Kibreab. Dr Gaim's paper was entitled "Post-Independence Eritrea: Why Institutions Matter?". In his paper he argued that the main reason why institutions have not developed in Eritrea was because there is no rule of law. He further explained the difference between institutions and organisations and the interaction between the two. He ended his presentation by urging civil societies to engage in activities that foster civic virtues, unity, democratic values, empathy and respect for each other.

Following Q&A session, there was a presentation on the role of the independent newspapers and the impact they had in debating national issues. The government's interference and subsequent closure of the independent media and the arrest of most journalists was also discussed. It was said that currently people call the national newspaper a "photo-album of the president;" the radio, "a microphone of the president;" and the television, "a mirror for the president." This was echoed by a paper sent by Reporters Without Borders.



The difficulty international media face in reporting news from Eritrea was also discussed by Martin Plaut. He is Africa editor of the BBC World Service News and has followed Eritrean affairs for a number of years. Martin was not representing the BBC at the symposium.

A brief presentation was also made on the legal action taken against the Eritrean government. It was stated that Eritrea was found in violation of the African Commission for Human and People's Rights treaty it signed. It was also stated that as a consequence both the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the European Parliament passed a resolution supporting the verdict and are urging the Eritrean government to take note of the verdict and release all the parliamentarians that are detained illegally.

There were some testimonies from people who have close family member detained or disappeared. These touching testimonies tangibly evidenced the devastation caused by the violations that are occurring in Eritrea today.



The plight of Eritrean women was then eloquently presented. This personal testimony mentioned briefly the role of women during the liberation struggle, after independence and more recently in the national service. The abuse and degrading treatment of women in the national service was stated.

The Eritrean opposition parties were represented by their umbrella organisation, the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). The EDA representative listed some of the human rights abuses that took place since independence and gave a brief explanation of the current political situation in Eritrea and what EDA's stand is on the matter. He stated that EDA believed in peaceful co-existence with our neighbors and in solving all disputes with neighboring countries through dialogues and peaceful negotiations only.

Following this a video clip was shown which included the various contradictory statements made by the President of Eritrea on the rule of law, on justice and on democracy.

A brief paper was then presented on the increasing number of Eritrean asylum seekers arriving in the UK. The presentation showed a marked increase of new arrivals in recent years. The paper argued that this could be due to the deteriorating human rights situation in Eritrea.

There was another Q&A session at the end where people discussed various issues.

Representatives from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Department for International Development, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, long standing British friends of Eritrea, journalists, students and a cross-section of the Eritrean public attended the event.

EHDR-UK will be publishing the proceedings of the symposium in the coming weeks.

## **RESOLUTION**

Following the discussion and Q&A session, the symposium adopted the following resolutions. The symposium:

- Called upon international community in general and western governments, particularly the UK government to bring pressure to bear on the Eritrean government to:
  - Release all political prisoners who have been incommunicado detention;
  - Respect the basic principles enshrined in its own domestic laws and in the international conventions to which it is a party;
  - Open dialogue with Eritrean political and civil society organisations; and
  - Remove the ban on the independent press and political and autonomous civil society associations.
  
- Called upon Western governments, particularly the UK to bring pressure to bear on the Ethiopian government to comply with the decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission in order to bring the state of no peace-no war to an end which has been blighting the lives of Eritreans and providing the government of Eritrea with an alibi to postpone democratic changes indefinitely.
  
- Called upon Western governments, particularly the UK government to appreciate the fact that it is the government's human rights violations and not economic hardship that is forcing Eritreans to flee their country in search of international protection.

- Called upon Eritrean civil associations in exile to set their differences apart and fight together for the development and consolidation of civic and democratic culture; and
- Called upon all Eritreans, particularly the Eritrean intellectuals, especially those in the Diaspora, to take their responsibility to inform the world and the Eritrean public opinion abroad, about the necessity for democratic change and the gross violations of human rights that have become part of everyday life in Eritrea.

London, 19 September 2005