

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# AT THE 56TH SESSION OF THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL STATES SHOULD EXTEND THE MANDATE OF THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON ERITREA AND STEP-UP EFFORTS TOWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COUNTRY

This year marks ten years since the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Eritrea. The COI found that crimes under international law may have been committed in Eritrea including crimes against humanity of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder. It further concluded that Eritrea is not in a position to provide accountability for those crimes and recommended further international action including through a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court and universal jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup>

In the years that followed the findings of the COI on Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea has regularly reported on continuing violations within the country. In his July 2024 report to the UN Human Rights Council the Special Rapporteur has reiterated that most recommendations made by international and regional human rights mechanisms, including the COI, remain unimplemented.<sup>2</sup> Though UN Human Rights Council members should uphold the highest human rights standards, the period of Eritrea's membership of the Council did not lead to substantive progress in the country's implementation of recommendations by UN human rights mechanisms.

Amnesty International and other organizations have consistently highlighted the dire situation in the country for the past two decades.

In his latest report, the Special Rapporteur again stresses that indefinite national/military service continues to be a primary source of human rights violations in the country. In 2024 despite frequent calls to discontinue indefinite national conscription and to end conscription of children for national service, authorities continue to forcibly recruit Eritreans into the national service under circumstances amounting to slavery.<sup>3</sup> Conscripts are forced to work in harsh conditions, with little payment, and at times face severe physical punishments, arbitrary detention, and torture.<sup>4</sup>

Young Eritreans are forced to spend their final year of secondary school at Sawa military training camp, making it difficult for them to complete their education. Conditions at Sawa include forced labour amounting to slavery, torture, other forms of ill-treatment, and sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> The Special Rapporteur reported that former female recruits from the Sawa military training camp disclosed that camp officials carried out rape and other forms of gender-based violence against female conscripts.<sup>6</sup>

Eritreans continue to flee their country due to harsh realities, including indefinite national service. In this process, often as refugees abroad, they have risked their lives and faced severe abuses. In Ethiopia, Eritrean asylum-seekers have been denied access to proper asylum procedures since 2021 and are facing widespread detention and deportation.<sup>7</sup> In his most recent report, the Special Rapporteur provided updates on how Eritrean refugees in Sudan, especially women and girls, were subjected to grave violations, including sexual violence and domestic servitude, attributed to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).<sup>8</sup>

The dire human rights situation within the country has also been a contributing factor for regional instability and repression of dissent beyond Eritrea's borders. While these concerns in the region have also been identified repeatedly by the Special Rapporteur, his latest report additionally highlights Eritrea's attempts to suppress dissent among Eritrean communities in third

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea | OHCHR, [ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-i-eritrea/commissioninquiryonhrin-eritrea](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-i-eritrea/commissioninquiryonhrin-eritrea)

<sup>2</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea*, 7 May 2024, UN Doc. A/HRC/56/24.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, "Eritrea: Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (superseded January 2018)" (AFR 64/5578/2017), 30 January 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, "Eritrea: Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (superseded January 2018)" (previously cited).

<sup>5</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea* (previously cited).

<sup>6</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea* (previously cited).

<sup>7</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea* (previously cited).

<sup>8</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea* (previously cited).

countries.<sup>9</sup> Practices violative of human rights within the country such as forced conscription, impunity and the climate of repression within the country as well as the lack of accountability for serious human rights violations committed in Eritrea are closely linked with these serious concerns. In a 2019 research, Amnesty International found that the Eritrean government's relentless harassment and threats against human rights defenders, activists, and Eritreans dissenting from the government's narrative abroad.<sup>10</sup> Multiple investigations by Amnesty International have also documented the involvement of Eritrean soldiers in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, including ethnic cleansing, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia between 2020 and 2023.<sup>11</sup> Addressing the situation within Eritrea can contribute not only to ending human rights violations within Eritrea but also to prevent further violations in the region and beyond.

Within Eritrea, authorities have been arbitrarily detaining and forcibly disappearing journalists and political dissidents for the past 22 years. They have also discriminated against people based on their faith, denying those from unregistered religions the right to practice their beliefs. According to the UN, hundreds of individuals are currently being held arbitrarily and subjected to enforced disappearances because of their affiliation with unrecognized religious groups.<sup>12</sup>

After two decades, the fate and whereabouts of 11 members of the G-15, a group of 15 senior politicians who spoke against the president in 2001, remain unknown, along with those of 16 journalists accused of being associated with the G-15.<sup>13</sup>

At the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council states should act to extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea and step-up efforts towards accountability. To this end we support calls by Eritrean as well as regional and international civil society organisations to request the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea to a) assess the evolution of the human rights situation in Eritrea during the country's period of Council membership in the Council and b) given the ten-year anniversary of the establishment of the COI on Eritrea, stocktake on accountability options and processes available to address past and ongoing violations.<sup>14</sup>

A stocktaking exercise in particular could provide an opportunity to: 1. reflect on ways to collect and preserve evidence for future accountability processes, including criminal judicial proceedings and 2. to examine options to take forward recommendations by the COI on accountability mechanisms – including those made to the Council such as the recommendation to support the establishment of a structure by the High Commissioner for Human Rights to assist in ensuring accountability for human rights violations in Eritrea, especially where such violations amount to crimes against humanity.

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<sup>9</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea*, 7 May 2024, UN Doc. A/HRC/56/24.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, *Eritrea: Repression without borders: Threats to human rights defenders abroad* (AFR 64/0542/2019), 27 June 2019, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr64/0542/2019/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr64/0542/2019/en/), p.

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, "Human rights in Ethiopia", [amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/ethiopia/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/ethiopia/)

<sup>12</sup> Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea* (previously cited).

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International, "Eritrea: Repression past and present", 3 October 2019, [amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/10/eritrea-repression-past-and-present/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/10/eritrea-repression-past-and-present/)

<sup>14</sup> Defend Defenders, Eritrea letter HRC56 (v5\_FINAL), [defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HRC56-Oral-statement-ID-Eritrea.pdf](https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HRC56-Oral-statement-ID-Eritrea.pdf)