

Thursday 10 March 2016

P8_TA(2016)0090

Situation in Eritrea**European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2016 on the situation in Eritrea (2016/2568(RSP))**

(2018/C 050/09)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on Eritrea, in particular those of 7 February 2002 ⁽¹⁾, 18 November 2004 ⁽²⁾ and 15 September 2011 ⁽³⁾ on the human rights situation in the country, including the case of Dawit Isaak,
- having regard to United Nations Security Council resolutions 751 (1992), 1882 (2009), 1907 (2009), 2023 (2011) and 2244 (2015), which extended the arms embargo on Eritrea until 15 November 2016, and to the report of 19 October 2015 of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea,
- having regard to the report submitted to the Human Rights Council on 19 June 2015 by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth,
- having regard to the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (the Cotonou Agreement), as revised in 2005 and 2010, to which Eritrea is a signatory,
- having regard to Council Decision 2010/127/CFSP of 1 March 2010 concerning restrictive measures against Eritrea ⁽⁴⁾, amended by Council Decision 2010/414/CFSP of 26 July 2010 ⁽⁵⁾ and further amended by Council Decision 2012/632/CFSP of 15 October 2012 ⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to the conclusions of Scrutiny Working Group A of the Committee on Development of the European Parliament of 11 November 2015,
- having regard to the statement by the spokesperson of the European External Action Service (EEAS) on political prisoners in Eritrea of 18 September 2014,
- having regard to the EEAS report on the Eritrea-European Union Partnership of 2015,
- having regard to the UN Women Country Report on the Government of the State of Eritrea of June 2014,
- having regard to the National Indicative Programme for Eritrea under the 11th European Development Fund of 3 February 2016,
- having regard to the statement to the media made by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea on 8 June 2015,
- having regard to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,
- having regard to the declarations of 23 November 2011 and 25 June 2013 by the Co-Presidents of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly on the situation of human rights in Eritrea,
- having regard to its debate of 27 May 2015 on EU development aid to Eritrea in the light of documented human rights abuses,

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 284 E, 21.11.2002, p. 359.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 201 E, 18.8.2005, p. 123.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 51 E, 22.2.2013, p. 146.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 51, 2.3.2010, p. 19.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 195, 27.7.2010, p. 74.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ L 282, 16.10.2012, p. 46.

Thursday 10 March 2016

- having regard to the Constitution of Eritrea adopted in 1997, which guarantees civil liberties, including freedom of religion,
 - having regard to International Labour Organisation Conventions No 29 concerning forced labour, No 105 concerning abolition of forced labour and No 87 concerning freedom of association and protection of the right to organise,
 - having regard to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981,
 - having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
 - having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
 - having regard to Rule 123(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas the EU has been supporting Eritrea since its independence from Ethiopia in 1993; whereas the initial promise of democracy and the rule of law following the country's independence has been inhibited by the Government of Eritrea on the pretext of national defence and national service; whereas presidential elections planned for 1997 never took place, and whereas the constitution ratified in the same year has never been implemented; whereas the regional elections of 2009 have yet to be held; whereas even before the National Assembly was disbanded in 2002, laws were passed by government decree;
- B. whereas Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993 created expectations within the international community and among the people of Eritrea that this would help the latter to build a country that respects human rights and is free of repression; whereas this has not happened, but instead there has been even greater repression and even more violations of human rights;
- C. whereas the report by the UN Special Rapporteur noted that Eritrea has one of the worst human rights records in the world, with routine human rights violations taking place every day and no improvement recorded in recent years; whereas many young people have fled the country to escape the repressive government and mandatory military conscription, which often starts at a very young age, whereas the statute of an 18-month period of service is often flouted, with most Eritreans serving indefinitely, and whereas such an extended mandatory military conscription inhibits the country's potential economic growth; whereas any increase in the national service salary is meaningless as the recent devaluation of the nakfa and bank restrictions have led to a current deficiency in the country; whereas many conscripts are used as forced labour and given civilian duties; whereas the majority of those in national service remain in a situation of slavery, in which any work, job applications and the possibility of having a family life are controlled; whereas freedom of worship and conscience, freedom of the media and freedom of expression are not guaranteed;
- D. whereas the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea has found that the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture and sexual slavery), national service as a form of slavery, forced labour and the shoot-to-kill policy at the border may constitute crimes against humanity;
- E. whereas Human Rights Watch stresses that there is no freedom of religion in Eritrea; whereas the government severely harasses citizens who practise religions other than the four it recognises; whereas even in the case of recognised religions the government interferes with people's religious practice;
- F. whereas homosexual activities are illegal in Eritrea, and the government refuses to implement anti-discrimination legislation to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons;

Thursday 10 March 2016

- G. whereas discrimination and violence against women are present in all areas of Eritrean society; whereas women are not only at extreme risk of sexual violence within the military and in military training camps, but also in society at large, where violence against women is perpetrated in an environment of impunity; whereas an estimated 89 % of girls in Eritrea have undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); whereas in March 2007 the government issued a proclamation declaring FGM a crime, prohibiting its practice and sponsoring education programmes discouraging the practice over that year; whereas women can lose their entitlement to food coupons and access to land;
- H. whereas a huge number of Eritrean people are arrested for various unjustifiable reasons such as expressing independent views or without any explicit justification, and thus for unspecified time periods; whereas detainees, including children, are held in extremely harsh conditions which in some cases amount to torture and denial of medical care; whereas female detainees are often guarded by male officers, thus increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence; whereas, according to the Freedom House Index (report 2015), Eritrea continues to rank among the most repressive media environments and received the lowest score possible which ranked it as the 'worst of the worst' and has one of the lowest internet access rates — only 1 % — in the world;
- I. whereas the statement issued in Brussels on 18 September 2014 by the spokesperson for the EEAS expressed concern about the detention of a group of 11 members of parliament and eminent members of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since 18 September 2001 without charge, judgment or the possibility of seeing a lawyer, and about the unlawful detention since 23 September 2001 of 10 independent journalists, including Dawit Isaak, a citizen of Sweden and the only European prisoner of conscience; whereas Patriarch Abune Antonios remains incommunicado and under house arrest since January 2006;
- J. whereas there is no freedom of press, as independent media is forbidden in Eritrea, with the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index ranking Eritrea last out of the 170-180 evaluated countries for eight years in succession;
- K. whereas Eritrea is ranked 186th out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index for 2015, according to the UNDP Human Development Report of 2015;
- L. whereas according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea there are three key areas of concern, namely: the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to adequate housing; smuggling and trafficking; and the increasing number of unaccompanied minors who form part of the more than 5 000 people fleeing the country on a monthly basis;
- M. whereas on 26 June 2015 hundreds of Eritrean refugees demonstrated in front of the African Union headquarters, demanding that the regional organisation push for democratic reforms in their home country; whereas protesters accused long-time Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki of being a dictator and urged the African Union to take action;
- N. whereas in November 2015 the UN warned of a severe drought in the Horn of Africa as a result of the current El Niño pattern; whereas the UN stated in December 2015 that this drought is the strongest ever recorded in the region, reducing crops by 50 % to 90 %; whereas, as a result, Eritrea is among the countries which will face the considerable challenge of ensuring food security for its population;
- O. whereas, in total contradiction with the reality of the drought, the Eritrean President has dismissed fears of a food crisis, saying that 'the country will not face any crisis in spite of reduced agricultural output';

Thursday 10 March 2016

- P. whereas the EU is an important donor for Eritrea in terms of development aid and assistance;
- Q. whereas the Eritrean Government unilaterally suspended aid in 2011 and does not recognise publicly its collaboration and partnership with the EU; whereas Eritrea does not facilitate the possibility of MEPs visiting Eritrea freely and without controls;
- R. whereas loss of their livelihoods encourages women and children to flee the country; whereas in 2015 Eritreans fleeing their country accounted for the fourth-largest number of people risking the perilous journey to Europe (after Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans), who run the gauntlet of pitiless people-smugglers to make the dangerous Mediterranean crossing; whereas, therefore, the situation in Eritrea directly affects Europe, since if human rights were respected and upheld in the country and people could live there without fear, Eritreans would be able to return to their homeland;
- S. whereas, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, over 400 000 Eritreans, or 9 % of the total population, have fled; whereas UNHCR estimates that some 5 000 Eritreans leave the country every month, this being explained to a large degree by the persistence of severe human rights violations; whereas in 2015 in 69 % of Eritrean asylum cases refugee status was granted in the EU while an additional 27 % of applicants received subsidiary protection, illustrating the gravity of persecution in Eritrea;
- T. whereas human trafficking for ransom with severe torture practices in the Sinai is the cause of numerous killings and disappearances of Eritrean refugees who had been abducted, whilst the severely traumatised survivors have received no care or support; whereas total impunity prevails whilst those responsible have not been brought to justice; whereas particular attention should be paid to unaccompanied child victims of trafficking in human beings, as they need specific assistance and support owing to their situation of particular vulnerability;
- U. whereas on 22 February 2016 the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Security Sector Program (SSP) officially launched, in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), a study report entitled 'Human Smuggling and Trafficking on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean Route';
- V. whereas Eritrea is supportive of the Khartoum Process (an EU and African Union initiative launched on 28 November 2014 with the aim of addressing the issue of migration and human trafficking), which encompasses the implementation of concrete projects, including capacity-building for the judiciary and awareness-raising;
- W. whereas the EU initially imposed sanctions on Eritrea in March 2010 in order to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1907 (2009), and whereas these included an arms embargo, travel restrictions and asset freezes relating to persons who constitute a threat to peace and national reconciliation;
- X. whereas the EU has a vested interest in seeing Eritrea stabilised, as the current situation is forcing a sizeable part of the population to flee, and thousands of people are losing their lives as a result of criminal activities, including smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings;
- Y. whereas the regime extends its totalitarian grip to the Eritrean diaspora, extorting funds from its members via a 2 % tax on expatriate incomes, spying on them and targeting family members who have remained in Eritrea on the grounds of perceived wrongdoing; whereas on 28 January 2016 the Eritrean Minister for National Development and the EU Head of Delegation signed the National Indicative Programme (NIP) under the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) in Asmara, worth EUR 200 million for the next five years; whereas actions should focus on renewable energy, governance and public finance management in the energy sector in particular;

Thursday 10 March 2016

- Z. whereas on 13 November 2015 Parliament's Committee on Development asked the Commission and the EEAS to take into consideration the conclusions sent to the EDF Committee on the draft National Indicative Programme for Eritrea, which referred to the scale and seriousness of the human rights violations committed by the Eritrean regime, the lack of reliability of this regime as a development cooperation partner, the pervasive corruption and the virtually total absence of transparency in public financial management in the country, and the risk of misusing EDF funds for migration management; whereas the Committee on Development called on the EDF Committee not to adopt the NIP pending further discussion; whereas Parliament's position was ignored;
- AA. whereas the PFDJ has established control and surveillance over the refugee and diaspora communities through the embassies, which are involved in extortion over diaspora taxes and 'voluntary' contributions in exchange for services, such as ID papers, passports, birth certificates and essential documents on which refugees may depend; whereas these practices are in breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations; whereas leaders of the PFDJ's youth organisation in the Netherlands have initiated legal campaigns against Dutch academics, media and government institutions, with the support of the political leadership in Asmara, presumably to silence critics of the regime; whereas the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea has also been subjected to threats;
1. Notes with great concern the continuing deplorable human rights situation and the complete absence of rule of law and media freedom in Eritrea;
 2. Stresses that addressing the justice deficit, democratic governance and restoration of the rule of law must be prioritised by ending authoritarian rule by fear of arbitrary and incommunicado detention, of torture and of other human rights violations, some of which may amount to crimes against humanity;
 3. Urges the Government of Eritrea to put an end to the system of indefinite national service by demobilising the conscripts who have completed their mandatory 18 months' service and effectively ending the practice of engaging conscripts in forced labour after that period, to provide for conscientious objection, and to end the compulsory practice of all school students spending their final year of schooling in a military training camp; calls on the Eritrean Government to ensure that no one undertakes military training before they reach 18 years of age and that no members of the population past the normal conscription age are conscripted; notes that the Eritrean authorities recalled in February 2016 that the EU agreement would not lead to any reform of Eritrea's military service policy;
 4. Believes that the EDF Committee should have taken into consideration the Committee on Development's recommendations not to adopt the NIP and to engage in further discussion; considers that the decision to adopt the NIP for Eritrea despite Parliament's opposition demonstrates a democratic deficit and severely undermines Parliament's role in ensuring the effective implementation of EU development objectives; calls, in this connection, for Parliament to be given powers of scrutiny over the EDF through a binding interinstitutional agreement under Article 295 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union; stresses that the Committee on Development's conclusions on draft programming documents should be automatically sent by the Commission to the Permanent Representations of the Member States;
 5. Takes note of the allocation of EUR 200 million over the next five years for the NIP under the 11th European Development Fund, in order to promote poverty reduction and socio-economic development, to tackle the root economic and political causes of migration, and to finance projects relating to renewable energy, energy efficiency and economic governance; recalls that this envelope is complementary to other areas of cooperation such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR);
 6. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the funding allocated does not benefit the Eritrean Government but is strictly assigned to meeting the needs of the Eritrean people for development, democracy, human rights, good governance and security, and freedom of speech, press and assembly; urges the EU to ensure the conditionality of the recently agreed aid and also to ensure that the NIP supports Eritrea in operating an important shift in its energy policy in order to make energy accessible for all, especially in the rural areas which are currently still without electricity; believes, moreover, that the governance component of the NIP should strongly focus on implementing the recommendations of the UN-led Universal Periodic Review on human rights;

Thursday 10 March 2016

7. Recalls that an unaccompanied minor is above all a child who is potentially in danger, and that child protection, rather than immigration policies, must be the leading principle for Member States and the EU when dealing with unaccompanied minors, so as to respect the core principle of the child's best interests; recalls that, without exception, anyone below the age of 18 years is to be regarded as a child and thus as a minor; points out that unaccompanied minors, particularly girls, are twice as susceptible to problems and difficulties as other minors;

8. Appeals to the international community and Eritrea's development partners to intervene in the situation and to put pressure on the Eritrean Government to allow foreign aid to support vulnerable communities before the crisis worsens; urges the EU to take urgent and effective measures to help the Eritrean people enhance their resilience to El Niño in order to guarantee food security, access to water and sanitation;

9. Remains very concerned about the human rights situation in the country; reiterates its call to the Eritrean authorities to release immediately and unconditionally parliamentarians, journalists (including Swedish citizen Dawit Isaak, who has not been heard from since 2005), political prisoners and prisoners of conscience;

10. Encourages the Commission to seek clear guarantees from the Eritrean Government that it will implement democratic reforms and ensure respect for human rights, including by implementing the recommendations made by the 18th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group, which it accepted on 7 February 2014; calls on the government to allow access to the country to UN and African Union independent experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur, and to allow the Commission of Inquiry on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea to fully exercise its mandate and to cooperate with it, including as regards public finance issues;

11. Recalls that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemns any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion;

12. Welcomes the measures taken by the Eritrean Government to fight FGM; calls on the government to enhance in general the promotion and protection of women's rights, including by taking further measures to combat harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and to end impunity in cases of sexual violence; calls on the Eritrean Government to respect single female-headed households and ensure that they are supported and protected;

13. Condemns the use by the Eritrean Government of the 'Diaspora tax', which is collected by extortion and other illegal means from Eritreans outside of Eritrea and is used in violation of UN resolutions to fund armed groups in neighbouring countries and thus destabilise the region; urges the government to end the 'guilt-by-association' policies that target family members of those who evade national service, seek to flee Eritrea or fail to pay the 2% income tax imposed by the government on Eritrean expatriates;

14. Demands that Eritrea sign and immediately enact the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and fully uphold its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both of which prohibit torture; notes with concern that public and private actors, including companies, are severely restricted by government control; recognises that the lack of any public finance management, including the absence of a national budget, makes budgetary control impossible, and that the fungibility of financial resources owing to central bank controls by the government may encourage military purchases and thus contribute to terrorism and destabilisation in the region;

15. Urges all international companies investing in Eritrea to act in respect of the full realisation of human rights and to do no harm;

Thursday 10 March 2016

16. Urges the EU Member States to investigate the role of the PFDJ and its various wings, including the youth wing, and to prohibit all forms of association and activity that directly support control and surveillance exercises in Europe, undermine democratic principles and the rule of law, and create patterns of intimidation and extortion; urges the Member States to act to end the diaspora tax and to investigate the financial transactions related to any other 'contributions' raised by Eritrean government-linked associations abroad, and to fully protect the asylum rights of all Eritrean refugees in Europe;

17. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of the African Union, the East African Community, the Secretary-General of the UN, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Eritrean authorities.
