



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN ERITREA

Oral Statement

Check Against Delivery

23 June 2015

Delivered by Andrew Smith, ARTICLE 19

Mr President,

The egregious and systematic violations reported by the Commission of Inquiry on the human rights situation in Eritrea, for too long hidden from international scrutiny, necessitate immediate action and accountability.

Eritrea's continued policy of non-cooperation with the United Nations' and regional human rights mechanisms, including this Commission of Inquiry, is unacceptable and in light of this report, reprehensible.

As the Commission reports, the "isolation" and "silencing" of voices is central to the regime's apparatus of repression and on-going impunity. The perpetual "state of emergency" sustains a climate where independent voices have all been wiped out.

No private media have existed in Eritrea since the last eight private newspapers were forced to close in 2001, when at least 18 journalists and 11 former government officials (part of a collective known as G-15) were arrested on 'national security' grounds. A total of 69 journalists have been arrested and detained without charge or fair trial for exercising their right to freedom of expression since 2001. While eight journalists are reported to have died in detention, a wall of silence means it is impossible to know how many others remain in prison, where they are detained, or information about their wellbeing.

ARTICLE 19 cautiously welcomes reports that some journalists were released in January 2015 and April 2013, but underscores that barriers to the free flow of information into and out of Eritrea hamper efforts to verify the exact details of these reports

The few remaining “media” in Eritrea are state owned and far from independent, serving as a mouthpiece for the Ministry of Information. Alternative sources of news are largely non-existent due an extremely low Internet penetration level of around 6%, and routine blocking of online news sources by Eritrea’s sole and government owned telecommunications provider, Eritrea Telecommunication Services (EriTel). The regime’s iron grip over the free flow of information is such there are no opportunities for the re-establishment of the media.

Reports of arbitrary arrests, detentions and executions of demonstrators at protests mean that freedom of association and assembly are not enjoyed, political parties and trade unions are banned, and therefore participation in public affairs impossible.

Eritrea’s legal framework, together with a complete absence of credible or functioning public institutions or an independent judiciary, provides the discretionary means to crush any hint of dissent and sustains impunity for human rights violations.

Following the Commission’s report, all international and regional actors must insist that accountability for human rights violations defines future engagement with the Eritrean authorities, as steps are identified to secure the institutional and legal reforms necessary to open space for free expression.

We reiterate the Commission’s recommendation that the government must account for the whereabouts and wellbeing of political prisoners, including journalists, and allow international and regional observers access to them with a view to securing the unconditional release of those that are still alive.

Thank you.