

Part 1

Eritrea: UN Names Commission of Inquiry
Panel's Focus Should Be on Justice for Abuses

(Geneva, September 26, 2014) – The United Nations Human Rights Council's establishment in June 2014 of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights abuses in [Eritrea](#) is an important step toward justice for the victims, Human Rights Watch said today. On September 26, 2014, the President of the UN Human Rights Council appointed Mike Smith (Australia) and Victor Dankwa (Ghana) to serve in the Commission of Inquiry, together with Sheila Keetharuth (Mauritius), the council's special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea.

The Commission of Inquiry should receive full cooperation and access from the government of Eritrea, as well as from all other countries it would need to visit, Human Rights Watch said.

“The flow of Eritrean youth fleeing the country shows that the persistent, alarming patterns of serious human rights violations in Eritrea need scrutiny and action,” said [Leslie Lefkow](#), deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “A Commission of Inquiry should bring world attention to Eritreans' suffering and explore possible avenues for justice for the victims.”

Smith served as Executive Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) from 2007 to 2013 and was elected Chairman of the former Commission of Human Rights in 2004. Dankwa is currently a professor at the University of Ghana and was a member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights from 1993 to 2005. Keetharuth has served as UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Eritrea since 2012.

Human Rights Watch and other independent human rights entities, including the UN special rapporteur on Eritrea, have [documented](#) serious patterns of human rights violations in Eritrea. These abuses include arbitrary arrest, torture, appalling detention conditions, forced labor, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and worship. There are no independent media in Eritrea, and local nongovernmental organizations are prohibited.

The Eritrean government uses a vast apparatus of official and secret detention facilities to incarcerate thousands of Eritreans without charge or trial. Many of the prisoners are detained for their political or religious beliefs; others because they tried to evade the indefinite national service or flee the country.

The Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on June 27 to establish the Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights violations in Eritrea “since independence” in 1991. The commission should investigate allegations of serious human rights violations, including the detention and torture of prisoners and indefinite military service with appalling conditions and forced labor for conscripts. It should also recommend appropriate accountability mechanisms, including criminal prosecution, for those responsible for the abuses, Human Rights Watch said.

The impetus for the Human Rights Council to form a Commission of Inquiry came from activists in the Eritrean diaspora and young Eritreans who had left their country. The establishment of the commission is an acknowledgement from the international community that their calls for ending the government’s abusive practices have been heard, Human Rights Watch said.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 5 percent of Eritrea’s population has [fled the country](#) . Many evoke the human rights situation and concerns over military conscription as the reason for their decision to leave. A national service law permits the Eritrean government to conscript citizens to perform compulsory military service for 18 months. But in practice most conscripts serve for years and face arbitrary detention and mistreatment if they protest or flee. While in national service, conscripts are used as forced labor in private or semi-public construction and agriculture projects.

Torture, cruel and degrading treatment, and forced labor are routine for both conscripts and detainees. Detention conditions are appalling, with detainees typically held in overcrowded cells – sometimes underground – or in shipping containers that reach searing temperatures by day and are freezing at night, Human Rights Watch said.

Many of the Eritreans who flee the country undertake hazardous journeys through Libya, Egypt, or across the Mediterranean in an effort to reach Europe. Some Eritreans have been detained for months or more en route, and some have fallen victim to [human traffickers](#) who imprison and torture them for ransom. Few Eritreans seek refuge in countries near Eritrea – including Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and Sudan – because those countries force them to live in closed remote refugee camps, deny them access to work, or detain and abuse them in inhuman and degrading conditions.

Eritrean refugees have become a crucial source of information on the human rights situation in Eritrea given that Eritrea has not allowed United Nations special rapporteurs or other international human rights investigators to visit the country, Human Rights Watch said.

“The UN inquiry’s main focus should be on documenting current abuses in Eritrea,” Lefkow said. “But given the horrendous abuses affecting many Eritrean migrants and asylum seekers, the commission should also shed light on the treatment by host governments of Eritreans seeking refuge.”

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<http://www.hrw.org/africa/eritrea>

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