

HELP PEOPLE, NOT THE ERITREAN DICTATOR



By Mirjam van Reisen*
IDN-InDepth News Viewpoint

The European Union had better change its policy towards Eritrea. The people would be better off if the EU were to spend its allocated funds for Eritrea on housing and education of the Eritrean refugees in Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Egypt or Yemen.

BRUSSELS (IDN) - Should the European Union help a merciless dictator or come to the aid of refugees? I think the answer is obvious. We are talking about Eritrea, the open air prison in the East of Africa.

This small country of about 6 million inhabitants on the shore of the Red Sea is ruled by the autocrat Isaias Afewerki since independence in 1991. At the Africa conference of the Evert Vermeer Stichting (EVS) in The Hague on October 29, I urged EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs to reconsider his policy before spending the remaining tens of millions of euros of his budget for Eritrea.

Piebalgs has put democracy in a central place in the policy communication '[Agenda for Change](#)' he presented on October 13 with a view to increasing the impact of EU development policy. The document states on its first pages prominently that "EU general budget support should be linked to the governance situation and political dialogue with the partner country."

It adds: "Should a country loosen its commitment to human rights and democracy, the EU should strengthen its cooperation with the non-state actors and local authorities and use forms of aid that provide the poor with the support they need."

'North Korea of Africa'

Eritrea clearly has no democracy. It doesn't even have a parliament that meets. The constitution has never entered into force. The government has made a habit out of arbitrary detentions, persecution of people with unwanted religions and suppressing the free press.

Eritrea can be considered the 'North Korea of Africa'. President Isaias Afewerki is the head of state and head of the only political party, the [Eritrean People's Liberation Front](#) (EPLF). He doesn't allow any criticism. Ten ministers that asked for some democracy in September 2001 were never seen again.

Among political prisoners, Dawit Isaac is a very prominent one. This Swedish-Eritrean author and journalist has been locked up since September 2001 in a crackdown on non-state press that saw all 8 independent newspapers close down.

Although never formally charged, he is apparently in the maximum-security prison in Embatkala, along with 112 other political prisoners, reportedly on the orders of President Issayas Afewerki. The prison is said to have one of the harshest regimes in the country. Rumour has it that he would be set free if the EU spends it subsidy on Eritrea, but that hasn't been the case yet.

No Civil Society

Most boys and girls are sent from school to the army. Officially they are to be enlisted for one year, but in practice they have to stay there until their fifties or sixties. Women have to serve in the army as well. Some are used as sex slaves for the leaders. A consequence of this huge army is that there are hardly any Eritrean men and women left for a functioning civil society or for starting a business. What is more, the Eritrean society is suffering from a shortage of workforce, because of the long war with Ethiopia.

A small workforce explains also the current lack of farmers and food. The situation is expected to worsen. As in the neighbouring countries, experts expect famine to follow drought. But Afewerki denies that there are any problems. And as he doesn't allow collection of data or aid organisations, we can only guess how many people would die of drought and famine.

Open Prison

Leaving the country is very dangerous. Minefields and a shoot-to-kill policy make Eritrea in fact an open air prison. Eritrea ranks among the world's Top 3 with the highest numbers of refugees per capita.

The United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea in December 2009 because, according to findings, Eritrea had provided support to armed groups undermining peace and reconciliation in Somalia. Above all, it had not withdrawn its forces following clashes with Djibouti in June 2008. The Security Council introduced an arms embargo on Eritrea, in addition to travel restrictions on political and military leaders. It also froze their assets.

The European Parliament in a resolution in September 2011 called for Eritrea to be suspended from the Cotonou Agreement, a comprehensive partnership agreement between developing countries and the European Union that includes economic aid. EU was asked to ensure that its development assistance does not benefit the Government of Eritrea but is targeted strictly at the needs of the Eritrean people.

Despite an obvious democracy deficit, the European Union had reserved 122 million euro (172 million dollar) in a multi-annual program for Eritrea. Of this sum of money, tens of millions are still unspent. How much of this program has been implemented in Eritrea – and how? Has all the spending been legal? Considering that millions of euros have been spent on supporting a dictator, it can be safely presumed that some rules have been breached.

The crucial question is: what to do with the money that has not yet spent on Eritrea? I think it should be spent for the benefit of the people, and not to the advantage of the dictator.

The European Commission has a particularly important role here, because it is not just another donor, it contributes 20% of the collective EU aid effort. The Commission also acts as a coordinator, convener and policy maker of development cooperation of 27 Member States of the European Union.

In principle, if the European Commission does not spend the earmarked funds, the unspent money remains in its coffers. I strongly urge the EU to reconsider its policy. The money must be used for a better objective, also in Europe's own interest. Many Eritrean refugees seek their way across the Mediterranean or other routes into Europe, to live as illegal immigrants.

What to do?

Therefore, I urge the EU to spend its remaining Eritrea budget on:

a) Housing for refugees in Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Egypt or Yemen. Presently, the UNHCR cannot cope with the large numbers of refugees from Eritrea. Because of adverse conditions, many of the refugees flee Eritrea, leaving their fate in the hands of 'people smugglers'. Some die crossing the desert or the Mediterranean, some are kidnapped or extorted. Reports are that some people fall victim to organ harvesting, in which knowledgeable sources allege the Eritrean government plays a role.

b) Education of young refugees from Eritrea. The European Commission could also finance scholarships for bright Eritrean youngsters to attend African universities. In the camps children now grow up only to join the ranks of another lost generation. But if they are educated and trained well, they might one day return home and help build infrastructure for a democratic and functioning society. President Isaias Afewerki will surely die one day, which would open up opportunities for change. This in turn would require the informed people.

It seems hard to visualise alternatives, such as working with non-state actors inside Eritrea to help the poor people. Aid organisations have left the country one by one. There is almost no civil society or company outside the army. The ruler has ordered that only one civil organisation for men, one for women and one for youngsters is just about enough for the country.

Spending money on the Eritrean government looks out of question to me. For some reason, Eritrea has managed to remain out of the focus of world attention, but the world will one day wake up and be outraged by massive human rights violations in Eritrea. The current situation cannot last any longer.

To conclude, I propose that the European Commission's communication Agenda for Change is also perceived as an agenda for change in Eritrea. That would really help people who are leaving Eritrea, and even more the people living in Eritrea.

*Dr Mirjam van Reizen is professor at the Netherlands' Tilburg University, and holds the chair for International Social Responsibility, endowed by the Marga Klompé Foundation, the first female government minister in the Netherlands. She is the founder and director of Brussels-based Europe External Policy Advisors ([EEPA](#)), and a member of the coordinating committee of Social Watch. [IDN-InDepthNews - October 31, 2011]

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