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PRESS RELEASE

European aid supports Eritrea, land of Child Soldiers and forced labour

There is growing concern of the lack of a coherent European Union policy to Eritrea and the Horn of Africa. While Europe is struggling to find an answer to the infinite stream of refugees coming from the country, through Lybia, Tunisia and Egypt, it is supporting the dictatorship with aid money. The fate of Eritrean refugees escaping their country is tragic: during the last months almost 400 Eritrean were drowned in the Mediterranean.

A report released today bears witness to the unbelievable risks that refugees take to escape the country, reminiscent of the risks that were taken by East German refugees to cross the Berlin Wall. Father Mussie Erai Yosief, a catholic priest in Rome, called attention to the “250 Eritrean refugees held captive by traffickers at the border between Egypt and Israel.” He added that “reports suggest that the refugees have been tethered with chains in inhumane conditions, and are being held ransom for USD 8000.” Father Mussie appeals to the European Union “to intervene in this situation in order to avoid further degradation of human dignity.”

According to UNHCR latest figures Eritrea is in the top three of the largest number of asylum-seekers, despite its small population estimated at just 4 million people. Equally concerned about the fate of the refugees, MEP Judith Sargentini, chair of the group of MEPs for a Democratic Eritrea, raises questions on the legitimacy and wisdom of the European policy to give development support to the government of Eritrea: “Europe is providing Eritrea with development aid to facilitate social dialogue between the workers union of Eritrea and the Government. I am a firm believer in social dialogue but I have my doubts about the possibility of an ‘open’ dialogue with the Eritrean Government. Is this not legitimising the regime of Isaias Afewerki? Is Europe’s silent diplomacy really telling Afewerki that this opposition will sooner or later turn against him?”

The report contains a contribution by Professor Mirjam van Reisen and Dr. Daniel Mekonnen, which contests the legal basis for the European Aid provided to Eritrea, listing severe human rights violations, including child labour and forced child soldiers. In a reaction professor van Reisen (faculty of Humanities, Tilburg University) stated: “The European aid programme to Eritrea for cooperation with the Afewerki authoritarian regime is illegal under the EU’s own laws and should be stopped.”

The report can be downloaded at: www.eepa.be

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