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## **Debate on human rights in Eritrea at the British Parliament**

### ***Large excerpts***

UK Parliament (09.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1SicD2B> -

#### **Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): (...)**

Until recently, like most of my constituents and most fellow Britons, I knew little of Eritrea, its people or its Government. Conditions in the country were brought to my attention a little over a year ago by one of my constituents, Habte Hagos, who owns and runs the award-winning Blue Nile restaurant in Woolwich, among other ventures. Like many Eritreans, Habte lost family members in the struggle for a free, democratic Eritrea and he has worked over many years to raise awareness about human rights violations in his homeland. I am delighted that Habte and others are in the Gallery this evening to watch the proceedings.

Desperate human beings are moving across our continent on a scale not seen since the second world war. As we know, a significant proportion are fleeing civil war and sectarian violence in Syria, but **large numbers of Eritreans are also leaving the land of their birth in the horn of Africa. An estimated 5,000 people leave Eritrea every month** and almost as many men, women and children left that country last year as fled from Syria. This human exodus is all the more staggering when we consider that it is from a country of just 6 million people that is not presently at war.

#### **Matthew Pennycook: (...)**

**Most Eritreans who flee end up in neighbouring countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia, but many make the dangerous trek north towards the Maghreb and the Sinai peninsula in the hope of finding sanctuary in Europe. In doing so, each must evade: capture by their own security forces, who operate a shoot-to-kill policy against those leaving without permission; violence and extortion at the hands of desert gangs; death from dehydration in the Sahara; detention in Libya or Israel; and the lethal risks of crossing the Mediterranean. What dread leads so many, not just adults, but thousands of unaccompanied minors, to risk everything to leave their homeland behind? Words such as "tyranny", "oppression" and "cruelty" are regularly used to describe conditions within all manner of distasteful regimes across the globe, to the point where sometimes they risk becoming stale with overuse. Yet if anything, those words fall short when applied to Eritrea under the rule of President Isaias Afwerki.**

Isaias' **Eritrea is regularly described as "Africa's North Korea"**. That is a hackneyed phrase but in this instance the comparison is pardonable, because ruthless repression is the norm for those living under the rule of this isolated, hermetic and authoritarian regime. It is a far cry from what so many Eritreans fought for, heroically and for decades, and from the hopes of those who supported the struggle for liberation. Instead of

democracy and the rule of law, Eritreans are ruled by a culture of fear and absolute obedience: fear that they or their classmates will be sent to carry out national service in a remote location for an unknown number of years; fear that a trusted co-worker who yesterday openly expressed an opinion may not turn up at work tomorrow; fear that a friend arrested arbitrarily will be incarcerated in a vastly overcrowded metal container or a simple hole dug in the desert ground, with little prospect of release; and fear that a disappeared family member might never be seen again.

**There have been no elections since 1993, and no independent press since a government clampdown in 2001. We have seen the pervasive and ongoing restriction of all freedoms—movement, expression and association. People have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, with no fair trials or no trials at all; indefinite compulsory military conscription; forced labour; and torture, including widespread sexual violence against women and girls. That is the situation in Eritrea today.**

An extensive and detailed report published in June by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights describes, in horrifying detail, a siege state where control is absolute and where "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations" are being committed. It says that these violations "may constitute crimes against humanity".

The crimes taking place today in Eritrea add themselves to old, but not forgotten, and still raw, abuses. **Politicians, journalists, faith leaders and business owners who once proudly set out to build a prosperous post-independence future for their country instead find themselves languishing in one of the country's numerous detention centres—or they have died there, suffering like thousands of ordinary citizens punished for refusing an order, being a member of the wrong religious domination or expressing sympathy with the wrong person.**

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene before this debate. Is he aware that **since 2002, when the Government in effect banned all but three denominations, thousands of Christians from unregistered Churches have been arrested and detained indefinitely? Does he share my concern that 13 years later not only are the Eritrean Government continuing this campaign of arrest, but followers of registered religious communities also suffer maltreatment?**

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I share his concern about the persecution of particular minority groups, including religious groups, and of countless individuals, whose names many of us could mention. Many of the Eritreans to whom I have spoken could name friends, journalists and others from minorities who have been persecuted. **Sadly, the repression has worked. Those who remain in Eritrea dare not speak up, for fear of reprisal, while diaspora communities are subtly infiltrated by agents of the state. Those who have fled abroad and who strive still to promote human rights are systematically intimidated.**

**Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP):** (...)

In Glasgow, I, too, have a number of Eritrean friends who have found that when they have tried to campaign against the human rights abuses, their family members and friends still suffer in Eritrea. **They have been infiltrated by Government supporters and threatened and abused, and they are supposed to be here for safety.**

**Matthew Pennycook:** I would certainly join the hon. Lady in asking for that. As she says, it is not just the family members who remain in Eritrea who are affected, but the

communities that live here and that face fragmentation and abuse by these agents, much of which is online by anonymous trolls who target critics using everything from abusive emails to fully fledged death threats.

(...)

**Intimidation of the diaspora is compounded by exhortation in the form of the so-called rehabilitation tax that the Eritrean Government impose on their countrymen and women living abroad. This 2% tax on the income of Eritrean émigrés is a diminishing, but still important, source of revenue for the regime. The previous coalition Government voted in favour of UN Resolution 2023 that condemned the tax and called on all states to ensure that it ceased.**

Other countries have taken robust steps to enforce that resolution. **In May, the Canadian Government expelled the Eritrean consulate-general in Toronto for continuing to levy the tax. Yet there are credible reports that collection of this tax continues unabated in the UK. Will the Minister assure the House that the collection of the 2% tax on Eritreans living in the UK has ended or, if he cannot give that assurance, can he outline what steps the Government plan to take to ensure that it is?**

(...)

As the Minister knows, **a UN and EU arms embargo is in force on Eritrea. In addition, there is also a travel ban and an asset freeze imposed on listed individuals deemed a threat to peace and the national reconciliation process. In the past, the UN has toughened sanctions on the regime by requiring foreign companies involved in Eritrea's mining industry to ensure that funds from the sector are not used to destabilise the region.**

If the Government accept—I hope that the Minister will confirm that they do— that the mass exodus of people from Eritrea is a reaction, in large part, to human rights abuses taking place there, then surely there is a case for considering a toughening of sanctions against the regime to deny it the means to persecute its people and thereby destabilise the region?

**Will the Minister let us know what consideration the Government have given to widening sanctions against the Eritrean Government? Specifically, will he let the House know whether he agrees with me that, given the severity of the human rights abuses in Eritrea and their impact on regional stability, there is convincing a case for an expansion of targeted sanctions on those mining projects in Eritrea in which the Afwerki Government have a significant stake and that provide the regime with much-needed foreign exchange?**

The third and final issue is EU development aid. The EU has responded to the flood of Eritreans fleeing their homeland by offering hundreds of millions in development aid in return for assurances from the Eritrean Government that they will address the social and economic exclusion that it is adamant are the root causes of irregular migration and human trafficking. In doing so Europe has, at best, given the impression that it believes that a lack of economic opportunity is the root cause of the population outflow, rather than repression. At worst, it risks the perception that the European Union would be content to see human rights abuses continue in the country, if only the regime would stem the growing tide of Eritreans heading toward this continent.

Money will not alter the simple fact that repression, rather than economic prospects, is the main driver of migration from Eritrea. In any case, money and the appalling human rights abuses that have been documented by the UN are inextricably interlinked, because Eritrea's economy now is almost completely dominated by the state and the ruling PFDJ party. **In such circumstances, aid will simply entrench the regime. The Minister will know that aid to Eritrea under the European Union budget will have to take account of the country's human rights record under the terms of the Cotonou agreement, but can the Minister reassure the House that demonstrable proof of improvements in the human rights situation in the country will be an absolute prerequisite for the release of any EU development funding for Eritrea?**

Eritreans have been and are being terrorised and oppressed by their own Government. The hermetic seal that the regime has attempted to enforce is well and truly broken. Eritreans are fleeing persecution at the hands of their rulers in record numbers, and they will not stop until meaningful progress on human rights in their homeland is under way. If there is one thing that history teaches us, it is that the struggle against the totalitarian mindset is an endless one that must be fought and refought in every generation. Eritrea is a central battleground in that conflict in our generation. Our own national interest, as well as our credentials as a bastion of human rights, demand that we give the victims of the Afwerki regime not only our solidarity, but clear and unequivocal support to alleviate the very real suffering they face.

**The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on securing this timely debate, and on speaking with such eloquence and passion.

**The debate is timely because later this week, as the House will know, European and African leaders will gather in Malta to discuss how we can work together to reduce the number of people risking their lives in perilous journeys across the Mediterranean. This year alone more than 32,000 Eritreans have made that crossing, and others have lost their lives in the attempt. More Eritreans still are living in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, so the question has to be, as the hon. Gentleman asked, why are so many leaving and what can be done to improve the situation within Eritrea?**

A large part of the answer, as the hon. Gentleman argued, relates to human rights.

(...)

**We are troubled also by the United Nations commission of inquiry's findings that widespread human rights violations had been committed in Eritrea. It is unfortunate that the commission has so far been unable to visit Eritrea to see the situation first-hand. In July this year at the UN Human Rights Council, the United Kingdom supported an extension of the commission's mandate so that it could further investigate these allegations. We have made it clear to the Government of Eritrea that they must co-operate with the UN commission, including allowing its members to visit Eritrea to see matters for themselves, and that they must co-operate also with other UN human rights bodies.**

**Jim Shannon:** I want it recorded in *Hansard*, please, that this year marks the eighth anniversary of the illegal removal of Patriarch Antonios from his position as head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the country's largest religious community. Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable that the patriarch, an octogenarian with severe diabetes, has been under house arrest since 2007?

**Mr Lidington:** Yes, I do. (...)

Alongside the very real concerns shared by everyone in the House this evening, we should not ignore any signs of progress, even small ones. I welcome the fact that Eritrea took part in the UN universal periodic review process at the Human Rights Council and in article 8 dialogue with the EU. Last year, Eritrea ratified the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and voted in favour of a global moratorium on the use of the death penalty. I also welcome its co-operation in efforts to tackle the human trafficking and smuggling that puts people's lives at risk. These are indeed small steps, but they are steps in the right direction. The test now is for the Eritrean Government to follow through on their commitments with concrete action to improve the human rights situation on the ground, and the onus is on them to demonstrate progress.

**A key part of that action should be to amend Eritrea's system of indefinite national service. A system without a clear end date drives many young people to leave the country, and this needs to change. I welcome the fact that earlier this year the Eritrean Government made a public pledge to limit national service to 18 months,** but Ministers here have been very clear when talking to the Government in Asmara that it is not enough for Eritrean officials or Ministers simply to make that pledge in Europe—the commitment needs to be publicised widely within Eritrea itself, and it should apply to all conscripts and not just those who have been enlisted recently.

(...)

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich raised a number of specific questions, and I will try to provide him with answers. He asked about the imposition of the expatriate tax. **The levy of a tax on nationals living in a foreign country is not in itself illegal—in fact, many countries do it—but the UN resolution made it clear that using coercive measures to try to collect such a tax would be illegal. We have made it clear to the Eritrean embassy in London that coercive measures will not be accepted in the United Kingdom. We urge any such cases to be reported to the relevant police force without delay, so that an investigation can be made and action taken.**

The hon. Gentleman asked about increased development assistance to Eritrea, including through the EU's European development fund 11. That fund is still under discussion (...)

Aid does not mean providing funding to the Government of Eritrea. Greater EU assistance could, for example, be provided through United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations. I give a commitment that any further Department for International Development assistance will be carefully assessed against Eritrea's commitment to its partnership principles, including on civil and political rights.

**Matthew Pennycook:** I want to press the Minister on how we can know, with a regime that has no financial accountability and does not let in international observers, that any development aid will be spent on health or economic outcomes, rather than on lining the pockets of party officials or the regime's supporters.

**Mr Lidington:** That is precisely why aid is often best spent via reputable international agencies and NGOs with a track record of ensuring that help goes to those who are genuinely in need and which will shout very loudly if the Government of the recipient country try to interfere in that progress.

(...)

The hon. Gentleman talked about the UN arms embargo. Last month, the Security Council noted in resolution 2244 that, during the course of its current and previous

mandates, **the sanctions monitoring group had not found any evidence of the Government of Eritrea supporting al-Shabaab.** I welcome that, but the resolution was also clear on what Eritrea needed to do if it wanted a serious discussion on the overall appropriateness of sanctions—that is, to deepen its engagement with the monitoring group and facilitate its entry into Eritrea.

I have to confess that **I am not at the moment persuaded by what the hon. Gentleman urged in respect of mining companies,** although I will report what he said to my colleagues in DFID and the Foreign Office. **Despite all the problems in Eritrea, the mining companies provide one of the few sources of employment for people. It may be a matter of weighing up our wish to penalise the Government against the fact that we might inadvertently penalise people who are themselves suffering.**

**Matthew Pennycook:** There are documented instances of forced labour at more than one mine, with compulsory military conscription being used. It is not a process whereby an international mining company goes in there legitimately. These sites are the sites of some of the abuses that I have talked about.

**Mr Lidington:** I will write to the hon. Gentleman after the debate with chapter and verse, but the advice I have received is that Nevsun, the leading international mining company in Eritrea, has a firm policy of refusing to accept on to its workforce people who have been conscripted in the way he describes. Undoubtedly, the Eritrean Government have tried to use conscripted labour in mines at various times.

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## Eritrea – Paths out of isolation



**Annette Weber thinks that Eritrea should be reintegrated into Africa's regional structures, especially those that focus on conflict mediation and economic development. Such a move, she argues, will help build trust and neutralize Eritrean narratives that stress Ethiopian aggression and international conspiracies.**

By Annette Weber for SWP

*This article was [originally published by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs](#) on July 2015.*

ISN - <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=192621> - (04.08.2015) - Two decades after achieving independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea is back in the European headlines above – all for a wave of refugees arriving in Europe. At the same time, a recent United Nations Commission on Human Rights report accuses the Eritrean regime of gross human rights violations. President Isayas Afewerki sees Eritrea's regional and international isolation since its war with neighbouring Ethiopia (1998–2000) as evidence of a conspiracy between Ethiopia and influential Western states. Every month between three and five thousand Eritreans attempt to flee the total mobilisation instituted for national defence.

Reintegrating the country in regional structures could build trust and neutralise the Eritrean narrative of Ethiopian aggression and international conspiracy

In 2014, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 360,000 refugees left Eritrea, 37,000 of whom came to Europe. Altogether, more than 6 percent of the population have fled the country, despite Eritrea suffering neither famine nor war nor terrorism. It would therefore appear that emigration is driven by other motives. The main cause is in fact the potentially unlimited military service that was introduced in 2002. Both men and women are obliged to complete this "national service", which must officially be completed between the ages of eighteen and fifty. While the duration is supposed to be limited to eighteen months, it can in reality last ten years or more. Apart from national defence, citizens may be ordered to work in agriculture, roadbuilding or mining. For the Eritrean government in Asmara, national service therefore represents a significant economic factor.

In the interests of creating a national identity transcending ethnic ties, the government has taken to rotating conscripts between locations (a strategy already applied by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front from which today's governing PFDJ emerged). In combination with the lack of a time limit, however, the concept leaves young people spending long periods far from home without contact to their families. Where they are rewarded at all, conscripts are also so poorly paid that they are unable to provide for a family or make any kind of investment in their future.

The government, on the other hand, regards compulsory service as a vital safeguard for Eritrea's national defence and independence. For the ideologists of the SWP Comments ruling party, the country's defence and autonomy form an imperative more important than individual liberties. Fleeing the service is tantamount to treason, so returnees must expect persecution and imprisonment. Because it is more or less impossible to leave the country legally, a dense network of organised traffickers has arisen specifically serving Eritreans. A range of methods are involved. In "normal" trafficking, refugees are taken to Israel or Libya via Sudan. But traffickers also make money by kid napping refugees and blackmailing their families in Eritrea. A string of beneficiaries, including members of the border police and the Eritrean and Sudanese armed forces, members of nomadic groups in eastern Sudan and the Sinai, and trans-African trafficking networks, profit enormously from Eritrean asylum seekers, whose journey and ransom cost upwards of \$10,000.

### **Background**

Eritrea achieved independence in 1993, after thirty years of fighting against Ethiopian rule. The Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation movements were originally closely linked, having jointly toppled communist military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. This led to hopes of peaceful coexistence following Eritrea's secession, for which ideal preconditions appeared to exist. The two states shared an interest in regional trade, while Ethiopia wished to use the Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab after losing its access to the Red Sea through the secession.

But only five years after Eritrean independence, war broke out between the two allies—over exactly those supposedly shared interests, such as Ethiopian access to the sea. The conflict quickly escalated, with border disputes leading to occupation of territory by both parties and air strikes on each other's airfields. The war lasted two years and cost about one hundred thousand lives, before ending as a "frozen conflict".

The Algiers Agreement of 2000 and the 2002 decision of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) delimiting the border created the formal preconditions for peace. Yet Ethiopia refuses to this day to recognise the proposed border line and continues to occupy Eritrean territory. Neither the African Union nor the UN nor bilateral partners demand that Addis Abeba observe the agreements and implement binding decisions. Ethiopia is one of the West's closest allies in the "war on terror" and valued as a stable (albeit repressive) regional power in the Horn of Africa. The AU even has its headquarters in Addis Abeba. Ethiopian preeminence creates a situation where the West is much more conciliatory towards Ethiopia than to other countries in the Horn of Africa, generally

turning a blind eye to repression, human rights violations and anti-democratic measures. In fact the states in the region are not far apart in the relevant indices of human rights, political freedoms and democratisation. The Asmara government, in turn, sees Ethiopia's refusal to implement valid agreements, in conjunction with the attitude of Western states, as a wholesale betrayal.

### ***Human Rights and Liberties***

Repression spiralled in Eritrea following the war of 1998 to 2000, with Isayas Afewerki instrumentalising the external enemy Ethiopia and the West's "complicity" to largely suspend civil liberties, democratic mechanisms and rule of law structures. Instead, Afewerki established an autocratic one party regime under his rule. He was, like his cousin Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, initially the leader of the national liberation movement before assuming the presidency after independence in 1993. The parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2001 were cancelled, and the constitution adopted in 1997 never came into force. To this day political decisions are promulgated by presidential decree. Shortly after the war a group of Afewerki's closest advisers, the so-called G15, criticised his policies as "illegal and unconstitutional". Eleven of them were detained, and it remains a mystery where they are being held, whether they will ever face charges, and whether they are even still alive. According to the UNHCR report, disappearances, torture and detention without trial are common practice in Eritrea.

In 2001 President Afewerki closed all independent newspapers and had a number of journalists arrested. According to Reporters without Borders, sixteen journalists were still in prison in 2015, and Eritrea has occupied last place in its regular World Press Freedom Index for the past seven years. (...)

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