



Conscience and Peace Tax International

Internacional de Conciencia e Impuestos para la Paz

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ORAL STATEMENT BY CONSCIENCE AND PEACE TAX INTERNATIONAL

Delivered by **Derek Brett**, CPTI Representative in Geneva, Wednesday 17th March 2010

ADOPTION OF THE UPR REPORT ON ERITREA

The recommendation numbers cited in Eritrea's responses (A/HRC/13/2/Add1) do not entirely tally with those in the report on the Working Group (A/HRC/13/2). Nevertheless it is clear from paragraphs 26 and 27 of the responses that Eritrea rejects all the recommendations relating to military service, except perhaps those by Slovenia (55) and Austria (54) relating to sexual exploitation and violence against women in the armed forces.

Unfortunately, the response that "Severe punishment has been and will be meted out to those convicted of violating the dignity and liberty of (...) female members of the armed forces" (para 24) addresses only part of these recommendations, as it says nothing about preventing the abuses through an awareness-raising campaign – a duty which should be felt particularly strongly in a State where women played such a prominent part in the armed independence struggle, and which now alone with Israel systematically conscripts women into active service in the armed forces.

Sadly, Eritrea is not the only State which feels obliged in the light of threats to its territorial integrity to maintain a system of conscription into military service. However, the indefinite prolongation of the military service of conscripts (the subject of recommendations by Canada (58) and the United Kingdom (60)), the non-recognition of the right of conscientious objection to military service (mentioned by Slovenia (59), and Argentina (57)), and abuses within the National Service programme (referred to by the USA (62) and the United Kingdom (61) all do nothing to add to national security and solidarity. They simply alienate the population from their government, and are an important cause of the flood of refugees from Eritrea in recent years.

Eritrea may quibble with the assessment that it systematically conscripts persons aged under 18. This is however no reason not to take effective measures to protect them

from recruitment, as suggested in recommendations by Germany (56), Argentina (57), the United Kingdom (61), the USA(62), Poland (63) and Ghana (64).

A different batch of recommendations (by Australia (89), the Netherlands (90), Austria (91), Ireland (92), Chile (93), Brazil (97) and Norway (98)) concerned the freedom of religion or belief and arbitrary detentions on grounds of religious adherence. Eritrea neither accepted nor rejected these recommendations.

The freedom of thought, conscience and religion under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Eritrea is a party, includes the right of conscientious objection to military service. Eritrea's treatment of conscientious objectors is exceptionally abusive. In the sixteen years of Eritrean independence, every person known to have declared a conscientious objection when faced with military recruitment has been imprisoned, and there has not been a single reported instance of the release of a conscientious objector from imprisonment.

Paragraph 32 of the responses states that "Eritrea does not detain people for their religious belief.", but continues "There are those who have been detained for committing crimes, including treason and threatening national security. Their cases have been, and continue to be, under review." Presumably this disclaimer is meant to cover among others the cases of Jehovah's Witnesses Paulos Eyassu, Negede Tecklemariam and Isaac Mogos who have been incarcerated at Sawa Military Camp since the 24th of September 1994. Did their genuine wish to serve their country in a civilian rather than a military capacity (a possibility supposedly allowed for in national law) really constitute a threat to national security? And how is the continuing review of their cases progressing?

Turkey (26) recommended that Eritrea issue all invitations requested by special procedures mandate holders. Eritrea responded to this and similar recommendations that such requests are considered on a case by case basis (para 15). Among others, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has for several years been seeking to visit Eritrea. CPTI calls upon Eritrea to issue an invitation at an early date.

Paragraph 28 of the responses raises further questions. In response to a recommendation by the United Kingdom, we are told that a demobilisation programme began in 2002, but are given no details. In the same paragraph we are told that graduates of the Sawa School now have three career options, all essentially civilian. Sawa School is attached to an army camp in an unpopulated desert region. What civilian purpose can be served by the requirement that all students should spend the final year of secondary education there?

Finally, those Missions who have participated in the UPR review of Eritrea must have become acutely aware of the dire state of human rights in the country, particularly associated with military service, and of the treatment of returned refugees. CPTI would call on those Missions to feed back to their capitals a strong recommendation that adequate protection be given to all Eritreans who have fled the country, and particularly to conscientious objectors to military service.

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