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ERITREA

Human rights record in spotlight at United Nations

States from every continent of the world expressed concern yesterday at the extent of human rights violations taking place in Eritrea. Appearing before the Human Rights Council, the Eritrean delegation faced broad-ranging, and yet consistent, questioning of their human rights record.

Statements by members states repeatedly expressed concern at the ongoing use of torture, arbitrary and indefinite detention, the suppression of press freedom and freedom of religion and belief, the recruitment of child soldiers, the abuse of female conscripts and the indefinite term of national service.

Nations participating in Eritrea's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the Human Rights Council repeatedly recommended that the country signs and adheres to the Convention Against Torture and other relevant international conventions, and creates a national human rights body.

The Eritrean delegation had initially insisted, among other things, that there was religious freedom in the country, that human dignity was respected, and that no prisoners of conscience existed. Eritrea's representative Dr Girmai Abraham subsequently confessed to being "overwhelmed" by the number of questions he had received, and responded to calls for open access to Eritrea for the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other special mandate holders with a guarded conditional acceptance. However, in an astonishing admission, he indicated that an independent press was incompatible with Eritrean culture.

At a post-UPR hearing organized by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE), both organizations expressed satisfaction at the extensive international concern for human rights in Eritrea, which Director of HRCE Elsa Chyrum described as "a sign of breakthrough following years of campaigning". She also provided a comprehensive overview of the general human rights crisis, while Eritrean journalist Tedros Abraham spoke movingly of the detention of Eritrean journalists and of his own suffering at the hands of the regime. Dr Khataza Gondwe of CSW reported on the continuing abuse of religious freedom which has left over 3000 Christians in detention. These include the detention in November of over 90 Christians from diverse localities following a new wave of arrests.

Tina Lambert Advocacy Director of CSW said: "We are encouraged by the virtually unanimous recognition of the serious human rights crisis in Eritrea, and by the consistent recommendations for Eritrea to engage with the UN to address this situation. It is vital that concerned members of the international community ensure that the Eritrean government makes genuine efforts to bring practice into line with international standards."

Notes to Editors

Photo: Tedros Abraham is a journalist who fled Eritrea after being imprisoned on three occasions. He was able to speak freely at a UN hearing organized by CSW and Human Rights Concern Eritrea. He is pictured alongside CSW's Tina Lambert who chaired the event. To use the photo of Tedros Abraham, please credit CSW.