

Eritrea: Peace deal could offer hope for reforms, including three key steps, says UN expert

GENEVA (18 September 2018) – The peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia raises hopes that human rights will be at the centre of Eritrea’s path towards a society respectful of all fundamental rights, says the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth.

The leaders of the two countries signed a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship on 9 July 2018. They have reaffirmed it on several occasions since then, raising expectations that the end of the 'no war, no peace' stalemate between the countries would impact positively on Eritrea’s internal human rights situation.

The arrest of eleven senior government officials who had criticised the President’s actions in an open letter, and that of ten independent journalists, thus silencing analytical discussions and the private press on 18 September 2001, set off a period of sweeping oppression in Eritrea. Reportedly, such repression continues, quashing the aspiration for tangible improvements in its human rights record.

“During the past 17 years, the Government of Eritrea has maintained tight control over the country, stifling any form of public debate and participation. I have received reports that the former Minister of Finance, who recently wrote two books on the current state of affairs in the country, including the rule of law, has been arrested in Asmara during the morning of 17 September 2018. If confirmed, this arrest on the eve of the anniversary of the 2001 clampdown would add to the apprehension that improvements in Eritrea’s external relations are not mirrored inside, especially regarding respect for fundamental rights and freedoms,” said Ms Keetharuth.

“Comprehensive reforms at the domestic level are required on the path towards a free, just and democratic society, with citizens enjoying all their human rights”, the expert stressed, “yet, Government can take immediate action in three concrete areas, where urgent rectification is most needed”.

Firstly, the families of those who have disappeared in Eritrean prisons should be informed about the fate of their loved ones. Furthermore, the large but unknown number of people imprisoned in Eritrea, some for excessively long periods and others arrested more recently, should be brought before the courts of law as a matter of urgency or released unconditionally without delay.

Secondly, the implementation of the Constitution that has been pending since 1997 would be the natural basis on which to build a solid national legal framework and a society governed by the rule of law.

Thirdly, thousands of Eritreans have left the country because of violations committed in the context of national/military service. With the end of the 'no war, no peace' context that served as a justification for the indefinite nature of national/military service, the Government could inform those who have been enlisted as conscripts recently that they will not have to serve beyond the 18 months stipulated by Eritrean law. For those in the national/military service for lengthy periods already, the Government should elaborate a demobilisation plan without further delay, especially for long-serving conscripts.

"The achievement of peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia must be duly celebrated. However, Eritrean authorities must urgently embrace and implement bold measures to strengthen protection of and respect for human rights, justice and accountability," the UN expert concluded.

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Ms Sheila B. Keetharuth (Mauritius) was appointed as the first [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea](#) in October 2012. From 2014 to 2016, she also served as a member of the [Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea](#). Since May 2014, Ms Keetharuth has been an expert member of the Working Group on Extractive Industries, Environment and Human Rights Violations of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Until 2012, Ms. Keetharuth was the Executive Director of the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa in Banjul, The Gambia. She also worked with Amnesty International in Kampala, Uganda, and as a lawyer and broadcaster in Mauritius. In 2017, Ms Keetharuth was awarded with the Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award by the University of Leicester, in recognition of her human rights work.

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*This year is the **70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948. The Universal Declaration – translated into a world record 500 languages – is rooted in the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It remains relevant to everyone, every day. In honour of the 70th anniversary of this extraordinarily influential document, and to prevent its vital principles from being eroded, we are urging people everywhere to **Stand Up for Human Rights**: www.standup4humanrights.org.*