



Eritrea: Raising an Alarm of Impending Disaster

13 July 2020

What is happening in Eritrea during the COVID-19 outbreak? No one really knows. According to government “information”, the first case was confirmed on 21st March, and, to date, the total cases allegedly number 251, with no confirmed deaths. The world is used to hearing optimistic claims from Eritrean authorities, but very few experts trust their statistics, particularly regarding the absence of any Covid-related deaths. The government claims to have 41 quarantine centres, but has not disclosed their locations. The Minister of Health has not briefed the nation since the beginning of the pandemic, which hardly inspires confidence in the veracity and transparency of government information and policy.

The “Lockdown” period, initially announced to last for 21 days, has been extended indefinitely. It has now been more than three and half months since it was initially implemented. “Lockdown” guidelines are strictly enforced, and people who attempt to leave their homes in search of food are assaulted by the armed forces. The Army and Police are dispatched to any place where citizens appear in public. This is one of the most extreme enforcement regimes in the world. Experience from other African countries suggests the negative effects of army mobilization. Information on the activities of the army in Eritrea is very scarce, as usual.

The Eritrean regime is forcibly collecting money from citizens inside Eritrea, supposedly to fight the virus. According to information from inside the country, this measure is not voluntary but by decree. But what is being done with this extorted money? There is supposedly a Covid-19 “Task Force”: but what is it doing? No-one has any evidence of its activities. What then is the role the government is playing? No one knows.

In the rest of the world, governments issue advice during lockdown, exhorting their citizens to “Stay Home; Stay Safe”. But how can Eritreans dependent on day labour stay home with no income and no food? Starvation and death await them if they adhere to such advice. The other advice during this worldwide pandemic is to “keep washing your hands with soap and water to avoid the virus”. How does an Eritrean without running water, and particularly in Asmara, faced with acute water shortages, implement such advice? Health services are hugely disrupted, and there is no effective medical care for children, the old, and pregnant mothers. Even greater difficulties face the estimated 10,000 prisoners of conscience incarcerated in filthy, unhygienic and overcrowded prisons, without proper washing or toilet facilities. “Maintain 2 (or 1) metres distance from other adults at all times,” we are exhorted across the world. But in Eritrean prisons, with 100 to 400 persons in a prison cell, and 20-30 crammed into a shipping metal container, how does anyone maintain social distancing and avoid infection?

Eritrea has no welfare system, and over 2 million people have no food to eat. Businesses are shut, all economic activity is ended, streets are locked-down, and unemployment, which was already

high, is now universal. How are people to find food to eat? An exceedingly cruel and callous national policy of enforced hunger and starvation is being deliberately implemented.

We urge the international community to wake up to the gravity of what is happening in Eritrea; and to ask the Eritrean authorities the following:

- If the government's COVID-19 statistics are accurate, why is the nationwide lockdown still in place? Why are people being left to starve and some dying from starvation? Why are the starving citizens not allowed to find work and food?
- Why is the government not using some of the funds it received from foreign mining companies operating in Eritrea, which are kept in secret bank accounts abroad, to feed and heal the helpless in a hurting nation?
- Why is the government turning deaf ears and blind eyes to the suffering of its citizens?

The Eritrean government must also stop extorting money from desperate citizens inside the country, and release the 10,000 or more prisoners of conscience from over 350 prisons scattered across the country before mass infections and a plague of deaths occurs when Covid-19 sweeps through these detention centres.

The world must hold the Eritrean leader and his government accountable for allowing Eritrean people to die of starvation during a crisis worse than any other the world has faced.

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