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Press Release

Eritrean Activists Meet with UN Officials in Geneva

A delegation of Eritrean pro-democracy activists met with senior officials in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva on Monday and Tuesday, 23-24 January 2017. The delegation included Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis, Board member of the Forum for National Dialogue (FND) and Eri-Platform, and Mr. Woldeyesus Ammar, Head of Foreign Relations of the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

The extensive discussions centred on the prevailing human rights situation in Eritrea; the push and pull factors driving the continuous flight of Eritrean youth from the country; the plight of young refugees living in the squalor of refugee camps in Eritrea's neighbourhood; abuses and insecurity in the refugee camps and human trafficking; the role of the relevant UN agencies; and the obligation, under international humanitarian law, of the countries of destination in the region and the Global North to host and provide fleeing Eritreans due protection, including granting them residence and work permits to enable them earn their living pending changes conducive to their safe return home.

The UN officials briefed the Eritrean delegation on the state of play in the ongoing engagement of the OHCHR and the UNHCR with the Government of Eritrea aimed to improve the human rights situation in Eritrea. They shared their perspectives regarding the status of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the failure of the government to act on its pledges and the general lack of real progress and tangible improvement in the human rights situation of the Eritrean people.

In turn, the Eritrean pro-democracy delegation underscored the primacy of the push factors: the systematic and widespread abuses of basic human rights with impunity; indefinite active national service without due remuneration; the state of harsh political repression; the denial of the opportunity for normal family life and proper education; and severe economic hardship.

The OHCHR officials expressed their readiness to do all they can to help improve the human rights situation of the Eritrean people. At the same time, they urged Eritreans to take a leading role towards addressing their own problems. The officials hoped that Eritreans would undertake a more effective advocacy work. The UNHCR officials, on their part, also expressed hope that Eritreans in the Diaspora would engage more actively to play their part in helping address the refugee problem affecting their own people.

In conclusion, it was agreed to continue the discussions and exchange information on the human rights situation in Eritrea, the condition of Eritrean refugees in the region and elsewhere in the world, and explore areas of cooperation to improve respect for human rights in Eritrea and the lot of Eritrean refugees, especially in the country's immediate neighbours.