

Permanent Mission of Eritrea
to the United Nations
GENEVA



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البعثة الإرترية الدائمة لدى الأمم المتحدة
جنيف

Date: 21/02/2018
PME/003/02/2018

Ms. Beatriz Balbin,
Chief, Special Procedures Branch, Office of the
High Commissioner for Human Rights

Dear Ms. Beatriz Balbin,

Kindly find attached the response of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea, H.E. Osman Saleh, to the following four mandate holders who sought clarification in their joint appeal of 17 January 2018 on the subject matter addressed in the aforementioned reply.

I kindly request the transmission of the letters to the respective mandate holders: namely; Vice-Chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Special Rapporteur on Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. Attached is also a press release issued by the Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva relating to the conduct of business of the Special Rapporteur that H.E. Minister Osman refers to; in his response.

Please accept, Madame, the assurances of my highest consideration


Adem Osman
Chargé d'affaires a.i.

Ms. Beatriz Balbin, Chief, Special Procedures Branch,
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.



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Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ref: OM/040/18

Ms. Elina Steinerts
Vice-Chair
Working Group on Arbitrary Detention
Geneve

Dear Ms. Steinerts

I refer to a rather curious communication (Ref. AL ERI 2/2017) that was sent to me jointly by your good selves on 17 January last month.

Let me first dwell briefly on the incident.

On the early afternoon of 31 October 2017 around 100 youth (students from the Al Daa Private School and others in the neighborhood) marched from Akheria, a neighborhood in the northern periphery of Asmara to the al-Khulafa' ar-Rashidun Mosque in the center of the city. After the prayers, the unruly group, who were chanting sectarian and inflammatory slogans all the way, proceeded to Liberation Avenue and the Ministry of Education. At this stage, they began to throw stones and to attack the Police. In the circumstances, the Police fired warning shots into the air and dispersed the crowd before they could incur damage to lives and property.

The Police subsequently detained, for questioning, several people involved in illicit acts of vandalism as well as principal culprits behind the whole episode. These are indeed normative measures that the police in any country would take to ensure public safety by, in part, dispersing and apprehending people who have willingly engaged themselves in offences including the public disturbance of an otherwise peaceful city.

It must be underlined that this particular incident had nothing to do with freedom of expression or freedom of faith. Eritrea is a secular State where the freedom of religion is fully and solemnly enshrined in its laws. Furthermore, it has a fine and exemplary tradition of religious tolerance and co-existence nurtured over centuries.

In this perspective, Proclamation 73/1995, issued to “Clarify and Regulate Religions and Religious Institutions”, enshrines the principle of secularism by limiting government activities to the political administration of the country and religions/religious institutions to religious matters; without one crossing into the mandate of the other.

Eritrea’s education policy reflects, in part, this law by limiting religious institutions to providing religious education with the freedom to implement their curricula in accordance with the dictates of the respective faiths – and all non-religious schools, whether private or public, to providing education in secular fashion as required by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education.

Accordingly, all the faiths enjoy unrestricted rights to run and administer religious schools in their respective religious institutions and premises. They have unfettered rights to establish and operate purely religious schools at all levels; including at the tertiary level. Along the same line, religious teachings and/or exclusivist religious attitudes are not permitted in secular schools. Discriminatory or segregationist practices of refusing access and enrollment to individuals on the basis of their gender, religion or background are also prohibited in secular schools.

Al Diaa is a private school that falls within the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. It is not an Islamic School, as your letter insinuates, affiliated in administrative and policy respects to the Muslim Faith in the country. (Indeed, it was first established in 1969 as “Berhan Elementary School” open to all inhabitants of the Akheria community without discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity).

In subsequent years, and especially after independence, Al Diaa School began to gradually introduce practices that were in breach of the country’s secular education policy. Among other things: access to the school was restricted to followers of the Islamic faith only; it introduced segregation of classes on the basis of gender; it stopped teaching on Fridays; and it breached national school guidelines on dress code and school uniforms; and it hired foreign nationals without valid permits and approval of the Ministry of Education regarding their qualifications.

The Ministry of Education held a series of meetings, over several months, with all relevant stakeholders of the School, including the Parents Committee, to rectify the overall situation. When consensus was broadly reached, the School principal rejected the agreement and advocated for confrontational approaches. The incident happened against this backdrop of events.

It must be borne in mind that the transgression of Eritrea's secular education policy and the inflammatory words and deeds of the School principal, and others implicated in the act, were wayward practices that merited appropriate action. The popular sentiment was perhaps better captured in the words of Sheikh Salim Ibrahim Al-Muktar, the Managing Director of Eritrea's Mufti Office, who stated during the public celebrations of Mewlid Al-Nabi on 30 November 2017 that "Islam and Christianity have co-existed in harmony in Eritrea since ancient times. As such, externally induced religious extremism has no space in our country".

For reasons that defy explanation, external media reaction to this singular incident was mind boggling. A sinister story that originated from a subversive Ethiopia-based armed group, the so-called Eritrean Red Sea Afar Organization (RASDO), alleging "the killing of 28 civilians and wounding of 100 others", went viral with prestigious media outlets gullibly recycling the story without minimum verification. Weeks later, some media outlets, including the ZDF TV Channel in Germany, retracted the story even if they have not apologized to Eritrea for their defamatory news coverage.

Let me revert now to your letter. I am extremely intrigued by the action you have taken. Eritrea's laws and policy of education can only be lauded as it is meant to ensure equality and harmony in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Indeed, we can invoke stringent measures – including the banning, as may be required by the Islamic faith, of veils in public places and beaches as well as constraining regulations on minarets enacted by major Western countries – which, to our knowledge, have not elicited joint communications from the bodies you represent. Finally, let me also draw your attention to recent acts of the Special Rapporteur that are clearly incompatible with her mandate. Eritrea's mission to the UNHRC has duly lodged a complaint on (copy attached). I hope you will not be inadvertently associated with, or unwittingly defend, her unacceptable excesses.

Sincerely,

Osman Saleh

21 February





Press Statement:

UNHRC Special Rapporteur in cahoots with subversive groups

In mid-October this year, Eritrea's avowed detractors convened a meeting in Brussels under the rubric of "human rights situation in Eritrea". Principal speakers at the event - which was open to limited and selected invited guests during the first day (October 19th) included the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea (SR) Ms. Sheila Keetharuth; Ms. Mirien v. Reisen (European External Policy Advisor) - who has publicly and vocally opposed Eritrea's independence from the outset - as well as a number of notorious "regime-change" activists and their foreign mentors. It is also perplexing that a UNHCR project on Eritrean and Somali "refugees" was presented by a member from UNHCR - Sweden. Her involvement and request to integrate the project into the plan of the above group also warrants clarification from UNHCR.

The first day public event was followed by a closed meeting that was held on 20th October. The Special Rapporteur participated in the closed meeting too in particular guiding the special discussion on coordination of all the disjointed "regime-change" activists. Documents and audio recordings obtained of the closed meeting reveal the "six-month plan of action" that this murky group have charted out to advance their elusive agenda of subversion and "regime-change". The main points of this plan of action for the period leading to the upcoming June Report of the SR include the following actions:-

- Implement the proposal of the SR, on a coordinated campaign to extend the Human Rights Council (HRC) special mandate on the human rights situation in Eritrea
- Accordingly, establish a networking of Eritrean organizations abroad under an umbrella organization, but excluding those sympathetic to the Eritrean Government
- Campaign against Europe's recent policy shift on the political asylum of Eritreans including programmes to contain Eritrean "refugees" in neighboring countries



The Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva is not perturbed by the nefarious, if inconsequential, schemes that these notorious groups float from time to time. For some of these sell-outs, this has indeed long become a “convenient” way of life for appropriating funds from certain institutions.

What we find unacceptable is the deplorable presence and complicity of the Special Rapporteur in this illicit gathering. Her conduct contravenes accepted ethical norms and standards of “...discretion, transparency, impartiality and even-handedness...” enshrined in the relevant UN guidelines that must be strictly observed by experts and special rapporteurs.

This is not indeed the first time that Mrs Sheila Keetharuth has been found wanting in terms of objectivity, neutrality and professionalism in discharging her duties. The SR has persistently exploited the UN mandate to mobilize self-described “human rights activists” associated with human traffickers and involved in a declared regime-change agenda.

As we have incessantly clarified, virtually all her annual reports were also culled from the rumblings of these notorious ‘regime-change’ activists as well as from willfully concocted disinformation provided to her by Ethiopia and Djibouti. Furthermore, she has often doubled as an activist to launch pre-emptive press statements and campaigns of her “unfounded” reports prior to their submission to and discussion by the UNHRC sessions.

This time round, the SR continues to irrevocably cross the red line to go beyond recycling and varnishing the vitriolic reports of these subversive groups in UNHRC garb to officially behave as one of their active members. The outcry is, however, another desperate effort to solicit support for her forthcoming effort to blackmail the HRC and keep Eritrea under the continued agenda of the HRC and thereby renew the mandate.

The UNHRC and the OHCHR have not heeded our repeated appeals in the past that drew attention to her inherent bias stemming from her unorthodox association with Eritrea’s detractors and arch-enemies. The OHCHR in fact went out of its way to portray our legitimate concerns as “witch hunting”; stating in its press briefing of 21st November this

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year that *"Ms Keetharuth has been faithfully carrying out the mandate given to her by the UNHRC, and she should not be subjected to vitriolic personalized attack by Government officials"*.

The curtains have been lifted now. Her compromised position is not defensible and cannot be rationalized anymore. As such, the Permanent Mission of Eritrea in Geneva expressly requests the UNHRC to take swift action without further delay and also reject her on-going premeditated campaign to continue the special mandate on Eritrea.

[Handwritten signature]

Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea
to the UN and other international
organizations in Geneva
24 December 2017

