

Eritrea called on to provide info on jailed journalists

GENEVA, Switzerland - The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, has called on the Eritrean Government to urgently provide information on the whereabouts and state of health of senior government officials and independent journalists arrested on 18 September 2001 and in the following days.



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Fifteen years ago, the Eritrean authorities arrested and detained a group of senior cabinet ministers, members of parliament and independent journalists without charge or trial. To date, the Government has refused to share any information on their whereabouts and state of health.

“The Eritrean Government has denied those arrested their fundamental right to liberty and security of the person, right not to be subjected to torture, right to a fair trial as well as right to freedom of expression and opinion,” Keetharuth said ahead of the anniversary on Sunday. “Those arrested have been detained incommunicado and in solitary confinement. Even family members have never been allowed to have any contact whatsoever with them.”

“The 2001 clampdown set in motion a chain of egregious, widespread and systematic human rights violations that continues to this very day, including arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, denial of the right to a fair trial within a reasonable time, right not to be subjected to torture, and disappearances, among others,” the Special Rapporteur said. “In addition, the right to freedom of opinion and expression as well the right to freedom of the press has since then, also been negatively impacted.”

Earlier this year, the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea - of which Keetharuth was also a member - concluded that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that Eritrean officials have committed, among others, the crime of enforced disappearance, a crime against humanity.”

The Government of Eritrea said that the arrests and detentions of September 2001 were in response to national security threats posed by the prominent politicians and independent journalists. However, the expert stressed that “invoking national security as the main reason to violate basic fundamental human rights of Eritreans cannot be perpetual.”

“All those arrested in September 2001, as well as of all other detainees, including those arrested in the aftermath of the 2013 ‘Forto’ incident should either be brought to court or released unconditionally and immediately if not charged,” she said. “Furthermore, the Eritrean authorities should allow independent monitors to have unhindered access to all detainees in the country as a matter of priority.”

The Special Rapporteur recalled that Eritrea is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights since 2002, to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights since 1999 and to the Convention against Torture since 2014.

“However, it has consistently failed to give effect to their provisions guaranteeing universal fundamental human rights to its people,” Keetharuth noted. “It is time to revert this trend and ensure accountability for past and ongoing crimes.”

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