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HIGH REPRESENTATIVE

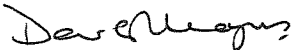
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Thank you for your letter of 23 November. Human rights issues in Eritrea have been a matter of concern for some time now. The EU and its institutions (the Commission, the Parliament and the EEAS) have addressed them on many occasions, and at various levels.

There are a number of issues that give rise to serious concerns, including the denial of basic political rights and freedoms, the situation of members of the G11 group held since September 2011, the plight of a number of journalists kept in detention in Eritrea, including the Eritrean-Swedish citizen Dawit Isaak, and numerous reported cases of persecution made on religious grounds.

The EU has continued to raise these problems with the Eritrean government, both during political dialogue sessions and on every other occasion where meetings with Eritrean officials have taken place. There is a standing instruction to the EU Delegation in Asmara to enquire about and look for any information on the whereabouts and the condition of political prisoners.

Both the previous and the current European Commissioners responsible for Development Cooperation have been personally involved in the case of Dawit while I, for my part, have issued a declaration on behalf of the EU calling for the release of political prisoners in Eritrea. Nicholas Westcott, the EEAS Managing Director for Africa, has visited Eritrea recently, and one of his main objectives was to raise – directly with President Afewerki – our concerns over human rights abuses in Eritrea, as well as to appeal for the release of Dawit Isaak.

You also raise the issue of the trafficking of refugees, many of them from Eritrea, in the Sinai desert. The EEAS is actively reviewing this case, and the EU Delegation in Cairo liaises regularly with local civil society organisations and with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Representation in Cairo. In coordination with the EU Member States, the EU Delegation has met repeatedly with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior to express our concerns and urge appropriate follow-up. However the progress made by the Egyptian authorities in this matter has been limited so far.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, Eritrean and Somali refugees are victims of several gangs involved in human trafficking. As these people have crossed the frontier illegally and not applied to the Egyptian authorities or to the UNHCR for refugee status, they are considered "infiltrators" and are subject to the national regulatory framework on refugees. UNHCR is denied access to the detention facilities because the detainees omitted to register their refugee status. Since September, a campaign has started for the forced repatriation of illegal Eritreans and Somalis to their countries of origin. The UNHCR has warned the Egyptian authorities that the "Non-Refoulement" (i.e. 'non-return') Principle would be violated if the repatriation of refugees with asylum status in Sudan or Ethiopia took place in the country of origin, rather than in the country of asylum.

The EU will continue to urge the Egyptian authorities to ensure respect for human rights, including the protection of migrants and refugees. The EU has repeatedly invited Egypt to develop and improve the quality of the assistance and protection it offers to asylum seekers, and to refugees residing in or transiting its territory. The EU has also pressed the Egyptian authorities to ensure that the “Non-Refoulement” Principle is observed for all migrants in need of international protection, while UNHCR is given full rein to implement its mandate across the entire territory of Egypt, including the Sinai region.

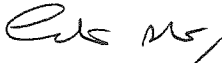
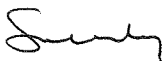
Meanwhile, the drought and famine that hit the Horn of Africa this year have aggravated the refugee situation. The presence and collective action of international actors (like the International Organisation for Migration, the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the EU’s DG ECHO) have contributed to mitigating the impact of famine. In 2011, the EU contributed more than €705 million in humanitarian assistance – nearly one third of the total assistance to the Horn of Africa. Still, the situation is serious, and more than 13 million people in the Horn are now in need of emergency assistance. Among them are around 2.5 million refugees and Internally Displaced People. Existing challenges are aggravated by the instability and conflicts which make access to some areas very difficult, if not impossible.

In response to migration, the EU provides support to the UNHCR’s Regional Protection Programme (RPP) in Kenya, Djibouti and Yemen. The RPP aims to strengthen the protection and enhance the assistance given to refugee and asylum seekers, as well as providing border security and protection from trafficking. Significant EU support is also provided to Dadaab in Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world. Further, the EU conducts a dialogue with the region in order to step up cooperation on migration, in the framework of Article 13 of the Cotonou Agreement.

The complex situation in the Horn requires a multi-faceted and coordinated approach. On 14 November 2011, the EU Council of Ministers adopted a Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa. This strategy ensures EU coherence in pursuit of its goals – and one of these is poverty reduction, economic growth and prosperity. The EU is committed to support the institutions and the development of policies that will contribute to alternative livelihoods by job creation and education.

The EEAS will continue to work alongside the relevant departments of the Commission, and with the new EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, Mr Alexander Rondos. The strategic framework for the Horn gives us a context for helping refugees and addressing migration, and we will use this opportunity.

I am grateful for your assurance that members of the European Parliament stand ready to assist us in this task. We count on your support.



Catherine Ashton