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Eritrea: A Neglected Regional Threat

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
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In 1993, the citizens of Eritrea, then a province of Ethiopia, voted to become an independent nation. Ethiopia had annexed Eritrea in 1962, and its citizens no doubt believed they were well on their way to controlling their destiny. Unfortunately, their hopes would soon be dashed. Elections have been repeatedly postponed, and opposition political parties are no longer able to organize.

Those same initial hopes for democracy and good government in Eritrea also were held by the international community. In a March 1997 report on the U.S. Agency for International Development program in Eritrea, the American aid agency had high praise for its collaboration with the Eritrean government:

“Over the past year, the young state of Eritrea continued its exciting and pace-setting experiment in nation-building, and, similarly, USAID/Eritrea established itself as Eritrea’s leading development partner.”

Within a few years, the Government of Eritrea ended its relationship with USAID, but this decision was originally taken as a sign that Eritrea was ready to become an example to the rest of the developing world by managing its own humanitarian needs. Yet Eritrea’s government instead merely became less open, and when an East African drought occurred in 2011, we knew very little about how Eritreans were faring. Today, we know that two-thirds of Eritreans live on subsistence agriculture, which has had poor yields due to recurring droughts and low productivity.

What we also know is that Eritrea’s citizens are living under a regime that does not honor their human rights. In June of this year, the UN Human Rights Council released a report that accused the Government of Eritrea with a variety of violations, including extrajudicial executions, torture, indefinitely prolonged national service and forced labor, and sexual harassment, rape and sexual servitude by state officials.

In its Trafficking in Persons Report from June 2016, the State Department listed Eritrea as ‘Tier 3’ and stated, “Eritrea is a source country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor...the government did not investigate, prosecute, or convict trafficking offenders during the reporting year...the government demonstrated negligible efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims...the government maintained minimal efforts to prevent trafficking.”

In their most recent International Religious Freedom Report, the State Department listed Eritrea as a country of particular concern. Moreover, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom lists Eritrea as a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern for its egregious religious freedom violations. Eritrea’s government interferes with the internal affairs of registered religious groups and represses the religious liberty of those faith groups it refuses to register, such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims who do not follow the government-appointed head of the Islamic community. Furthermore, the government has a record of arbitrary arrests of believers and their leaders and reportedly tortures those in prolonged detention.

As a result of the authoritarian government’s actions, Eritrea is considered one of the world’s fastest emptying nations, with about half a million of the country’s citizens having left their homes for often dangerous paths to freedom. An estimated 5,000 Eritreans leave their country each month.

In a July 9, 2015, hearing by our subcommittee on African refugees, John Stauffer, President of the America Team for Displaced Eritreans, told us that Eritrean government officials operated freely in eastern Sudan, arresting and bringing back to Eritrea those they considered high-value targets among refugees, such as government officials or church leaders. He also testified that refugees moving east may be kidnapped and extorted locally for a few thousand dollars, or taken off to Egypt or Libya where they are abused. That abuse often included organ harvesting.

In the past year, the world has witnessed a flood of Eritrean refugees risking their lives on too-often unseaworthy boats bound for Europe. The prevalence of Eritreans among refugees has been overshadowed by refugees from the Middle East, especially Syria. The United Kingdom, one of the prime destinations for Eritrean refugees, apparently wanted to slow down the flow of Eritrean into the country. Earlier this year, the UK reduced the percentage of Eritrean asylum claims from 95% to 28%.

Directly addressing the root causes of the flight of Eritreans seems a better policy than trying to determine the final destination of Eritreans who feel forced to leave home. That means an enhanced level of communication between Eritrea’s government and the international community. There have been quiet contacts between Eritrea’s government and the U.S. government and civil society. Today’s hearing will examine how such contacts have developed. We expect testimony in this hearing to answer critical questions.

Can the United States form a relationship with a government it has under sanction?

Does the dire situation in which Eritrea's people live require an alteration of U.S. policy?

What would a change in policy mean for the international effort to hold Eritrea's government responsible for blatant human rights violations?

These and others questions must be answered before there is any policy adjustment toward Eritrea, and we look forward to answers to these questions at least beginning to be answered here today.