**Statement of Dr. Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea**

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen; it is my honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur to present my oral update during this interactive dialogue on Eritrea. Since my last update to the Council in June 2021, I have continued to monitor the human rights situation in Eritrea. Regrettably, recent developments continue to evidence a lack of progress in the human rights situation in the country.

Eritrea’s systematic crackdown on dissenting voices continues unabated. Political opponents, activists, journalists, religious leaders, people of faith and draft evaders are subjected to prolonged arbitrary detention in inhuman and degrading conditions, in some instances amounting to torture. On 9 February 2022 Archbishop Abune Antonios, leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, passed away at the age of 94 after languishing in home detention for over 15 years. Patriarch Antonios was arrested in January 2006 after denouncing the Government’s interference in the internal affairs of the church. He was deprived of his rights to communicate with the outside world and to participate in religious services. He was never officially charged with any offences, nor did he have the opportunity to challenge his detention before a court. Patriarch Antonios is one of thousands of Eritreans who have been arbitrarily detained since 1991 without any regard to basic due process rights. Many have been held in Eritrea’s prisons for decades. Some have died over the years. The whereabouts of others remain unknown. I urge this Council to exert the maximum possible pressure on the Eritrean authorities to release all prisoners of conscience. A comprehensive reform of the justice sector is also urgently needed to re-establish the foundations of the rule of law.

Civic and democratic space remains hermetically shut, as the Government continues to severely curtail freedom of opinion, expression, assembly, association, and religion. There are no independent media outlets in the country, and the right to seek and receive information is highly restricted. Internet penetration is one of the lowest in the world, making access to communication and to information from abroad very difficult.

I am also deeply concerned about the impact of the on-going conflict in Ethiopia on the internal human rights situation in Eritrea. Further to the involvement of Eritrean forces in the conflict, the Eritrean Government has dismissed calls to reform the national service, and justified its indefinite extension as necessary to defend the country against the TPLF. In place since 1998, the indefinite national service programme effectively constitutes forced labour and remains one of the key sources of human rights violations in the country. Conditions for conscripts are extremely harsh, and sexual harassment, severe punishments and inhuman or degrading treatment are common. The programme also has severe impacts on the rights to education and to decent work of thousands of Eritreans, as well as on their families who cannot survive on the meagre pay received by conscripts. Conscripts are routinely denied permission to visit their families, often for years; gravely infringing on their right to family life. Over the past few months, I have received multiple and credible allegations indicating that round ups of young people have intensified to ensure they undergo military training and participate in the national service. Witnesses have also reported the increased forced conscription of children between 14 and 18 years of age. As a result, children as young as 11 or 12 would be dropping out of school and going into hiding due to fear of conscription.

These conditions continue to push thousands of young Eritreans to flee their country every year. Since my last update to this Council, I have continued to highlight the plight of Eritrean refugees globally. Over the past few months, I have heard harrowing accounts by brave Eritrean refugees of the violations they endured in the Horn and North Africa, including arbitrary detention, kidnapping for ransom, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, and dangerous collective expulsions and pushbacks at sea. My mandate is increasingly receiving calls for help from Eritrean asylum seekers in the region in detention or at risk of deportation to Eritrea in violation of the principle of non-refoulement. I call on countries in the region and beyond to revise their policies to ensure compliance with their international legal obligations and to effectively protect Eritreans and all refugees without discrimination.

Deeply troubling information continues to emerge from the Tigray and Afar regions of Ethiopia, where an estimated 80,000 Eritrean refugees remain caught in the crossfires of this gruesome conflict. Several attacks against refugee camps have been documented over the past few weeks, including a drone strike on 5 January in Mai Aini camp, resulting in the death of three refugees; and the attack on 3 February at Barahle refugee camp in Afar region, in which five refugees were killed and several women kidnapped. The humanitarian situation in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps in Tigray is critical. 16 months into the conflict, over 25,000 refugees remaining in these camps are facing extreme hunger and dying of preventable causes due to lack of access to clean water, food and medicine. I condemn the attacks on refugee camps and reiterate my calls to all parties to the conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps, ensure access to humanitarian actors for the provision of much needed assistance, and facilitate the evacuation of refugees to safety.

Finally, I call on the Eritrean authorities to cooperate with my mandate and express, once again, my readiness to engage in a constructive dialogue on the way forward for the promotion of human rights in Eritrea.

Thank you.