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

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Honourable chair, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen; it is my honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur to present my oral update on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

Since I presented my report before the Human Rights Council in June 2021, there has been no evidence of progress in the human rights situation in Eritrea. Last month marked 20 years since Eritrea’s 2001 crackdown on dissent, freedom of expression and the media. On 18 September 2001, 11 high-level Eritrean officials who had called for democratic reforms and for the implementation of the constitution were arbitrarily arrested and subjected to enforced disappearance. It has been 7,337 days today, during which their loved ones have continued to search, to fear for their safety, to live in the uncertainty of not knowing if they are dead or alive. 20 years of unresolved bereavement. And they are not the only ones. Since 1991, large numbers of Eritrean citizens have been subjected to enforced disappearances. I urge the Eritrean Government to put an end to the practices of enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention, and call for the urgent release of all persons arbitrarily detained in Eritrea without due process of law.

18 September 2021 also marked 20 years without free media in Eritrea. On the same day, all private media outlets were banned. Over the following days, 15 journalists and employees of independent newspapers were arrested and detained incommunicado without trial. Many are reported to have died in jail. To this date, the Eritrean authorities continue to arbitrarily detain those perceived as critical of the Government in inhumane and degrading conditions, without any regard for the right to a fair trial. Most Eritreans only have access to controlled State-run TV, radio and newspapers, and access to the Internet remains among the most limited in the world.

The authorities also continue to restrict religious freedoms and to persecute people of faith. In my report presented before the Human Rights Council in June 2021, I welcomed the release of over 100 people of faith during the previous year. Regretfully, a Jehovah’s Witness went missing after his release, and at least 15 of the Christians released have reportedly been re-arrested since. Three evangelical pastors in their seventies were also arrested in July.

In my report, I also address the role of Eritrean troops in perpetrating grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the Tigray region of Ethiopia; including acts of pillage, deliberate attacks against civilians, summary executions, arbitrary detention of Eritrean refugees, and widespread sexual and gender-based violence. Evidence implicating Eritrean forces in perpetrating human rights violations in Tigray continues to mount, including verified reports of international human rights organizations and other institutions. I am alarmed at reports indicating that after their withdrawal from Tigray in June, Eritrean troops re-entered the region in August and have taken positions in northern Tigray. It is still unclear whether Eritrean forces will participate, and the extent of their involvement, in the latest offensive launched by Ethiopian forces in Tigray on 11 October. I reiterate my calls on Eritrea to withdraw its troops from Tigray, and urge Eritrea to respect the international humanitarian and human rights standards applicable in situations of armed conflict.

I have continued to express my utmost concern for the situation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray, who have been targeted by all parties to the conflict. As detailed in my report, I have received numerous allegations of grave human rights and humanitarian law violations committed against Eritrean refugees, including reprisal attacks, killings, sexual and gender-based violence, looting and obstruction of humanitarian assistance. Between November 2020 and February 2021 the refugee camps of Hitsats and Shimelba, which hosted 20,000 Eritrean refugees, were occupied and destroyed by Eritrean and Tigrayan forces.

Following the displacement of Eritrean refugees from Tigray to other regions of the country, the Ethiopian Government rounded up and detained hundreds of Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa, on the basis of their lack of the required documentation authorizing them to leave the Tigray region. Some were returned to Tigray. I welcome the efforts of the Ethiopian refugee agency (ARRA) and UNHCR to protect displaced refugees, including by locating, registering and providing documentation to those previously residing in Tigray. I also acknowledge the efforts underway to relocate refugees from Tigray. However, the highly restricted humanitarian access and volatile security situation has delayed this process. I am particularly concerned about the extremely vulnerable situation of approximately 24,000 refugees who remain in the Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps in Tigray, and the 20,000 refugees in the Berhale camp in Afar region. I once again urge all parties to the conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps, and ensure respect for the 1951 Convention for the Protection of Refugees.

The situation of the estimated 5,000 Eritrean refugees who are currently in Libya is also very alarming. I have received information indicating that hundreds of Eritrean refugees, including pregnant women and children, would have been swept up in raids in Tripoli in early October, amid a crackdown on migrants and refugees. It is yet unclear whether any Eritreans were among the six people killed and 24 injured after security forces fired against detainees at an immigration detention centre on 8 October. I urge the international community to do more to protect Eritrean refugees and ensure their human rights, including respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

Finally, I call, once more, on the Government of Eritrea to cooperate with my mandate, as well as with the African and international human rights mechanisms. My requests to visit the country and to meet with the authorities have gone unanswered. I take this opportunity to reiterate my readiness to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Government of Eritrea, with the only agenda of making progress on the significant human rights challenges facing the country.

Thank you.