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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen; I am honoured to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur and to present my report.

May this year marked 30 years since Eritrea gained formal independence and was recognised internationally as a State. Three decades on, Isaias Afwerki has been the only President that Eritrea has ever had. No national elections have been held since. 30 years later, the Constitution has not been implemented. There is no rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and no separation of powers. There are no checks or balances on the President’s absolute power.

For decades, every aspect of life in Eritrea has been monitored and strictly controlled. The People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) remains the only authorised party. There is also no independent media, no civil society, or political opposition in the country. As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights this year, we must recall that article 21 of the Declaration recognises the fundamental right of every person to take part in the government of their country, and provides that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government, and that this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections. From the perspective of this mandate, Eritrea’s autocratic system of government violates the right of all Eritreans to participate in political or public life.

Eritrea continued its policy of arbitrary detention and continuous crackdown on any form of dissent. Journalists, political opponents, artists, people of faith, draft evaders, and returned asylum seekers, were subjected to grave human rights violations including enforced disappearance, torture, and prolonged arbitrary detention in inhuman or degrading conditions. I urge Eritrea to promptly release all those unlawfully and arbitrarily detained. Such releases would be an important signal of the government’s willingness to improve its human rights record. Revealing the whereabouts and allowing the families to visit those subjected to enforced disappearances is also crucial. Their families continue to live in a state of permanent fear and unresolved grief, in many cases years or decades after their disappearance.

Faith and religious beliefs are highly restricted and controlled by the government, which only allows four authorised religious denominations. Since I last reported to this Council, the repression of freedom of religion or belief has escalated, with renewed waves of mass arrests of religious leaders and followers. As of April, an estimated 400 evangelical Christians and 27 Jehova’s witnesses remained arbitrarily imprisoned. Religious leaders and people of faith remain in detention in inhuman and degrading conditions, without any charges or due process, often for years. In October 2022, three Catholic priests were arbitrarily detained, and released in late December. Over 40 Orthodox monks, supporters of the late Patriarch of the Orthodox Church Abune Antonios, who had been openly critical of the government, had been detained as of April 2023.

The national service remains one of the main tools of social control imposed by the Eritrean government. Eritreans continue to be forced into this State-sponsored system of forced labour and military service, serving for years or often for decades. The patterns of conscription I described in my last report to this Council have intensified: in mid-late 2022 there was an upsurge in forced recruitment, and increasingly coercive practices were used to force Eritreans to participate in the Tigray war. These included applying collective punishments on entire families: evicting families, confiscating their belongings, and rendering them homeless, imposing fines, denying families access to food coupons, and detaining family members in order to force those trying to avoid conscription to present themselves to the authorities. Children continued to be rounded-up and conscripted.

Forced conscription has changed life in Eritrea in a fundamental way. As detailed in my report, the national service continued to have negative impacts on economic, social and cultural rights, including on the rights to quality education, decent work, and an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing. It has generated a climate of fear, and destroyed the Eritrean social fabric. Private and family life has been severely affected, as conscripted Eritreans often go for years without seeing their families and children grow up with absent fathers. The end to the conflict in Tigray represents a new opportunity for positive change. It is the time to take decisive measures to effectively reform the national service, release detainees and adopt the rule of law in Eritrea.

I welcome the cessation of hostilities agreement signed in November 2022 between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front and commend both parties for taking this crucial step forward towards peace. However, the absence of accountability measures for crimes committed by the Eritrean Defence Forces remains an issue of concern. In my previous reports, I have documented Eritrea’s central role in the conflict and the involvement of Eritrean forces in the commission of human rights and humanitarian law violations in Tigray. These include the perpetration of large-scale massacres, extrajudicial killings, sexual and gender-based violence, looting, obstruction of humanitarian assistance, destruction of refugee camps and other humanitarian infrastructure, and kidnapping and targeted attacks against Eritrean refugees. These acts should not and cannot remain in impunity.

In my report, I highlight the situation of the **Eritrean Afar** indigenous communities, one of the most disenfranchised communities in Eritrea. For decades, they have been subjected to discrimination, harassment, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and interference with their traditional forms of livelihood, threatening their way of life and their existence as an indigenous community.

My report also raises the important challenges in the **protection of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers** thatpersist in the region and beyond. According to UNHCR, over 577,000 Eritreans had sought asylum outside of their country as of end of 2022. More recently, the situation of the 134,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan has become particularly dire. Displaced once more, Eritrean refugees have been left in a highly vulnerable situation. I have received several reports about missing Eritrean refugees, raising alarms that some might have been kidnapped by the Eritrean authorities. I emphasize the serious risks that Eritrean asylum seekers may be subjected to serious human rights violations at their return to their country of origin. I urge neighbouring countries to accept and provide protection and assistance to Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, and the international community as a whole to exercise solidarity. I have also observed with concern policy, legislative and judicial developments in some host countries that affected Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers.

Excellences, despite its membership of the Human Rights Council, Eritrea continues its policy of non-cooperation with the Council’s own Special Procedures. It has also failed to cooperate with other human rights mechanisms, including treaty bodies and African regional human rights mechanisms. Notwithstanding my many attempts to establish a dialogue on substantive human rights matters, the Government of Eritrea has continued to refuse to engage with my mandate and to comment on my reports before their publication. I urge the Government to reconsider its position and I reiterate my interest in establishing a meaningful dialogue that could pave the way for improvements in the human rights situation. I urge the Human rights Council to adopt measures with regard to the prolonged lack of cooperation of Eritrea with the mandate.

Excellences, the overall human rights situation in Eritrea has continued to deteriorate. I call on members of the Council, and the international community at large, to take all available measures and exert maximum pressure on Eritrea to promote respect for human rights in Eritrea, and to ensure access to justice and the rule of law to the Eritrean People.

Thank you.