

Deconstructing the Myth of a “Promising” Political Change in Eritrea

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This short presentation aims at deciphering the myth of a purported (latest) political change in Eritrea, insinuated in two recent official pronouncements of the Swiss government: 1) a reference report on Eritrean asylum seekers published on 22 June 2016, and 2) a decision to re-launch development cooperation with Eritrea announced on 2 November 2016. I will start with the latter.

The Fantasy of “Cooperation” with a Predator Regime

European renewed interest for “dialogue,” rather monologue, with the Eritrean regime is conceived under the pretext of “development cooperation.” The lead actor in this melodrama of self-deception is none other than the European Union (EU), which suffers from utter aversion to learning from past mistakes about Eritrea, at least dating back to the era of Mr. Louis Michel, the former EU Commissioner for Development Cooperation.

The latest move of European politicians is based on a fabrication of “promising political development” in Eritrea. In reality, there is no meaningful or substantive political change in Eritrea, warranting the sort of change of mind witnessed on the part of European governments. The most authoritative account supporting this claim is the interactive dialogue of the UN commission of inquiry (COI) on human rights in Eritrea with the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly that took place on 27 October 2016. As noted previously by the COI, there is an on-going situation of crimes against humanity. To my knowledge, this is the only such situation in Africa, officially verified by a UN fact-finding mission.

In that case, why are then European governments talking about a political change that never materialised? The answer is to be found in their narrow political interest, juxtaposed under the excuse of a growing “migration crisis” in Europe. The primary objective of their pretence is stemming the flow of refugees from Eritrea at any cost, even by flouting well-established principles of international refugee law. Eritrea, as a major source country of refugees, always occupies a central place in European debates on migration. In their erroneous assumptions, European governments think that “engagement” with the Eritrean government will help stem the flow of refugees.

That this is not going to yield any tangible outcome has been told to them repeatedly at least over the last 10 years – if they are ever interested in taking serious note of this advice. The Eritrean regime can be likened unmistakably with a recidivist criminal. It has zero chance of rehabilitation from its debilitating sickness of crude deceit and intoxicating addiction to totalitarianism. Seen against this backdrop, European governments also seem to be accustomed to repeating gross errors of judgment every time they hear empty promises of “change” from the Eritrean regime. How naïve can they be to fail to see that they are dealing with a regime that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world, except for North Korea.

The New Reference Report on Eritrean Asylum Seekers

In June 2016, the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (also known as SEM) published an update on national service and illegal exist from Eritrea. The report has adverse consequences on the rights of Eritrean asylum seekers in Switzerland. It contains erroneous assumptions not supported by credible evidence. First and foremost, the report insinuates, rather outrageously, that draft evaders or deserters (failed asylum seekers) should be expected to “regularize” their relationship with the Eritrean government, in order to safeguard themselves from persecution in the event they are deported back to Eritrea. At the very minimum, it can be said that the manner in which “regularization of relationship” is used in the report has the risk of interpretation to the above effect. Seen in the context of the on-going situation of crimes against humanity in Eritrea, this is grossly irresponsible. How can asylum seekers be expected to regularize their relationship with a regime from which they have fled in search of safe haven?

The SEM report also claims that there is a certain unpublished directive of the Eritrean government that gave effect to exemption from punishment to returnees or failed asylum seekers. The claim defeats itself at least on two major grounds: firstly, by admitting that there is “no legal certainty” about the said directive, because it “has never been made public.” Secondly, the report also defeats itself by acknowledging the fact that: “There is hardly any information available regarding the treatment of forcibly returned persons.” Moreover, reliable information coming from Eritrea indicates that individuals who have returned to Eritrea on various grounds as late as this year have indeed been persecuted by the Eritrean government.

The most problematic part of the SEM report is that which deals with asylum seekers who have not reached the age of military conscription. The report says this group of people are not required to “regularize” their relationship with the Eritrean government, supposedly either by paying the so-called “2% income tax” or by signing the notorious self-incriminating statement routinely requested by Eritrean diplomatic missions. The implication of this is that this group of people may be forcibly returned to Eritrea, if their application for asylum is rejected, under the erroneous assumption that they will not be persecuted even if they do not regularize their relationship with the Eritrean government prior to deportation.

In another instance of contradiction in terms, the SEM report admits that repeated promises of the Eritrean government about limiting the national service program to 18 months had not been fulfilled. The report adds: “no reliable information is available on the demobilization and dismissal of conscripts assigned to the military part of National Service.” And it concludes by making inaccurate claim to the following effect: the promised pay rise for national service conscripts has already started. Very latest and reliable information coming from Eritrea contradicts this claim.

It indeed seems that Swiss immigration authorities are trying to give utmost priority to the political objective of stemming the flow of refugees at the expense of obligations emanating from international refugee law. This position is untenable when seen against the latest decision (judgement) of the UK Immigration and Asylum Tribunal, of October 2016, and the COI report of June 2016. Based on this, one can only hope that the Swiss government will take a courageous step by rectifying the confusion caused by the June 2016 reference report of SEM, which is already adversely affecting the rights of Eritrean asylum seekers. And the following are important observations by way of conclusion.

Conclusion

This is a time when Eritrea is suffocated by an on-going situation of crimes against humanity. Thus, the talk of some European governments about a “positive change on a gradual” and a “step-by-step basis” is grossly irresponsible. When it comes to Eritrea, they seem to have a messed up list of priorities, characterised by dealing with a notorious human rights violator on the basis of a “wait-and-see” approach. They ignore the fact that this is a regime stifled by obstinate repugnance to any form of accountability, a regime with zero chance of redemption. European talk on development cooperation with Eritrea is also based on the fiction of Eritrea as a poor African country. Since 2011 Eritrea is already generating a huge amount of money from its lucrative extractive industry, estimated at times at US\$ 1 billion a year. For a small country like Eritrea, this does not make it a poor country. The problem is in asking as to where this revenue is ending up, only if European politicians knew how to do this. The main issue in Eritrea is the on-going situation of crimes against humanity, and its concomitant challenge of a pervasive culture of impunity. The only effective remedy for this is accountability, be it in the form of international criminal justice or other mechanisms. We will never cease reminding European politicians to shoulder their responsibility in this regard. As the saying goes: ultimately we will be judged not by the stand we take in times of comfort and convenience but by those we take in times of challenge and controversy.