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CECCO

Coalition des communautés et organisations érythréennes du Canada
Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations

December 23, 2014

VIA FAX AND EMAIL

E-mail: Stephen.harper@parl.gc.ca

Subject: Letter to the Prime Minister Harper from the Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations

Rt. Hon. Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

1. We are writing on behalf of the 30,000 Canadians of Eritrean descent to urge your government to take immediate action in lifting the Regulations implementing the UNSC Resolution 1907, and ease restrictions on the people of Eritrea and its Diaspora. We are deeply concerned that government policy towards Eritrea since 2010 has not changed despite an October 2014 UN report that found no evidence linking Eritrea to the instability in Somalia. As community leaders we believe that sanctions encroach more upon the freedoms of civilian populations and particularly in our case Canadians of Eritrean origin. We view sanctions at the very least as a counterproductive manner of promoting ones concrete interests, and at worst an indefensible method of achieving policy objectives through the collective punishing of a people struggling to become self-sufficient. Furthermore, sanctions isolate and aggravate peace and security and have historically—as in the case of U.S-Cuban relations, not been reliable instruments in effecting desired change. It is ordinary Eritreans who are paying the price associated with the burden of political and economic isolation, on the basis of what we believe to be unsubstantiated charges.

2. Eritrea is a much maligned and misunderstood country. Adverse media coverage of the country makes it challenging for policymakers to understand and appreciate the true nature of its current state. Policymakers and individuals who favour Canadian sanctions and restrictions on Eritrea will often avail themselves of an analogy between Eritrea and North Korea to justify the punishment of African countries that are deemed as “rogue”. In our opinion, sanctions play into

Eritrea's deeply-rooted historical narrative of persecution at the hands of the West. Like the colonial system before it, there has been an established engagement by the West with African countries that has been in place since the second half of twentieth century. Largely the product of US-led organizations, this "order" has brought stability and prosperity to much of the West. But like colonialism before it, this order has had tragic reciprocal consequences and contributed to the general uncertainties of the times in which we live. For many years after the Second World War, it did these things in the name of preventing the spread of communism, as in Canada's support for pro-western leaders like Emperor Haile Selassie—who caused much suffering in Eritrea as a result of human rights violations carried out by imperial soldiers. Eritreans turned to the West and the United Nations in the 1950s for support but much of this fell on to deaf ears because of our pre-occupation at the time with stemming the tide of communism. Canada's foreign policy justified an alliance with Ethiopia and eventually became the tacit acceptance of the repressive practices conducted against the Eritrean people. Today, the pendulum has only shifted slightly in the opposite direction. Canada and our allies continue to work and cooperate with monarchies and repressive regimes around the world. Acknowledging the double standard in the application of sanctions may be the first constructive step towards improving the diplomatic relationship between Canada and Eritrea and re-establishing peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

3. We believe Canada's main interest in the Horn should be the peaceful development of Eritrea as a stable trade and cultural partner. There are already reasons to do so - Eritrea is Canada's largest source of gold in Sub-Saharan Africa and it is strategically located at the southern end of the Red Sea—a prime location for the lucrative trade with Asia and Europe. Because of its proximity to the Middle East, it also carries broader strategic implications for Canada. Whatever affects Eritrea, sooner or later, will affect Canada—whether it is preventing a blockade of oil lanes or keeping the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region free from threats of piracy or terrorism.

4. We cannot accept either that the sanctions today are necessary to prevent Eritrea from funding radical militant groups like Al-Shabaab. Since the media first began reporting it, this line has become part of a body of generally accepted truisms about Eritrea that are used to support the need for sanctions. It is a statement that disregards contradictory or nuanced statements made by the same organization that first made the claim back in 2009. Early in 2011, versions of the rumor that Eritrea supported Al-Shabaab were written in the National Post. Since 2012, the UN itself found no evidence of support by Eritrea to Al-Shabaab during the course of its mandate. Despite this, the National Post continued to report, even as late as July 2014, that Eritrea backed Al-Shabaab. The same is true for a confidential RCMP report from 2012 that we obtained via a Freedom of Information Request, stating that allegations of funds being used to support Al-Shabaab come entirely from complainants referred to as individual members of groups opposed to the Eritrean Government. The RCMP later confirms in the same report that proving that money paid in taxes or contributions goes to Al-Shabaab is impossible given the lack of evidence.

5. We also recognize that sanctions play a role in economically isolating Eritrea and pushing its citizens to flee in search for opportunity in wealthier countries in Europe and North America. According to the oft-cited human rights organization known as Human Rights Watch, Eritreans flee because of mass torture, random political repression, and severe restrictions on freedom of

religion. Nearly all major news organizations in Canada have routinely used HRW reports when reporting on Eritrea. Solid facts about the situation in Eritrea are hard to come by and HRW has no physical presence in the country -- thus making their reports unsubstantiated and speculative. Conversely, a recent report from the Danish government published after a fact finding mission to the country in October 2014, concludes that Eritreans leaving the country in increasing numbers is more likely attributable to the economic situation as well as the fatigue of national military service. That is why individuals who visit Eritrea on vacation or on diplomatic mission, for example, notice a disparity between the dire situation that is reported by human rights organizations and what things appear to be on the ground. The Danish government's report states that hardly anyone leaves Eritrea for political reasons alone.

6. On the issue of military service, it may be said that resolving the long-standing occupation of Eritrea's sovereign territory by Ethiopia, in violation and in disregard of international law, could help accelerate the demobilization of National Service conscripts and curb the volume of individuals leaving their homeland. Our organization is deeply concerned that a wider effort by the government of Ethiopia to push for sanctions on Eritrea rather than peace, and targeting remittance of the Diaspora is a regrettable and indefensible way of putting pressure on Eritrea. The Canadian parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade accepted that resolving this occupation was central to improving the human rights situation in the region. In 2005, the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy said,

"the lack of resolution of the conflict is such a large and powerful force that impedes any efforts, whether it's human rights improvement or poverty reduction or agricultural reform. It's like that big 800-pound gorilla that's sitting there, and you just can't get around it. Until the conflict itself is resolved, any efforts in these other areas I think would be severely impeded.

More recently, Canada publicly reaffirmed its recognition of the 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement and the final and binding resolution of the Border Commission awarding disputed territory to Eritrea.

7. We hope that the information and context argued above provide the foundation for engaging in a more frank, and constructive conversation about Eritrea and Canadians of Eritrean origin.

Regards,

Lambros Kyriakakos

On behalf of the—Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations

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