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## [Eritrea, human rights and the right to peace](#)

Posted by [Marilena Dolce](#)



Ms. Sheila Keetharuth, special rapporteur for the United Nations on human rights.

The High Commissariat for human rights, in an informative note, announced the trip to Italy (22-26 September) of Ms. Sheila Keetharuth, special rapporteur for the United Nations on human rights.

Her task will be to collect information, listening to migrants and political refugees present in our Country.

Ms. Keetharuth will meet the Committee on human rights and African issues to speak about the Eritrean situation – a situation, so far, only seen from the outside.

And this is, in a nutshell, the reason for her trip to Italy: to look for evidence, abroad, on the [alleged] non observance of human rights in Eritrea, because since her appointment (2012) to the present day Ms. Keetharuth has never entered the Country.

In fact, Eritrean authorities, often scalded by hot water, as you say, are not scared of (presumably) cold water, too.

Some brief examples, to explain the American point of view on Eritrea: “nail and crush Eritrea”, writes an American diplomat in a telegraphic manner (source: Wikileaks), or, more officially, as American UN ambassador Susan Rice puts it, “the United States are pleased to announce” the imposition of sanctions against Eritrea.

Incidentally, we mention that Susan Rice has never hidden her affection and friendship bond with Meles Zenawi and Ethiopia. Going back in years, in 1950, the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, declares the General Assembly of the United Nations that, though the desires of the Eritrean people must be taken into account, “the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin require that the Country is linked to our ally, Ethiopia”.

And those geopolitical interests in the past sixty years do not appear to have changed.

Back to the enquiry Commission on human rights in Eritrea, of which Ms. Keetharuth is part, its task will be to establish what happens in Eritrea, observing the Country from outside – if there are “human rights violations, extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances and imprisonments in isolations, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments, torture, inhuman imprisonment conditions, if indefinite national military service is a violation of human rights, whether there is freedom of expression, of opinion, of assembly, of association, of religious faith and movement”.

In order to carry out this delicate task, Ms. Keetharuth will meet Eritrean refugees, probably the asylum seekers in our Country indicated by the humanitarian associations who look after them, above all the *Agenzia Habeshia* of father Mussie Zerai and *Gandhi*, the non-profit organization of Dr. Alganesh Fessha, who was awarded the “Ambrogino d’oro” prize last year in Milan.

In July, vice minister Lapo Pistelli, after a visit to Eritrea, declared, taking many by surprise after talks with President Isaias Afwerki, that “you make peace with enemies, you go for a pizza with friends, instead”.

Out of metaphor, the wish was to resume bilateral relations, starting just from human rights, the trafficking of human beings and the Eritrea-Ethiopia stalemate situation, after the non-compliance with the Algiers Agreement (2002) following the clash of 1998 – 2000.

We stress that, to date, Ethiopian troops are present in the territory, which international agreements, as well as former colonial maps, define as Eritrean.

It is as if Italy invaded Bellinzona, considering it as Italian due to its name, and was therefore surprised for the belligerency of Switzerland, a Country that has always been neutral.

This paradoxical situation, that foreign Countries hostile to Eritrea use as an alibi, a pretext to keep young people imprisoned, is in reality a “no peace – no war” state, a war which Eritrea is trying to avoid at the heavy price of having a Country in peace with a wartime economy and way of life. For fourteen years, boys and girls born after independence, have been unable to look to their future with optimism, and to see prospects for themselves and for their (beloved) Country.

Can a Country, invaded by another, not have an army?

To understand this, rather than questioning young refugees, it would be advisable to study recent history.

Asylum seekers present in Italy will give an outline of their situation within the Country, in accordance with their request for “humanitarian aid” – a different type of asylum, in terms of motivations, than political asylum.

Eritrean young people leaving the Country without a visa (which foreign embassies do not issue) are informed, they take into account the risks of a difficult journey, they want to obtain the status of refugee and, alongside this, a stay permit, a house and subsidies. In fact, the most sought after Countries are those with a better welfare state, not Italy – a Country of transit.

These young people see, via the internet, how life is abroad, where there are often relatives who, during the Ethiopian occupation, fled to Europe, America, Canada.

The exodus, however, has never cut the bonds with their roots.

Since 1974, combatants and exiled people who found themselves gathered in Italy, in Bologna, united and supportive, concretely organized the help to be sent to the motherland to those who were fighting.

With this spirit many Eritreans from all over the world gathered in Bologna, in the last Summer 2014, to hold hands once ore with one another,

despite the great difficulties in their Country.

The Italian Eritrean Community could speak of this and much more, if interviewed.

For instance, women could explain Ms Keetharuth why in Italy they have gathered funds for a polyfunctional medical and reception centre, opened in Keren last August, and why they believe the right to health is a priority.

Eritrea, said Ms. Christine Umutoni, UNDP representative in Asmara, is committed to the projects it believes in, and, first among these, is the project for women's health, for safer births, for a reduced incidence of neonatal deaths and for widespread children vaccination.

So why would a Country – which achieves the Millennium Goals (MDG's) invests in training young people and increases scholarization, then sell these very young people to traffickers of human beings to be killed in the sand or at sea?

Eritrean society, based on the importance of traditions, after achieving independence in 1993, has become a lay society, respectful of all religions, which coexist peacefully. In an area of the world where this is a rare occurrence, it so happens that Muslim families living next to Christian families, reciprocally participate in family weddings.

Ms. Keetharuth could ask the Eritrean community questions about this religious tolerance, too. After all, accusations that the Eritrean Government is helping al Shabaab, a group of Somali Islamic extremists, have been found to be completely unfounded.

There are two major issues that Ms. Keetharuth ought to tackle in order to understand the human rights issue: the heavy duty of the long military service, which inevitably limits other rights and which would end if only Eritrea should not defend its borders, and the imprisonments without process on fifteen opponents, the so-called "G15".

With regards to the first point, though, rather than interviewing refugees and representatives on non-profit organizations in Italy, [Ms. Keetharuth] ought to ask Ethiopia why it does not observe the agreement signed some time ago. If Ethiopia withdrew from Eritrean territories, if its incursions stopped, Eritrea would regain a fundamental right, the right to peace. And may grant more rights to its people.

The second issue is more intricate to be solved abroad. Certainly, to imprison someone without a process, to condemn and throw away the key is not what our penal code teaches us.

But one has to remember that Eritrea has fought part of the long fight for independence, without foreign support and with various forces inside the Country.

To overthrow the Menghistu regime, the Eritrean and Ethiopian fronts have fought together. A unity that held out until independence was achieved, then Ethiopia, though, a large country next to a small one, expected that the two paths would proceed united.

And when Eritrea in 1998 decided to abandon the birr, the Ethiopian currency, to introduce its own currency (nafka), Ethiopia understood that the two paths were separating and, shortly after, attacked the old ally.

An "incomprehensible" war for the West, caused by a small plot of land that gps do not even detect, as the Italian press wrote. Peace has been rejected on more than one occasion by Ethiopia, ignoring the ultimatums of the UN Security Council, in spite of the famine hitting its population.

Humanitarian aids get there, in any case, and with regards to a possible arms embargo, it has a good stock of them, accumulated during the years.

In 2001, in a critical context, with a precarious peace, not accepted by neighbours, an attempted coup takes place in Eritrea.

Today, we are asking Ms. Keetharuth to establish whether the imprisonment of the organizers of this failed plot is right and if, during detention, their human rights have been respected.

President Isaias on the situation of the "G15" has spoken with clarity (interview by Giovanni Porzio for *Panorama* magazine, 2010): it was a war situation. During the interview, he declared that it was a matter of avoiding a great danger for national security, a situation provoked from outside, borne during the 1998 war. The harsh reaction of the Country was therefore a necessity, an act of self-defence.

Some of the leaders of the coup were his friends and had fought with him. A personal sadness, he explained, not different from what he had felt many times before during the thirty years' war for independence, when his companions deserted, going to the enemy lines, ready to kill you and to kill their own people.

To give a voice, symbolically, to those who are currently in prison, I am quoting here what was written in a public letter by Meaza, daughter of Petros Solomon (*former Minister for Defense and Foreign Affairs*), who was a child when her father was imprisoned: "your only crime was to expect freedom for your people", she writes referring to the G15.

And, adding a post-scriptum for her dad: "I hope that you will be able to attend my graduation ceremony in June 2015".

In summary, I would like to repeat, that Ms. Keetharuth, addressing human rights, ought to help Eritrea to regain its first right, the right to peace.

The whole picture of the Country's situation, however, will not be completed by giving a voice only to those who left their Country in desperation. A long established Eritrean community exists in Italy, which arrived a long time ago and has very clear ideas in terms of justice and rights.

It is formed by men and women who have fought – sometimes parents, uncles, relatives of those who have left the Country, these people have mourned the deaths of their sons at sea and in the desert.

Why not meet them, Ms. Keetharuth, to listen to their opinion on human rights?

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