UN Watch statement

Human Rights Council, 26th Session
UPR of Eritrea
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Delivered by Ms. Meron Estefanos

Thank you, Mr. President.

My name is Meron Estefanos and I am a journalist and a human rights activist. I have been following, researching and reporting on the Eritrean refugee crisis and particular the harrowing situation in the Sinai, where human traffickers prey on Eritrean refugees and would-be refugees collude with traffickers and even authorities and trap them. They then extort thousands of dollars from their families, by torturing and threatening to do worse to the refugees.

Based on the research I did with colleagues at the Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA) and the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands, an estimated 40,000 Eritreans are believed to have been extorted in such manner. This has caused devastation to entire communities across the country and continues to do so even as we speak. Many have lost their lives and the numbers of those dead can only be estimated, based on accounts from the refugees themselves and their families. The telephone helpline I ran receives several calls in any week from people seeking information on a relative missing some going back to 2007/8.

The situation is just as bad with refugees making dangerous crossings organized by abusive smugglers across the Mediterranean and overcrowded and ill-equipped refugee camps in the region.

Many of those fleeing the country are young people escaping the indefinite national service or underage children fleeing before they reach conscription age. While the government of Eritrea continually claims that they have "evidence" of those involved in trafficking, to date no concrete action is being taken against the perpetrators nor is there any evidence of a clear strategy for addressing an issue that is costing the lives of thousands of young Eritreans.

I call upon the Council to urge Eritrea to assume its responsibilities under international law and to safeguard the welfare of its youth and respect their human rights.

Thank you