



STATEMENT

11 JUNE 2014

A PLEA FOR THE CHILDREN OF ERITREA: UNACCOMPANIED, SEPARATED AND FLEEING FROM A MILITARISED SOCIETY

*Statement by the Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria
on the Day of the African Child, 16 June 2014
about the state of the child in Eritrea*

The Unaccompanied children of Eritrea: a plea for collective responsibility

As the African continent celebrates the Day of the African Child, 16 June 2014, the Centre for Human Rights (CHR), University of Pretoria, focuses on the plight of unaccompanied children fleeing from a militarised society that is destabilising the social fabric of the country. Thousands of unaccompanied minors take risky journeys across the borders into Ethiopia, Sudan and further afield.

The Children of Eritrea: No escape from the military

Eritrea's circumstances are unusual as the country is not at war but the society is highly militarised. The continuing border dispute with neighbouring Ethiopia is cited as the key reason for the prevailing condition that Eritrea terms as 'no war-no peace'. Eritrea uses this situation to impose a conscription programme that is both forced and indefinite, spawning a constant exodus of refugees out of the county. Youth below 18 years of age often refer to the fear of military service as one of the main factors pushing them to escape.

A grave concern for children in Eritrea is the militarisation of education. Military service is compulsory for all Eritreans and the education system is tailored to prepare children for this unending duty. Since 2003, secondary school students spend their final year (Grade 12) at the Sawa Military Training Camp. In Sawa, the year begins with a three-month period of military



training, followed by an academic programme. Upon completion of Grade 12, children attend compulsory national service. A portion of school-leavers get admitted into vocational colleges that were created following the closure of the University of Asmara. However, for the vast majority of the children it means reporting for military service. Should any child refuse to undergo military training in their final year, they are denied a school leaving certificate and access to further education, which is a denial of children's right to education.

There are other push factors forcing children to cross borders, often without the knowledge of their families. The children cite lack of educational opportunities, their difficult family circumstances and the problems faced in child-headed households owing to the long absence of their parents, who, as soldiers, were either serving in the military, detained or in exile. Eritrea also represses freedom of thought and religion, and reports persist of children being arbitrarily detained with their parents for practicing a religion not recognised by the authorities in Eritrea.

For Eritrean children these realities are so distressing that they risk crossing the border to seek better opportunities as refugees. However, conditions are tough, with limited space and resources, posing protection challenges to the agencies running the refugee camps. While they cross international borders to seek a better future, the unaccompanied and separated children face more struggles. They find that the prevailing conditions are far from what they imagined. As a result, some of them try to move to other destinations, seeking to reunite with relatives. Their vulnerability cannot be stressed enough, as they are at high risk of all kinds of exploitation and abuse, including being abducted into human trafficking rings.

The plight of separated and unaccompanied children in the camps in Ethiopia and Sudan requires the attention of all, and more specifically that of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Eritrea signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1994, and is party to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) since 2000. However, the country is yet to adopt specific legislation exclusively addressing the rights of the child.

The CHR stresses how crucial a time it is for countries receiving Eritrean unaccompanied and separated children to fully apply the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum, and Guidelines on Protection and Care of Refugee Children. These instruments should be used as a matter of course in dealing with unaccompanied and separated children to help provide stronger protection because of the vulnerability of these children.

The CHR reminds all that it is only through collective responsibility and action that children's rights can be guaranteed. The CHR calls on:

- (i) Eritrea to dissociate military training from secondary education and provide for comprehensive and quality education for children;
- (ii) Countries neighbouring Eritrea to fully apply the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum, and Guidelines on Protection and Care of Refugee Children;

- (iii) The international community to promote inter-country cooperation in establishing secure channels of migration from Eritrea to counter illicit practices of human smuggling and trafficking;
- (iv) The African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child to stress on Eritrea the need to uphold the best interests of Eritrean children by eliminating factors that make children flee their country and turn them into refugees.

Background to the Day of the African Child

The Day of the African Child, is an initiative of the Organisation of African Union (OAU), now African Union (AU), and has been celebrated since 1991 to commemorate the 1976 Soweto Uprising which saw school children take to the streets in opposition to a poor quality and racially discriminatory education system that existed under the apartheid regime that ruled South Africa at the time. Every year on June 16 we are reminded of the more than 100 children killed by security forces during the Soweto Uprisings and the thousands who were injured.

Today we are reminded not only of the passion and resilience of the children, but also of their vulnerability — a vulnerability we have a collective responsibility to address in a spirit of protection.

This year's theme of the ACRWC is 'A child friendly, quality, free and compulsory education for all children in Africa'.

We bring particular awareness to the plight of Eritrea's children, whose right to education is negatively affected by military training and policies of the Eritrean government.

For more information, please contact:

Dr Martin Nsibirwa

Programme Manager: Centre for Human Rights

University of Pretoria

Tel: (012) 420 4754

Email: martin.nsibirwa@up.ac.za

www.chr.up.ac.za