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16th April, 2012

To: Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Africa

**FORUM ON THE PARTICIPATION OF NGOS IN THE WORK
OF THE 51ST SESSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND
PEOPLES' RIGHTS AND 25TH AFRICAN HUMAN RIGHTS BOOKFAIR
14-16 APRIL, 2012 - BANJUL, THE GAMBIA**

Dear Honourable Minister,

The participants of the above-mentioned Forum present their compliments to your respective offices.

We, the undersigned non-governmental organisations, participating at the NGO Forum and the 51st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, are writing to call to your attention the ongoing widespread and systematic human rights violations in Eritrea and to call on African Union Member States to take urgent action to respond to this appalling situation.

In September 2001, eleven prominent government officials who demanded implementation of the Constitution and ten independent journalists were arbitrarily arrested and detained. Over ten years later, their fate is unconfirmed: while some are reported to have died in detention, the others remain in harsh detention centres without due legal process. Thousands of their fellow citizens face a similar fate. An Eritrean can be arrested and imprisoned without charge or trial for years upon end merely for being critical of the government, belonging to what the government defines as a 'wrong' religious group, or refusing to comply with the indefinite national service imposed on all Eritreans over the age of 18 years.

Torture, arrests, killings and forced labour are common. No independent civil society organizations have permission to operate inside Eritrea, and since 2001 there has been no independent domestic media.

The humanitarian situation in Eritrea is critical. Food is rationed and distributed by the government and severe hunger is widespread. The health infrastructure, such as it exists, cannot cope with the burden of widespread infectious diseases.

Members of Eritrean civil society in exile and their supporters have sought redress at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. In two separate decisions, the African Commission has found the government to be in violation of fundamental rights contained in the Charter and requested the release of the government officials held incommunicado since September 2001 (250/02 Liesbeth Zegveld and Mussie Ephrem vs. Eritrea; November 2003) and for at least 18 journalists also held incommunicado to be given access to their lawyers (275/03 Article 19 vs. Eritrea; May 2007). To date, Eritrea has ignored both these decisions.

Concern for the situation in Eritrea has also been expressed at the United Nations. In a resolution tabled by Nigeria and Gabon in December 2011, the UN Security Council decided to extend sanctions on Eritrea. A number of UN special procedures have sent communications and requested country visits, which the government has so far ignored. Most recently in March 2012, 44 countries from all regions supported a statement at the Human Rights Council requesting the High Commissioner on Human Rights to report on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

We believe that the dire human rights situation in Eritrea merits a more sustained and serious engagement on the part of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

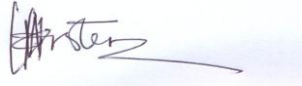
The undersigned organisations therefore recommend:

- The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to take all necessary measures for the effective implementation of their decisions and to seek support from all stakeholders, including member states of the African Union;
- the member states of the African Union to ensure the effective implementation of the ACHPR decisions on Eritrea;
- the members states of the African Union, especially those who are members of the UN Human Rights Council, to support the appointment of a Special Rapporteur who would report to the UN Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in Eritrea;

- the Government of Eritrea to permit special mechanisms of the ACHPR and the UN special procedures unhindered access to visit the country.

While thanking you for your kind consideration, please accept the assurances of our highest consideration.

Yours Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'H Forster', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hannah Forster (Mrs)
Executive Director
Chairperson, NGO Forum Steering Committee
On behalf of the participants of the NGOs Forum

CC: Permanent Representatives to the African Union
Permanent Representatives to the UN Human Rights Council
Members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
NGOs Forum Steering Committee Members