

## Aid fattens the Eritrean dictatorship

(English translation of an article which appeared on the Swedish daily, *Expressen*, on 31 March 2009: <http://www.expressen.se/debatt/1.1517416/bistandet-goder-eritreas-diktatur>)

Eritrea is one of the poorest, hungriest countries in the world, governed by one of the most corrupt and repressive regimes on earth. More than 20 000 political and religious prisoners have disappeared into Eritrean prisons. Eritrea is, along with North Korea one of the only countries in the world that has denied the Red Cross access to its prisons. The European Union is the largest donor of aid to Eritrea. This aid has the best of intentions, but instead finds its way into the coffers of thieving regime. This week the Swedish government and the 26 other member states of the EU are set to approve 1 300 million SEK in Development Aid. Though these funds are sorely needed by the people of Eritrea, they will instead sustain the brutal regime of Isaias Afwerki, Africa's worst dictator.

The rationale for giving aid to brutal dictatorships has always been that engagement is better than confrontation. Isaias Afwerki has time and time again thumbed his nose at international pressure. When Omar al-Bahir was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in the Hague, Afwerki invited him for a state visit. Afwerki has supported the Islamic fundamental insurgency in Somalia, invaded neighboring Djibouti, and provided logistical support to pirates attacking cargo ships in the Gulf of Aden. All while receiving billions of Swedish kroner in development aid.

Development projects funded by the European Union are primarily infrastructure, building roads, bridges and dams. Those doing the work are hundreds of thousands of Eritrea's youth who have been conscripted in a never-ending scheme of national military service. Young people, aged 16 or younger are forced into military service without any end. Thousands die each year fleeing this forced labour, making their way across the Sahara desert in hopes of freedom. This includes women, who constitute nearly half of Eritrea's army, and who are routinely raped and sexually harassed by army commanders accountable to no one but the President.

The situation in Eritrea is direr than ever. In the wake of the financial crisis, the economy has collapsed. Foreign investment in mining and commodities has almost disappeared; remittances by Eritreans living abroad have nearly dried up. In this moment of crisis, the government continues its policy of repression and confrontation. Sweden and the European Union are rightly searching for ways to help the suffering people of Eritrea.

Instead of continuing a failed policy of coupling aid with quiet diplomacy, the EU must place real conditions on aid, and make real demands on the Government of Eritrea to:

- Release the more than 20 000 political and religious prisoners, and pending their release allow access to their family members and international rights groups;
- Dismantle the more than 300 illegal prison sites and detention centres scattered across the country;
- Abolish the notorious national military service in which hundreds of thousands of Eritrea's youth are enslaved;
- Transition to democratic governance including the scheduling of general elections;
- Respect human rights, freedom of the press and the rule of law.

Sweden has a long and noble tradition of leading the world on development aid. If the government of Sweden does not act, the EU will send 1 300 million SEK to pockets of a criminal dictatorship, with only the slightest terms and conditions. It is often convenient for governments of the EU member states to hide behind decisions made in Brussels. In this case, one single member state can put a stop to this failed policy. It is my hope that the Swedish government will take a stand on behalf of millions of Eritreans who are not free to do so themselves.

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