

**Testimony of
Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield
Bureau of African Affairs
before the
House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the situation in Eritrea.

After twenty-five years of independence, Eritrea today stands as a country best known for its emigration and its poor record on human rights. Out of a population of approximately three million people, per UN estimates, an estimated five thousand people a month flee the country. Many risk a perilous journey across Africa and across the Mediterranean at the hands of sometimes ruthless smugglers and in unsafe vessels. The country is hemorrhaging its youth. In a country that has never known an election, Eritreans are voting with their feet. They are fleeing indefinite conscription into military or national service; religious persecution and other human rights violations; and economic hardship. These same conditions frame the United States' relationship with Eritrea.

In virtually every other country in Africa, including those with whom we have profound disagreements, we still seek to achieve partnerships across a range of shared global interests. We provide billions in foreign assistance to support those partnerships formed to fight HIV/AIDS and malaria; to support education; to combat violent extremism; and to strengthen governance. In Eritrea that is not the

case and that is because of the decisions of the Eritrean government. In 2005, the Eritrean government ordered USAID, other donors, and international NGOs to leave the country. It subsequently ordered the Embassy's Defense Attaché office to close. As a result, we have no bilateral assistance, no military to military relationship, and—since 2010—no ambassador in Asmara.

This is not the relationship we desire. Eritrea is one of the poorest countries on Earth. It is located in a volatile and strategic neighborhood on the Red Sea. But if Eritrea likes to portray itself as David and the United States as Goliath, I would argue that its wounds are largely self-inflicted and its sling shot hurls stones at its own people. Up to five thousand of them make this clear every month, risking their lives rather than remaining in the country.

Eritrea's continuing torrent of emigration is no doubt driven in part by economic conditions, but it is its human rights record that pushes so many to leave. Over the past decade the Eritrean government has arbitrarily detained journalists, political opposition members, and others trying to express their opinions. In 2001, the Eritrean government detained without charge a group of reform-minded ministers and other prominent individuals who called for elections and implementation of the constitution. Many of these individuals remain imprisoned to this day. Almost all citizens, with few exceptions, are forced into indefinite conscription into national service and in many cases separated from their families for years. The Government has imposed severe restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion and belief and has subjected members of "non-authorized" religions to arbitrary detention and forced recanting as a condition of release, as well as other ill-treatment. The Government has singled out groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their members'

refusal to bear arms in the independence struggle or to participate in national service.

Eritrean officials have long justified their poor human rights record and large-scale militarization on an emergency “no war, no peace” situation over the unresolved demarcation of their border with Ethiopia. Eritrea has remained under a UN-imposed arms embargo and sanctions since 2009 for its actions that contributed to regional instability, including support for al-Shabaab in Somalia. In their last two annual reports, the UN’s Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group has not found evidence of ongoing support to al-Shabaab, but Asmara’s refusal to allow the group access to conduct investigations in Eritrea per its mandate, has limited the UN’s ability to determine Eritrea’s compliance with the sanctions regime. Eritrea also continues to hold Djiboutian prisoners of war and is accused of fomenting unrest in neighboring states.

For all these reasons, we have made it clear that turning a new page in the United States-Eritrea relationship first requires significant improvements in human rights. We have repeatedly called on the government to abide by its international human rights obligations, implement its own constitution, hold national elections, honor its commitment to limit the duration of national service to 18 months, develop an independent and transparent judiciary, and release persons who have been arbitrarily detained. We also continue to support the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group, and other international efforts to make progress.

And there has been some progress—albeit limited. In recent years, Eritrea has made some efforts to engage with the international community. The

Government reversed an earlier decision to close UN operations and has allowed some non-governmental organizations to return. Earlier this year they released four of the larger group of Djiboutian prisoners of war, who were reunited with their families for the first time since 2008. Eritrea has recently been more open to working with the European Union on development programs and has allowed a handful of international journalists to visit the country.

Eritrea's efforts to engage with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights are also welcome. The country accepted nearly half of the Universal Periodic Review recommendations, and we continue to encourage the government to follow through on these.

As I have noted, our bilateral relationship with Eritrea is not easy, but we have not and do not seek to cut off diplomatic engagement and communication. This summer, one of our Deputy Assistant Secretaries traveled to Asmara to visit our embassy there. Our charge and her team meet regularly with officials and host a variety of events at the American Center in Asmara.

Many challenges remain. Yet I am impressed by the resiliency of the Eritrean people. Eritrea and Eritreans pride themselves on self-reliance in the face of adversity. The largest obstacles to peace and prosperity in their country have been erected by their own government. We are encouraged by the small steps towards progress I have outlined above. We would urge the government to take much larger strides forward by ending indefinite national service and releasing political prisoners. If given the opportunity to be heard and to fully and freely participate in their government, I believe that the people of Eritrea can do great things. We look forward to the day when that will be possible.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak today and I welcome any questions you may have.