

# INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION

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Mister Chairman,

Enforced indefinite national service is an increasingly element of Erythrea human rights crisis. Conscripts are subjected to military punishments and torture. Those who evade national service are treated cruelly. Evaders are detained in terrible conditions and heavy penalties are imposed on the family of those who evade service or flee out of the country.

The law states that all Erythrean citizens men and women between the age of 18 to 50 have the obligation to perform national service. In normal circumstances national service is supposed to last 18 months. This consists of six months military training and 12 months deployment either on military duties or some other national development project. However after completing the compulsory 18 months national service can be extended until the the age of 50 under mobilisation or emergency situation given by the government. Concripts may spend 10 years in the service.

For a country to enforce conscription laws may not be a violation of human rights. However in Erythrea, the methods used, the lack of any rights to conscientious objection constitutes abuses. Furthermore although national service may allow a limited exception to the prohibition of forced labour, the indefinite nature of national service in Erythrea, the use of recruits for forced labour, the punishment of those who do not participate and the threat of penalty to their family for those who desert, violates various provisions of the Erythrean constitution and the international human rights laws.

The consequences for Erythrea are disastrous. The more the government seeks to compel the population, the more people flee the country. Erythrea is now in the grip of a refugee crisis with thousands of people fleeing or attempting to flee every month. Since everyone must serve no family in Erythrea is unaffected by the consequences of the national service policy.

Jehovah witnesses are particularly affected by the lack of a righth to conscientious objection because their faith forbids them to bear arms. Since independence of the country they have been systematically persecuted for what the authorities have treated as a questionable commitment to the national struggle.

We do hope that Erythrea will find reconciliation with the neighbour countries so as the people will be able to live in peace in their own country.