

EU decried for seeking deal with ‘North Korea of Africa’

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6 Jul. 2016 (updated: 6 Jul. 2016)

Despite crimes against humanity being commonplace in Eritrea, the EU wants to deal with Eritrea’s autocratic regime on a border protection project, using development aid under German leadership. [EurActiv Germany reports.](#)

Some call Eritrea the “gulag” or “North Korea of Africa.” For example, the country’s so-called military service is undertaken by about 400,000 recruits between the ages of 18 and 50; often, the recruits end up building roads. The men and women must live where the government tells them and the pay is too meagre to support most families. Deserters are interred in prison camps.

Torture, murder, forced labour and religious discrimination contribute to 60,000 people fleeing Eritrea every year. After Syrians, they form the largest group seeking asylum in the EU. The government has “over the last 25 years, systematically committed crimes against human rights”, according to a new UN report. The UN’s investigators, led by Australian jurist Mike Smith, found that the perpetrators, from the highest levels of government, the security forces and the military, have been operating in a “climate of impunity”.

However, while the UN Human Rights Council called for the Eritrean government to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, the European Union is seeking to partner up with the East African country, as it looks for solutions to the ongoing refugee crisis.

The European Commission is to set aside up to €8 billion in its new Migration Partnership, which will primarily invest development funds in an attempt to put the brakes on migration. As a part of the Khartoum Process, agreed in 2014, the EU is set to put pen to paper on agreements with some dubious African governments.

One of the targets is Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, who has been in office since 1993. On Monday (4 July), head of the EU’s border protection agency (Frontex), Fabrice Leggeri, said that “in Eritrea, there is persecution and a brutal dictatorship; these people are in need of protection.”

Around €200 million is earmarked for this autocratic regime also for building up the renewable energy sector. But the country will also be expected to use European money to combat people smugglers and to increase border security on its border with Sudan.

The Commission has already acknowledged criticism of its planned partnership with Eritrea and Sudan. When asked by [Spiegel Online](#), the executive indicated that money would indeed be sent to Eritrea, but that it would end up in the hands of NGOs and civil society. Talks are still ongoing though.

Mirjam van Reisen, professor of international relations and director of the Europe External Policy Advisers (EEPA), told EurActiv.de that the matter is problematic: “In Eritrea, there are no NGOs. Critics have called it unreasonable that tax-payer money will be sent to a regime that supports crimes against humanity and inters people in prison-like conditions,” she said.

Numerous international observers warned that increased border measures would endanger refugees on both sides of the border. Any people intercepted and registered by Sudanese authorities would run the risk of ending up like the aforementioned deserters. They would face mistreatment, torture or even death.

Although Germany’s development cooperation with Sudan and Eritrea is suspended, the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) will nevertheless take the lead on a border protection project between the two countries, on behalf of the EU and the German government. Its mandate will include providing equipment and training to security personnel.

A spokesperson for GIZ told EurActiv.de that they are working on a project financed by the EU Regional Trust Fund in collaboration with eleven countries to “improve the management of migration in the Horn of Africa” and to “help countries combat criminal networks of people smugglers” in particular.

The current agenda has not yet determined specific measures. There were reports that reception centres for refugees would be built in Sudan, but these have turned out to be false.

“I think that the EU’s idea to support Sudan in securing its Eritrea border is totally absurd,” criticised Nicole Hirt, an Eritrea specialist at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). “Anyone between 18 and 55 cannot leave the country legally anyway,” she told EurActiv.de.

Giving the Sudanese regime money to secure a border that is already protected by the armed Eritrean military is both absurd and contrary to any mandate in protecting refugees, she added.

In order to dissuade people from making the often lethal journey across the Mediterranean, Hirt suggested that the EU would be better off supporting Eritrean refugees in neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. “They have to improve the living conditions in camps and set up integration programmes,” she added.

Van Reisen shared this view and said that asylum seekers “need safe places.” She highlighted that “at the moment, most refugee camps have little, no internet connection, no work, no chance for education for anyone older than 13. And they are in constant danger of being sent back to Eritrea.” She concluded that: “Of course they are going to try and escape these camps to try and reach Europe.”

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