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## UN Security Council considers Eritrea a threat to peace

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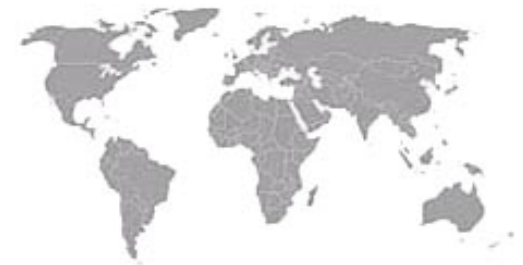
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## UN SECURITY COUNCIL CONSIDERS ERITREA A THREAT TO PEACE



By Martin Plaut\* and Mirjam van Reisen\*\* | IDN-InDepthNews Analysis



BRUSSELS (IDN) - The UN Security Council has concluded that the Eritrean regime remains a serious threat to peace in the Horn of Africa and the region as a whole. In a resolution adopted on October 23, the Council expressed concern at the evidence provided by UN experts who accused President Isaias Afewerki of organising

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“ongoing Eritrean support for certain regional armed groups.” The Security Council went on to re-affirm its arms embargo against the Eritrean government.

Behind these bland phrases lies a catalogue of evidence carefully assembled by experts of the UN Monitoring Group. They explain in graphic detail how the regime operates: It supports rebel movements in neighbouring Ethiopia and Djibouti, something that has been known for quite some time. What is new is that – cynically enough – Eritrea is now embroiled in the Yemeni civil war in return for the Saudi and UAE financial support.

The backing of the Houthi rebellion in Yemen is indeed the most striking new finding. The monitors state that they have “received credible and persuasive testimony from multiple sources and independent reports indicating that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have established a military presence in Eritrea as part of the military campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen and may be offering Eritrea compensation for allowing its territory and possibly its troops to be used as part of the Arab coalition-led war effort”.

Experts say that this deal was done after Djibouti rejected a similar arrangement with the Saudis and their allies. The UAE are said to have struck a separate deal to use the Eritrean port of Assab for the next 30 years. Situated just 60 km from the Yemeni coast, it has lain idle since Eritrea’s war with Ethiopia (May 1998 to June 2000) – a conflict that sealed the borders between the two countries.

It is not hard to imagine what Eritrea might do with the funds from its new Arab allies, since the regime has been keen to purchase weapons. The UN monitors report that a ship – the Shaker 1 – secretly docked at the Eritrean port of Massawa in January 2015. On board were Sudanese heavy weapons, apparently en route to arms fair in Abu Dhabi.

Whether they ever reached their destination is a moot point. What were described as eight ‘empty containers’ were offloaded at Massawa. The monitors say they have evidence that the containers were full, not empty, as claimed. It is likely that the howitzers and rocket launchers provided by the Military Industry Corporation of the Sudan were offloaded at the time. If so, this was in clear violation of the UN arms embargo against Eritrea.

Serious as these violations are, they pale into insignificance beside the evidence of the ongoing Eritrean backing of armed groups attempting to overthrow neighboring governments. These operations are co-ordinated by the head of Eritrean intelligence, Brigadier General Abraha Kassa, “a long-time associate of the President” – as the UN report puts it.

These movements include a newly formed front of Ethiopian rebel organisations, whose unity was “facilitated” by the Eritrean government. The Eritreans are also said to provide support to Afar rebels operating in Diibouti. Eritrean

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officials were confronted with this allegation, but they failed to respond.

## Lack of financial transparency

These are exactly the kind of operations the Security Council has repeatedly demanded that Eritrea brings to an end. One of the roles of the monitors is to try to ensure that finances are not diverted by the regime to destabilise the region. This has been difficult to achieve, since the Eritrean government refuses experts all access to the country.

Even when senior Eritrean officials, including a senior political adviser to the President of Eritrea, Yemane Gebreab, meet with the UN's appointed monitors, their promises of assistance prove worthless. The report notes that the Government continues not to disclose its budget appropriations and the country's budget is not publicly available. UN monitors have yet to receive the official data for the past three years, promised at a meeting in Cairo in February 2014.

Given what is termed as "lack of financial transparency" the UN experts explain their concerns about reports that the European Union is considering a substantial increase in aid to Eritrea. The monitors call for "due diligence, monitoring and full oversight of the dispersal of large amounts of aid to Eritrea" since there is otherwise every risk that these would be used to fund rebellions across the region.

According to the UN, 5000 refugees leave Eritrea each month. Eritrean refugees are the second largest group of refugees entering Europe over the Mediterranean route.

In recent months the EU has been preparing a 200 million Euro bilateral aid package and a 40 million Euro package to be signed in a framework of collaboration to curb migration and human trafficking. Given the lack of financial transparency, it is difficult to understand how EU officials can possibly monitor the disbursal of funds.

Eritrea unilaterally ended aid relations in 2011 after the EU expressed grave concern over human rights violations in the country. At present, the EU is keen to encourage reforms in Eritrea by providing aid. It aims at tackling the root cause of the exodus of refugees by encouraging development.

Observers are however sceptical and point to the absence of any official government budget or budgetary procedures in Eritrea, the absence of democratic institutions, severe human rights violations as well as the regime's role in destabilising the region.

There has been speculation that Eritrea wants to attract aid, since it requires foreign exchange to modernise its military. It has been pointed out that manipulating the exchange rate of the national currency, the Nakfa, would allow Eritrea to divert aid funds to other priorities.

Increased aid to Eritrea may well contribute to undermining peace in the region and therefore increase the number of refugees. In the light of this it is significant that the newly imposed UN sanctions specifically refer to 'public



of refugees. In the light of this it is significant that the newly imposed UN sanctions specifically refer to public finance' as an area requiring careful scrutiny.

Federica Mogherini, the EU's senior diplomat, warned Eritrea last month (October) to respect human rights and urged the country to engage in deep reforms. The question is whether such diplomatic warnings will suffice.

The UN Monitoring Report provides significant insights into Eritrea's financial organisation as well as its determination to perpetuate instability across the region, contributing to an increasing refugee exodus.

The Eritrean regime officials are due to attend the Africa-EU Summit to be held in the Maltese capital Valletta on November 11-12. Their presence will pose difficult questions for their European partners, since this will be a critical opportunity for EU diplomats to deal with the refugee crisis, while at the same time building peace and regional security.

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Photo: Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki in joint press briefing in Asmara, December, 10, 2002 | Credit: Wikipedia

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