

The Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva wishes to provide clarification on the erroneous assertions made by the "Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea" in a News Release issued on 21 June 2019.

The "Special Rapporteur" alleges, among other things, the curtailment of Catholic Church activities in Eritrea.

Eritrea is a secular nation within a societal context of Christian, Islamic and other faiths which have co-existed peacefully for centuries. Christianity was introduced in 329 A.D. and Islam in 615 A.D. The Eritrean people are not only pious practitioners of their respective faiths but all Eritrean cities, towns and village are notable, perhaps uniquely, as places where churches of various denominations (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) and mosques are found in proximity or juxtaposed to each other. (Asmara has one Synagogue serving literally a couple of Jewish families).

Based on this centuries old tradition and culture of tolerance, the right to belief has further been enshrined in Eritrea's modern Civil and Penal Codes. The country does not have an official religion, as is customary in various countries all over the world as well as our region. None of the established religions have preferential or primary status within the framework of the secular Eritrean State.

This laudable climate of statutory equality of all religions has further been reinforced in recent years by additional regulations that spell out the distinct powers and functions of the State and the respective faiths.

Regulation 73/1995, enacted in 1995 after proper consultation between the government and the respective faiths, is a case in point. The regulation emphasizes the separation of powers and limits developmental activities of religious institutions to funding and monitoring in specific sectors identified by the Government (Article 6). Religious institutions are not allowed to actually conduct developmental activities in areas of their choice as this is fraught with discrimination against non-adherents of the specific institution in question. Religious institutions are not also, allowed, to solicit funds from external donors for the same considerations of equity and eschewing externally-induced imbalances. In this spirit, the funds that religious institutions

allocate to developmental services must be raised from their local constituencies (Article 7).

The recent directive issued by the Ministry of Health to relevant religious institutions (mostly clinics run by Catholic Churches) constitutes implementation of Regulation 73/1995 in the instances where it had not been fully enforced in the past years. The directive requests relevant religious institutions to transfer operational/administrative authority of clinics under their control to the respective regional branches of the Ministry of Health in full compliance of Regulation 73/1995.

The notion that this will negatively affect "or endanger" delivery of health services is far-fetched and simply not true. In the first place, the issue at hand is the mere transfer of operational modality.

More importantly, the wide network of Referral and Regional hospitals, clinics and health stations throughout the country are run by the Ministry of Health. Health services in Eritrea - outpatient as well as inpatient - are heavily subsidized in accordance with the policy of social justice and have equitable spatial distribution. The commitment of the Eritrean Government to the provision and expansion of affordable and accessible healthcare to the population can be easily inferred from the substantial investments made in the past two decades to build and operate health facilities, including publicly-funded training of healthcare providers, and provision of medicaments at affordable prices. This investment has resulted in more than 82% of the Eritrean population having access to medical facilities within 10 kilometers radius.

The stellar achievements of Eritrea in the health MDGs gives a glimpse of the enormous investment and tangible progress in the health security of its citizens. This is also attested by UN agencies (WHO and UNICEF in particular) that have various programs of cooperation with the Government in this sector.

The Permanent Mission of Eritrea expresses its disappointment in the judgments and conclusions made in the Special Rapporteur's Press Statement without due regard to the concrete situation on religion and religious harmony as well as the legal basis in the provision of religious institutions in public social services. Furthermore, Eritrea finds unacceptable the common pattern of making such pronouncements by a special rapporteur and other groups in a sensational way for political pressure and by timing it with the HRC Sessions.