



Duncan Lewis

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Press Release

Eritrea Focus v United Kingdom: Eritrean Road Project Legal Challenge

This is an update on Eritrea Focus' legal challenge against the UK Government's funding and support to the EU Trust Fund for Africa's *'Reconnecting Eritrea and Ethiopia through rehabilitation of the main arterial roads in Eritrea'* development project in Eritrea.

This EU project was using conscripts from the Eritrean National Service. The use of National Service conscripts in Eritrea has been described as "enslavement" and a "crime against humanity" by a UN Commission of Inquiry. The European Parliament denounced it as "forced labour" and "a form of slavery". Despite this, the EU funding, with UK Government contributions, continued unabated and indeed increased throughout last year.

The UK Government has responded to our case. The UK Government has admitted that it had entered into this project despite having "significant concerns" of human rights abuses and the use of forced labour regarding the planned use of national service labour in delivering the project.

The Government also confirmed that the UK's involvement operational contracting period of the EUTF comes to an end on 31 December 2020. The UK made its final payments before 31 July 2020. The Government confirmed that "there will not be any further [UK] financial contributions to the EUTF programme."

Eritrea Focus is pleased to see that the UK will no longer be contributing to the use of forced labour through this project.

However, our client will continue to actively monitor the UK Government's actions in 2021, and will hold the Government to account if, and when, it makes the decision to provide funding and/or support to the Eritrean government in its use of forced labour.

Toufique Hossain and Isabella Kirwan, two of the lawyers from Duncan Lewis representing Eritrea Focus, say, *"The UK Government admitted there were significant concerns of human rights abuses when it entered into this project. Many of our clients have been forced to work on construction sites and development projects in Eritrea – this is something we see very often. It has become one of the most common ways for the Eritrean Government to use their conscripts. The Eritrean Government leadership was benefitting from the Aid, whilst making free use of forced labour."*

They continue, *“this is a positive outcome. We hope that the Government can learn from this and take precaution when allocating UK taxpayers’ funds and support to a project like this which was directly making use of forced labour.*



Eritrea Focus is proud that our challenge to the UK Government's support for the Road Rehabilitation Project in Eritrea has contributed to its ending. The funding was unethical and, in our view, unlawful since the Project was almost exclusively manned by National Service conscripts or slaves.

Eritrea Focus's stand is based on our determination to work for the improvement in the conditions of the Eritrean people. If the country was not trapped in one of the worst dictatorships, we would do all in our power to encourage inward investment and engagement with Eritrea. However, we know from bitter experience that development only encourages and strengthens President Isaias Afwerki's ability to deprive the Eritrean people of their inalienable rights.

Eritrea Focus is based in the UK where the rule of law is one of the best, if not the best, in the world. The law is on our side and we have no doubt we will triumph in our endeavour to stop the UK Government from directly or indirectly funding the current Eritrean Government in the future.

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