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During questions on Tuesday 16 June you asked a question about reports that national service conscripts are being used as forced labour in foreign-owned mines in Eritrea. I am sorry that I was unable to respond to you at that time and promised to write to you.

We are aware that the report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea made reference to national service conscripts being used within foreign-operated companies (paragraph 78) in Eritrea. National service is compulsory in Eritrea and many conscripts serve indefinitely.

The national service system was one of the reasons the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) listed Eritrea as a "Country of Concern" in its annual Human Rights Report 2014. The report set out that civilian national service has often included work for government and state-owned companies on low salaries, exposing the government of Eritrea to the allegation of using forced labour. We have been clear to the government that it must amend or abolish its national service system. Eritrean government representatives have assured UK officials that the term of service will be strictly limited to 18 months for all new recruits starting from March 2015.

We will continue to monitor the situation closely. The Commission of Inquiry's report is currently under discussion at the UN Human Rights Council. We expect that the Council will agree to extend the Commission's mandate so that it can investigate these allegations further.

You may be interested to note that earlier this month FCO officials held a meeting with representatives of Nevsun Mining, operators of the main mine in Eritrea. This followed the publication of the company's independent Human Rights Impact Assessment Report: <http://www.nevsun.com/responsibility/human-rights/>. During the meeting, Nevsun set out the strict procedures in place to prevent national service conscripts working at the Bisha mine, which are detailed in page 20 of the above report. This involves interviewing the potential applicant and confirming with the relevant government department the authenticity of any potential employees' national

service discharge papers. Nevsun have also confirmed that their mining contract prohibits the employment of national service conscripts. We hope that this will serve as a model for other mining operators in Eritrea.

I hope you find this letter helpful. I am also sending a copy to all those Peers who spoke to the question and will place a copy in the Library of the House.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lord Patrick". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P".

THE EARL OF COURTOWN

Lord Collins of Highbury
House of Lords