

## UN Information Service Director Sandra Macharia's visit to Eritrea



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*Sandra Macharia, Director of UN Information Services in Nairobi, visited Eritrea this week to explore opportunities for collaboration and strengthen communication efforts. In an exclusive interview, she shared insights into her visit and the UN's commitment to supporting Eritrea's development. Here are some highlights from our time spent with Sandra Macharia.*

- *What are the main priorities of your visit to Eritrea, and how do they fit into the broader regional communication objectives of the UN information services?*

Thank you for having me for this interview. As the director of the UN information service, we are part of the UN Department of Global Communications focused on solutions-oriented storytelling, which concentrates on how we tell stories that demonstrate the effect on people's lives. As we approach the halfway point of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, we have the opportunity to assess how the UN team is supporting the Eritrean people, explore ways to improve communication, highlight additional stories about solutions and their impact on people's lives, and utilize our platforms to disseminate these stories more widely. At the same time, I am here to collaborate with the UN country team in Eritrea,

with the aim of promoting a balanced narrative that is grounded in fact and effectively highlights the impact of the United Nations.

- *How did your meeting with the Eritrean officials go? Were any noteworthy agreements or areas identified for future collaboration in communication efforts?*

We had the opportunity to meet with several Eritrean officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance and National Development, Minister of Information, the Commissioner of Sports and Culture, and several others. In addition, we had the chance to interact with representatives from the Asmara Museum and the Northern Red Sea Region Museum in Massawa, as well as some of the archaeologists and paleontologists working there. And the work they're doing there is fantastic. We got to visit some of the sites they are working on and see objective first-hand evidence of what they are working on and the rich cultural heritage that Eritrea has, which has been a custodian for the Eritrean people. I was accompanied by one of our regional directors from UNESCO, who is also responsible for overseeing some of the cultural heritage projects. Together, along with the country team, we brainstormed ways to communicate the rich cultural heritage of this place, highlighted the distinctive historical legacy and the archaeologists' efforts, and explored ways to collaborate in bolstering Eritrea's cultural priorities and crafting captivating narratives. Also, we'd have to reflect within the UN country team on the next steps and support Eritrean priorities in that area of work.



- *In what ways are the UN information services looking to support Eritrea's communication landscape and enhance the flow of accurate*

***and reliable information? Are there any specific plans or projects in the pipeline? S***

So, as I said, my role here was on the invitation of the UN country team because they're the ones who are working in service and now here on the ground working in Eritrea, supporting the government, supporting the communities, and the idea then is how do we tell a more balanced story, what are the channels and news, what are the stories that you can serve, and really, at the end of the day, what is the impact on people's lives and how people's lives are improving because of the investments that the government with the support of the UN has made. As we consider the global network within the UN, we're examining stories related to topics such as health and food security, with the aim of disseminating these inspiring tales to other countries. As we approach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the COVID pandemic has caused a setback or regression in our progress towards these goals. So there's pressure on everyone, whether you are a community worker, private sector actor, or young person, at whatever level you are. Can you help us accelerate progress toward our sustainable development goals? Since our goal is to ensure that no one is left behind, we also aim to ensure that people live with dignity in a sustainable manner.

- ***How does your office intend to contribute to shaping and promoting a balanced image of Eritrea on regional and global platforms?***

As I mentioned earlier, we frequently discuss solution-oriented stories, which necessitates our use of the most effective methods to demonstrate that this is a story we can firmly support, that we have thoroughly fact-checked, and that we are confident in its authenticity. However, this does not necessarily imply that the story is always positive or newsworthy. We aim to illustrate the complexity of issues related to health, food security, and related fields, while also highlighting the existence of progress, innovations, and activities that can find a middle ground in these areas. The balanced narratives incorporate evidence based content and take into account effective communication strategies to reach the audience. Therefore, it is crucial to examine various platforms and explore available options, as we aim to prevent individuals from claiming they are unaware of their potential

contributions to our community. We are making some progress on this fundamental goal, which is very much about the dignity of human beings.

- ***Communication is vital for national development. What practical steps or resources can your team offer to help Eritrea improve its information-sharing infrastructure and outreach strategies?***

This is a vital question. It is indeed true that communication plays a fundamental role in national development. This is due to the fact that development is primarily focused on individuals, who must understand how to access services and provide feedback on specific issues. We must be aware of the available resources, and it's beneficial for individuals to recognize the advancements made, as it instils in them a sense of optimism about the potential for improvement and the active role they can play as change agents. Communication is really at the core of everything. Suppose you're doing something and nobody knows about it or can't hear. In that scenario, the effectiveness may not be as high as it would be if you prioritized communications from the start of the programming process. At the Department of Global Communications, where my office is located, our focus is on uncovering untold stories, not forgotten ones, but unique perspectives that we can present. When I reflect on my travels to Massawa and Adulis, for example, and witness the sight of the oldest mosque in Africa, I find it to be a truly remarkable piece of history that holds immense significance not only for Eritrea but also for millions of people worldwide. Therefore, these intriguing tales remain largely untold. How can we ensure that communication plays a central role in these stories, not only to inform people about them but also to potentially spark more awareness and activities around the preservation of these precious cultural artifacts and heritage?

- ***During your visit, you engage with various local partners. Please share any impactful experiences or insights that may influence future cooperation in communication.***

The visit to the museum has been quite impactful. We witnessed a wealth of history, ranging from prehistoric to the representation of cultural artifacts from various nationalities in Eritrea. Even though I was only in Eritrea for a few days, the opportunity to witness and experience this rich history was a brief yet

extremely valuable. Witnessing a modern Eritrea and embarking on a journey during a significantly suppressed time, as well as visiting archaeological sites and engaging in conversations with archaeologists and paleontologists, who are dedicated to preserving this world-renowned culture, has been profoundly moving. This experience is not limited to the present, but also extends to Eritrea's past. This experience has been inspiring and has instilled hope in me. If we can preserve this and remember where we've come from, it's essential to preserve it for future generations, allowing them to witness Eritrea's and the continent's story throughout time. That is just amazing.

- ***You just mentioned your visit to Massawa and Adulis. Please tell me more about it and provide any final remarks you may have.***

It was amazing to go and see Adulis. Understanding the history of the area was fascinating. The length of the coastline suggests that people were trading here, coming from all over the world to meet and exchange. Observing remnants of ancient coins and pottery, the notion of safeguarding and managing this site in a manner that engages the local community, who we understand actively participates in archaeological endeavors, was truly remarkable. The ability to see today the places where our forefathers and foremothers worked and traded was an astounding idea from a communications perspective, and it was truly lovely to me. It proves we have a purpose on Earth and that we existed before. The visit to Massawa and Adulis was terrific. Working at the UN is about making a tangible difference in people's lives. It revolves around the pressing nature of sustainable development goals, which prioritize the well-being of people. Additionally, it involves narrating the experiences of marginalized and typically overlooked individuals. So, it is interesting to find these stories showcasing their development path and realizing their aspirations. I always say we're all the same and want the best life for our children and their children. Therefore, we should do whatever we can today to further this sustainable development goal. It's not just a term or a high concept idea; it is about positively impacting people's lives.

- ***Thank you!***