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country summary

Eritrea

The government of President Isayas Afeworki continues to maintain its totalitarian grip on the country. Arbitrary arrests and detention without trial are common. Prisoners are routinely tortured and kept for years in underground cells in isolation or crammed into shipping containers. Mass arrests and harassment of members of minority religious denominations continue. The government imposes such prolonged and repeated compulsory military service that thousands of young men have fled the country.

The constitution approved by referendum in 1997 remains unimplemented. No national election has ever been held and an interim parliament has not met since 2002. No political groups are permitted aside from the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), of which Afeworki is executive secretary. The last session of the PFDJ party congress occurred in 1997. No media or civil society organizations exist outside those controlled by the PFDJ. Private enterprise has been severely curtailed, largely replaced by PFDJ-owned businesses.

Afeworki justifies his repressive rule by claiming that the country must remain on a war footing until a boundary dispute with Ethiopia is resolved. Ethiopia refuses to accept the 2002 demarcation decision by a Boundary Commission established under the 2000 cease-fire agreement ending the bloody two-year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Suppression of Free Expression

Dissent is ruthlessly suppressed including within the PFDJ. Eleven PFDJ leaders arrested in September 2001 for questioning the president's leadership remain detained without charge or trial. The independent press remains closed—in 2001 all editors and publishers except those who managed to flee—were detained. In 2007, Reporters without Borders ranked Eritrea last of 169 countries on its Press Freedom

Index. The government even cannibalizes its own media. In November 2006 it arrested nine state media employees after others fled the country. They were beaten while under arrest to obtain information about their email accounts and to discover possible escape plans. One of those arrested, Fetiha Khaled, is reported to have been forced to join the army. The others were released but were placed under surveillance and forbidden to leave Asmara. In July 2007, one of those released, Paulos Kidane, fell ill while trying to escape to Sudan and later died or was killed by security forces.

Government permits are required for gatherings of more than three to five persons. No domestic human rights organizations are allowed to exist; foreign human rights organizations are denied entry. All labor unions are PFDJ affiliates. In 2007, the regime released three PFDJ union leaders who had been arrested two years earlier after advocating for improved working conditions.

Prison Conditions and Torture

Incarceration of suspected political opponents without trial or rudimentary legal safeguards is routine. The political leaders and journalists arrested in 2001 remain in solitary confinement in a secret detention facility; nine of the 31 prisoners are reported to have died. Many other prisoners are packed into unventilated cargo containers under extreme temperatures or are held in underground cells. Torture is common, as are indefinite solitary confinement, starvation rations, lack of sanitation, and hard labor. Prisoners rarely receive medical care, even when severely injured or deathly ill. Death in captivity is common.

Prisoners are warned not to speak about their imprisonment after release, but some details have emerged. In 2006 one escapee, a former journalist, told a conference in Uganda that he had been beaten and kicked, had his feet tied to his hands behind his back, was later manacled, threatened with death, held in solitary confinement in a narrow underground dungeon, and prohibited from sending or receiving mail. He was released after almost two years, but then was conscripted into the army, where he was closely monitored, before managing to escape.

Military Conscription and Arrests

Men between ages 18 and 50, and women between 18 and 27, must serve 18 months of military service. However, as in previous years, men were rounded up in massive sweeps and house-to-house searches (*giffas*) for repeated periods of service far exceeding 18 months. As one young Eritrean noted in 2007, “there is no end to this service.” Conscripts are used in labor battalions on public works and on projects benefiting military commanders personally. Pay is nominal and working conditions often harsh. Over a dozen conscripts were reported to have died in the summer of 2007 at the Wia military training camp near the Red Sea coast from intense heat, malnutrition, and lack of medical care. Conscientious objection is not recognized.

Refugee agencies report that approximately 120 young men fleeing conscription arrived in Sudan each week in 2006 and 2007 and that another 400 to 500 reach Ethiopia monthly, even though border guards reportedly have orders to “shoot-to-kill.”

Since 2005, families of conscription evaders are fined at least 50,000 nakfa (US \$3300), a massive sum in a country where yearly per capita income is less than \$1000. Since late 2006, some family members have reportedly been conscripted to substitute for missing relatives.

Religious Persecution

Only Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Orthodox Christian churches and traditional Islam are permitted to worship in Eritrea. Although four other denominations applied for registration in 2002, none were registered as of late 2007. Members of unregistered churches, especially Protestant sects, are frequently persecuted. Some 2,000 members of unregistered churches are incarcerated at any one time in shipping containers, underground cells, and military outposts. Many are beaten and otherwise abused to compel them to renounce their faiths. Some are arrested and released after a month or two but others are held indefinitely.

Even “recognized” religious groups have not been spared. In 2006, the government engineered the removal of the 79-year-old patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox church and placed him under house arrest after he refused to interfere with a renewal movement within the church. In May 2007 he was evicted from his home after a replacement patriarch was “unanimously” confirmed by church authorities; his whereabouts are currently unknown. Members of the renewal movement have been arrested and abused in the same fashion as members of non-recognized churches.

The government has also interfered with the Catholic Church. In late 2006, the government demanded that Roman Catholic Church schools, health clinics, and other social service facilities be turned over to the Ministry of Social Welfare. In November 2007, it expelled 13 Catholic missionaries by refusing to extend their residency permits.

Relations with Ethiopia

Tensions with Ethiopia remain high. A September 2007 Border Commission meeting with the two countries to obtain agreement to demarcate the border ended in failure. Ethiopia subsequently announced it might terminate the armistice agreement altogether. In 2002, the commission had designated the border and directed that it be demarcated accordingly. Although Eritrea accepts the commission decision in full, Ethiopia refuses to permit demarcation of portions of the border that would award the village of Badme, the flashpoint of the war, to Eritrea.

An international peacekeeping force, the UN Mission in Eritrea-Ethiopia (UNMEE), maintains 1,700 troops and observers in a 25-kilometer-wide armistice buffer between the two countries. Since 2005 Eritrea has infiltrated thousands of troops into the buffer zone, and has prevented UNMEE from patrolling large parts of it and from engaging in aerial observation, all in violation of the armistice agreement. Eritrea ignores repeated Security Council resolutions demanding withdrawal of the troops and cooperation with UNMEE. As a result, heavily armed troops of both countries are within meters of each other. In March 2007, the government expelled the program manager of the UNMEE Mine Action Coordination Center, one of a series of expulsions of UNMEE personnel over the years.

Since 2006, Eritrea and Ethiopia have been engaged in a proxy war in neighboring Somalia. Eritrea allegedly provides logistical and military support to insurgent groups fighting with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) against Ethiopian forces and the Somali transitional government. In 2007 it provided refuge to ICU leaders. A United Nations team monitoring the arms embargo on Somalia in July 2007 accused Eritrea of providing “huge quantities of arms,” in late 2006 to the ICU. In April 2007 Eritrea suspended its membership in the regional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) because of the organization’s support for Ethiopian intervention in Somalia.

Key International Actors

Relations with the United States, already strained, worsened in 2007. President Afeworki harshly criticized the United States for failing to pressure Ethiopia to comply with the boundary commission decision. In August 2007, the US threatened to place Eritrea on its short list of “state sponsors of terrorism” because of its alleged military support to the ICU and for sheltering ICU leaders whom the US labels terrorists. The US also ordered Eritrea to close its consulate in the US—in California—in response to interference with operations of the American embassy in Asmara.

Since the government ordered the USAID office to shut down in 2005, the US has provided no development assistance to Eritrea. For economic assistance, Eritrea now relies on China, Arab states, and the European Union, and remittances from the Eritrean diaspora. In 2007, China partially cancelled Eritrea’s existing debt. It also agreed to provide assistance for construction of a college in Adi-Keyih. China’s Export-Import bank agreed in 2007 to lend the government US\$60 million to purchase a large minority interest in a gold mine project by a Canadian mining company at Bisha in western Eritrea. Still, currency flows remain decidedly in China’s favor. In 2006, the last full year for which figures are available, China exported almost \$38 million worth of goods to Eritrea and imported only \$720,000-worth.

The European Union is in the final year of a US\$119 million five-year development grant. In September, the EU expressed concern about “severe violations of basic human rights” by the government.

In July 2007, two British Council employees, were arrested, one of whom was released shortly thereafter. A visiting British diplomat was expelled for allegedly trying to install communications equipment without authorization at the council.