

Eritrea (93)

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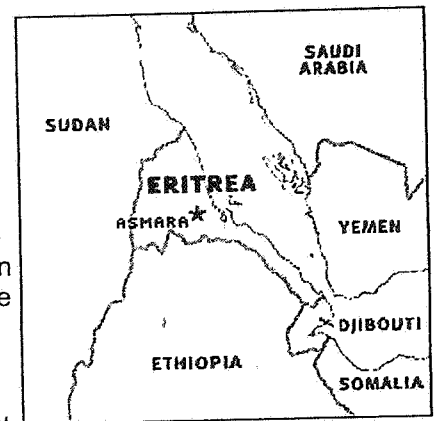
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HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS

Despite a Pyrrhic victory in the 1997-2000 border war with Ethiopia, Eritrea remained a country under siege—from its own government. In April 2002, a boundary commission established under the cease-fire agreement between the two countries gave a ruling favorable to Eritrea. Although the exact boundary between the two countries was still to be demarcated, many of the most intensively disputed areas would fall on the Eritrean side of the border. The government continued to use the war as an excuse for not implementing a constitution ratified in a 1997 referendum and for not holding elections. Nine years after Eritrea obtained its independence, no institutions existed to restrain government abuses, and presidential rule by decree continued unfettered. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) was the sole political party allowed to operate.



Ignoring penal code requirements, the government continued to detain without charge eleven members of the so-called Group of 15 (G-15), prominent critics in the PFDJ central council arrested in September 2001 after publishing an open letter to President Isayas Afewerki requesting democratic reforms. In response to criticism by the European Parliament, the government asserted that the eleven had participated in a "conspiracy to oust the president illegally," had attempted to negotiate independently with the Ethiopian government during the war, and had engaged in "sedition" by infiltrating government offices and the military through the creation of "clandestine cells."

In April eleven editors and reporters arrested in a September 2001 clampdown on the independent media, and since held at a police station in the capital, Asmara, began a hunger strike to demand their release. After three days, the government moved them to secret locations and cut off all contact by the detainees with the outside world (they had previously been allowed family visits). One of the journalists, Dawit Isaac, was briefly hospitalized, reportedly as a result of torture while in police custody. None of the journalists were charged with a crime as of October 2002. Three other journalists, one of whom had been arrested in July 2000, remained unaccounted for.

All private newspapers remained closed. The government controlled all sources of information within the country. It operated the sole radio and television stations and news agency and published all remaining newspapers and magazines. There were unconfirmed reports that the government used its control over the only local internet server to read e-mail traffic to and from Eritrea.

The government arrested dozens of others it deemed sympathetic to its critics, including a former consul general, journalists working for the government press, businessmen, the solicitor-general, local government administrators, and members of the families of people previously arrested. Also in detention were two local employees of the United States embassy, who had been arrested in September 2001, reportedly for trying to arrange political asylum for G-15 members. Their whereabouts, at an Asmara police station, were not kept secret; but they, too, were not charged or allowed visitors.

In January 2002, the government reconvened an interim "National Assembly" that had not met since September

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2000. The assembly consisted of seventy-five PFDJ central committee members and seventy-five party members selected by the leadership in 1993. The assembly approved the government's arrests and press closings. It accused those arrested of having committed "grave crimes." A resolution claimed that the closed newspapers had been "foreign-funded" and had "engaged in defamation and rumor-mongering."

The assembly approved an election law designed to preserve the PFDJ's monopoly on power. Under the law, no political party other than the PFDJ would be allowed to operate. The assembly resolution criticized previous attempts to permit political pluralism. The election law disenfranchised anyone who commits treason or "crimes against the nation." It permitted members of the armed forces to be candidates for office. Although President Isayas appointed a five-person electoral commission at the end of January 2002, no elections had been scheduled as of October.

As government repression intensified, several government officials resigned; they included the ambassador to Sudan and the chargé d'affaires in Djibouti, both of whom left their posts in September. In mid-2002, the government extended mandatory national service obligations for another two years, providing cheap labor for government projects. Widespread enforcement round-ups were carried out around the country, and as a result hundreds of Eritreans fled to neighboring countries and beyond. In October, Malta deported over two hundred recent refugees. They were arrested upon arrival in Asmara, taken to a military camp, and held incommunicado. Eritreans caught attempting to flee the country were reportedly beaten and tortured.

One of the more notable escapes was that by University of Asmara student union president Semere Kesete. He had been arrested in July 2001 after protesting the university's management of a forced labor national service program for university students. Semere had been imprisoned in an Asmara police station but was never charged with a crime. In July 2002 he managed to escape to Ethiopia with the assistance of one of his guards.

In 2002, the government ordered all houses of worship other than those affiliated with the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Christian faiths and Moslem mosques to close. The ban affected Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostal adherents from practicing their religions. Jehovah's Witnesses were especially harshly treated because of their religious practices and beliefs. Four Jehovah's Witnesses were still imprisoned after more than five years without charge or trial for refusing to participate in the national service program, even though the maximum penalty for refusal to serve is three years. Jehovah's Witnesses were denied national identity cards, making them ineligible for government employment and government permits, such as passports and driver's licenses.

In a positive development, Eritrea acceded to the Mine Ban Treaty on August 27, 2001. Mine survey, clearance and mine risk education activities increased greatly. The United Nations (U.N.) Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) Mine Action Coordination Center reported that from November 2000 through December 2001 over 10 million square meters of land and 989 kilometers of roads were cleared.

DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

Only one human rights organization has been allowed to exist in Eritrea, Citizens for Peace. It limited its advocacy to the rights of war victims. It was not reported as active in 2002.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The European Union remained critical of Eritrea, but the United States muted its criticism in light of Eritrea's potential importance as a military ally in the region. Speaking at Eritrea's eleventh independence anniversary celebration, President Isayas repudiated widespread international criticism: "To those few who intervene in our internal political matters and who pretend to be our mentors of democracy, . . . we have this simple message. We shall not choose slavery to get their assistance."

United Nations

The U.N. expected to provide U.S.\$120 million in assistance in 2002, primarily in food aid. Forty-two hundred peacekeeping troops assigned to UNMEE patrolled a twenty-five kilometer-wide buffer zone between Eritrea and Ethiopia. (See also Ethiopia.) The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) concluded that by the end of 2002 Eritreans in Sudan would no longer automatically be entitled to refugee status but could apply individually if they feared persecution on return to Eritrea. UNHCR reported that it had voluntarily repatriated fifty thousand Eritreans from Sudan between May 2001 and mid-October 2002. Even so, well over one hundred thousand Eritreans remained in refugee camps in Sudan as of October 2002.

African Commission

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights wrote to President Isayas asking for the release of political prisoners. The letter stated that incommunicado detentions without trial and violated the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

European Union

The E.U. and its member states frequently voiced complaints about the government's human rights record; the European Commission limited its financial assistance largely to humanitarian aid. A total of €23.775 million (U.S.\$23.47 million) was newly allocated to projects including refugee support and resettlement assistance; food aid and food security; demining and border demarcation; and emergency assistance. In September 2002, the commission committed €27 million (\$26.49 million) to support military demobilization, a program the Eritrean government frequently proclaimed in 2001 and 2002 but rarely implemented. Denmark, which provided about 40 percent of the Ministry of Agriculture budget, announced that it would end financial assistance to Eritrea by 2005 because it did not "want to maintain dictators in power." In September Eritrea and Italy named new ambassadors, healing the diplomatic rift created by Eritrea's 2001 expulsion of the Italian ambassador—who was also the European Union's representative—after he delivered a demarche expressing concern for about deteriorating human rights conditions. In response, Italy had cut off further assistance and had expelled the Eritrean ambassador.

United States

Although U.S. aid to Eritrea remained small, U.S. Defense Department officials saw Eritrea as a strategic ally. The commander of the U.S. central command visited Asmara in March and was reported to have expressed interest in creation of a naval bombardment and gunnery range along Eritrea's coast with the southern Red Sea. The Defense Department's African affairs director told the Voice of America that a "military-to-military" relationship with Eritrea would provide "a lot of benefits" but that the American government had not yet decided to proceed. One stumbling block to a closer relationship was the continued incarceration of the two U.S. embassy employees.

In mid-October 2002, the State Department issued a press statement demanding release of the two employees or a fair and open trial for them. Referring to the detention of government critics and journalists, the shut-down of the private press, and restrictions on religious affiliation, the statement also called on the Eritrean government to "return to the basic values of democracy and human rights, as it has repeatedly committed itself to do." Eritrea labeled the statement "unacceptable" and accused the CIA of unlawfully having attempted "to change the government" during the war with Ethiopia by conspiring with "some senior [Eritrean government] officials," presumably those arrested in 2001.

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