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2024 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Eritrea

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Eritrea during the year. The government abused a wide range of human rights.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious abuses in a conflict; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom; restrictions of religious freedom; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; prohibiting independent trade unions and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1.

Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no credible reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings within the country during the year.

In past years, there were reports of deaths of detainees at the hands of prison staff, although there were no specific reports of such deaths during the year. There was no available information to determine whether the government acted against persons responsible for detainee deaths.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses

Numerous reports of serious abuses by government forces along the border in Ethiopia persisted throughout the year despite a 2022 agreement that ended active hostilities. For further details, please refer to the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2024* for Ethiopia.

Section 2.

Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

Although the law provided for freedom of speech, including for members of the press and other media, the government severely restricted this right.

The law banned private broadcast media and foreign ownership of media. The government controlled all domestic media, including one newspaper published in four languages, three radio stations, and two television stations.

The law required journalists to be licensed. The law restricted printing and publication of materials by anyone lacking a permit, and the printing or dissemination of prohibited foreign publications was punishable under the law.

The government severely restricted the ability of individuals to criticize the government in public or in private through intimidation by national security forces.

According to the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) End Blasphemy Laws, the law provided for a prison term of up to one year for “disparaging” or “profaning” religious feelings. During the year, there were no reports of blasphemy, libel, and defamation laws being enforced.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

The NGO Committee to Protect Journalists reported 16 journalists remained in detention and incommunicado with no information on their location or health since 2001. In 2023, the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention published an opinion on the detention of these journalists and referred the case to the Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances; the special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; and the special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association for appropriate action. At year’s end, there were no reports of resulting action.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

State influence over traditional media was absolute. The law required submission of documents, including books, to the government for approval prior to publication. No printing house would print materials without proof of that approval. Most independent journalists were in detention or lived abroad, which limited domestic media criticism of the government. Authorities required journalists to obtain government permission to take photographs. Journalists practiced self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal. Internet penetration was so low and unreliable that independent online media did not exist in the country.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of certain workers to form and join unions, bargain collectively, and conduct strikes. Labor laws did not fully cover or directly excluded large populations such as civil servants, domestic workers, police, national service conscripts, and those in the informal sector. The

law prohibited antiunion discrimination but provided no remedies in case of antiunion discrimination at recruitment or during employment. The law did not require reinstatement of union workers other than leaders who had been dismissed for union membership or activities. The law allowed for the establishment of unions in private-sector workplaces with at least 20 employees and required a minimum of 15 members to form a union but prohibited all nongovernmental gatherings of more than seven persons. The law permitted workers from multiple smaller worksites to band together to create a “general association,” if there were at least 20 members. The law required prior authorization from the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare to establish a union, but it deemed registration granted if the ministry did not respond within one month. Workers reported the government prevented new independent unions from being formed.

The government did not respect or effectively enforce the law. The Labor Relations Board decided penalties and legal protections against antiunion interference on a case-by-case basis. Penalties were not necessarily commensurate with those for denials of civil rights. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

The government did not respect freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. No independent unions existed. For the few formal workers in the private sector, the only option for collective representation was the one umbrella trade union, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW). The confederation was directly linked to the ruling party and took no action against party-owned enterprises. The government kept all unions under close scrutiny, including the government-linked NCEW. In general, NGOs were not permitted to play a role in promoting the rights of workers in the country.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The national minimum wage for employees of party-owned enterprises and government employees was below the poverty line. There was no national minimum wage for private-sector workers. The law provided for a standard workweek of 48 hours and no more than two hours per day of overtime, but it included exceptions for when an employee was absent or when there was “urgent work.” The law entitled workers, except for those employed in national service, to overtime pay.

Occupational Safety and Health

No published occupational safety and health (OSH) standards existed. Workers had the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, although workers in the national service generally could not remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without a medical exemption. Each government enterprise had a separate agreement with the local union defining the work standards, including OSH regulations, for that enterprise. There were 168 government enterprises in the country, accounting for most large-scale employers.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare was responsible for enforcement of minimum wage, hour, and OSH laws. The government did not effectively enforce the law or the negotiated

standards. The UN Human Rights Council reported the government perpetrated abusive working conditions in national service positions. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, and there was no information available that penalties were applied against violators. The ministry employed 28 inspectors, which was insufficient to enforce compliance. The NCEW reported every enterprise had an inspection at least once per year, which was then reviewed by the enterprise, the union, and the ministry. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and demand changes, but they were not able to initiate sanctions. The government did not report on violations of minimum wage, hour, or OSH laws.

Approximately 80 percent of the population worked in the informal sector. The government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were reports from local sources and international advocacy organizations of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. An unknown number of persons disappeared during the year and were believed to be in government detention or to have died while in detention. The disappeared included persons presumably detained for political and religious beliefs; locally employed staff of foreign embassies; foreign or dual nationals; and individuals suspected of evading national service and militia duties. Authorities disappeared others for unknown offenses. The government did not make efforts to prevent disappearances or to investigate or punish those responsible.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The unimplemented constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not observe these provisions.

On July 1, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea informed the UN Human Rights Council that “patterns of gross human rights violations, including the widespread use of arbitrary and incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance persist unabated.” Authorities generally detained suspects for longer periods without bringing them before a judge, charging them with a crime, or informing them of the reason for their detention. Authorities sometimes arbitrarily changed charges during detention. Incommunicado detention was widespread.

Arbitrary arrests occurred frequently. Security force personnel detained individuals for reasons that included suspicion of intent to evade national and militia service, criticizing the government, attempting to leave the country without an exit visa or passport, and for unspecified national security threats. Authorities also arrested members of unregistered Christian groups that were not Orthodox, Eastern Catholic, or Evangelical Lutheran. Authorities sometimes arrested persons whose papers were not in order and detained them until they were able to provide evidence of their active national service or militia status, or proof of their demobilization from national service. The government contacted places of employment to identify those unwilling to participate in the militia.

The government held an unknown number of detainees without charge or trial, including politicians, journalists, members of registered and unregistered religious groups, and persons suspected of not completing national service or evading militia duty. In 2022, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch estimated there were hundreds of prisoners of conscience including journalists, former politicians, and practitioners of unauthorized religions. The local partner of international NGO Release International estimated more than 1,000 Christian prisoners remained in indefinite detention without trial.

Authorities brought few, if any, persons detained on alleged national security grounds to trial. Some persons arrested in previous years for refusing to bear arms on grounds of conscience and for participating in unregistered religious groups remained in detention. Several prisoners were reportedly held for more than 20 years without a trial.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials employed them. Reports of torture continued, especially against political and religious prisoners.

Lack of transparency and access to information made it impossible to determine the numbers or circumstances of deaths due to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Impunity was a serious problem among security forces. The government did not release any information to indicate it conducted investigations of alleged abuses, making it difficult to assess the extent of the problem among the different branches of the security services.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, unless the woman was pregnant or had already had a child, in which case the minimum was 16. The government enforced the law. The minister of justice or someone appointed by the minister could also waive the age requirement. Officials spoke on the dangers of early marriage and collaborated with UN agencies to educate the public regarding these dangers; many neighborhood committees actively discouraged the practice.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government refused to cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern, but worked with other humanitarian agencies to address the needs of these populations.

Provision of First Asylum

The law did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government had no established system for providing protection to refugees. The government did not recognize Ethiopians, Sudanese, or South Sudanese as refugees, instead considering them economic migrants, including newly displaced Sudanese. The government, however, allowed these refugees to enter and remain in the country or transit to a third country.

Resettlement

Although the government did not grant persons of Ethiopian or Sudanese origin asylum or refugee status, authorities permitted them to remain in the country and to live among the local population instead of in a refugee camp. Those living among the population were required to provide a guarantor and pay a fee to extend their residency or face possible detention.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

One Jewish person remained in the country, and he maintained the only synagogue without reported government interference. There were no known reports of antisemitic incidents.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

Amnesty International, opposition groups abroad, and other credible groups accused the government of engaging in transnational repression, including harassment of activists and coercing diaspora members to participate in and contribute to Eritrean embassy events and activities.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence

According to reports, the government used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries for politically motivated reprisal.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

Government officials reportedly used social media to direct harassment and threats against antigovernment members of the diaspora.