

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	114
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Amnesty International Report 2010 - Eritrea
Udgivet:	28. maj 2010
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. juni 2010

Title	Amnesty International Report 2010 - Eritrea
Publisher	Amnesty International
Country	Eritrea
Publication Date	28 May 2010
Cite as	Amnesty International, <i>Amnesty International Report 2010 - Eritrea</i> , 28 May 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c03a82d23.html [accessed 16 June 2010]



Amnesty International Report 2010 - Eritrea

STATE OF ERITREA

Head of state and government: Isaias Afewerki

Death penalty: abolitionist in practice

Population: 5.1 million

Life expectancy: 59.2 years

Under-5 mortality (m/f): 78/71 per 1,000

Adult literacy: 64.2 per cent

Freedom of expression was severely restricted and legitimate criticism of the government suppressed. Independent journalism, political opposition, unregistered religious groups and civil society were highly restricted. Perceived critics of the government remained in detention. Deserters from the armed forces, those evading mandatory military conscription, and their families, were harassed, imprisoned and subjected to ill-treatment. Family members of detainees reported that international communication was monitored by the government and could lead to reprisals.

Background

Despite government claims of self-sufficiency, the local population remained heavily dependent on international food aid. Donor countries and inter-governmental institutions contributed millions of dollars in aid, including the European Union which gave 122 million euros in 2009. Food shortages were exacerbated by drought and desertification in certain areas. The government became increasingly reliant on a 2 per cent tax levied on most members of the Eritrean diaspora.

Large numbers of mainly young Eritreans fled to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan to avoid conscription into national service.

UN Security Council (UNSC) members, the African Union and the USA accused Eritrea of supporting Somali armed opposition groups. In December, the UNSC passed Resolution 1907 imposing sanctions on Eritrea, including an arms embargo, and an assets freeze and travel ban on individuals and organizations to be determined. Eritrea maintained a troop presence in the disputed Ras Doumeira area and Doumeira Island of Djibouti, despite a

UNSC resolution calling for Eritrean withdrawal.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission ruling of October 2008 was not enforced. However, Eritrea stated that it would respect a decision by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission which required the government to pay Ethiopia US\$12.6 million in damages over the border war of 1998 to 2000.

Freedom of religion

Members of banned religious groups remained at risk of harassment, arrest and incommunicado detention. Only four religious institutions are officially recognized in Eritrea since 2002, namely the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Lutheran Church and Islam.

- Some 3,000 Christians from non-state sanctioned religions remained in detention.
- The home of Pastor Tewelde Hailom, an elder of the Full Gospel Church, was raided by Eritrean security personnel on 15 October. Pastor Hailom was not placed in detention because of ill health but three others who were with him were detained. Two days later, another seven members of his congregation were also detained.

At least 22 Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly arrested, bringing the number of those detained due to conscientious objection and religious activities to at least 61.

Prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners

The government reacted with hostility to any form of criticism and placed severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Political prisoners imprisoned since the government clampdown of 2001 remained in incommunicado detention. In most cases, their whereabouts and health status remained unknown.

Prisoners of conscience included draft evaders and military deserters. Some prisoners of conscience were also failed asylum-seekers forcibly returned to Eritrea.

In early 2009 there were unconfirmed reports that nine out of 11 former government officials known as the G-15 had died in detention since 2002. The group had called for government reform in 2001.

Freedom of expression – journalists

The government tightly controlled all media and reacted with hostility to any perceived criticism in state media. All independent journalism has been effectively banned since 2001.

- Ten journalists who protested against the closure of the media in 2001 remained in incommunicado detention. Four may have died in detention since 2002.
- On 22 February, at least 50 employees of Radio Bana were arrested by Eritrean security forces. Although some were released, an unknown number remained in detention. They were not charged with any offence.
- In January, prisoner of conscience Dawit Isaak was reportedly transferred to an Air Force hospital in Asmara. He was believed to be seriously ill, although the extent and cause of his illness remained unclear. A journalist with the newspaper *Setit*, he was imprisoned in 2001 following the government clampdown. He was released from custody on 19 November 2005, then re-arrested two days later on

his way to hospital.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Hundreds of people reportedly fled the country each month to Sudan and Ethiopia, including those avoiding military conscription.

The UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, issued new guidelines in April, calling for the "full assessment" of all Eritrean asylum claims, owing to the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. It recommended that states refrain from all forced returns of rejected asylum-seekers to Eritrea based on an assessment of the human rights situation and treatment of past returnees. Despite this, both Egypt and Sweden forcibly returned Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers.

- In January, Egypt forcibly returned at least 64 Eritreans trying to cross into Israel.

At least eight people were forcibly returned to Eritrea from Sweden, contrary to UNHCR guidelines (see Sweden entry).

According to accounts by escaped detainees, Eritrean security officials were particularly interested in what failed asylum-seekers had said about Eritrea during their asylum application process. All statements about persecution in Eritrea were perceived as acts of treason against the state.

Military conscription

National service was mandatory for men and women at least 18 years of age. Initially 18 months long, it included six months' military service and frequent forced labour, could be extended indefinitely, and was often followed by reserve duties. Much of the adult population was engaged in mandatory service. There was no exemption from military service for conscientious objectors. Penalties for evading or deserting national service were harsh, and included torture and detention without trial. Some family members of evaders and deserters were also subject to harassment, imprisonment and torture.

Jehovah's Witnesses were particularly at risk due to their conscientious objection to military service.

Torture and other ill-treatment

The authorities interrogated, tortured and otherwise ill-treated critics of the government in an attempt to deter dissenting opinion. Prisoners were often whipped, kicked or tied with ropes in painful positions for prolonged periods.

Prison conditions were dire. Many prisoners were held in underground cells or shipping containers and denied access to daylight. Conditions were overcrowded, damp and unhygienic.

Prisoners were frequently exposed to the sun for extended periods of time, or locked in metal shipping containers, which magnified extremes of heat and cold.

Religious prisoners reportedly died in custody as a result of harsh conditions and ill-treatment, or from lack of medical care for treatable diseases.

- Two Christians, Mogos Hagos Kiflom and Mehari Gebreneguse Asegedom, reportedly died in detention in January.
- Yemane Kahasay Andom, aged 43, of the Kale-Hiwot Church, reportedly died on 29 July due to torture. He had been held in an underground cell in isolation and was believed to have refused to sign a document renouncing his religion.

Amnesty International report

- Eritrea: Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review (AFR 64/001/2009)

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