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Eritrea: Crackdown on Draft Evaders' Families

(Nairobi) – The Eritrean government has in recent months punished relatives of thousands of alleged draft evaders as part of an intensive forced conscription campaign, Human Rights Watch said today.

Eritrean security forces have been heavily involved in operations in support of the Ethiopian government since the outbreak of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020, and have carried out some of the conflict's worst abuses. Eritrean authorities have conducted waves of roundups in Eritrea to identify people it considers draft evaders or deserters. Since September 2022, when Ethiopian and Eritrean forces carried out joint offensives in the Tigray region, the Eritrean government has inflicted further repression, punishing family members of those seeking to avoid conscription or recall, to enforce widespread forced mobilization, including of older men. Such punishment has included arbitrary detentions and home expulsions.

"Struggling to fill its dwindling fighting ranks, Eritrea's government has detained and expelled older people and women with young children from their homes in order to find people it considers draft evaders or deserters," said Laetitia Bader, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Eritrea should immediately end its collective punishment of relatives of those who refuse to comply and instead focus on reforming its ruthless indefinite military service system."

Eritrea has a policy of indefinite national service, including compulsory military conscription, which has been central to the government's broader repression of its population since the 1998-2001 border war with Ethiopia, and its aftermath.

The statutory national service of 18 months was indefinitely extended to require all male and female adults under age 40 to be available to work at the direction of the state, either in a military or civilian capacity. In practice, adults older than 40 are also forced to serve. Despite the country's 2018 peace deal with Ethiopia, the government has refused to reform this repressive system.

Once conscripted into the military, young men and women, some still minors, have very few options for discharge. As a result, they risk serious reprisals to escape what a United Nations Commission of Inquiry has characterized as "enslavement."

Human Rights Watch interviewed 14 people who had recently fled Eritrea, relatives of people affected by the forced conscriptions and reprisals, as well as 11 journalists and other analysts, two of whom

were inside Eritrea as the campaign took place. Human Rights Watch did not interview anyone still inside Eritrea for security reasons. Human Rights Watch also reviewed satellite imagery that corroborated important aspects of the accounts of those interviewed through mid-January 2023. In February, Human Rights Watch received reports of the return of some military units that had been sent to fight in Tigray, and of some reservists who had been at the border inside Eritrea.

The latest conscription drive started mid-2022, with the authorities targeting people considered draft evaders, including students who have dropped out of school to evade military training, as well as army deserters, some of whom already had served for years. Then, in mid-September, the government mobilized reservists, primarily men aged 50 through to 60, many of whom had been officially discharged from active military duty but continue to hold arms and are required to conduct guard duties. On September 17, Eritrea's information minister told the media that only "a tiny number" of reservists were being called up, denying that the entire population was being called up.

During the latest mobilization drive, especially from September onward, the security forces have set up checkpoints throughout urban and rural areas. In addition, by working with the local officials, security forces have gone door to door, ostensibly to confirm eligibility for coupons that grant people access to subsidized goods, but in fact, to also identify draft evaders. They used the visits, people interviewed said, to identify discrepancies between the number of family members the coupon system said should be in a particular home and those of conscription age who were living there, often retaliating against family members who the authorities claimed had failed to track the missing people down.

Older parents as well as women with young children have been temporarily detained for days, some reportedly longer, and have been expelled from their homes during the government's searches, Human Rights Watch found. A 71-year-old woman was evicted from her home in Asmara, the capital, because she was unable to confirm the whereabouts of one of her sons being sought by the authorities. Another son who lives abroad said:

My mother has some health issues, so the neighbors tried to plead with the authorities not to lock up the house after my first brother turned himself in. But when the second didn't come, they shut up the house.

An Eritrean woman abroad whose relatives have also been evicted said: "The confiscation of homes, we've never seen this before. It's an act of desperation."

Despite a November cessation of hostilities agreement, signed between the Ethiopian federal government and Tigrayan authorities, Human Rights Watch continued to receive reports of ongoing roundups and reprisals through early 2023.

Many presumed draft evaders, rounded up near Asmara, were initially taken to the notorious, military-run Adi Abeito prison, northeast of the capital. Satellite imagery Human Rights Watch analyzed shows large crowds of people in the prison yard and surrounding areas of the prison from October 2022 through late January 2023. Relatives reported that many men were taken from the prison to their assigned military unit headquarters in this time period.

Satellite image recorded on January 23, 2023 offers a snapshot of the large crowds of people gathered in the compounds of Adi Abeito prison, located north of the capital of Asmara. Satellite image © 2023 Maxar Technologies. Analysis and graphic © 2023 Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch was not able to confirm where reservists were taken, but did receive reports that dozens of reservists called up in Asmara were taken toward Tsorona town, near the border with Ethiopia.

“Everyone has always lived with the dreadful feeling of the risk of being conscripted, but this is at a whole different level,” an Asmara resident said.

Some forms of conscription for military service are permitted under international human rights law. However, Eritrea uses violent methods including the threat of penalty and punishment for those who do not participate, and collective punishment of relatives. Officials also show a lack of respect for the right to conscientious objection and provide no opportunity to challenge arbitrary enforcement and the indefinite nature of conscription. These factors constitute abuse, Human Rights Watch said. International human rights law prohibits holding anyone criminally responsible for acts they are not responsible for.

International and regional officials should take concrete measures against Eritrea’s leadership for the ongoing repression. They should ensure ongoing scrutiny by the United Nations Human Rights Council, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and UN experts.

They should adopt and maintain targeted sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for serious abuses inside Eritrea, as part of broader targeted sanctions for Eritrean and other armed forces responsible for serious abuses in northern Ethiopia, tied to clear human rights benchmarks, Human Rights Watch said. Eritrea’s regional partners, including Horn of Africa and Gulf states, should press Eritrea to ensure meaningful changes to the abusive national service system, which has continued to drive Eritreans into exile.

“Eritreans from all walks of life are bearing the brunt of the government’s repressive tactics,” Bader said. “Eritrea’s regional partners and international actors should take action to end rampant repression.”

Indefinite Forced Conscription and Eritrea’s Role in the Tigray War

Military training and national service are compulsory for all Eritreans, male and female, ages 18 to 40, and it is often indefinite despite provisions in Eritrean law limiting national service to 18 months. When the country’s 1998-2001 border war with Ethiopia broke out, former fighters and reservists who had been demobilized were forcibly conscripted and all national service recruits were retained under emergency directives. Conscription for many has continued to be extended indefinitely ever since, forcing many Eritreans, some under 18 and others above 40, into military service for years, some for decades.

Enforced indefinite conscription for many Eritreans starts during their final year of high school. Past Human Rights Watch reporting has documented that the Eritrean government forcibly channels thousands of young people, each year into military training even before they finish their schooling. Some of the students are still children, in violation of international standards. From here, people are sent either directly into military service or later national service.

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea found that “slavery-like” practices are routine within the national service system. Human Rights Watch has documented that during their prolonged conscription Eritreans, particularly those in the military, risk systematic abuse, including

torture, harsh working conditions, and pay insufficient to support a family, which constitute illegal forced labor.

Human rights organizations have repeatedly documented that Eritreans who attempt to avoid conscription, including by dropping out of school, escaping from a military duty station, or fleeing the country risk punishment, notably arbitrary detention. In a 2009 report, Human Rights Watch documented that families of draft evaders were collectively punished usually by being jailed or forced to pay fines.

Conscientious objection is prohibited, and only rare exemptions are granted for people with a disability and, temporarily, on health grounds, although these exemptions are not systematically applied.

Since war broke out in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region in November 2020, the Eritrean government has conducted waves of roundups, which intensified parallel to events in Tigray.

Eritrean forces had remained in parts of Tigray throughout the Ethiopian federal government's five-month humanitarian truce, including in Western Tigray, until fighting broke out again in August 2022. Media reported that Tigrayan authorities accused Eritrea of a massive offensive in late September.

Within Tigray, Eritrean forces have committed large-scale massacres, pillaging, and the worst forms of sexual violence and targeted civilian infrastructure. They also killed and raped Eritrean refugees and destroyed two Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray.

Following a cessation of hostilities agreement, signed in South Africa on November 2, 2022, between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigrayan authorities, the parties signed another declaration in Nairobi, Kenya, on November 12, stipulating that the Tigrayan forces' handover of heavy weapons would be carried out in conjunction with the withdrawal of foreign and non-Ethiopian federal military forces from the region. In mid-January 2023, media reported on the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from key towns in central Tigray, notably the town of Shire. Yet reports of ongoing Eritrean force presence inside Tigray and ongoing abuses by Eritrean forces continue to emerge.

The European Union rolled out sanctions on Eritrea's national security agency, headed by Maj. Gen. Abraha Kassa, for serious human rights abuses in Eritrea including killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture in March 2021. In September 2022, US President Joe Biden extended, sanctions for one year on Eritrean officials for serious human rights abuses in Tigray.

Collective Punishment of Families of Draft Evaders, Deserters

The government has intimidated and harassed people of all ages to pressure them into handing over missing relatives.

Relatives of those affected by the expulsions said that the government has confiscated homes of the parents of suspected draft evaders. This has left older people and women with children without a roof over their heads.

"My uncle was kicked out of his home," said a woman whose uncle, about age 80, was evicted from his home in September by authorities looking for his daughter. "He's now on the street. He's homeless."

A 71-year-old woman with chronic health issues was ejected from her home [in Asmara] in October when she was unable to locate one of her sons and was forced to seek shelter in an outdoor building with no lock.

The authorities have locked up the homes and put notices on the door.

Several people said that on occasion the local authorities threatened other people if they sheltered those evicted. "There is a standing order that no one can give shelter to those whose homes have been locked up," said a man whose mother was ejected from her home. "This order was circulated by the local authorities."

In early December, a 37-year-old woman was evicted from her home by local officials and military officers, following their search for her daughter who had refused to adhere to the call up. A relative said:

When she came to our home, they threatened her and my family. She wasn't even able to stay one night. It was the local officials. They are watching. You can't go to anyone's house, it's like a crime. She is living on the streets. Our relatives are sending her food there, but now authorities have told her she can't stay on the streets. They threatened to send her to jail if she doesn't send her daughter.

The authorities have also arbitrarily detained relatives of draft evaders in formal and informal facilities, including older people and people with health conditions.

In early September, a 78-year-old man was detained for three days in a village school because the authorities were looking for one of his sons. "My parents and nephew were given the option to lock up the house or for my father to be arrested," said another son. "There was no warning." None of the relatives were granted access to him during his detention.

There is no limit to how many members of a family can be conscripted. An 80-year-old man with diabetes was detained in early December for failing to bring forward the youngest of his six sons. His five older sons had already been conscripted.

Other Forms of Punishment

The authorities have also targeted people's means of livelihood and income. Human Rights Watch received reports of government forces confiscating livestock in rural communities and preventing people from harvesting their crops to get people to hand themselves in, particularly in southern Eritrea in the first weeks of the campaign. Media reported that local administrations have also been withholding ration coupons from families whose members have not heeded the call. Two people said that their relatives' shops were shut down to punish them for failing to hand over missing relatives.

Impact on Families

People described the significant toll of the collective punishment to Human Rights Watch.

"There is a lot of fear among the community, many people from all walks of life have gone into hiding," said an Asmara resident.

“We don’t know if they [the authorities] are just doing this to terrorize people,” said a woman whose relatives have been targeted in the campaign. “They had left them [children and older people] in peace, but now they are trying anything to put pressure on them.”

A woman, whose relative was evicted from her home in Asmara, said:

People are afraid, you can’t help your relatives. That’s why people are giving up, they give their children, they give their husbands, as you can’t keep resisting.

Several other people said that they and their relatives are still willing to pay the price of protecting their loved ones. An older man, who was detained for three days after refusing to force his son to hand himself in, fell ill for several weeks after this detention, but the family remains resolute: “My brother is still in hiding, but we all support his decision,” said the brother who lives in exile.

Intensifying Forced Conscription Since Mid-2022

The government’s enforced conscription drives intensified during the summer. Human Rights Watch received reports of the drive starting in July 2022 in rural areas, notably in the country’s southern region around the town of Seghenyti, before intensifying in major towns including Asmara in mid-September through early 2023.

In mid-September 2022, the government also started recalling reservists, over age 50. The security forces set up checkpoints to verify whether people were exempt from military conscription and alongside the local administration conducted door-to-door searches in neighborhoods.

Local authorities keep track of people through a family coupon system, which specifies how many people are a part of the household and requires all family members to be there or to justify an absence in order to renew a family’s coupon. This system has played a central role in identifying alleged draft evaders during house-to-house searches.

“This is happening in literally every neighborhood in Asmara,” a resident said. “Every household that has a member who could be conscripted has been visited.”

People have also been rounded up from religious facilities. Reliable sources reported that on September 4, security forces detained young people attending a mass in a Roman Catholic church in Akrur, in the southern region. Human Rights Watch analyzed images posted online starting in early September appearing to show uniformed men rounding up young men and women outside of the Medhane-Alem Roman Catholic Church near Akrur, southeast of Asmara. Researchers were able to verify the locations shown in the images.

In October, three Roman Catholic priests were detained in separate incidents, including the bishop of Segheneity, Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim, who had called for peace in Tigray. The three were unlawfully held until their release in December.

Media have also reported that the authorities called for those previously exempted from military service to undergo new medical tests. However, Human Rights Watch received accounts of people with chronic health issues and disabilities, including injuries sustained during the 1998-2000 border war, being rounded up in the recent drive and sent off to military postings.

The conscription campaign has continued through early 2023, nearly three months after the cessation of hostilities in Tigray was signed.

Detention Sites

Relatives and observers said that many of those rounded up in Asmara of conscription age have initially been taken to the infamous Adi Abeito prison on the northeastern outskirts of the capital then sent on to various military headquarters and other camps. Rights groups and the media have previously documented inhumane and degrading conditions and treatment in Adi Abeito. In 2021, the US-based Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) released a documentary with leaked footage that they said was from the facility that showed prisoners lying on top of each other, unable to stretch out, inside a warehouse and reported regular torture inside the compound.

Human Rights Watch reviewed dozens of satellite images captured between September 2022 and January 2023 over the three different prison compounds identified in the PBS documentary. Human Rights Watch independently confirmed the locations of the compounds that appear in the videos.

Satellite imagery recorded over several months offers snapshots of compounds in Adi Abeito prison where an increasing number of people were visible from October 2022 onwards. Satellite image © 2023 Maxar Technologies. Satellite © 2023 CNES / Airbus. Source : Google Earth. Analysis and graphics © 2023 Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch identified a substantial increase in the number of people in one of the courtyards of the Adi Abeito prison compound beginning in the end of October 2022. This increase was still visible as of January 23, 2023. The courtyard appears significantly overcrowded. People congregated in organized groups within the prison compound are also visible on satellite imagery in the same period.

An increase in the number of people in the adjacent courtyard, identified by PBS as the compound of the women's prison, is observable on satellite imagery from the beginning of January.

In another courtyard of the prison compound, which the PBS documentary had identified as the area where prisoners are ill-treated and tortured, Human Rights Watch observed on satellite imagery, since mid-November 2022, that some courtyard areas are covered by tarpaulins. Human Rights Watch was not able to identify whether the number of people in this area increased.

While it is difficult to confirm where those rounded up and those called up were taken, several people told Human Rights Watch that reservists from Asmara were taken toward the border with Ethiopia around Tsorona, while some of the people of conscription age were initially taken to their units.

A man said that one of his two brothers evading the draft handed himself in:

The call up paper came a month ago exactly. My first brother turned himself in 16 days ago [mid-October] at the local administration in his locality. He stayed in Adi Abeito prison for 10 days. After that he was taken to his military unit base.

Two interviewees said reservists sent in the first roundups to the border were asked to bring their own rations and found very little when they arrived.

The BBC reported that some reservists were sent to the front lines. Videos that appeared on Tigrayan regional media outlets allegedly showed detained prisoners of war in Tigray, described as Eritrean soldiers, many of whom were older men.

ecoi.net description:

Tigray Region: Article on indefinite conscription and Eritrea's role in the Tigray-War

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