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Eritrea

Since 2001 the government of President Isayas Afewerki has carried out an unremitting attack on democratic institutions and civil society in Eritrea by arresting political opponents, destroying the private press, and incarcerating anyone thought to challenge the government's policies. Almost no civil society institutions survive but the assault continued in 2006 on religious practitioners, military service evaders, and staff of international agencies.

A constitution approved by referendum in 1997 has never been implemented. No national elections have been held since independence in 1993. No opposition political party is allowed to exist. No independent labor organizations are permitted. Nongovernmental organizations have been systematically dismantled and their assets confiscated; those still operational are closely monitored. The government controls all access to information.

The border dispute with Ethiopia that led to the devastating 1998-2000 war continues to fester, a circumstance the government uses to justify repressive policies. Ethiopia has demanded "dialogue" with Eritrea about the border in the Badme sector (where the war began) before it will comply with the independent boundary commission decision on border demarcation, but Eritrea, having accepted the April 2002 commission decision, rejects further talks before full demarcation. In 2006 the threat of war resuming between Ethiopia and Eritrea waned temporarily, but Eritrea continued arming rebel forces in parts of Ethiopia. Eritrea denies reports by the United Nations and United States that in 2006 it sent arms and military trainers to assist the Islamic Courts movement that has taken power in Somalia's capital and is strongly opposed to Ethiopia.

Suppression of Political Dissent and Free Expression

Governing party and government leaders and journalists arrested in 2001 as alleged traitors, spies, and foreign agents continue to be held incommunicado in undisclosed prisons. In 2006 a website issued a detailed but unconfirmed report asserting that 31 prisoners, including the leaders and journalists, were being held in isolation cells in a remote jail built expressly to hold them. The report claimed that nine of the 31 had died in captivity (one by suicide).

Absent an independent press and with foreign broadcasts periodically jammed, Eritreans seldom have access to information other than from government-run media outlets. The government also takes pains to avoid information filtering out of the country. There are no domestic human rights groups; and no international human rights organizations are allowed to operate in Eritrea.

Freedom of Religion

The government closed all religious institutions in May 2002 except those affiliated with the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) churches and with traditional Islam. Although the government claimed it would register other churches, it had not done so as of November 2006 despite having had applications pending for more than four years. Some religious groups have not applied, fearing that disclosing membership rolls will endanger their members. The government is reported to have confiscated all assets of the Kale Hiwot (Baptist) Church in 2006, including orphanages and kindergartens, even though the church had applied for registration.

In 2006 the government arrested members and clergy of religious groups that had not filed for registration, raiding homes during worship, including wedding ceremonies. Several hundred are in detention, and recantation of church membership is often imposed as a condition for release.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been especially mistreated. Some have been detained for more than a decade for refusing to participate in national military service even though the official penalty is a prison term of no more than three years (Eritrea does not provide

for alternative service). Jehovah's Witnesses are precluded from government employment and from receiving many government services, including business licenses.

Religious persecution has not been limited to minority religions. The Orthodox patriarch was placed under house arrest in 2006 and his lifetime appointment was rescinded after he questioned the arrest of three reformist bishops. He had already been stripped of administrative functions in 2005 in favor of a government-appointed lay administrator.

Military Conscription Roundups and Arbitrary Arrest of Family Members

Eritrean men between the ages of 18 and 50 must perform two years of compulsory national service. In addition to military duties, conscripts are used for public works projects, but there have been repeated reports that they have also been used as laborers on military generals' personal properties. Spurred by the rigors and abuses of the national service system, draft-age Eritreans and high school seniors have been fleeing the country in the thousands over the past five years or have gone into hiding. Refugee agencies estimated that each month in 2006 about 700 Eritreans fled to Sudan and another 400 to Ethiopia.

Since mid-2005 the government has been arresting family members when a conscript fails to report for service. Relatives can buy their release by forfeiting the equivalent of about US\$3,500, a huge penalty in a country where, according to the World Bank, the annual per capita income is around \$220; there were reports in 2006 that the amount to be forfeited had doubled.

Prison Conditions, Torture, and Ill-Treatment

Ongoing political and religious persecution and the clampdown connected to evasion of national service have contributed to thousands of people being detained. Most of those arrested are held incommunicado indefinitely without formal charge or trial. Torture has frequently been reported. Detention facilities are severely overcrowded—because of the large number of arrests, less prominent prisoners (such as adherents to unregistered religious groups) are sometimes packed into cargo containers, located so as to be unbearably hot or cold. Other harsh detention conditions include

starvation rations, lack of sanitation, and hard labor. Psychological abuse can include indefinite solitary confinement.

Information on abusive prison conditions emerges despite frequent warnings to prisoners who are released not to talk about their imprisonment or treatment.

Freedom of Movement

Eritreans must have exit visas to leave the country. These are rarely granted to men of military age. In 2006 government officials and members of sports teams defected when abroad, as others had in previous years. To discourage defections, the government reportedly began requiring the posting of bonds equivalent to US\$7,000 for participants in sports teams traveling outside the country.

The government imposed internal travel restrictions in 2006 on all foreign nationals, requiring permits to travel beyond Asmara.

Key International Actors

An international peacekeeping force, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) maintains troops and observers in a 25-kilometer-wide buffer line between the two countries. The force and the zone are based on the agreement suspending the conflict. In late 2005 the Eritrean government placed severe restrictions on UNMEE's patrols and grounded helicopter surveillance flights, despite the UN Security Council's strong objections. In 2006 the government periodically arrested UNMEE local staff, releasing some after a short period but keeping others jailed. It declared five UNMEE personnel persona non grata, accusing them of aiding Eritrean nationals to escape to Ethiopia. Faced with Eritrean belligerency and Ethiopian obstinacy, the Security Council in 2006 reduced the UNMEE force by about a third, to 2,300.

Because of Eritrea's woeful human rights record, it receives little other than humanitarian assistance. In 2005-06, the government cut the number of free food aid recipients from 1.3 million to 70,000 to promote self-reliance through a "food-for-work" program. In August 2006 the European Commission, which had appropriated €6 million for assistance

through UN agencies, stated that it would protest the selling of food aid without consultation and might ask Eritrea to repay €2.4 million for the cost of the food.

The United States withholds non-humanitarian assistance in part because Eritrea has refused to release or bring to trial US Embassy local employees arrested in 2001 and 2005. USAID operations ended in 2005 when the government demanded that the local USAID office close. In 2006 the United States maintained the partial denial of arms export licenses first imposed in 2005 because of the government's religious persecution. It also imposed travel restrictions on Eritrean diplomats and consular officials in retaliation for restrictions placed on US officials in Asmara.

In 2006 the Eritrean government expelled six Italian aid NGOs and confiscated their equipment and supplies; it also told Mercy Corps, Concern Worldwide, and the Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD) to leave. Other aid NGOs, including two Italian ones, have been allowed to continue operations.

China's president promised economic assistance when President Isayas traveled to Beijing early in 2006, but no major initiatives have been announced at this writing.