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Amnesty International Annual Report 2011 - Eritrea

Head of state and government: **Isaias Afewerki**

Death penalty: **abolitionist in practice**

Population: **5.2 million**

Life expectancy: **60.4 years**

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

Adult literacy: **65.3 per cent**

Widespread human rights violations were routine. The government severely restricted freedom of expression and freedom of religion. No opposition parties, independent journalism or civil society organizations, or unregistered faith groups were allowed. The authorities used arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture to stifle opposition, holding thousands of political prisoners in dire conditions, many in secret detention. Military conscription was compulsory and deserters, draft evaders and their families were harassed, imprisoned and ill-treated. A "shoot to kill" policy against anyone attempting to flee across the border remained in place.

Background

President Isaias Afewerki and the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the only permitted political party, exerted complete control over the state without a hint of indefinitely delayed elections. There was no independent judiciary.

Eritrean society remained highly militarized. All adults faced compulsory national service which was frequently extended indefinitely.

The costs of mass military conscription contributed to a crippling of the national economy. Food shortages increased. The UN estimated that as many as two in every three Eritreans were malnourished, but the government restricted food aid and humanitarian access, apparently as a way of controlling and punishing the population, and limiting external influence.

Large numbers of mainly young Eritreans fled the country. The government continued to implement a "shoot to kill" policy for those caught trying to cross the border.

The UN Security Council continued to apply sanctions against Eritrea, including an arms embargo, on the grounds that it was supporting Somali armed groups and for failing to resolve a border dispute with Djibouti.

For the first half of the year Eritrea maintained a troop presence in the disputed Ras Doumeira area and Doumeira island of Djibouti, despite a Security Council resolution calling for Eritrean withdrawal. In June, Eritrea agreed to withdraw its troops and resolve the dispute with Djibouti through mediation by Qatar.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission decision of 2002 requiring Ethiopia's withdrawal from the border village of Badme was not enforced; and the damages set out by the 2009 Claims Commission to be paid by both sides were not paid. The government used the pretext of the border dispute, and possible threat of future conflict, as justification for the severe curtailment of civil and political rights.

Freedom of religion

Only members of permitted faiths – the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Islam – were allowed to practise their religion. Members of banned minority faiths faced harassment, arrest, incommunicado detention and torture. Many were arrested while worshipping clandestinely in private homes or at weddings or funerals.

Up to 3,000 Christians from unregistered church groups were held in detention during the year, including 60 Jehovah's Witnesses who were known to be in detention in May. Among the 60 were Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam, detained since 1994 without trial.

A clampdown on Evangelical Christians, in particular the Full Gospel Church, in the Southern Zone (province) was reported in October. Up to 40 men and women were arrested and detained incommunicado, reportedly on the orders of the governor of the Southern Zone.

- Senait Oqbazgi Habta, a 28-year-old woman, reportedly died in April at the Sawa Military Training Centre. She had been detained for approximately two years for attending a Bible study group. She was detained in a shipping container and denied medication for malaria and anaemia.

Prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners

Large numbers of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience continued to be detained indefinitely without charge, trial or access to legal counsel. They included suspected critics of the government, political activists, journalists, religious practitioners, draft evaders, military deserters and failed asylum-seekers forcibly returned to Eritrea. Many were held in incommunicado detention for long periods, including political prisoners detained since a government clampdown in 2001. The whereabouts and health status of most remained unknown. Prisoners' families faced reprisals for inquiring about them.

- The G-15 group, prisoners of conscience detained without charge or trial since 2001, continued to be held in secret detention. During 2010 the government again did not respond to allegations that nine of the G-15 had died in detention.
- Prisoner of conscience Dawit Isaak, a journalist detained in the 2001 clampdown, remained in detention, allegedly in Eiraeiro Prison. He was reportedly in poor mental and physical health.

Freedom of expression – journalists

The government tightly controlled all media and reacted with hostility to any perceived criticism. All independent journalism has been effectively banned since 2001. Numerous journalists remained in incommunicado detention without charge or trial. In many cases the government refused to confirm their location or health status.

- Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, a Radio Bana journalist arrested in February 2009 when the authorities closed the station, was reportedly placed in solitary confinement in Mai Swra Prison in May.

Eritrean journalists in the US-based diaspora community reported government surveillance and harassment by Eritrean-government supporters within the USA.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Many Eritreans fled the country. Families of refugees faced severe reprisals for the flight of their relatives, including fines and prison sentences.

The guidelines issued by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, in 2009, recommending that states refrain from forcibly returning rejected Eritrean asylum-seekers to Eritrea, remained in force. As of January 2010, 223,562 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers were living abroad, according to official figures.

- In June, Eritrean detainees at the Misratah detention centre in Libya were forced by officials to be photographed and to complete bio-data forms provided by the Eritrean embassy.
- Yonas Mehari and Petros Mulugeta returned to Germany and were granted asylum in 2010. The two men were asylum-seekers forcibly deported by the German authorities to Eritrea in 2008. They were detained after their return, Yonas Mehari in an overcrowded underground cell and Petros Mulugeta in a shipping container. Both men recounted inhumane conditions, including disease, insanity and death among fellow detainees.

Military conscription

A significant proportion of the population was engaged in compulsory national service, which was mandatory for men and women over the age of 18. An initial period of 18 months' service includes six months' military service and 12 months' deployment in military or government service. This often involves forced labour in state projects. Conscripts perform construction labour on government projects such as road building, work in the civil service or work for companies owned and operated by the military or ruling party elites. Conscripts are paid minimal salaries that do not meet the basic needs of their families. National service can be extended indefinitely and is also followed by reserve duties.

Penalties for desertion and draft evasion were harsh, and included torture and detention without trial.

Torture and other ill-treatment

The use of torture in detention facilities was widespread. Detainees, including prisoners of conscience, were often tortured and ill-treated. The most frequent forms of torture reported were whippings, beatings and being tied with ropes in painful positions for prolonged periods.

Prison conditions were extremely harsh, with many prisoners held in overcrowded, unhygienic and damp conditions. Large numbers of detainees were held in underground cells and others were locked in metal shipping containers, many in desert locations creating extreme temperatures. Prisoners were given inadequate food and unclean

drinking water. Almost no medical assistance was available. Various prisoners of conscience and political prisoners were reported to have died in detention, but most reports were not confirmed by the authorities.

- Hana Hagos Asgedom, a Christian imprisoned for nearly four years for her religious beliefs, died in January. She was reportedly beaten with an iron rod for refusing the sexual advances of an officer at the Alla Military Camp and died from a heart attack soon after.

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