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World Report 2012 - Eritrea

Events of 2011

Eritrea marked 20 years of independence in 2011, but its citizens remain victimized by one of the world's most repressive governments. They suffer arbitrary and indefinite detention; torture; inhumane conditions of confinement; restrictions on freedom of speech, movement, and belief; and indefinite conscription and forced labor in national service.

Arbitrary Detention

Since September 2001 or even before, Eritreans from all walks of life – government officials, leaders of government-controlled labor unions, businesspeople, journalists, and national service evaders or escapees – have been jailed for explicit or inferred opposition to President Isaias Afwerki and his policies. The number of Eritreans jailed for such opposition is difficult to confirm, but ranges from 5,000 to 10,000, excluding national service evaders and deserters, who may number tens of thousands more. Twenty prominent critics and journalists have been held in incommunicado isolation for a decade; nine are feared dead.

Prisoners are often held indefinitely without access to family members, prison monitors, or lawyers. There are no public trials and no appeals. Persons inquiring about a relative's whereabouts risk being jailed themselves.

Families are punished for the acts of one of its members, especially for draft evasion or desertion. The family is given no opportunity to defend itself. Families are fined Nakfa 50,000 (US\$ 3,333) for evasion or desertion. Those who do not or cannot pay are jailed and may have property confiscated.

Forced Labor and Other Abuses in "National Service"

Since 2002 Eritrea has misused its national service system to keep a generation of Eritreans in bondage. Service is indefinitely prolonged, extending for much of a citizen's working life. Pay is barely sufficient for survival. Recruits are used as cheap labor for civil service jobs, development projects, and the ruling party's commercial and agricultural enterprises. Female recruits have reported sexual abuse by higher-ranking officers.

Thousands of Eritreans, mostly of younger generations, flee the country because of the harsh conditions in national service. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in early 2011 that 220,000 Eritreans, about 5 percent of the population, have fled. During a visit to a refugee camp in Ethiopia in mid-2011, an assistant high commissioner said she was shocked to see such a "sea of young faces." The new refugees included a significant number of unaccompanied children, some as young as six-years-old.

Among the most prominent defectors in 2011 were 13 members of a 25-member soccer (football) team who refused to return after a regional tournament in Tanzania. Such defections are not new. In 2009, 12 soccer players absconded in Kenya. Earlier in 2011, fearful of further defections, the government refused to allow a soccer team that won a first-round game in Eritrea to play a return match in Kenya.

A UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea found strong evidence that high-level Eritrean officials facilitate escapes to earn hard currency: "People smuggling is so pervasive that it could not be possible without the complicity of Government and party officials, especially military officers...." Military officers charge about \$3,000 per person for a border crossing and up to \$20,000 for smuggling escapees through Sudan and Egypt. According to the UN group, receipts are funneled through Eritrean embassy staff into a Swiss bank account.

Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment

Escaping Eritreans, including prison guards, report that torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in detention are systematic and routine. Aside from severe beatings, punishments include mock drowning, hanging by the arms from trees, being tied up in the sun in contorted positions for hours or days, and being doubled up inside a tire. One investigative technique is to tighten handcuffs so that circulation to the hands is cut off and pain from the swelling hands becomes unbearable.

Many prisoners are held in unlit underground bunkers and in shipping containers with broiling daytime and freezing nighttime temperatures. Prisoners are held in isolation or are packed tightly in severely crowded cells. Food rations generally consist of lentils and a bread roll once a day and tea twice a day. Deaths in prison from torture, disease, inadequate food, and other harsh conditions are frequent.

Freedom of Expression and Association

The government destroyed Eritrea's private press in September 2001 and arrested its journalists. Since then propaganda outlets run by the Ministry of Information – television, radio, and newspapers – serve as the only domestic sources of news. Information inconsistent with President Isaias's preconceptions is suppressed. It took a month for government media to mention the Tunisian, Libyan, and Egyptian revolutions. When they did, it was to assert that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's government deserved to fall for not adopting Isaias's policy of self-reliance.

According to Reporters Without Borders, four additional journalists were detained in 2011 and remain in custody: Neibel Edris, Ahmed Usman, Mohammed Osman, and Tesfalidet Mebratu.

Internet access is available but difficult. Penetration is under 4 percent, primarily through cyber cafés in Asmara. Users are closely monitored. Some users were reportedly arrested in early 2011.

No political or civic organizations are permitted except those controlled by Isaias's People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Nongovernmental public gatherings of over seven persons are prohibited. Critical questions at government-convened meetings constitute grounds for arrest.

Freedom of Religion

In 2002 the Eritrean government banned religious activities, except those organized by four registered religious organizations: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea. It deposed the

Orthodox patriarch in 2005, has held him in house arrest since 2007, and chose his successor. The government also appointed the current Sunni mufti.

Adherents of "unrecognized" religions are seized in raids on churches and homes and imprisoned and tortured until they renounce their faiths. Jehovah's Witnesses are especially victimized. As of April 2011, the Jehovah's Witness media website lists 51 Witnesses incarcerated as conscientious objectors, for participation in religious meetings, or for unknown reasons; three conscientious objectors have been imprisoned for 17 years.

Usually reliable sources who monitor religious persecutions reported continuing persecution of religious practitioners in 2011. Thirty members of an evangelical Christian church were arrested in Asmara in January. In May and June authorities reportedly arrested over 90 members of unrecognized Christian churches, including 26 college students. Two women and one man in their twenties, arrested in 2009 for participating in prayer meetings while serving in national service, reportedly died in captivity at military camps in 2011. A 62-year-old Jehovah's Witness arrested in 2008 died in July, a week after he was placed in solitary confinement in a metal shipping container.

United Nations Sanctions and Horn of Africa Relations

The UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea in 2009 for providing political, financial, and logistical support to insurrectionary groups in Somalia and for occupying Djibouti territory it had invaded in 2008. In 2011 the council's Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that Eritrea was still funneling funds through its embassies to al-Shabaab and other groups fighting the UN-recognized Somali government. Although Eritrea had withdrawn from Djibouti territory by 2011, it continues to hold 19 Djiboutian prisoners of war to whom it has not permitted third-party access.

The Monitoring Group also concluded that Eritrea had sponsored an unsuccessful attempt to bomb an African Union Heads of State Summit in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, in January 2011. Eritrea and Ethiopia have been bitter enemies since Eritrea began a border war in 1998. The bitterness continues partly because of animosity between the leaders of the two countries, and partly because Ethiopia refuses to vacate land that a neutral boundary commission, whose decision both countries agreed would be binding, held belongs to Eritrea.

Key International Actors

Eritrea received modest amounts of foreign aid from China (in the form of soft loans), the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Libya, and Qatar in recent years; no loans or grants were

announced in 2011. The European Union provides some development and emergency assistance, but the bulk of this remains undisbursed because of concerns about transparency and accountability.

The Isaias government lost a key political and financial supporter with the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. The emir of Qatar and president of Sudan remain important supporters. Qatar is financing a four-star resort on Dahlak Kebre island, not far from a notorious underground prison. In October 2011 Sudan refouled over 300 Eritreans without screening them for refugee status, ignoring an agreement with the UNHCR calling for such screening.

Eritrea in 2011 began to re-engage with other African countries, announcing that it would rejoin the regional organization, the Intergovernmental Authority for Growth and Development.

Eritreans who fled the country in 2011 report a lack of food and soaring prices for what food remains available because of a serious regional drought, but Eritrea insists it needs no food assistance. It has not allowed access by humanitarian organizations to assess needs. In 2009 Isaias privately told the UN Children's Fund that Eritrea was suffering from famine even as he publicly denied food shortages. It continues to receive UN funding for health, sanitation, and safe-water projects, but it ended its relationship with the World Bank in 2011.

Isaias told Eritreans in May 2011 that international NGOs harbor "a pathological compulsion for espionage."

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