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

National service conscription was compulsory and frequently extended indefinitely. Military training for children remained compulsory. Conscripts were used as forced labour. Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners continued to be arbitrarily detained in appalling conditions. Torture and other ill-treatment were common. No opposition parties, independent media or civil society organizations were permitted. Only four religions were sanctioned by the state; all others were banned and their followers arrested and detained. Eritreans continued to flee the country in large numbers.

Background

The humanitarian situation in the country was reported to be serious and the economy remained stagnant. However, the mining sector continued to develop, with foreign governments and private companies interested in Eritrea's significant deposits of gold, potash and copper, despite a risk of complicity in human rights violations through the use of forced labour at mining sites.

The Ethiopian army conducted military incursions into Eritrea twice in March, announcing successful attacks on camps where they claimed Ethiopian rebel groups trained. Ethiopia blamed Eritrea for backing a rebel group that attacked a group of European tourists in Ethiopia in January (see Ethiopia entry). The group which claimed responsibility for the incident said it had no camps in Eritrea.

In July, the UN Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, in response to "the continued widespread and systematic violations of human rights ... by the Eritrean authorities." The Eritrean government dismissed the appointment as politically motivated.

In July, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that Eritrea's support for al-Shabab in Somalia had declined, but that Eritrea continued to harbour armed opposition groups from neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia. The report also found that Eritrean officials were involved in trafficking of weapons and human beings.

Around the middle of the year, reports indicated that the government was distributing guns to the civilian population, for unknown reasons.

Prisoners of conscience and political prisoners

Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners remained in arbitrary detention in appalling conditions. They included politicians, journalists and religious practitioners. They also included people caught trying to evade national service, flee the country or move around the country without a permit. Some prisoners of conscience had been detained without charge for over a decade.

High profile prisoners were not permitted visitors and in most cases their families did not know their location or health status. The government continued to refuse to confirm or deny reports that a number of prisoners had died in detention.

- It was reported that three journalists – Dawit Habtemichael, Mattewos Habteab and Sahle Tsegazab – all arbitrarily detained since their arrest in 2001, had died in detention in recent years. The government did not confirm these reports.

Freedom of religion or belief

Only members of permitted faiths – the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, and Islam – were allowed to practice. Members of banned faiths continued to be arrested, arbitrarily detained and ill-treated.

- In April, 10 Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in Keren, in connection with their attendance at a funeral. At the end of the year, 56 Jehovah's Witnesses were reported to be imprisoned for practising their faith.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment of prisoners were widespread. Prisoners were beaten, tied in painful positions and left in extreme weather conditions, and held in solitary confinement for long periods. Conditions in detention amounted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Many detainees were held in metal shipping containers or underground cells, often in desert locations, where they were exposed to extremes of heat and cold. Detainees received inadequate food and water. They were frequently denied – or provided with only inadequate – medical care.

- Journalist Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, arrested in February 2009, was reportedly admitted to hospital in January, under permanent guard and with no visitors permitted. Her family was not told why she had been admitted.
- Petros Solomon, a former Foreign Minister and one of the G15 group – 11 high-profile politicians detained arbitrarily since 2001 – was reportedly hospitalized in July due to a serious illness. However, adequate medical care was unavailable in Eritrea. His fate remained unknown.

A number of deaths in custody were reported.

- In August, Yohannes Haile, a Jehovah's Witness detained since September 2008, reportedly died at Me'eter prison from the effects of extreme heat after being confined underground since October 2011. Three others detained with him were reportedly in critical condition. Their fate remained unknown.

Military conscription

National service remained compulsory for all adult men and women. All schoolchildren were required to complete their final year of secondary education at Sawa military training camp, a policy which affected children as young as 15. At Sawa, children suffered poor conditions and harsh punishments for infractions.

The initial national service period of 18 months was frequently extended indefinitely, on minimal salaries that were inadequate to meet families' essential needs. Conscripts continued to be used widely as forced labour in state projects, including agricultural production, or in private companies owned by military or ruling party elites. They faced harsh penalties for evasion, including arbitrary detention and ill-treatment.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Thousands of Eritreans fled the country during the year, mainly to evade indefinite national service. A "shoot to kill" policy remained in place for those caught attempting to cross into Ethiopia. People caught crossing into Sudan were arbitrarily detained and severely beaten. Family members of those who fled successfully were forced to pay fines or risk imprisonment.

Eritrean asylum-seekers forcibly returned faced a serious risk of arbitrary detention and torture. Despite this, several countries including Egypt, Sudan, Sweden, Ukraine and the UK, planned or carried out forced returns to Eritrea.

- On 24 July, Sudan forcibly returned nine asylum-seekers and one refugee to Eritrea. They had been convicted of unlawful entry by a Sudanese court.

Trafficking in human beings

The July report of the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group stated that Eritrean officials, including senior military officials, presided over weapons smuggling and people trafficking through criminal networks in Sudan and the Sinai, Egypt. According to the report, the scale of activity suggested the complicity of the Eritrean government.

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