

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	406
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	World Report 2024
Udgivet:	11. januar 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	27. februar 2024

World Report 2024



Eritrea

Events of 2023

Eritrean refugees demonstrate near a police station in Tel Aviv, calling for an end to the violence perpetrated by pro-government groups against them. October 5, 2023, Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Eritrea continues to suppress basic rights, including to freedom of opinion, religion, and expression, with heightened restrictions in the context of forced mass conscription. Eritrean security forces continued to commit serious rights violations in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

This year marked the 30-year anniversary of President Isaias Afewerki's one-man rule over Eritrea. The country has had no elections since independence in 1993, and the unelected president has refused to implement the 1997 constitution guaranteeing civil rights and limiting executive power. Since 2010, no legislature has met. There is no free press or civil society to keep check on the executive. Impunity remains the norm and due process rights are systematically flouted.

The government continued its abusive indefinite forced military and national conscription service and has failed to either limit the duration of service or stop abuses against conscripts, including children. From mid-2022 through early 2023, it conducted a new mass conscription drive targeting alleged draft evaders. The relatives of alleged conscription evaders were collectively punished.

Eritrea is not a party to the November 2022 cessation of hostilities [agreement](#) signed between Ethiopian and Tigrayan authorities. The country's forces remained in parts of Ethiopia's Tigray

region where they continued to commit serious violations, including [widespread sexual violence](#) and extrajudicial executions, and blocked humanitarian aid from reaching areas under their control.

Despite being a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Eritrea refused to cooperate with key UN and African Union (AU) rights mechanisms, including by denying access to the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and ignoring African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) decisions.

Eritrea criminalizes consensual same-sex relations with up to seven years' imprisonment.

Abusive, Indefinite Military Conscription and Forced Labor

The government continued to use its uniquely abusive form of national and military service to control the population. Despite legal provisions limiting its duration to 18 months, the service—which is compulsory for all Eritreans aged 18 to 40, male and female—has often been indefinite since the start of the country's border war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000. The conscription has forced many Eritreans into military service for years, some decades. Releases from service, if they occur, happen arbitrarily.

Alleged draft evaders are rounded up by police through raids known as *giffas*. From mid-2022 through early 2023, the government of Eritrea conducted an intensive [forced recruitment campaign, including](#) of 50- to 60-year-old reservists called up to serve in border areas.

The government collectively punished relatives of alleged draft evaders and deserters, which is illegal under regional and international human rights law. Government security forces and officials evicted older relatives and women with young children from their homes, cut them off from critical food rations, and arbitrarily detained.

[The conscription system continues to have a devastating impact](#) on children's education. Students of Warsai Yekalo Secondary School, in the Sawa military camp, some of them still children, are [pushed](#) into military service before they finish secondary school, compelling many to drop out. Conscripts have no say about the place and duration of their assignment after Sawa. Conscientious objection is prohibited.

The UN special rapporteur on Eritrea [documented](#) a significant number of school-age children being recruited during recent mass conscription drives.

Unlawful Detentions and Enforced Disappearances

Mass roundups and prolonged arbitrary arrests and detentions without access to legal counsel, judicial review, or family visits, sometimes for decades, targeting the government's many perceived opponents are widespread. Detainees are held in horrific conditions.

Many of the alleged draft evaders rounded up near the capital, Asmara, from mid-2022 through early 2023, were initially taken to the notorious military-run Adi Abeito prison, to the north. Residents saw large crowds of people in one of the prison compounds from October 2022 through late January 2023.

Many Eritreans have been disappeared, including top [government officials](#) arrested in 2001 after they questioned Isaias' leadership, and are held incommunicado (or died in detention). [Sixteen journalists](#) were also arrested that year. Ciham Ali Abdu, daughter of a former information minister, [has been held for 11 years](#) since her arrest at age 15. Former finance minister and critic of the president, Berhane Abrehe, [has remained in incommunicado detention since September 2018](#).

Freedom of Religion

The government continues to detain and deny religious liberty to anyone whose religious affiliation does not match the four government “recognized” denominations: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches.

In 1994, the Isaias regime revoked all Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Eritrean citizenship and imprisoned them for not voting on the independence referendum and for claiming their conscientious objection to military service. There are 36 Jehovah’s Witnesses (10 women and 26 men) [reportedly still in detention](#).

Even the leaders of those recognized faiths are not spared imprisonment. Three Catholic priests, including a bishop who called for peace in Tigray, were [arbitrarily held](#) for over two months in late 2022.

Throughout the year, new arrests of Christians were reported. In January, [44 people holding religious services were reportedly detained and sent to Mai Serwa prison](#), followed by another 103 Christians in April.

The UN special rapporteur on Eritrea said that 44 orthodox monks, supporters of the late patriarch Abune Antonios, were detained in April. A Pentecostal church leader [died in detention in April](#), following 10 years of detention, and was, according to Christian groups, denied the burial chosen by his relatives.

Positively, the UN special rapporteur [reported](#) the release of at least 11 Christians from Mai Serwa in the first quarter of the year.

International Protection and Forced Returns of Eritrean Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Indefinite national service has continued to drive Eritreans from their country. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported [345,000](#) Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in East Africa alone, as of June, out of [over 580,000](#) Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers globally.

Eritreans seeking protection in several countries faced threats to their safety, pushbacks, or forced returns in 2023 by the country’s authorities or by Eritrean forces, including in Ethiopia, Israel, and South Sudan and reportedly in Sudan. Forcibly returned Eritreans face serious risks of persecution or other human rights violations. Egypt had previously deported Eritrean asylum seekers in 2022 who were subsequently held in [incommunicado detention](#), according to the UN special rapporteur on Eritrea.

In Sudan, which [hosted over 130,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum](#) seekers as of February 2023, asylum space and protection for Eritreans shrank further as conflict broke out in April. [Media reported](#) on the alleged abductions and forced returns of Eritrean asylum seekers in Sudan by Eritrean security forces in the early phases of the conflict. In South Sudan, authorities turned back dozens of Eritreans fleeing the conflict in Sudan via flights to South Sudan’s capital of Juba in May, despite the serious risks they faced in Sudan.

In Ethiopia, government policies and ongoing fighting since 2020 kept registrations on hold, leaving many Eritreans unregistered. UN special procedures [condemned](#) Ethiopia’s summary expulsion of hundreds of Eritreans to Eritrea in late June. They called on authorities to provide information on the fates of deportees.

Eritrean asylum seekers abroad protested the celebrations to mark Eritrea’s 30th anniversary of independence in various foreign embassies. In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [threatened to deport Eritrean](#) asylum seekers involved in demonstrations that turned violent outside

an event sponsored by the Eritrean embassy. UNHCR [urged](#) the Israeli government to refrain from actions that could constitute unlawful refoulement.

Key International Actors

Eritrean forces remained in Ethiopia's Tigray region where they have continued to commit serious violations and to [restrict civilians' access to critical aid](#). The Eritrean government, including President Isaias, have repeatedly denied allegations of serious abuses, calling them "[a fantasy](#)."

In June, Eritrea [rejoined](#) the regional body, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), almost 16 years after it withdrew in protest of the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia.

Despite its resumption of diplomatic relations with Djibouti in 2018, a decade after border skirmishes, [Eritrea continues to withhold information](#) about 13 Djiboutian prisoners of war allegedly captured in 2008.

In July, during a visit to Moscow, Isaias [accused](#) the United States' "unipolar world order" of spreading "crises and destruction" around the world.

The US [renewed](#) an executive order related to the crisis in Ethiopia and, with it, the sanctions on Gen. Filipos Woldeyohannes, Chief of Staff of Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), for serious human rights abuses committed by the Eritrean forces in Tigray. In September, the US government added Eritrea for the first time to its list of governments implicated in the recruitment and use of child soldiers and prohibited military assistance to Eritrea under the US Child Soldiers Prevention Act. The European Union maintained individual sanctions, first issued in March 2021, on Eritrea's national security agency head, Maj. Gen. Abraha Kassa, for serious human rights abuses in Eritrea, including killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture.