

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	217
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Amnesty International Report 2014/15 - Eritrea
Udgivet:	25. februar 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. maj 2015

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Amnesty International Report 2014/15

State of Eritrea

Head of state and government: Isaias Afewerki

No political opposition parties, independent media, civil society organizations or unregistered faith groups were permitted to operate. There were severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Military conscription was compulsory, and frequently extended indefinitely. Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners continued to be held in arbitrary detention, in harsh conditions. Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment was common. Eritreans continued to flee the country in large numbers.

Background

On 21 January 2013, around 200 soldiers took control of the Ministry of Information in the capital, Asmara, in an apparent coup attempt. The director of Eritrean state television was forced to read a statement on air containing the soldiers' demands, including freeing all political prisoners, implementing the 1997 Constitution, and putting in place a transitional government. The broadcast was cut off mid-transmission.

In July 2013, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea observed "emerging fissures within the political and military leadership" in Eritrea. In October 2014, they also reported the continued use of coercive measures to collect the "diaspora tax" (a 2% levy on income imposed on Eritrean nationals living abroad) in a number of countries.

After hundreds of Eritreans drowned while trying to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa in October 2013, four Eritrean Catholic bishops issued a letter in May 2014. In a rare public expression of dissent, they criticized the situation that led so many people to continue to leave the country.

Prisoners of conscience

Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained and held in incommunicado detention without charge or trial for various reasons, including: criticizing government policy or practice; for their work as journalists; for suspected opposition to the government; practising a religion not recognized by the state; evading or deserting national service conscription; or for trying to flee the country, or in the place of family members who had fled. In most cases relatives were not aware of the detainee's whereabouts. Some prisoners of conscience had been in prison without charge or trial for two decades.

The government continued to refuse to confirm reports that nine of the 11 so-called G15 prisoners – a group of high-profile politicians detained since 2001 – had died in detention from a range of illnesses, as well as a number of the journalists arrested alongside them. There were unconfirmed reports that eight detainees held since 2005/2006, including government officials and medical doctors, were released in April 2014.

Freedom of religion

Only four faith groups were permitted to operate – the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, and Islam. Members of other banned groups, including Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian denominations, continued to be subject to arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment for practising their religion.

Military conscription

National service continued to be mandatory for all men and women aged between 18 and 50, with no provision for conscientious objection. All school pupils were required to complete their final school year at Sawa military camp, effectively conscripting children into the military. The initial 18-month period of service continued to be frequently extended indefinitely, with minimal salaries and no choice over the nature of work assigned – a system that amounted to forced labour. Conscripts faced harsh penalties for evasion, including arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment. Children at Sawa were kept in poor conditions and received harsh punishments for infractions.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment was reported to be widely used as punishment, interrogation, and as coercion. Common methods included tying prisoners in painful positions for long periods and prolonged solitary confinement.

Appalling prison conditions amounted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Many detainees were held in overcrowded underground cells or metal shipping containers, often in desert locations, suffering extremes of heat and cold. Food, water and sanitation were inadequate.

Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

As of January 2014 UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported 338,129 persons of concern originating from Eritrea, including 308,022 refugees and 30,038 asylum-seekers. Around 3,000 people fled the country each month.

Human trafficking networks continued to prey upon Eritreans fleeing the country, including in Sudan and Egypt. Victims were held hostage, sometimes for a year or longer, and subjected to violence by criminal groups attempting to extract ransom payments from their families. The UN Monitoring Group reported that it had identified a Swiss bank account that had been used to collect such payments.

In April 2014, 266 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers were released from detention in neighbouring Djibouti and transferred to a refugee camp in the south of the country.

International scrutiny

Eritrea faced increased international scrutiny. Appointed to the newly created role of UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea in October 2012, Sheila Keetharuth presented wide-ranging concerns and recommendations in reports to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2013 and June 2014, and to the UN General Assembly in October 2013 and October 2014. The Special Rapporteur's requests for access to the country have not been granted since her appointment in 2012.

In June 2014, a three-member UN Commission of Inquiry was established for one year to investigate all alleged violations of human rights in Eritrea outlined in the reports of the Special Rapporteur.

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