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Eritrea

The Eritrean government's tyranny became more ruthless in 2005. Rule by force and caprice remains the norm, as the government aggressively moves to intimidate the population and to isolate it from the outside world.

The border dispute with Ethiopia continues to fester and is used by the government to justify repressive policies. The government of Eritrea seriously interfered with the United Nations' ability to monitor troop movements along the border in 2005 and threatened to resume war unless Ethiopia accepts an independent Boundary Commission decision which it considers favorable.

Arrests, Imprisonment and Torture

Suppression of Political Dissent and Opinion, Arbitrary Arrest, and Illegal Detention

No political party other than the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is allowed to exist in Eritrea and no national elections have been held since the country won its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Using the excuse that Eritrea remains at war, the government has refused to implement the 1997 constitution, drafted by a constitutional assembly and ratified by referendum, that respects civil and political rights.

The government has arrested thousands of citizens for expressing dissenting views, practicing an "unregistered" religion, avoiding endless military conscription, attempting to flee the country, or on suspicion of not fully supporting government policies. Mass arrests began in September 2001 with the detention of eleven leaders of the PFDJ who questioned President Isayas Afewerki's erratic and autocratic leadership. The government arrested publishers, editors and reporters and closed all independent newspapers and magazines. The arrests continued in 2005 and included three leaders of government-affiliated labor unions, the only unions allowed to operate in the country.

Most of those arrested are held indefinitely in incommunicado detention. None are formally charged, given access to lawyers or brought to trial. Some prisoners are released but are warned not to talk about their imprisonment or treatment. Some manage to escape and flee the country. As of September 2005, the World Food Program reported that ten thousand fleeing Eritreans are in refugee camps in Ethiopia, two hundred of whom fled since January, with two hundred to three hundred more arriving monthly.

Prison Conditions and Torture

Prisoners are often held in secret prisons, including underground cells. Because of the large number of arrests, less prominent prisoners are packed into cargo containers or in other overcrowded prisons. In addition to psychological abuse, solitary confinement and abysmal conditions, escapees report the use of physical torture. Prisoners are suspended from trees with their arms tied behind their backs, a technique known as *almaz* (diamond). Prisoners are also placed face down, hands tied to feet, a method of torture known as the “helicopter.”

Military Conscription Roundups and Arrests

Eritreans between the ages of eighteen and forty-five must perform two years of compulsory national service. In practice, however, the time for service is repeatedly prolonged. There are frequent *giffas* (sweeps) to round up “evaders”—some of whom have already fulfilled their lawful obligations. The government often uses national service as retribution for perceived criticism of government policies. Those accused of evading service are frequently tortured. Conscripts are often used for public works projects, such as road building. There have been persistent reports that they are also used as laborers on party, military, and officers’ personal farms.

In September 2005, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* published photographs taken by a diplomat in Asmara who witnessed a killing by security forces of a young man wounded during a *giffa*. According to the diplomat, a security agent shot the man at close range, execution-style, while the victim lay in the road. The government denied the diplomat’s account and photographs, quoting several persons who lived in the area who asserted that the only body in the street was that of a drunk.

In mid-2005, the government for the first time made hundreds of arrests of family members of children who had not reported to the military training camp at Sawa for their final year of high school or who otherwise did not report for national service. Although the government issued denials, foreign diplomats confirmed the arrests.

Three separate immigration decisions in 2005, by an appellate court in the United States (*Nuru v. Gonzales*, 404 F.3d 1207 (9th Cir.)), the European Court of Human Rights (*Said v. the Netherlands*, Application no. 2345/02), and the United Kingdom Immigration Appeal Tribunal (Appeal No: Eritrea CG [2005]UKIAT 00106), granted asylum to Eritreans fleeing conscription on the grounds that national service is used as a measure of political repression and that anyone forcibly returned to Eritrea is likely to be tortured.

Religious Persecution

The government closed all religious institutions in May 2002 except for those affiliated with the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) churches and Sunni Muslim mosques. Members of Pentecostal Christian churches are arrested for possession of Bibles or for attending communal worship. In 2005, the government intensified its persecution of adherents of unregistered

religions by raiding wedding parties at private homes. Some clergy of a modernizing wing of the Eritrean Orthodox church were also arrested in 2005. Many of those arrested are beaten or tortured during their arrest or while in captivity.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been especially mistreated. Some have been detained for a decade for refusing to participate in national military service even though the official penalty is incarceration for no more than three years. The Eritrean government defends its practices on the ground that the unrecognized churches have failed to register, but some religious groups applied for registration in 2002 and have not been registered. The government announced in April 2005 that it soon would register the Seventh Day Adventist denomination, but as of November 2005, it had not done so.

In September 2005, the United States imposed sanctions after having earlier designated Eritrea as a "country of particular concern" for its religious persecution.

Suppression of Human Rights Groups

Neither domestic nor international human rights organizations are allowed to operate in Eritrea. Indeed, almost no domestic civil organizations are allowed to function except as an appendage to the government or to the PDFJ. In June 2005, the government imposed new restrictions on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing assistance to the country. The restrictions require annual registration and prohibit any NGO with less than U.S.\$2 million in capital (if foreign) or U.S.\$1 million (if domestic) from being registered.

No non-governmental sources of information exist except word-of-mouth. Foreign broadcasts are periodically jammed.

Relations with Ethiopia

The 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia ended with an armistice agreement by which Eritrea and Ethiopia agreed to binding arbitration of their border. An international peace-keeping force, U.N. Mission in Eritrea-Ethiopia (UNMEE), maintains troops and observers along the twenty-five-kilometer-wide armistice buffer line between the two countries. The force and the zone are based on the armistice agreement that suspended the conflict.

In 2003, Ethiopia announced its rejection the decision of the independent Boundary Commission, largely because it awarded the village of Badme, the flashpoint for the war, to Eritrea. The Eritrean government uses the possibility of renewed conflict as a justification for postponing elections, prolonging national service, and for its repressive policies. Eritrea has lashed out against the international community for not compelling Ethiopia to implement the border commission decision. Eritrea insists that the border be demarcated without conditions and Ethiopia insists that, while it accepts the Boundary Commission's decision in principle, demarcation can proceed only after bilateral discussions. No serious international pressure has been applied to Ethiopia to honor its commitments.

In 2005, President Issayas threatened to resume the war if the impasse is not resolved. In October 2005, the government declared that UNMEE helicopters and night patrols could no longer be used to monitor the border. By November, both Eritrea and Ethiopia had substantially increased troop levels and armament near the border.

Key International Actors

In January 2005, the African Union adopted a 2003 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights report finding Eritrea's arrest of the eleven government officials in 2001 and their continued incarceration in violation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. In April, the Inter-Parliamentary Union unanimously concluded that continued detention was a gross violation of fundamental rights under Eritrean and international law, and inferred from the conflicting justifications given by the government that the accusations against the eleven were groundless.

The international community's assistance consists of food and other humanitarian assistance. The European Union announced in 2003 that it would provide Eritrea an unstated sum under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, in addition to a € 96 million five-year aid package (until 2007) for social and economic development. The European Union said that its assistance would depend on the government's willingness to improve civil liberties but has taken no action to withdraw assistance in the face of government intransigence.

With minor exceptions, the United States withholds non-humanitarian assistance to Eritrea because it has refused to release two American embassy local employees arrested in 2001. (After four years, no charges have been filed against them.) In August 2005, Eritrea arrested two more local embassy staff, allegedly for human trafficking. In early summer, the government demanded that the U.S. Agency for International Development cease operations in the country without offering a reason, other than that the government was uncomfortable with HIV/AIDS programs and wanted assistance to be provided directly to the government. In September, the United States imposed a partial denial of arms-export licenses on Eritrea for its religious persecution. This sanction is more symbolic than real because the United States exports few arms to Eritrea. The Eritrean ministry of defense issued a statement calling the sanction part of a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency plot to "instill chaos" in Eritrea and to rescue the Ethiopian government. Despite the official U.S. position of keeping its distance, high-level U.S. Defense department officials frequently visit and praise the Eritrean government for fighting terrorism.