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World Report 2023



Eritrea

Events of 2022

A civilian man who fled violence sits in a bed covered with a mosquito net at the compound of the Agda Hotel, in the city of Semera, Ethiopia, February 17, 2022.

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Eritrea's government continued to severely repress its population, imposing restrictions on freedom of expression, opinion, and faith, and restricting independent scrutiny by international monitors. Eritrea continued to negatively impact the rights environment in the Horn of Africa region.

Eritrea is a one-man dictatorship under unelected President Isaias Afewerki, with no legislature, no independent civil society organizations or media outlets, and no independent judiciary. In 2001, Isaias closed all independent newspapers and arrested 10 journalists held incommunicado to date. Elections have never been held in the country since it gained independence in 1993, and the government has never implemented the 1997 constitution guaranteeing civil rights and limiting executive power.

The government has taken no steps to end its widespread forced labor and conscription, instead, [reports](#) of mass roundups (*giffas* in Tigrinya) and forced conscription to fill the army's ranks increased in the second half of the year as fighting resumed in Ethiopia's Tigray region. In September, it [reportedly recalled reservists](#) (up to the age of 55) in anticipation of renewed fighting alongside Ethiopian security forces in Tigray.

Eritrean forces remained in parts of Ethiopia's Tigray region where they have continued to commit serious violations, including [mass arbitrary detentions](#), and pillage and rape of Tigrayans in Western Tigray zone.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [did not report](#) any information on vaccination campaigns in Eritrea.

Eritrea was [re-elected](#), in late 2021 to the United Nations Human Rights Council on an African group non-competitive slate. However, this [did not](#) result in reforms of its oppressive policies, according to the [UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea](#).

Eritrea continued to refuse to cooperate with key UN and African Union rights mechanisms, including by denying access to the UN special rapporteur. In December 2021, it [opposed](#) the establishment of a commission of human rights experts on Ethiopia ([ICHREE](#)) to investigate abuses by all parties in the Tigray conflict.

Eritrea's 2015 penal code punishes homosexual conduct with five to seven years in prison.

Indefinite Military Conscription and Forced Labor

The government continued to conscript Eritreans, mostly men and unmarried women, indefinitely into military or civil service for low pay and with no say in their profession or work location. Conscientious objection is not recognized; [it is punished](#). Discharge from national service is [arbitrary](#) and procedures opaque. Conscripts are often subjected to inhuman and degrading punishment, including torture, without recourse.

Since Eritrea joined the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, new waves of mass roundups of Eritreans believed to be evading service to fill the army's ranks have been regularly reported, which have included child recruitment according to the UN special rapporteur on Eritrea. Roundups increased [in August and September](#) as fighting resumed in Ethiopia; families of draft evaders also [faced reprisals](#), including arbitrary detentions and evictions from their homes. In September, the media said that reservists, men 55 years old and below who had been discharged from the army but were still expected to undergo guard duties, were also [being called up](#). Families are not given official information about the fate of their loved ones sent to fight in Tigray.

Conscription begins at the Sawa military camp where students, some as young as 16, are forced to attend their final year of secondary school while undergoing compulsory military training. Students in the camp are under military command, with harsh military punishments and discipline, and female students have [reported](#) sexual harassment and exploitation. Dormitories are crowded and health facilities very limited.

Unlawful, Prolonged, and Abusive Detentions

There continued to be widespread mass roundups and prolonged arbitrary arrests and detentions without access to legal counsel, judicial review, or family visits, some for decades, targeting perceived government's opponents, including draft evaders.

[Countless prisoners](#) languish in the country's extensive formal and informal prison network, held in overcrowded places of detention with inadequate food, water, and medical care.

Many detainees, including top [government officials](#) and journalists arrested in 2001 after they questioned Isaias's leadership, are held incommunicado. Some are believed to have died in detention. An additional [16 journalists](#) were also arrested at the time. [Ciham Ali Abdu](#), daughter of a former information minister, has been held for 10 years since her arrest at age 15. Former finance minister and critic of the president, Berhane Abrehe, has been in [incommunicado detention since September 2018](#).

Freedom of Religion

For over two decades, the government has [denied religious liberty](#) to anyone whose religious affiliation does not match the four denominations that the government "recognizes": Sunni Islam,

Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches. People affiliated with “unrecognized” faiths continue to be imprisoned, and torture has been used to force them to renounce their religion.

The trend of releases that [took place](#) in 2020 and 2021 was reversed. People continue to be detained purely because of their religious beliefs. In March, [29 Christians](#) were [reportedly detained](#) during a prayer meeting in Asmara and taken to the Mai Serwa prison. Twenty Jehovah Witnesses [remained](#) in detention since [at least 2014](#), including [Tesfazion Gebremichael](#), 80, detained since 2011.

Between October 11 and 15, the Eritrean government detained three Catholic priests, Abba Abraham Habtom Gebremariam, Father Mihretab Stefanos, and Bishop Abune Fikremariam Hagos. Abune Hagos who was arrested as he returned to Eritrea from Italy, had in [2019 penned](#), along with three other bishops, a pastoral letter obliquely calling for justice and reform. In February, Abune Antonios, the deposed Eritrean Orthodox Church patriarch, [died](#) while under house arrest, to which he had been subjected [since 2006](#).

The government continued to take control of schools and other institutions run by the Catholic church. In August, [media reported](#) that the government planned to take over two Catholic-run vocational training centers. Some peaceful protesters [arrested](#) in 2017 and early 2018 for protesting the government takeover of Al Diaa Islamic school, remained in detention.

Refugees and Returnees

Eritrea is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and has not ratified the 1969 African Refugee Convention.

There were [over 580,000](#) Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers abroad as of the end 2021, and “the overwhelming majority cited the indefinite national service as the principal reason they fled the country,” according to the May 2022 [report](#) of the UN special rapporteur [on the situation of human rights in Eritrea](#).

Eritreans seeking protection abroad have been targeted for abuses by Eritrean authorities and security forces, both while abroad (in Ethiopia), and after forced returns from other countries, such as Egypt.

Since the outbreak of conflict in Tigray in November 2020, warring parties, including Eritrean forces, have subjected Eritrean refugees to serious abuses.

In January, the [UN reported](#) that a January air strike near the Mai Aini camp in Tigray region killed three Eritrean refugees, two of them children. Humanitarian access and basic services to the 25,000 Eritrean refugees living in two remaining camps in Tigray [has been affected](#) by fighting, an uptick in drone strikes, and the Ethiopian government’s effective siege on the Tigray region.

In January, the UN reported 20 preventable deaths there due to lack of medicine and health services. [Nongovernmental organizations](#) and UN rights experts [raised concerns](#) that the effective siege and impunity for conflict-related abuses was contributing to Eritrean refugee women’s vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation.

In March 2022, Egypt [forcibly returned](#) 31 Eritrean refugees and threatened additional repatriations; in December 2021 it [had deported 24 Eritrean refugees](#), including children. In Sudan’s capital, Khartoum, for several months, undocumented Eritreans were [reportedly arbitrarily](#) detained and released after paying significant sums.

In April, [UN human rights experts](#) cited “patterns of human rights violations against Eritreans who have been forcibly returned” to Eritrea, including torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearance,

and arbitrary detention. They stated that some Eritreans, deported by Egypt in October 2021, had not been seen or heard from since and were believed to be held in incommunicado detention by Eritrean authorities.

Key International Actors

In January, the UN launched a new development cooperation framework with Eritrea, sending a high-level delegation to Asmara.

In March, Eritrea [voted against](#) a UN general assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, [one of only five countries](#) (including Russia) to do so. President Isaias later [defended Russia](#) in an annual Independence Day speech. He [reportedly invited](#) Russia to establish a naval base on its Red Sea Coast.

In its [concluding observations on Eritrea](#), in April, [the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child \(ACERWC\)](#) noted that by not affording children the right to freedom of religion, Eritrea had violated the provisions of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

The committee recommended that Eritrea, referring to the final year of schooling in the Sawa military camp, should ensure that children are not educated in a militaristic environment, revise its policy recognizing only four religions, the law prohibiting independent local media platforms, take legislative measures to explicitly outlaw the use of corporal punishment, and authorize the committee to conduct a fact-finding mission to investigate allegations of child military training in the Sawa camp.

In September, US President Joe Biden extended, for one year, the ability to sanction Eritrean officials for committing serious human rights abuses in Tigray. The European Union maintained individual sanctions on Maj. Gen. Abraha Kassa, head of Eritrea's national security agency, which it rolled out in March 2021, for serious human rights abuses in Eritrea including killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture. In September, the US [condemned](#) Eritrea's re-entry into the conflict.

In July, Somalia's new president visited Somali troops being trained in Eritrea, reversing his predecessor's denials that any were there.