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COI QUERY

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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on 11 March 2022. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE – Eritrea

Conditions regarding the civilian branch of the national service, including for women, 1 January 2021-1 March 2022

1. Applicability of exemptions from the national service for women

Background information regarding the availability and applicability of exemptions from the national service for women can be found in: [EUAA Query Response Eritrea - Latest developments on political situation and national service between 1 January 2020-31 January 2021](#) (April 2021), at pp. 6-7; [EUAA Country of Origin Information Report Eritrea National service, exit, and return \(September 2019\)](#), at pp. 31-34; [EUAA Country of Origin Report Eritrea - National service and illegal exit \(November 2016\)](#), at pp. 22-23, 40-41; [EUAA Country of Origin Information Report. Eritrea Country Focus \(May 2015\)](#), at pp. 33-34.

According to a shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, submitted by the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR):

‘Proclamation No.11/1991 provided the statutory basis for national service prior to the promulgation of the current National Service Proclamation (No. 82/1995); its provisions exempted married women and single mothers from national service duties. The 1995 National Service Proclamation removed these exemptions for married women and mothers, contributing to the disintegration of families. Whilst the GoSE claims that married women and single mothers are exempt, there is no legal basis for this claim and where they are exempted, this is done in an arbitrary manner and at the discretion of the recruiting officer’.¹

In its 2021 report on trafficking in Eritrea, the United States Department of State (USDOS) noted the following:

‘Eritreans may be released from National Service after an indefinite number of years by petitioning the government based on criteria that shift periodically and are not fully transparent; policies and practices for obtaining release from National Service are inconsistent across organizations and job fields, but officials generally release expectant mothers and individuals who can show they have become the sole or primary source of familial support’.²

In January 2022, Human Rights Watch, referring to events that occurred during 2021, noted that ‘mostly men and unmarried women were sent indefinitely into the military or civil service for low pay and with no say in their profession or work location’. Human Rights Watch further noted,

¹ EMDHR, Eritrea Shadow report to the CEDAW Committee, 13 January 2020, [url](#), para. 3.2

² USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 06 Jul 2021, [url](#)

citing its August 2019 report³, that ‘discharge from national service is arbitrary and procedures are opaque’.⁴

Information outside of the reference period that might nevertheless prove useful includes:

According to the report of a Fact-finding Mission by the Finnish Immigration Service in May 2019, quoting an international organization operating in Eritrea, ‘not all women in Eritrea are exempted from National Service; instead, several females are ordered to do National Service like men. Family relations or the place of residence have no influence on where a person is sent’.⁵

According to sources in the 2020 report by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), there are 6 categories identified as exempt in practice: a. ‘mentally ill persons b. ‘disabled persons c. ‘persons with medical conditions d. ‘pregnant women e. ‘mothers of young children f. ‘persons who are sole providers for their families.⁶ None of the sources interviewed by the DIS ‘had received any information suggesting that rules or practices regarding exemption from national service had changed after the signing of the Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia on 9 July 2018.⁷

2. Details regarding the conditions of Eritrea’s national service for women

Background information regarding the conditions of Eritrea’s national service, including the civilian branch, can be found in: [EUAA Query Response Eritrea - Latest developments on political situation and national service between 1 January 2020-31 January 2021](#) (April 2021), at pp.4-6; [EUAA Country of Origin Information Report Eritrea National service, exit, and return \(September 2019\)](#), at p. 37; [EUAA Country of Origin Report Eritrea - National service and illegal exit \(November 2016\)](#), at pp. 39-44; [EUAA Country of Origin Information Report. Eritrea Country Focus \(May 2015\)](#), at pp. 39-40.

Duration

No information on any particular differences between men and women regarding the duration of the national service could be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

In May 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, in a report focusing on events in the reference period 5 May 2020-28 April 2021, stated that ‘the national/military service remains in place in Eritrea’, and that no information was available ‘of any

³ Human Rights Watch, ‘They Are Making Us into Slaves, Not Educating Us’, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2022 - Eritrea, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

⁵ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), p. 49

⁶ DIS, Eritrea- National service, exit and entry, 3 February 2020, [url](#), para. 40

⁷ DIS, Eritrea- National service, exit and entry, 3 February 2020, [url](#), para. 39

improvement in conditions compared to previous years, or evidence of a reduction in the duration of national/military service⁸, confirming earlier reports addressing the issue⁹.

According to Eritrean law, nationals between 18-40 years old must undergo six months of military training, as well as ‘12 months of active military service and development tasks in military forces for a total of 18 months’.¹⁰ However, ‘since the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict, the 18-month limit has been suspended’.¹¹

In July 2021, USDOS reported that the ‘active military duty’ component ‘constitutes a small and diminishing percentage’ of the national service.¹² The same source further mentioned that, due to the suspension of the legal 18-month limit of the service, ‘most individuals are not demobilized from government work units after their mandatory period of service, but rather are forced to serve indefinitely under threats of detention, torture, or familial reprisal’.¹³

While outside the reference period, a November 2019 report by the Finnish Immigration Service stated that it was, at that time, ‘aware of Eritreans who have been called back into national service they had already completed. [...] At least young men have been called back into service before, but now even young women have been called back, as well’.¹⁴

It should be noted that, in May 2016, the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea concluded that:

‘Eritrea’s military/national service programmes violate Article 565 of Eritrea’s Transitional Penal Code, which criminalises enslavement. They also violate Article 8 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] ICCPR, Article 5 of the [African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights] ACHPR, and the Slavery Convention of 1926. Aspects of the programmes also violate Articles 9, 10, 12, 17 and 22 of the ICCPR, Articles 8, 12, 15 and 18 of the ACHPR, and the 1930 and 1957 conventions on forced labour. [...] [Additionally], the Commission has concluded that programmes also constitute the crime against humanity of enslavement.’¹⁵

Conditions and tasks

No information on any particular differences between men and women regarding the conditions and tasks of the national service could be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 37

⁹ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), p.7; BBC, Ethiopia-Eritrea border: Landmark summit aims to end conflict, 8 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰ Eritrea: Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 of 1995, 23 October 1995, [url](#), Article 8

¹¹ USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 06 Jul 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 37

¹² USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 6 July 2021, [url](#)

¹³ USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 6 July 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), p.8

¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, 8 June 2016, [url](#), para. 95

In May 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea pointed out that, while ‘some conscripts perform purely military roles in the army’, in fact ‘most draftees are assigned to work in civilian administration, infrastructure projects, education and construction and perform other duties, without any free choice about the area of their employment’.¹⁶

The same source noted that ‘national service conscripts are not allowed to travel within the country without a permit, and that those of conscription age who have not yet been demobilized are banned from travelling abroad’.¹⁷ On the topic of restrictions, an earlier report of 2019 by the Finnish Immigration Service stated that ‘the duty to report for national service has become stricter and more heavily controlled. Individuals doing their national service must register as being present on a daily basis’, while ‘those who do their service at government agencies must report their presence in the morning and in the evening’. According to an organization quoted in the report, ‘the duty to report of government employees was increased to four times a day [...] because there are not enough people left in the national service’.¹⁸

Also in May 2021, a report by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) quoted the Horn of Africa director of Human Rights Watch, who stated that “‘the whole civil service system in Eritrea — teachers, doctors, everyone — are conscripts’”.¹⁹

In July 2021, USDOS highlighted reports of ‘grave human rights violations in the military/national service regime in Eritrea, including its prolonged and indefinite duration, abusive conditions and the use of conscripts in forced labour’.²⁰

USDOS further quoted reports alleging that ‘some partially or wholly government-funded enterprises employed national service workers’, while not providing further info on the nature of these reports.²¹

According to USDOS, national service conscripts fulfilled roles including:

‘office work in government agencies and enterprises (functions ranging from lawyers, diplomats, and mid-level managers to skilled technicians and mechanics, to clerical, maintenance, and janitorial work); medical professionals and support workers; elementary and secondary school teachers; and construction or other unskilled physical labor; [...] labour in mining enterprises partially owned by the government, [including] white collar occupations in mine management, technical analysis, and/or government oversight responsibilities.’²²

¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 39

¹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 52

¹⁸ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), p.8

¹⁹ PBS, 500,000 Refugees, ‘Slavery-like’ Compulsory Service, No National Elections, Border Conflicts & Secret Prisons: 5 Human Rights Crises in Eritrea, 4 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 37

²¹ USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 6 July 2021, [url](#)

²² USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 6 July 2021, [url](#)

Remuneration during the national service

No information on any particular differences between men and women regarding the remuneration the national service could be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

In May 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea stated that salaries in the national service ‘are extremely low and do not allow conscripts to support a family’.²³

Also in May 2021, PBS quoted the Horn of Africa director of Human Rights Watch, stating that conscripts in the civils service system of Eritrea were ‘not paid livable wages’.²⁴

In July 2021, USDOS highlighted that, while ‘conditions [were] often harsh for those in military service or physical labor, [...]some national service members experience normal, civilian workplace conditions, albeit with low pay and, in many cases, negligible to complete lack of freedom to pursue alternative employment opportunities’.²⁵

While outside the reference period, the November 2019 report by the Finnish Immigration Service stated that ‘the pay received from the national service is not enough to live on in Eritrea. [...] In the afternoon, recruits leave their place of service and go to work somewhere else. Still, even Eritreans who hold three separate jobs have difficulty making a living’.²⁶

Sexual violence during national service

The May 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea highlighted that sexual abuse during national service ‘continued with impunity’, with women being more vulnerable, although the source did not specify whether this occurred during the military and/or civilian branch of the service.²⁷ An earlier report of May 2019 by the Finnish Immigration Service, had pointed out that ‘violence against women and girls performing armed national service in the military has increased’, noting that rape and sexual abuse ‘within the military [was] even worse than before’ and ‘led to increased desertion from places of service’, but no such acts were reported by the source with regards to the civilian branch of the service.²⁸

²³ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 39

²⁴ PBS, 500,000 Refugees, ‘Slavery-like’ Compulsory Service, No National Elections, Border Conflicts & Secret Prisons: 5 Human Rights Crises in Eritrea, 4 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁵ USDOS, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Eritrea, 6 July 2021, [url](#)

²⁶ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), p.8

²⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Eritrea Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike, 12 May 2021, [url](#), para. 55

²⁸ Finnish Immigration Service Eritrea: Fact-Finding Mission to Ethiopia in May 2019, 20 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

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