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The State of the World's Human Rights; Eritrea 2023

Background

Eritrean Defence Forces continued to carry out systematic and widespread sexual violence, including rape and gang rape, against women in neighbouring Ethiopia's Tigray region, months after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in November 2022 (see Ethiopia entry). The government failed to initiate any investigation into these, and other crimes under international law committed in Tigray. The president denied well-founded allegations of the Eritrean army's conduct as "fantasy".

Eritrea continued to refuse to cooperate with international mechanisms, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

The ban imposed on independent media in 2001 remained in place.

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances

The government continued its 22-year-long policy of arbitrarily detaining and, in some cases, carrying out the enforced disappearance of journalists, real or perceived political dissidents and members of religious congregations (see below, Freedom of religion and belief) as a tool of repression. Detainees' rights to judicial review and access to legal counsel were denied. The fate and whereabouts of 11 members of the G-15, a group of 15 senior politicians who spoke publicly against the president in 2001, remained unknown, along with that of 16 journalists accused of being linked to the G-15.

Freedom of religion and belief

The authorities discriminated against people on the basis of their faith, denying those belonging to unregistered religions the right to practice their beliefs. Hundreds of people remained in prolonged arbitrary detention and some were subjected to enforced disappearance for belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea were the only registered religions, while the Baha'i faith was recognized de facto.

On 9 April, Pastor Tesfaye Seyoum, the founder and leader of Meserete Kirstos Church, died in Mai Serwa prison, where he had been held for 10 years for belonging to a banned religion. The authorities did not permit his family to bury him for 10 days, and then compelled them to do so in the capital, Asmara, not his home town.

Indigenous Peoples' rights

The Afar Indigenous People continued to experience multiple government attempts to interfere with their customary way of life, including by banning them from fishing, their primary livelihood. According to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, they were "subjected to discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrests, disappearance, violence and widespread

persecution”; and as of May, at least 57,000 of them were registered as refugees in Ethiopia, having fled their homes.

Forced labour

The use of mandatory indefinite national military service persisted, as well as the forced labour attached to it, sometimes amounting to slavery.

In his report to the UN Human Rights Council in June/July, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea said he had received information about “heavy round-ups” of conscripts in August 2022. Up to November 2022, the army used “coercive practices to force individuals to participate in military action in Ethiopia”, and families were forced to hand over their relatives, including children.

Reports of torture and other ill-treatment and sexual violence continued in conscript camps. The Special Rapporteur reported that former women recruits of the Sawa military training camp said that camp officials carried out rape and other forms of gender-based violence against female conscripts.

Many young people were forced to spend their final secondary school year at the Sawa military training camp, making it difficult for them to complete their education.