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World Report 2013 - Eritrea

Torture, arbitrary detention, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and religious freedom remain routine in Eritrea. Elections have not been held since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the constitution has never been implemented, and political parties are not allowed. There are no institutional constraints on President Isaias Afewerki, now in his twentieth year in power.

In addition to ongoing serious human rights abuses, forced labor and indefinite military service prompt thousands of Eritreans to flee the country every year.

Access to the country for international humanitarian and human rights organizations is almost impossible and the country has no independent media. In recognition of the “continued widespread and systematic violation of human rights,” the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2012 appointed a special rapporteur on Eritrea.

Forced Labor and Indefinite Military Service

National service keeps most young Eritreans in perpetual bondage. Although a decree mandating compulsory national service limits service to 18 months, in practice the government prolongs service indefinitely. National service conscripts are poorly fed and receive inadequate medical care. Eritrean refugees describe them as emaciated. Their pay (less than US\$30 per month) is insufficient to provide sustenance for a family. Female conscripts report sexual abuse by commanding officers. In early 2012, President Isaias acknowledged that national service members and government employees are so poorly paid that they essentially “have been fulfilling their duties apparently without pay” for the past 20 years.

Conscripts allegedly provided forced labor to construct infrastructure at the Bisha gold mine, Eritrea’s only operating mine and a major source of revenue. Although the Eritrean government had agreed with the mine’s principal international owner that no national service conscripts would be allowed to work at Bisha, it required use of a ruling party-controlled contractor, Segen Construction. Segen makes widespread use of conscript labor and there is evidence that it did so at Bisha as well. Escapees told Human Rights Watch in 2012 that they worked 12-hour shifts and endured dangerously inadequate food and housing conditions. They did not complain because, as one escapee told Human Rights Watch, “we were afraid for our lives.”

Recent escapees report that conscripts are also involuntarily assigned to public works projects, the ruling party’s commercial and agricultural enterprises, farms owned by high-ranking military officers, and the civil service.

On average, over 1,500 Eritreans flee the country monthly despite shoot-to-kill orders to border guards and immense dangers along escape routes. Unaccompanied minors also flee; the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported over 1,100 unaccompanied minors living in one Ethiopian refugee camp in 2012. Not only are ordinary citizens defecting, so are those the government had privileged with authority, foreign travel, and publicity.

In October, two senior air force pilots defected to Saudi Arabia in the plane normally used by Isaias. Earlier, Eritrea's standard bearer at the 2012 Olympics asked for asylum along with three teammates. Repression in Eritrea, he said, "forces people to do things that may cost them their life, but at the end of the day sometimes there isn't a choice." Two prominent musicians were also reported to have fled abroad.

Torture, Death, and Prolonged Incarceration without Trial

Eritreans are routinely subject to imprisonment without explanation, trial, or any form of due process. Incarceration often lasts indefinitely. Senior government officials and journalists, arrested in 2001 after they raised questions about President Isaias' rule, remain jailed incommunicado. Defecting guards report that most of these officials have died.

According to accounts from those who have fled, conditions in Eritrea's detention facilities are abysmal, with minimal food and medical care. Prisoners are held in underground cells and shipping containers, subject to boiling and freezing temperatures. Many prisoners die from the harsh conditions.

Torture and other abuses during detention are routine. Punishments include mock drowning, being hung from trees by the arms, being tied up in the sun in contorted positions for hours or days, being doubled up inside a rolling tire, having handcuffs tightened to cut off circulation, as well as frequent beatings.

Restrictions on Freedoms of Expression and Association

The Isaias government closed the independent press in 2001 by revoking their licenses and arrested its editors and publishers. Based on former guards' testimony, Reporters without Borders reported that four journalists died in prison in 2012, including two imprisoned since 2001. Journalists working for government agencies, arrested since 2009 for allegedly providing information to Western nongovernmental organizations and governments, remain incarcerated incommunicado.

All domestic media are controlled by the government. Two of four internet service providers prohibit access to sites unapproved by the government and persons using internet cafes are subject to surveillance. Eritrea periodically jams satellite radio transmissions by opposition groups. For the sixth year, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2012 named Eritrea "one of the world's most censored countries."

Defectors describe a climate of intense fear in the country. To question authority, much less criticize it, can result in imprisonment and worse. Gatherings of more than seven unrelated people are forbidden and formation of NGOs is prohibited. Political organization is restricted to the ruling

party, the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Unions are prohibited, except for PFDJ subsidiaries.

Interference with Religious Beliefs and Practices

The Isaias government controls all religious activity. The government acknowledges a right to exist only for four “recognized” religious groups, the Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church. Other religious groups have applied for recognition since 2002 but the government has never acted on their applications. It deposed the Eritrean Orthodox Church patriarch in 2005, after he protested government interference in church affairs. He remains under house arrest in ill health. The government selected his successor and also appointed the current Sunni *mufti*, the chief Islamic legal authority.

Members of “unrecognized” religions are arrested, held in oppressive conditions, and sometimes tortured to compel them to recant their faith. Jehovah’s Witnesses are especially victimized. Twelve were arrested in 2012 while attending a funeral, and one died in 2012 because of heat prostration in an underground cell. Currently, 56 Jehovah’s Witnesses are incarcerated, including 11 in their 70s and 80s and 3 conscientious objectors held since 1994.

Retaliation against Family Members

Since at least 1995, Eritrea has imposed a 2 percent income tax on Eritrean expatriates (retroactive to 1992) to be eligible for consular services, such as notarizing powers of attorney, certifying educational decrees, and issuance of travel documents. Relatives in Eritrea of expatriates who refuse to pay the tax have been threatened with loss of business licenses or have been prevented from selling property because of a missing notarial. Canada and Germany prohibit collection of the tax, while the Netherlands and others are considering a ban.

Families of national service conscripts who abscond are fined 50,000 Nakfa (US\$3,333), a crushing sum for many in a country where annual per capita income is 8,040 Nakfa (US\$536).

Horn of Africa Relations

Eritrea is under UN sanctions for trying to destabilize neighboring states by arming rebel groups and for having attacked Djibouti.

Relations with Ethiopia remain strained 12 years after the end of a border war between the two countries. Ethiopia occupies territory that a Boundary Commission, established by the parties’ armistice agreement, awarded to Eritrea, a decision that Ethiopia has ignored. A United Nations Security Council (Security Council) Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia reported in July 2012 that Eritrea continued to violate Security Council resolutions “by deploying Ethiopian armed opposition groups via Somali territory.” Earlier in the year, Ethiopia launched brief cross-border raids against rebel groups that Ethiopia claimed Eritrea was training and arming. Eritrea mobilized but did not retaliate militarily. In October, Ethiopia released 75 Eritrean prisoners of war (POWs) captured in the raids; seven POWs asked for asylum.

Eritrea invaded Djibouti in 2008 but persistently denied it had done so until 2010 when, succumbing to international pressure, it pulled back its troops and agreed to Qatari mediation of border issues. Even so, Eritrea refused to address Djibouti's claims that it was holding 19 POWs. In 2012, three escaped POWs told the UN Monitoring Group they had been among eight POWs held by Eritrea. All suffered from malnutrition and denial of medical treatment for wounds. As a result, the other five prisoners were too weak to escape; two had gone blind, one had lost use of an arm.

The UN Monitoring Group reported it had found no evidence of direct Eritrean support for Al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2012.

Key International Actors

At the end of 2011, Eritrea expelled nearly all remaining foreign nongovernmental aid groups (a small UN aid mission remains). Although President Isaias asserts the expulsions promote his policy of self-reliance, they reinforce his policy of isolating the Eritrean population from foreigners. Earlier in 2011, Isaias accused international NGOs of having a "pathological compulsion for espionage."

In late 2011, Eritrea cancelled a multi-year European Union assistance program. No country that had previously provided loans or grants to Eritrea announced new financial assistance in 2012. Isaias repeatedly accuses the CIA of conspiring against Eritrea. The CIA, he said in 2012, "is preoccupied with targeting the key aspects of the Eritrean economy."

One source of foreign exchange comes from extensive smuggling of weapons and Eritrean refugees to Sudan and Egypt by Eritrean security forces, according to the UN Monitoring Group.
