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The State of the World's Human Rights; Eritrea 2024

The use of mandatory indefinite military service, sometimes amounting to forced labour and slavery, persisted. Returning refugees faced human rights abuses. The right to education was violated. The right to freedom of expression was stifled and the fate of government critics forcibly disappeared in 2001 remained unknown. The government continued in its failure to implement the UN Commission of Inquiry's recommendations to investigate crimes under international law; and denied access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

Forced labour

The decades-long use of mandatory indefinite military service for those aged between 18 and 40 continued, as well as the forced labour and other gross human rights violations associated with it. The policy requires conscripts to complete their final secondary school year at the notorious Sawa military training camp, where forced labour, sometimes amounting to slavery, was documented (see below *right to education*).

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Eritrean refugees faced human rights abuses in countries to which they fled for safety. The government regarded claiming asylum abroad as evidence of treason, and anyone forcibly returned to Eritrea could be detained. According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, returnees also faced torture and sometimes death. In May, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea (Special Rapporteur on Eritrea) said that the authorities "reached across borders... to control Eritrean diaspora politics and silence pro-democracy activists, journalists, political opponents and human rights defenders." Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia were rounded-up, detained and summarily expelled to Eritrea. Women and girls in particular suffered violations by the Rapid Support Forces and others in Sudan, including sexual violence and domestic servitude. In August, Türkiye forcibly returned around 180 Eritreans to Eritrea, in contravention of their legal rights to protection.¹

Right to education

Eritrea had a debt-to-GDP ratio of 211%, one of the highest globally. In 2022, it spent 33.4% of the national budget on debt servicing. This high expenditure on debt servicing threatened the financing of education and other public services. Low spending on education, according to most recent reports, appeared to have stagnated at under 2% since 2020, below the average spending levels in Africa of 3% to 4% of GDP. This was compounded by factors including corruption and a lack of financial transparency.

According to the UN, 48% of primary school-age children were out of school, while only 4% of males and 3% of females of university age were enrolled in tertiary education. There was a shortage of properly trained teachers. Meanwhile, the forced conscription policy that could compel teachers into military service undermined educational standards and increased the already high student-to-teacher ratio. Many young people were forced out of education into military service or exile. There were also reports of the conscription of children, effectively denying them their right to education.

According to UNESCO, the high rate of early and child marriage was a key reason for many students' failure to complete their schooling.

Freedom of expression and enforced disappearances

Eritrea continued to be one of the few countries without any form of registered, privately owned media. The free press was dismantled in 2001, when the government arrested 15 politicians known as the G-15 – along with 16 supporting journalists, after they demanded that President Afwerki implement the draft constitution and hold open elections. The fate and whereabouts of 11 of the politicians, as well as the 16 journalists accused of links to the G-15, remained unknown.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

The government continued in its failure to implement recommendations of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Eritrea, established in 2014 by the UN Human Rights Council. The COI concluded in 2016 that crimes under international law had been committed in Eritrea since 1991, including crimes against humanity and other inhumane acts. In July the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea reiterated that most recommendations made by international and regional human rights mechanisms, including the COI, remained unimplemented. Meanwhile, the authorities continued to deny him access to Eritrea. Also in July, Amnesty International urged the Human Rights Council to intensify its efforts to assess the human rights situation in Eritrea and to reflect on ways to collect and preserve evidence for future criminal judicial proceedings.²
