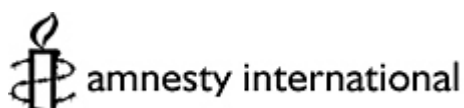


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Amnesty International Report 2009 - Eritrea

Head of state and government: Issayas Afewerki

Death penalty: abolitionist in practice

Population: 5 million

Life expectancy: 56.6 years

Under-5 mortality (m/f): 79/72 per 1,000

Adult literacy: 60.5 per cent

The government prohibited independent journalism, opposition parties, unregistered religious organizations, and virtually all civil society activity. Up to 1,200 Eritrean asylum-seekers forcibly returned from Egypt and other countries were detained upon arrival in Eritrea. Separately, thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners remained in detention after years in prison. Prison conditions were harsh. Perceived dissidents, deserters and those evading mandatory military conscription and other critics of the government and their families were punished and harassed. The government reacted dismissively to any criticism on human rights grounds.

Background

Close to half the population remained under-nourished and dependent on international food aid, including more than 85,000 children with malnutrition. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission completed its mandate in October despite Ethiopia failing to apply its ruling, and the UN Security Council withdrew the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) in the wake of Eritrean obstruction of its operations along the Eritrea/Ethiopia border.

From February to April, Eritrea built up its forces in the long-disputed Ras Doumeira area along the Eritrea/Djibouti border, with Djibouti claiming that Eritrea had encroached on its territory. Small-scale armed conflict between the two countries erupted in June. At least 35 soldiers were reported killed and 50 injured.

Eritrea hosted the Asmara wing of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), which split off from a Djibouti-based ARS wing. Eritrea provided and served as a transit point for weapons and ammunition sold in weapons markets in Somalia.

Eritrean opposition parties in exile remained active in Ethiopia and other countries in

Africa, Europe and North America.

Freedom of religion

More than 2,000 members of unregistered minority religions, including Pentecostal and evangelical denominations, which were banned by the government in 2002, remained in incommunicado detention without charge or trial. Many were arrested in 2008. Some government critics from registered religions, including Islam and the Eritrean Orthodox Church, also remained in detention. Amnesty International considers all who are detained solely on the basis of their religious affiliation or practice prisoners of conscience.

- Abune Antonios, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, arrested in January 2006, remained in secret detention, after a period of house arrest, for criticizing government intervention in church affairs and the detention of three Orthodox priests. He was earlier replaced by a government-appointed Patriarch. His health remained poor and he was reportedly refused adequate medical care for diabetes.
- On 13 and 14 August, at least 40 Muslim clerics and scholars from the Saho ethnic group were arrested by soldiers in Asmara and other towns. They were held incommunicado in undisclosed locations without charge and at risk of torture.
- Pastor Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot of the Kale Hiwot Church, arrested in October 2007, remained in detention. He had previously been subjected to 10 months of solitary confinement and hard labour at Sawa military camp.
- In February, 10 members of the Full Gospel Church who had been imprisoned for five years were released.

Prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners

The government was intolerant of peaceful dissent and restricted freedom of expression, assembly and association. Family members of detainees said that no form of international communication was safe from government monitoring and subsequent reprisal, adding to the difficulties of monitoring individual detainees, especially those who are believed to be held in secret detention.

Political prisoners, some held since 2001 or earlier, accused of support for armed opposition groups in exile, including Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) factions, were presumed to be still detained without charge or trial. Prisoners of conscience included draft evaders, military deserters and failed asylum-seekers who had been returned to Eritrea.

- Hundreds of former officials, independent journalists and civil servants arrested in September 2001 were believed to still be held in incommunicado detention after more than seven years. Among them were 11 former government ministers and veterans arrested after calling for government reform. Some were reported to have died in detention as a result of harsh conditions.
- Aster Yohannes, wife of prisoner of conscience Petros Solomon, was still held in incommunicado detention without charge. She was detained in 2003 when she returned from the USA to visit her children.

Freedom of expression – journalists

The government prohibited all independent and private journalism. There has been no functioning private press in Eritrea since 2001.

- Ten journalists detained in 2001 were still held incommunicado without charge. At least one, Fessahaye Yohannes (known as "Joshua"), was reported to have died in prison in January 2007. The government did not respond to questions about him.
- Daniel Kibrom, a journalist for state-owned Eri TV, was serving a sentence of five years' forced labour for trying to cross the border into Ethiopia. He had been detained in a prison camp since October 2006.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Egypt, Sudan, Germany, Sweden and the UK forcibly returned Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers from November 2007 onwards. These forced returns disregarded the fate of earlier returnees who had been arbitrarily detained and tortured, and ignored UNHCR guidelines which strongly recommend against any forced returns to Eritrea because of Eritrea's poor human rights record.

- The Egyptian authorities carried out a mass forced return of Eritreans from Egypt to Eritrea in the first half of 2008. Up to 1,200 asylum-seekers from Egypt were returned to Eritrea and were arrested and detained upon arrival. They were at grave risk of torture and other ill-treatment. While some pregnant women and women with children were released after weeks in detention, the majority of those returned were transferred to the remote Wia prison and other military facilities and were still held there at the end of the year. Egyptian authorities returned more than 20 additional Eritrean asylum-seekers in late December, while hundreds more remained at risk of return from Egypt.
- On 14 May German immigration authorities forcibly returned asylum-seekers Yonas Haile Mehari and Petros Aforki Mulugeta to Eritrea. Both were arrested upon arrival and remained in detention, Yonas Haile Mehari was held incommunicado, and both were at grave risk of torture and other ill-treatment.
- Some 700 Eritrean nationals, including 60 women and 30 children, who had fled from Eritrea to Sudan and then to Libya, were held in detention facilities in Mistarah, Libya, and other locations under threat of forcible return to Eritrea.

Military conscription

National service was mandatory for men aged 18 to 40 and women aged 18 to at least 27. Initially 18 months long, it included six months' military service and frequent forced labour, could be extended indefinitely, and was followed by reserve duties. Much of the adult population was engaged in mandatory service.

Some young people aged 17 were required to register for national service for the following year and were refused exit permits so that they could not leave the country.

The standard punishment for evading military service has been detention and being tied in painful positions. Imprisonment, ordered by military commanders, could be extended indefinitely. There was no exemption from military service for conscientious objectors.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Conditions of detention in Eritrea remained harsh and prisoners were regularly tortured or otherwise ill-treated. A common reported method of punishment over recent years has been tying detainees in painful positions known as the "helicopter" and the "eight". Prisoners have also frequently been left exposed to the sun for extended periods, or locked in metal shipping containers which magnify extremes of heat and cold. Many

detainees were held in secret prisons and some in security prisons such as Karchele in Asmara. Many prisoners were held in crowded underground cells without access to daylight. Conditions were unhygienic and damp, with no water for washing or cleaning. Prisoners were underfed and received unclean drinking water. There was almost no medical assistance available.

- In February local sources reported the death in prison of Muslim leader Taha Mohammed Nur, co-founder of the ELF.
- Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, a member of the evangelical Full Gospel Church, reportedly died in Wia military prison in October after being denied treatment for malaria. Another evangelical Christian, Azib Simon, was reported to have died in similar circumstances in June.

Amnesty International reports

- Egypt: Deadly Journey through the Desert (20 August 2008)
- Eritrea: Prisoners of conscience remembered on 7th anniversary of mass detentions (18 September 2008)
- Egypt: Amnesty International calls for President to stop flights to possible torture in Eritrea (20 June 2008)
- Libya: Amnesty International warns against deportations of Eritreans (11 July 2008)

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