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HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA: REVIEW OF 2019 - ERITREA [AFR 01/1352/2020]

The use of and indefinite military conscription, amounting to forced labour, continued despite an agreement to end the protracted border dispute with Ethiopia, a dispute the government had used to justify prolonged national military service. Thousands were prevented from travelling abroad without government permission, or due to repeated border closures. Eritreans fleeing the country were subjected to serious human rights violations in transit. Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances continued. Security forces restricted the right to freedom of expression inside the country, and government supporters attacked and threatened human rights defenders in the diaspora.

BACKGROUND

The governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia resumed diplomatic and commercial relations in July 2018 when they signed a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship to end the protracted border dispute which opened hopes for an improvement in the human rights situation. However, there was no change in the Eritrean human rights situation.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Thousands of Eritreans continued to flee the country primarily to avoid the imposition of an indefinite military national service programme, and the general human rights situation and sought asylum in other countries. They faced serious human rights abuses while in transit; many were subjected to detention, abduction, sexual abuse, torture and other ill-treatment in transit countries on their way to Europe, particularly in Libya. In Addition to Eritrean asylum seekers, 1300 Somali refugees in Eritrea crossed the border to Ethiopia after the Eritrean government closed the Umkulu refugee camp.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The right to leave the country remained restricted, and people were prevented from travelling abroad without obtaining permission from the government.

The 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia led to the opening of the Humera, Zalambesa, and Bure border crossings between the two countries, allowing for the free movement of people during the last quarter of 2018. The period witnessed an exponential increase in the number of Eritreans crossing the border and seeking asylum in Ethiopia. However, this came to an abrupt end after Eritrea closed the border crossing points in January 2019.

FORCED LABOUR AND SLAVERY

Conscripts to the mandatory national service programme were forced to serve for indefinite periods which extended far beyond 18 months, the maximum length of national service sanctioned by legislation, despite hopes that the Eritrean/Ethiopian rapprochement might put an end to the indefinite terms of national service. The government continued to conscript students in their final year of high school and made no commitments to release them from national service after they had served 18 months. Thousands remained in open-ended conscription, sometimes for as long as 10 years or more.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances continued, for which security forces were not held accountable. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience and other prisoners, including journalists, former politicians and practitioners of unauthorized religions, continued to be arbitrarily detained without charge or access to lawyers or family members, many of whom had been held for nearly two decades. The whereabouts and fate of 11 politicians and 17 journalists, arrested and detained 18 years ago, for criticizing the President's rule, remained unknown.

Berhane Abrehe, a former finance minister, who was arrested by security forces in the capital, Asmara, in September 2018, had not been seen until April 2019 according to his son. He was arrested just days after he published a book called *Eritrea My Country* which criticized the government and called on Eritreans to use peaceful means to bring about democracy. After his arrest, the authorities refused to disclose information as to his whereabouts or fate. There is no publicly available information if he had not been charged with any offence by the end of the year.

In November, security agents rounded up and arrested more than 20 people in the Mendefera and Adi Quala areas in the Southern Zone. The reasons for their arrest and their current whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The authorities continued to restrict the right to freedom of expression, and particularly sought to undermine the independence of the media. Since 2006, private media had been shut down and independent journalists had been in detention. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Eritrea remained one of the 10 most censored countries in the world.

There was routine and widespread use of harassment, attacks and threats by the government, and its supporters, against human rights defenders in the diaspora, with the apparent support of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the ruling party.

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