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Eritrea

STATE OF ERITREA

Head of state and government	Issayas Afewerki
Death penalty	abolitionist in practice
Population	4.7 million
Life expectancy	56.6 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	84/78 per 1,000
Adult literacy	60.5 per cent

Two-thirds of the population remained dependent on international emergency food aid. The government did not allow opposition parties, independent civil society organizations or unregistered faith groups and tolerated no dissent. Thousands of prisoners of conscience were held. There was no recognizable rule of law or justice system, civilian or military. Detainees had no means of legal redress and judges were unable to challenge or question arbitrary detentions or government or military actions violating human rights. Constitutional and legal protections of human rights were not respected or enforced.

Background

Border demarcation following the Eritrea-Ethiopia war of 1998-2000 did not begin and the International Boundary Commission ended its work in November with the dispute unresolved. Eritrea imposed severe restrictions on the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which administered a buffer zone on the Eritrean side of the border. Eritrean government troops moved into the zone and arrested or conscripted several UNMEE Eritrean staff. There were fears of a new outbreak of fighting between the two countries' troops massed along the border, partly because of both countries' involvement in the Somalia conflict. The mandate of the UNMEE was extended by the UN Security Council in December.

Eritrea continued to support Ethiopian armed opposition groups. It supported opposition to Ethiopian troops in Somalia, including the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia which was formed in Eritrea in mid-2007. Ethiopia supported Eritrean opposition groups formerly based in Sudan.

Freedom of expression Religious believers

Hundreds of members of minority faiths banned by the government in 2002 were arrested in 2007 and indefinitely detained incommunicado without charge or trial. Many were arrested while worshipping clandestinely in private homes or at weddings or funerals. Their churches were closed down and church properties and welfare projects were seized by the government. Some critics from permitted faiths – the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Islam – were also imprisoned.

■ Patriarch (Abune) Antonios, head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, was transferred to secret security detention in May when a new pro-government Patriarch was appointed contrary to church regulations. He had been under house arrest since January 2006 after criticizing the government's intervention in church affairs and the detention of three Orthodox priests. Aged 79 and in poor health, he was refused medication for diabetes.

At the end of 2007 there were at least 2,000 religious prisoners of conscience, mostly from evangelical churches. They included women and children and some had been held incommunicado for more than three years. Among them were 27 Jehovah's Witnesses, three of whom had been held in Sawa military camp since 1994.

Political prisoners

There were frequent arrests by the security authorities of suspected government critics, and no tolerance of dissent. There was no permitted forum for independent expression of political opinion or political association. The authorities reportedly intercepted telephone and internet communications.

It was difficult to obtain information on people who “disappeared” into secret detention. The security authorities took reprisals against detainees’ families if they inquired about an arrest or communicated with international human rights organizations.

- Eleven former government ministers and Eritrean liberation veterans who had called for democratic reform remained in secret detention. They had not been seen by their families since their arrest in 2001. The government had accused them of treason but never charged them or took them to court. Some, such as General Ogbe Abraha, were reported to have died in detention because of harsh conditions and denial of medical treatment.

Hundreds of other people detained in 2001 also remained in secret detention, along with other people arrested subsequently. The few individuals released were ordered to keep silent about their experience.

- Aster Yohannes, the wife of Petros Solomon, a detained former government minister, was still detained incommunicado. She was arrested in 2003 when she returned from the USA to see her children.
- Asylum-seekers forcibly returned by Malta in 2002 and Libya in 2003 were still detained in secret.

Journalists

No independent or private news outlets were allowed. The private press was shut down in 2001.

- Ten journalists detained in 2001 for allegedly supporting dissident government ministers accused of treason were still held incommunicado and without charge or trial. They were prisoners of conscience. There were unconfirmed reports that Fessayahe Yohannes (known as “Joshua”) had earlier died in detention.

Other journalists working for the tightly controlled state media were detained if they seemed to criticize the government. Some of the eight detained in 2007 were reportedly still held at the end of the year, or conscripted into the army.

Military conscription

National military service, in the army or in civilian occupations under military conditions, was indefinite, and was justified by the government because of the military threat from Ethiopia. Military service was compulsory for all citizens aged 18 to 40, with few exemptions allowed. People aged 40 to 50 or who had been demobilized had reserve duties. Women over the age of 27 were informally exempted. There was no exemption for conscientious objection, for example by Jehovah’s Witnesses who refused military service although not rejecting development service.

Conscripts performed military duties or construction labour, or worked in the civil service with their salaries reduced to small conscript “pocket money” payments. Some conscripts were sent on foreign military assignments. Two conscripted journalists captured in Somalia in January were illegally transferred to detention in Ethiopia.

The relatives of young people who hid from conscription or fled abroad were detained by police and made to pay large fines if the person did not return. They remained in indefinite detention if they did not or could not pay the fines. This system had no legal basis nor could it be challenged in court.

Children spent their last year of schooling in Sawa military training centre. They then either went into military service or into further education at vocational training colleges, with conscription postponed until graduation. University education was no longer available in the country. Thousands of young people facing conscription and conscripts fled the country to seek asylum.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture by means of painful tying, known as “helicopter”, continued to be a routine punishment and means of interrogation for religious and political prisoners. Members of evangelical churches were tortured to try to make them abandon their faith. Military offenders were tortured. Many were young people who had tried to flee conscription or who had complained of harsh conditions and the indefinite extension of their national service.

Prison conditions were extremely harsh and constituted cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Many

prisoners were held in shipping containers, which were overcrowded and unhygienic with no toilet or washing facilities, and varied between extremes of heat and cold. Medical treatment was rarely provided.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Despite a guideline from the Office of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, that rejected Eritrean asylum-seekers should not be returned to Eritrea, on account of the serious human rights situation, several were returned by Sudan and detained in late 2007. They included recognized refugees. One asylum-seeker forcibly returned from the United Kingdom was detained. Hundreds of detained Eritrean asylum-seekers in Libya were at risk of forced return. Most Eritrean asylum-seekers were fleeing conscription.

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