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Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 - Eritrea

Head of state and government: **Isaias Afewerki**

Death penalty: **abolitionist in practice**

Population: **5.4 million**

Life expectancy: **61.6 years**

Under-5 mortality: **55.2 per 1,000**

Adult literacy: **66.6 per cent**

Freedom of expression and association were severely restricted. No political opposition parties, independent media, civil society organizations or unregistered faith groups were permitted. Military conscription was compulsory, and frequently extended indefinitely. Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners continued to be held in arbitrary detention. Torture and other ill-treatment were common. Detention conditions were appalling. Large numbers of Eritreans continued to flee the country.

Background

A severe drought hit the region, leaving more than 10 million people in need of urgent assistance. Eritrea's government denied the country was affected by the drought or food shortages, and denied UN aid agencies and humanitarian organizations access to the country.

In November, the government informed the EU delegation in the capital Asmara that it intended to close all ongoing EU development programmes.

In July, a report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea stated that Eritrea had co-planned a bomb attack on an AU summit in Ethiopia in January.

In December, the UN Security Council reinforced sanctions on Eritrea for continuing to provide financial, training and other support to armed opposition groups, including al-Shabab; for failing to resolve the border dispute with Djibouti; and for planning to attack the AU summit. The Security Council demanded that Eritrea cease all efforts to destabilize states, end the use of "diaspora tax" on Eritreans abroad to fund the destabilization of the region, and stop using threats of violence and other illicit means to collect the tax. It also demanded transparency on the use of profits from the mining

industry and requested that all states promote vigilance in business dealings with Eritrea to ensure no assets contributed to Eritrea's violation of Security Council resolutions.

- Two Djiboutian prisoners of war escaped from Eritrea, despite the Eritrean government's denial that it continued to hold such prisoners since the clashes between the two countries in 2008. In December, the UN demanded that Eritrea publish information about any Djiboutian combatants held as prisoners of war.

Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience

There were thousands of prisoners of conscience in the country. These included political activists, journalists, religious practitioners and draft evaders. None were charged or tried for any offence. The families of most prisoners did not know their whereabouts.

- The government refused to confirm reports that nine of the G15 group – 11 high-profile politicians detained arbitrarily since 2001 – had died in detention in recent years.
- In October it was reported that Dawit Isaak, one of 10 independent journalists also detained since 2001, might have died in detention, as he was no longer in the prison where he had been held. The government did not confirm the reports.
- In October, Senay Kifleyesus, a businessman, was arrested, reportedly after he was cited criticizing the President in a Wikileaks cable.

Freedom of religion or belief

Only members of permitted faiths – the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, and Islam – were allowed to practice. Members of banned faiths continued to be arrested, arbitrarily detained and ill-treated.

More than 3,000 Christians from unregistered church groups, including 51 Jehovah's Witnesses, were believed to be arbitrarily detained.

- Jehovah's Witnesses Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos and Negede Teklemariam, continued to be detained without charge in Sawa military camp, where they had been held since 1994 for conscientious objection to military service.
- In May, 64 Christians were reportedly arrested in a village near Asmara. Six were released but the remaining 58 continued to be arbitrarily detained. In June it was reported that over 26 college students were arrested on suspicion of practising an unregistered faith, and were detained at an undisclosed location. It was believed that the majority were taken to Me'eter prison, which was regularly used to imprison religious detainees.

- In November, Mussie Eyob, an evangelist, was returned to Eritrea after being arrested for proselytizing in Saudi Arabia. He was believed to be in incommunicado detention.
- In July, Misghina Gebretinsae, a Jehovah's Witness, died in detention in Me'eter prison, where he had been detained without charge since July 2008.
- In October it was reported that three Christians had died in detention. Two women, Terhase Gebremichel Andu and Ferewine Genzabu Kifly, reportedly died in Adersete Military Camp in western Eritrea because of harsh conditions and ill-treatment. They had been detained since 2009, when they were arrested during a prayer meeting in a private home. Angsom Teklom Habtemichel reportedly died of malaria, after he had been denied medical treatment, in Adi Nefase Military Camp, Asab, after two years of arbitrary detention.

Military conscription

National service was compulsory for all men and women over the age of 18. All schoolchildren were required to complete their last year of secondary education at Sawa military training camp, and children as young as 15 were reportedly caught in round-ups and taken to Sawa.

The initial national service period of 18 months was frequently extended indefinitely. Conscripts were paid minimal salaries that did not meet their families' basic needs. Penalties for desertion and draft evasion included torture and detention without trial.

National service often involved forced labour in state projects, including road building, or working for companies owned and operated by the military or ruling party elites. International mining companies risked using forced labour by sub-contracting work to these companies.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Prison conditions were appalling, and in many cases amounted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Many detainees were held in underground cells or metal shipping containers, often in desert locations and therefore suffered extremes of heat and cold. Prisoners were given inadequate food and drinking water. Many prisoners were held in severely overcrowded and unhygienic conditions.

Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees were frequent. Prisoners were forced to undertake painful and degrading activities, and were tied with ropes in painful positions for long periods.

Refugees

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, estimated that 3,000 Eritreans fled the country every month, mostly to Ethiopia or Sudan, despite a "shoot to kill" policy for anyone caught attempting to cross the border. Many of those fleeing were young people escaping indefinite national service conscription. Families of those who fled faced reprisals, including harassment, fines and imprisonment.

Eritrean asylum-seekers forcibly returned to the country faced a serious risk of arbitrary detention and torture. Despite this, large numbers were forcibly returned by a number of countries.

- In July, one Eritrean woman died and another was seriously injured when they jumped off a truck in which they were being forcibly returned to Eritrea by the Sudanese authorities. In October, the Sudanese authorities forcibly returned more than 300 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers. These forcible returns coincided with a visit to Sudan by the President of Eritrea. During detention in Sudan, five of the Eritreans were reportedly taken away by Eritrean soldiers; their fate remains unknown.
- In October, at least 83 Eritreans were deported from Egypt, without being granted access to UNHCR. In late October, a further 118 Eritreans in detention in Egypt were reportedly facing imminent deportation. Eritrean diplomatic representatives were given access to the detainees, who were asked to fill in forms to arrange for their return. Many were reportedly beaten by security forces for refusing to do so.