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State of Eritrea

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

Thousands continued to leave the country to flee the indefinite National Service, a nationwide system amounting to forced labour. During the summer, Eritreans constituted the third largest group crossing the Mediterranean, after Syrians and Afghans, and a majority of those who lost their lives in the journey. Rule of law remained non-existent; political opposition was still banned; and independent media or universities were not allowed to operate. Restrictions on freedoms of religion and movement remained. Arbitrary detention without charge or trial continued to be the norm for thousands of prisoners of conscience.

BACKGROUND

In May, new Civil and Penal Codes, as well as Civil and Penal Procedure Codes, were promulgated to replace the transitional Codes in place since the country's independence.

In September, a joint venture formed of Sunridge Gold Corp, a Canadian company, and the Eritrean National Mining Corporation (ENAMCO) signed an agreement with the Ministry of Energy and Mines for gold, copper and zinc mining operations. Nevsun Resources, a Canadian mining company, faced a lawsuit in Canada over the alleged use of conscripted labour by its sub-contractor, the Eritrean state-owned Segen Construction, at the Bisha mine – also a joint venture with ENAMCO.

FORCED LABOUR – NATIONAL SERVICE

Mandatory National Service continued to be extended indefinitely in a system that amounts to forced labour. A significant proportion of the population was in open-ended conscription, in some cases for up to 20 years. Conscripts were paid low wages that did not enable them to cover their families' basic needs, and had limited and arbitrarily granted leave allowances which in many cases disrupted their family life. Conscripts served in the defence forces and were assigned to

agriculture, construction, teaching, civil service and other roles. There was no provision for conscientious objection.

Children continued to be conscripted into military training under the requirement that all children undergo grade 12 of secondary school at the Sawa National Service training camp. There they faced harsh living conditions, military-style discipline and weapons training. Some children dropped out of school early to avoid this fate. Children were also conscripted into training in round-ups conducted by the military, in search of people evading National Service.

Thousands of people tried to avoid this system, including by attempting to flee the country. Those caught trying to do so, including children, were arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, often in harsh conditions, and lacked access to a lawyer or family members.

A "shoot-to-kill" policy remained in place for anyone evading capture and attempting to cross the border into Ethiopia.

Older people continued to be conscripted into the "People's Army", where they were given a weapon and assigned duties under threat of punitive repercussions. Men of up to 67 years of age were conscripted.

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, including former politicians, journalists and practitioners of unauthorized religions, continued to be detained without charge or trial, and lacked access to a lawyer or family members. Many had been detained for well over a decade.

The government denied it was detaining many of these prisoners and refused to provide families with information on their whereabouts and health, or to confirm any reports of deaths in custody.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Detainees, including children, were held in harsh conditions, often in underground cells and shipping containers, with inadequate food, water, bedding, access to sanitation facilities or natural light. In some cases, these conditions amounted to torture. Children were sometimes detained with adults.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Eritreans fleeing the country faced multiple dangers on routes through Sudan, Libya and the Mediterranean to reach Europe, including hostage-taking for ransom by armed groups and people smugglers.

Refugees arriving in Europe reported having paid smugglers, many of whom were Eritreans themselves, for each stage of the journey. There were allegations of members of the army being involved in smuggling people out of Eritrea.

High numbers of children left Eritrea alone to avoid conscription, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. Smugglers reportedly offered to take children to Europe for free, holding them hostage once they reached Libya and demanding money from their parents in Eritrea to free them.

In response to the increasing numbers of refugees, some European countries such as the UK tightened their guidance on asylum cases of Eritrean nationals, making untenable claims of improvements in the country of origin as a basis on which to reject cases.

INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY

In June, the UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea presented its first report, documenting numerous cases and patterns of human rights violations since the country's independence and stating that the government may be responsible for crimes against humanity.

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