

Eritrea

Eritrea remains a country in shackles. Arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, severe restrictions on freedoms of expression and worship, and forced labor are routine. Despite government efforts to veil abuses from scrutiny, Eritrean refugees provided consistent firsthand accounts of widespread abuses. Thousands of people fled the country in 2009 due to Eritrea's serious human rights violations and indefinite military conscription.

Arbitrary Detention, Enforced Disappearances, and Deaths in Custody

Thousands of Eritreans are estimated to be incarcerated in known and secret detention facilities.

In September 2001 the government arrested eleven high-ranking government officials who had publicly criticized President Isayas Afewerki's leadership and called for democratic reforms in the wake of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia. Simultaneously, the government closed all private newspapers and arrested their editors and publishers. None of those prisoners has been charged or brought to trial. The government ignored two judgments from the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and a finding by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention criticizing the detentions and ordering the detainees' release. The leaders and journalists were reported to be held in incommunicado detention in remote prisons. In 2009 an opposition website published purported electronic copies of death certificates (but without official seals) for nine of the eleven leaders; four of the journalists have been presumed dead.

These prominent cases represent only a fraction of the number of people arbitrarily detained since September 2001. Thousands of less prominent people have been arrested and incarcerated without charge, trial, or opportunity to appeal and without access to family, lawyers, or independent prison monitoring organizations. A few prisoners were freed without explanation and warned not to speak to anyone about their detention. Most prisoners, however, remain in jail indefinitely. Among those reported to have been arrested in 2009 were five members of the staff of Radio Bana, a radio station sponsored by the Ministry of Education, two journalists for the government radio system, and twelve residents of a town who allegedly helped their children escape to Ethiopia to avoid conscription.

Deaths in custody are common as a result of ill-treatment, torture, starvation, and denial of medical care. Many other detainees have “disappeared,” their whereabouts unknown. In 2009 a reliable website reported the deaths of four prisoners held because of their religious beliefs; three died after torture, the fourth after denial of treatment for malaria.

The Eritrean government is also responsible for extrajudicial killings. Some deliberate killings occurred during detention, others when prisoners attempted to escape confinement or flee the country. The government maintains a “shoot-to-kill” policy for anyone caught trying to cross the country’s borders. Five teenage boys were reportedly shot at close range after having been captured trying to cross the border to Ethiopia in December 2008. Four were killed; the fifth managed to escape to Ethiopia after the others fell on him and he faked death.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

Torture and ill-treatment in detention are routine in Eritrea. Former detainees told Human Rights Watch that detention almost always included severe beatings, often leading to permanent physical damage. In addition to beatings, punishment entailed being hung up by the arms from trees, tied up in the sun in contorted positions for hours or days, and subjected to mock drowning.

Poor detention conditions often amount to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Prisoners were held in a variety of known and secret detention facilities, in unlit underground bunkers, or in shipping containers where they were subjected to extreme temperatures of well over 40°C (104°F) during the day and freezing conditions at night. People who escaped detention reported poor nutrition and starvation rations in most facilities. Medical care is minimal at best. In December 2008, 27 political prisoners, including three journalists arrested in 2001, were moved to the Dahlak archipelago in the Red Sea where prisoners were held in searing heat in subterranean isolation cells. In 2009 four prisoners held in underground cells for five years without access to daylight because they were “unrepentant” for their religious beliefs were reportedly blinded by sudden glare when they were brought to the surface; over the years there have been similar reports about other prisoners released from underground cells.

Freedom of Expression and Association

Since the private press was destroyed in 2001 no independent newspaper has been allowed to publish. No political organization other than the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) was permitted. Eyewitnesses told Human Rights Watch that actions as

innocuous as signing a petition for changes in educational policy result in imprisonment and beatings. Asking a critical question at a government-convened forum could have the same consequences. According to an expatriate website security officials arrested three internet users in late 2008 for allegedly connecting with opposition sites, and internet café owners were warned that they must control internet use.

The government prohibits the formation of private associations not under its leadership and control, including labor unions and self-help organizations.

Freedom of Religion

Since 2002 it is unlawful to practice any religion except the four official faiths: Eritrean Orthodox, Islam, Catholic, and Lutheran. Despite government statements that other religious groups could apply for registration, no applications have ever been granted.

Security forces indefinitely detain members of “illegal” religions. Persons arrested for their religious affiliations and practices suffer the same torture and abuse as other prisoners, usually with the expressed intent of compelling them to renounce their faith. In late 2008 and June 2009 the government arrested 25 Jehovah’s Witnesses, some in their 70s and 80s, bringing the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in detention to 61, three of whom have been detained since 1994. In December 2008 members of unrecognized churches and of a modernizing wing of the Orthodox Church were victims of a wave of arrests. The patriarch of the Orthodox Church, deposed by the government in 2006, remained under house arrest.

Forced Labor

Eritrea’s population is the world’s second most militarized according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies. By law, all able-bodied adult Eritreans are required to perform 18 months of national service; in practice national service is prolonged indefinitely. National service conscripts are paid a pittance and are often used as cheap, involuntary labor on projects for the personal benefit of ranking civilian and military leaders: they are also sometimes used to provide forced labor to implement development projects. Abuse of conscripts, including torture, is common.

Relations in the Horn of Africa

Relations with Ethiopia remain tense. Ethiopia refused to accept the border demarcated by a Border Commission established under an armistice agreement ending the countries’ 1998-2000 war. Although the commission demarcation was to be binding, Ethiopia still occupies

Badme, the village where the war started, which falls on the Eritrean side of the demarcated border. In 2009 a Claims Commission established under the armistice agreement awarded Ethiopia US\$174 million and Eritrea US\$161 million in war-related damages. The Commission found both sides had raped civilians, imprisoned civilians under harsh conditions, mistreated prisoners of war, and engaged in other violations of international law. It also reaffirmed its earlier holding that Eritrea had violated international law in 1998 by attacking Badme, then under Ethiopian administration.

Eritrea continued to occupy a portion of Djibouti, which it entered in 2008, despite a unanimous UN Security Council resolution demanding that it withdraw its forces by the end of February 2009. The Security Council had taken no further action by late 2009.

A UN team monitoring a UN arms embargo on Somalia accused Eritrea of smuggling weapons and up to US\$500,000 per month to insurgents fighting the transitional Somali government. Eritrea denied violating the embargo.

Key International Actors

Foreign aid, while modest, grew in importance as expatriate Eritreans increasingly protested government repression by refusing to remit Eritrea's two percent tax on foreign incomes. One of Eritrea's few international investment projects, a mining development at Bisha in western Eritrea, jointly owned by a Canadian firm and the Eritrean government, is to begin production in late 2010.

Eritrea receives little development aid. In 2009 the European Commission agreed to provide €122 million between 2008 and 2013, principally for food production and "infrastructure rehabilitation." China in 2009 agreed to provide an undisclosed number of volunteers for a year in agriculture, information technology, and sports. UN assistance was about US\$12 million. Abu Dhabi will lend US\$19.9 million for unspecified infrastructure projects. In late 2008 Iran's Bank for Export Development reportedly extended US\$35 million in credit. Eritrea was also the recipient of loans and grants in undisclosed amounts from Qatar and Libya.

The United States provided no direct assistance because President Isayas, angered by US support of Ethiopia, refused its aid, and because the United States accused Eritrea of providing arms to the al Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. The US threatened to place sanctions on Eritrea but to date had not implemented the threat.

The African Union called for sanctions on Eritrea in May as a result of its role in Somalia.