

Eritrea

In less than two decades of independence, the government of President Isayas Afewerki has established a totalitarian grip on Eritrea. Increasing numbers of citizens are fleeing oppression and seeking refuge in neighboring countries and beyond.

President Isayas's government controls all levers of power: political, economic, social, journalistic, and religious. A constitution approved by referendum in 1997 remains unimplemented. No national election has ever been held, and an interim parliament has not met since 2002. The judiciary exists only as an instrument of control. The press is entirely government-owned. No private civil society organizations are sanctioned; all are arms of the government or the sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). International human rights organizations are denied entry.

Isayas uses Ethiopia's failure to permit demarcation of the border with Eritrea as the excuse to justify his repressive rule, claiming that the country must remain on a war footing. In 2008 he said that elections will not be held for decades because they polarize society "vertically." He declared he will remain in full control until Eritrea is secure, "as long as it takes."

Suppression of Free Expression

Dissent in any form has been ruthlessly suppressed since 11 PFDJ leaders were arrested in September 2001 for questioning the president's leadership. They remain detained without charge or trial in a remote maximum-security prison in solitary confinement. The independent press was destroyed in 2001 and its editors and publishers, except those who managed to flee, remain detained. In 2008 Reporters Without Borders ranked Eritrea last of 173 countries on its Press Freedom Index. An Asmara-based British reporter was expelled in 2008 after he refused a demand from the Ministry of Information for the names of sources for his report that veterans of

the war of independence complained about life in Eritrea. More than 40 community leaders were detained in September 2008 for no apparent reason other than that they had complained about Isayas's economic policies at public meetings.

Prison Conditions and Torture

Detention conditions are harsh. There are generally no trials or terms of confinement; detention lasts as long as the government chooses. No independent monitoring organization has access to Eritrean prisons. Former detainees and guards report that prisoners are packed into unventilated cargo containers under extreme temperatures or are held in dark and cramped underground cells. Torture is common, as are indefinite solitary confinement, starvation rations, lack of sanitation and medical care, and hard labor. Of 31 political leaders and journalists arrested in 2001, nine are reported to have died. Other deaths in captivity have also been reported. For example, the family of a founder of the Eritrean Liberation Front—an armed pre-independence group—who was arrested in 2005, learned of his death in jail in 2008 only when called to collect his body.

Military Conscription and Arrests

Under a 1995 decree, all men between ages 18 and 50, and women between 18 and 27, must serve 18 months of military service. In fact, men serve indefinitely and boys under 18 years of age increasingly report being conscripted. In 2008 the World Bank estimated that 320,000 Eritreans are in the military. Conscripts are used as labor on infrastructure and projects benefitting military commanders. Working conditions are severe. Dozens of conscripts have died from intense heat, malnutrition, and lack of medical care; female conscripts are often victims of rape.

Eritreans flee the country by the thousands despite “shoot-to-kill” orders for anyone caught crossing the border. When Eritrea deployed troops to the border and clashed with Djiboutian forces in early 2008, at least 40 soldiers deserted. A refugee camp in northern Ethiopia became so cramped in 2008 that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees opened two new camps to accommodate new arrivals. Thousands of Eritreans escape through Sudan to Egypt and Libya despite efforts by Sudanese officials and Eritrean intelligence agents to return truckloads of people.

Over 2,500 Eritreans arrived in Israel, mostly by way of Egypt, in the first nine months of 2008. In June 2008 Egypt forcibly returned about 1,200 refugees to Eritrea. Although women with children were soon released, single women and most men were incarcerated at Wi'a, a notorious military camp near the Red Sea.

In 2008, President Isayas claimed that international reports of increasing Eritrean refugees are deliberate distortions and that defections are caused by an “orchestrated, organized operation financed by the CIA.”

Unable to staunch the flow of escapees, the government uses collective punishment to extort money. Once the government identifies those who have evaded or fled service, it fines their families at least 50,000 nakfa (US\$3,300); if the family cannot pay, it imprisons family members or seizes their land. No law authorizes either practice.

Religious Persecution

The government permits members of only Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Lutheran churches and traditional Islam to worship in Eritrea. Although four other denominations applied for registration in 2002, none has been registered. Members of unregistered churches, especially Protestant sects, are persecuted. Over 3,000 members of unregistered churches are incarcerated. Many are beaten and otherwise abused to compel them to renounce their faiths. Some are released after a month or two, but others are held indefinitely. Youths who protested confiscation of religious books at a military training school in 2008 were locked into shipping containers.

“Recognized” religious groups have not been spared. In 2006 the government removed the 81-year-old patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church after he refused to interfere with a renewal movement within the church. He has been in solitary confinement since May 2007. Members of the renewal movement have been arrested and abused in the same fashion as members of non-recognized churches. In 2008 the regime revoked the exemption from military service of most Orthodox priests.

The government has also interfered with the Roman Catholic Church. It has taken over church schools, health clinics, and other social service facilities. Since November 2007 it expelled at least 14 foreign Catholic missionaries by refusing to extend their residency permits.

Relations with Neighboring Countries

Tensions with Ethiopia remain high. Ethiopia has not implemented the 2002 border demarcation recommended by the Border Commission established under an armistice agreement that Ethiopia and Eritrea signed at the end of their 1998-2000 war. The commission's decision was supposed to be binding, but Ethiopia refuses to permit demarcation to the extent that the demarcation awards the village of Badme, the flashpoint of the war, to Eritrea.

In July 2008 the United Nations disbanded a peacekeeping force that had been patrolling the border. Eritrea had heavily restricted the force's activities by denying it access to fuel and to large sections of the border, and the opportunity to engage in aerial observation. Heavily armed Ethiopian and Eritrean troops are now within meters of each other.

As in previous years, in 2008 a UN team monitoring an arms embargo on Somalia accused Eritrea of smuggling weapons to insurgents fighting the Somali transitional government and Ethiopian troops in Somalia. Eritrea hosts a faction of the Somali armed opposition led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, as well as several Ethiopian armed opposition groups, consistent with Eritrea's policy of supporting armed groups fighting the Ethiopian government.

In early 2008 Eritrea launched border incursions against Djibouti. On June 10, the Eritrean military opened fire on Djiboutian troops after Djibouti ignored an ultimatum to return Eritrean troops, including officers, who had deserted. The clash resulted in 35 deaths and dozens of wounded, according to a UN investigation. Although the UN did not receive access to Eritrea to investigate the incursions, it concluded that Eritrea was the aggressor.

Key International Actors

Eritrea depends heavily on remittances from Eritreans living abroad, including a 2 percent tax on foreign incomes. Because of Eritrea's repressive policies, remittances have fallen, from 41 percent of GDP in 2005, to 23 percent in 2007.

As a result, Eritrea still depends on substantial foreign aid despite Isayas's policy of self-sufficiency. In 2008, the European Union announced it will provide €115 million between 2008 and 2013. The World Bank announced US\$29.5 million in grants for electrification and for early childhood health and education.

The United States provides no direct assistance partly because Isayas, angered by US support of Ethiopia, refuses its aid. Nevertheless, the US contributed \$3.1 million through UNICEF and other channels. The US did not in 2008 declare Eritrea a state sponsor of terrorism as it had earlier threatened to do because of Eritrea's support of Somali groups the US regards as "terrorists." However, in October the US government did ban arms sales to Eritrea on the basis that it is "not fully cooperating with anti-terrorism efforts."

Despite Eritrea's efforts to encourage financial assistance from Iran, China, and Middle Eastern countries, funding from those sources remains modest.

A 60 percent Canadian and 40 percent Eritrean government-owned gold-mining venture in Bisha, western Eritrea, is scheduled to begin in 2010.

Eritrea's human rights record is due to be reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council in December 2009.