

UPR Submission
ERITREA
April 2009

1. This submission has been prepared by Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights – UK (EHDR-UK) and Release Eritrea, which are both Eritrean human rights organisations registered in the United Kingdom. Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights-UK (EHDR-UK) is a UK based voluntary activist movement working for the respect of human and democratic rights of Eritreans in Eritrea and abroad. It is independent of any political persuasion or religious creed. It was set up in May 2002 in response to the deteriorating human rights and political situation in Eritrea. Release Eritrea was set up in 2004 and specialises on religious freedom and tolerance. Unfortunately, in present day Eritrea no independent organisations are allowed to operate within the country.
2. Eritrea is country that has become a symbol of repression, brutality and despair. Tens of thousands are languishing in various detention places most of which are not fit for human habitation. Families of the detained do not often know what happened to their loved ones and prisoners are mostly kept incommunicado detention. People are detained for unknown reasons, at undisclosed detention places for unspecified periods of time. Torture and ill-treatment are common place and hundreds die in detention due to torture, mistreatment or malnourishment. People between the ages of 18 to 50 are taken for an indefinite ‘national service’ where hard labour and mistreatment awaits them. As a result, thousands are now taking great risks by fleeing the country illegally where a shoot-to-kill policy awaits them at the borders. Villagers are moved to other parts of the country against their will and hunger and starvation is on the rise throughout the country. There is no freedom of worship, association, expression or movement.

Arbitrary Detention and Detention Conditions

3. People can be arrested for any reason by any ‘official’. It is almost impossible to know the exact reasons for one’s detention or even place of detention. The various security forces belonging to the President, the National Security or the generals can detain a person. If the relatives of the detained are lucky, they will know the whereabouts of the detained after a number of weeks but otherwise families are often left in a state of confusion and anxiety. These arrests take place outside the normal justice system and the civilian courts including the High Court cannot intervene.
4. There is a special court, which was set up by the President to allegedly fight corruption, but the set up of the court itself violates the very basic principles of justice. It is presided over by three army officers with no legal background and its rulings are final. They can overturn any court’s decision and trials before this court fall short of international fair trial standards, with trials conducted behind

closed doors and no rights to defence counsel or of appeal to a higher or independent court. In June 2001, the government reported that Ermias Debesay, a former ambassador to China, had been convicted by the Special Court of theft, embezzlement and abuse of power, and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was released on 9 April 2003 after serving his sentence but was later detained again in November the same year for undisclosed and unknown reasons. He remains in detention to this day.

5. Bitweded Abraha who joined the liberation movement in 1973 was detained in 1992 following disagreements with the President. He was briefly released for 3 months in 1997 and remains in jail to this day. Like most people who are detained in Eritrea, he has never been taken to court or charged with any recognised offence. As a result of detention mainly in the dark and in solitary confinement, he is reported to have developed mental health problems and almost lost his sight.
6. A number of political opposition figures are also detained in undisclosed places all over the country. Some were kidnapped from neighbouring countries and their number or whereabouts remains unknown.
7. Most prisoners, especially political prisoners, are not allowed visits by family members or legal representatives. None of these people have been charged with any offence. In fact their place of detention is not known and there isn't even certainty as to whether they are still alive. Prisons are being built in many parts of the country and some are deliberately being built in inhospitable climates in places such as Wi'a and Nakura. Inhumane treatment and torture are widely practiced in all prisons.
8. The above mentioned cases are but handful additional examples to those that have been widely publicised; the detention of eleven high ranking government and party officials (part of the so called G-15) and the fifteen journalists who worked for the independent or state media. Despite numerous appeals from international bodies including the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, they remain in undisclosed detention to date. There are reports that some may have died while in detention but the government never gave any official response.
9. In a discussion paper titled "Ensuring the Right to Bail" which was presented by the Office of the Eritrean Attorney General at a National Workshop on the Right to Bail, held at the Headquarters of the Eritrean Police on 5 June 2001, it was stated that close to 9,000 prisoners were kept in detention without trial throughout the country in the whole of 1999. The number has since increased exponentially turning the whole country into what some have taken to calling a 'big prison'.

Mass killings

10. In November 2004, following a widely reported spate of mass detentions allegedly clamping down on absconders from the national service, an incident occurred which cost the lives of over 40 young people when the walls of the makeshift prison camp walls collapsed as detainees tried to escape. The government of Eritrea dismissed the events and failed to notify parents of the dead. The injured were said to have undergone interrogations whilst in hospital, the death total is still only an estimate figure as many of those injured were transferred to the military hospital and the fate of some remains unknown.
11. In July 2005 it was reported that up to 161 young people were brutally gunned down, whilst attempting to flee from Wi'a military camp. Wi'a military camp is a detention centre in the guise of a military training centre located in a place reputed for its heat and harsh conditions. The government never acknowledged the incident took place and to date the families of those killed are not aware the fate of their children.

Forced Displacement & Hunger

12. In 2009 the government started forcibly displacing many villagers from the southern part of the country to another part of the country under the guise of moving them to more fertile areas of the country.
13. Furthermore, there is a visible increase in the number of beggars in the streets of the main cities. These are people who had no choice but to beg in order to survive. The government's refusal to accept food aid and humanitarian relief is making thousands destitute and there are even reports of death as a result of hunger.

Media Freedom

14. In spite of its protracted struggle for freedom, justice, peace and human rights, Eritrea continues to be ruled by one of the most violent regimes in the world. As a result, the country has become the biggest prison of journalists in Africa. Regarding press freedom, Reporters without Borders (RSF), in its media report published in October 2007, ranked Eritrea the worst country in the world for media freedom. Since 2001, more than a dozen of journalists of the private media have been kept in incommunicado detention. According to RFS and other sources, some four journalists have died in prison on account of torture, ill treatment and other causes.

Religious Persecution

15. Eritrea is perhaps the worst place in the world when it comes to religious freedom. Religious persecution intensified in Eritrean in 2002, when the Eritrean

government officially banned all religious groups in the country except the following: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation. Reports indicate that there are more than 2000 prisoners in Eritrea who were jailed merely on account of their religious belief. Of this, at least 26 are pastors and priests. In August 2005, in an unprecedented violation in the history of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church (the biggest Christian denomination in the country accounting for 40% of the population) and in contravention to canonical laws, the government dismissed the highest spiritual leader of the church, Patriarch Abune Antonios and put him under house arrest. A new patriarch was arbitrarily appointed in his place on 27 May 2007.

Militarisation and Forced Labour

16. The perpetual 'military service' of all young men and women aged between 18 and 50 means that at least one parent is separated from his/her children for an unknown period of time. The percentage of spouses living under one ceiling declined dramatically between 1995 and 2002. For example, the percentage fell from 60.4 to 30.5 for the age group between 15-19 years old and from 74.4 to 42.1 for 20-24 years old. Apart from the obvious loss of a parent that a child may endure, being in 'military service' means the parent is not receiving any salary but the standard payment. This mostly leaves families destitute and in need of support from extended families within Eritrea or abroad. According to UNDP report the percentage of the population that is undernourished went up from 70 % in 1990-92 to 75 % in 2004-05. Given almost half of the population is estimated to be below 15 years of age, the above figure has a disproportionate effect on children. Furthermore, this figure is likely to be significantly higher now.
17. Eritrea society is one of the most militarised societies in the world. High school students are forcibly enrolled for education in military camps, where they are disciplined under strict martial rule. The national military service, which was promulgated in 1994, has become one of the most abusive government policies in Eritrea. The 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia and the stalemate that followed has detrimentally contributed to the excessive militarisation of the whole Eritrean society. Once conscripted, the youth are meant to officially serve for 18 months in the army. However, in reality, it has become until their 50th or 55th birthday. There are regular round-ups from the streets and homes in order to capture and intimidate those who have 'avoided' or 'absconded' from the national service. The youth in the national service are forced to do unpaid, labour intensive work under harsh conditions, usually enduring abuse and maltreatment. Army commanders widely practice abusive punishments, including rape, torture and extra-judicial execution against conscripts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- All political prisoners should be released, including the G-15 and journalists in accordance with the judgements from the African Commission on Human and People's Rights;
- All religious prisoners of conscience should be released;
- The indefinite 'national service' should come to an end to allow conscripts to return to their normal lives;
- The special court should be disbanded and all prisoners sentenced by the court released until all its decisions are reviewed by an internationally recognised court;
- The ratified Constitution should be implemented, including the rights of association, worship, expression and movement;
- Families should be informed of the fate of members killed while in detention or trying to flee the country;
- The policy of forced displacement of villagers should come to an end;
- The government should make provisions to allow humanitarian aid to enter the country and be distributed to the needy without delay;
- All the private and independent media should be reinstated;
- All detention places in the country should disclose the names of the detainees they hold and the charges against them;
- National and international human rights NGOs should be allowed to operate in the country without undue hindrance or interference;
- The government should commit to a concrete plan for a free and fair elections without delay and with full participation of all Eritrean political forces.