

# The Current Human Rights Situation in Eritrea and Its Consequences

By Elizabeth/Elsa Chyrum

9 November 2009

Brussels, Belgium

After 30 years of bitter war and bloodshed to free Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation, the country finally became 'liberated' in 1991, but instead of an end to human rights abuses this proved to be the beginning of a sinister and ruthless oppression from within. Further, the border conflict which flared up in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been used as an all-purpose excuse to keep the Eritrean people in a perpetual oppression in a country which has become the biggest open prison in the world.

There is no freedom of any kind in Eritrea. The constitution drafted in 1997 was never implemented and there has never been any national election, not even a phony one. In September 2001, with the arrest of 11 members of the G-15 – a group of 15 higher officials who demanded the implementation of the constitution – the authoritarian regime of Isaias Afewerki was fully entrenched.

There is not a single private or independent media outlet in the nation, be it in the form of newspaper, magazine, radio or television. The state-owned media is the mouthpiece of the government, and it controls every public outlet of information. Its main purpose is to misinform, indoctrinate and repress the people. Currently 30 or more journalists are in prison. According to this year's, Reporters Without Borders and the Media Sustainability Index Eritrea is the worst offender even beating North Korea.

And so goes on the list: There is no independent judiciary system in Eritrea; suspected individuals are detained without any due process. There are no political parties, and no unions that protect workers' rights. There is no right of association; any gathering of more than seven people is illegal. There are no rights to protest peacefully; no public meeting like this one is allowed. There is no religious liberty, and the Eritrean government ranks internationally amongst the worst violators of religious freedom. And to cap it all, no human rights defenders are allowed to operate within Eritrea.

Most NGOs have been expelled from the country. Even USAID, which provided most of the food needed by the country, was asked to cease its operations in 2005. The World Food Programme was forced to terminate its operations. Thus at a time of famine, when it needs all the food aid it could get from the donor community, it has chosen control over the welfare of its people.

Hundreds of prisons have been cropping up everywhere in Eritrea to keep up with the exploding number of prisoners. Tens of thousands of men, women and children have been imprisoned without trial and languishing there in terrible conditions as we speak. They are subjected to torture on a regular basis, are kept malnourished and receive no medical attention.

Education in Eritrea has been completely militarized. All students are required to finish their last high school year in a military camp. Vocational colleges double as boot camps, often administered by illiterate colonels. The only university in the nation has been closed to pre-empt any potential dissent from students.

Indefinite military service is compulsory for anyone aged 18 or over and many who are younger, as young as 15. They are made to live in trenches across the country and camps which call themselves 'training camps', but bear greater resemblance to labour or concentration camps.

Most of the country is literally starving. A mix of drought, misguided agrarian policy, flagrant land expropriation, lack of labour force (all tied up in the national service), market monopolization and rejection of food aid have caused food crises one year after another. Now, food is rationed and is very expensive. The only food outlets where food can be legally purchased are run by the government. Some people cannot get grain even in their own villages; attempting to get maize, wheat, sorghum or other types of grain from elsewhere has become an illegal activity, so that even avoiding starvation has been criminalized.

In short, Eritrea has turned out to be hell for all those who live inside or outside the camps – that is, the entire population.

How does a rational person react to this insanely inhumane situation?

They flee. Or they try to flee.

In one day, based on facts provided by the Sudanese Refugee Commission, the official number of asylum seekers is 70-80 excluding those who bypass registration. A more realistic figure would be more than double that, between 150 -200 per day. In other words, up to 200 Eritreans risk imprisonment, torture and death every single day, and we are only looking at one border. We can only guess how many more suffer the same misery when attempting to reach the Ethiopian border, the Djibouti border, the Yemen border, to name but a few.

How do they flee? How do they escape from a country which has become a military prison with all of its citizens' movements constrained by permits, roadblocks and bullets? Bribing corrupt officials, paying hefty sums to smugglers and simply striking out on their own are some of the frequently used methods. We have to remember that for the few who have succeeded, there are many more who have failed.

Eritreans who try to flee their impossible situation are treated like criminals hunted down and even shot on the spot. Eritrean defense and security forces are stationed along all the borders with orders to shoot and kill on sight, and arrest, interrogate, detain and torture anyone attempting to escape or even suspected of trying to do so. And those who do not get shot while crossing

borders have to survive the hardships of the wilderness: lack of food and water, disease, snake bites and hyena attacks.

Many of those who escape are from the national service, where they are kept for years on end under the worst possible condition: forced labor, harsh regimentation, hunger, disease, imprisonment, torture, indoctrination, sexual coercion and rape, war, etc. And most of them have to stay hidden inside Eritrea to avoid national service, sometimes for years, before they find a way out of the country.

The government, aware that thousands remain hidden among the civilian population, frequently conducts vicious round ups (known as "giffa") to apprehend army deserters, draft dodgers, dissenters, conscientious objectors, religious minorities and others. Currently, the overwhelming majority that makes up the prison population in Eritrea come from these population groups.

Even if they survive all this, they have to survive hostility and humiliation from the potential host countries. This can be in the form of detention, destitution and eventual refusal of asylum resulting in forced deportation despite the certain knowledge that they will face imprisonment, torture and perhaps death on their return for the crime of seeking a livable life in another country.

Eritreans deported from Malta, Libya, Sudan, United Kingdom, Germany and Egypt were imprisoned incommunicado on arrival and subjected to torture and other inhumane and degrading treatments. Most are still languishing in unknown prisons and some others have died in detention due to harsh conditions.

Those who survive the crossing of the Sahara desert meet a new nightmare when they reach Egypt, Libya and even Israel.

In Egypt, they are shot on spot if caught trying to cross to Israel. Those who are shot in the legs while trying to cross the Israeli and Egyptian borders might find themselves in hospital with surgery marks around their stomachs suggesting the involuntary removal of organs; others are sent to prison, where men and women alike are raped, starved and tortured having exchanged one hell for another.

It's the same story in Libya; they are robbed, stabbed, raped, and tortured. The rape case in Libya is the most despicable one. Many women refugees have been raped by prison guards and army personnel multiple times. What kind of despair leads people to take such risks?

Even those who make it to the Mediterranean Sea often drown within sight of the Italians. 78 Eritrean asylum seekers who were heading to Italy on a rickety boat in July 2009 ran out of fuel and drifted for three weeks without any rescue by vessels passing by or Italian rescue forces. Due to thirst, hunger and the extremes of hot and cold temperature they were subjected to 73 of them died and five of them were rescued by a passing fishing boat. Despite being an EU member of state, signatory to the Convention and Protocol relating the

Status of Refugee, Italy has signed an agreement with the Libyan government to return Eritrean asylum seekers to Libya for torture. In fact Italy lacks any cohesive structure legislating for the protection of asylum seekers.

Eritreans are arriving in Europe in growing numbers and the vast majority of their asylum claims are being refused. A small number of EU states have sought, with limited success, to deport individuals back to Eritrea. Deportation is pursued contrary to the UNHCR position paper "Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea" issued in January 2004, "... that states refrain from all forced return of rejected asylum seekers to Eritrea and grant them complimentary protection instead, until further notice (p. 7)."

Nevertheless, EU member states continuously seek to deport failed asylum seekers to indefinite imprisonment, torture or possible death. Malta deported 234 Eritreans in 2002, United Kingdom 5 in 2007, Germany 2 in 2008, Sweden 1 in 2008, Holland 1 in 2006 and 3 in 2007, and hundreds from Italy over the last few years.

Apart from the deportations, thousands of Eritreans whose asylum claims have been refused become illegal residents in Europe – where some spend long periods in detention awaiting deportation – and others are left to live on the streets in destitution. Legislation bars these individuals from access to basic public services such as – shelter, food, medical care – and they are prevented from working.

Eritreans rarely make the news. How much longer do the Eritreans have to suffer before the international community realizes that something has to be done to fight this crime against humanity?

### **Recommendations:**

1. Please help the refugees living in camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. Even though these countries have been generous hosts, being very poor themselves, there is only so much they can do.
2. Put pressure on the UNHCR to put more resources in these camps. Many of these refugees are not even provided with tents. Many live in destitution with little to eat, no medication, no housing and no education.
3. Following the example of the US, try to process the status of refugees for settlement from these camps. This way, all the tragedy we are witnessing in trying to reach their destinations can be avoided.
4. Do not reward or appease the evil behavior of the rogue regime of Isaias Afewerki. No monetary aid should be given. Any aid should be given in kind – such as food and medical supply – and monitored.
5. A lasting solution could only be achieved by severely punishing the Asmara regime. What IGAD, AU, the US and the UK have proposed regarding sanctioning Eritrea should be embraced by the EU. If they agreed to impose sanctions on the Burmese Junta and Mugabe then why are they dragging their heels over Afewerki?