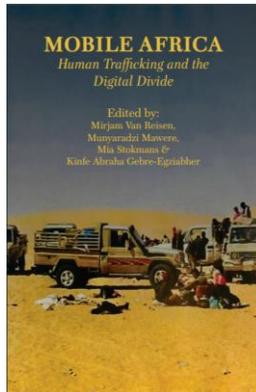


'Sons of Isaias': Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea

Mirjam Van Reisen, Makeda Saba & Klara Smits

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‘Sons of Isaias’: Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea¹

Mirjam Van Reisen, Makeda Saba & Klara Smits

Introduction

“God surveys the world one day, seeing the mountains, valleys, seas and all there is. Suddenly God stops and exclaims: ‘Why is Eritrea so green? I specifically made that country dry and yellow!’” The angel Gabriel leans over and whispers: ‘My Lord, those are army uniforms.’” (Kimball, 2008)

In an article for Reuters in 2008, Jack Kimball, picked up this black humour on the obligatory and indefinite National Service in Eritrea (Kimball, 2008; also cited in Bozzini, 2011). National Service, which was

introduced in 1994, dominates all aspects of life in Eritrea. It is made

In Eritrea, anyone over 18 is conscripted into indefinite National Service, where they are assigned to forced labour programmes in construction, teaching, health and administration. This is tantamount to slavery. Conscripts have no freedom to communicate, their movement is restricted, and they live in inhumane conditions. Under constant surveillance, feelings of hopelessness and fear propel the mass exodus of refugees from Eritrea, despite the shoot-to-kill policy at the border. This exodus is feeding human trafficking for ransom, as people desperately search for ways to flee the country.

¹ The term ‘Sons of Isaias’ is used by interviewee 21 to refer to those in National Service who are under the direct control of the President. The term was popularised by Papa Abdu, an Eritrean elder who used the term in reference to his own son, Ali Abdu, who was Minister of Information, but defected. The term compares the President to a patriarch who decides the fate of his children and favours some while expelling others because they do not tow the ‘family-line’. Others associate the term with a mafia-style organisation, in which the patriarch decides who is protected and who is punished, and threatens or terminates the life of those who are not considered loyal or useful (see also Saba, 2019).

up of military training (6 months) as well civil service (12 months). National Service conscripts are required to work for little or no pay, under conditions that the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea found to constitute forced labour (UN Human Rights Council, 2016). The conscripts also work in non-military activities, such as agriculture, road construction, house and building construction, mining, teaching, health and government administration, among other things. In 2002, the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme was introduced, under which education is militarised by requiring that all students complete their final year of high school at Sawa Military Camp (Kibreab, 2017b).

Eritrea is a one-party dictatorship ruled by the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). It is a country without political parties or rule of law (Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2018); where the Constitution, which was ratified in 1997, has never been implemented. There have never been any national leadership elections. The PFDJ itself has not had a party congress to elect officials and decide a strategy since 1994. It is a state where to even think about opposing the government is considered a crime by the government (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

Eritrea is also one of the most closed countries in the world, with freedom of press the lowest in the world (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) and access to digital technology very limited (International Telecommunication Union, 2018). The World Bank estimates that in 2017, only 1% of the Eritrean population had access to the Internet (World Bank, 2017). Internet cafes are available in places such as the capital, Asmara, but access is restricted by the knowledge that the government is watching and controlling all communication, as the only provider.

Eritrea has long been one of the largest refugees producing countries in the world and, based on data and population estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it is estimated that around 15% of the population have fled (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Eritrean's also make up the largest group of

refugees and asylum seekers registered in detention in Libya (UNHCR, 2019) and are estimated to be one of the largest groups of victims of human trafficking in Libya. Despite the end of hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia with the peace agreement in 2018, the number of refugees fleeing Eritrea is still on the rise (Melicherová, 2019). Among those fleeing, the majority indicate that it is because of National Service. This chapter looks at how National Service contributes to this exodus from Eritrea.

Escaping slavery

‘They Are Making Us into Slaves, Not Educating Us’: How Indefinite Conscription Restricts Young People’s Rights, Access to Education in Eritrea, is the heading of report by Human Rights Watch (2019). The organisation investigated National Service in Eritrea as the starting point for undertaking the dangerous journey to flee Eritrea through neighbouring countries, to Libya and Europe. A young 19-year old told Human Rights Watch: “They were making us into slaves, not educating us”. The conclusion of the researchers is that National Service is the root cause of the exodus from Eritrea by youth, despite the considerable risks involved in fleeing: “Young Eritreans would rather risk death at sea than let their leaders take their freedom” (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

It is difficult to imagine what the benefits of fleeing Eritrea are, an action that is severely discouraged. First, travel inside the country is restricted and it is illegal to cross the border. People require an exit visa to leave and those who do so illegally risk falling foul of the shoot-to-kill policy at the border. Those who flee are considered ‘traitors’ and ‘defectors’ by the state, and risk being imprisoned if they are caught. Relatives left behind are fined 50,000 Eritrean nakfa (ERN) (USD 3,333)² if they cannot account for members of their family. Family members are punished by association and are

² We have used the official exchange rate for the conversion, which has been 1 USD = 15 ERN (nakfa) since 2005. Up to 2015 the parallel market rate was 1 USD = 40 ERN, but since 2016 and the restriction on the circulation of the nakfa, the parallel market rate and official market rate are similar (parallel market rate 1 USD = 17 to 20 ERN).

imprisoned or penalised in other ways. The attitude of the Eritrean Government towards the youth who leaving the country is that they are lazy and inadequate and ‘good riddance to bad rubbish’. In an interview on Eri-TV, President Isaias Afwerki made this sentiment clear: “Do not think that this country is missing out because these people have left. There is no way that our world will be disrupted because of them... [People] like that are just burdens” (Eri-TV, 2014).

For Eritreans to return, a ‘regret form’ must be signed and payments made, including the fine of 50,000 nakfa for leaving and the 2% tax (Buyse, Van Reisen, & Van Soomeren, 2017). Opportunities for Eritreans in neighbouring countries (i.e., Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya) are limited, and Eritrean security operates in these areas as an extension of the regime to harass and intimidate Eritreans (Amnesty International, 2019; Buyse *et al.*, 2017). The chances of being captured by traffickers and detained for ransom are real and the situation for Eritrean refugees in Libya is hopeless and dangerous (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; see also Chapter 10, *Lawless Libya: Unprotected Refugees Kept Powerless and Silent*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits & Morgane Wirtz). The crossing to Europe is risky and many Eritreans have died at sea on these journeys. The information on these dangers is shared among Eritreans on social media leading to collective trauma (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). The question is, why do Eritreans continue to flee their country when the opportunities elsewhere are so few?

According to the push-pull theory, migration is a result of the rational consideration of positive factors in countries of destination and negative factors in countries of origin. But is this framework adequate to explain the large number of Eritreans fleeing their country? According to Van Reisen and Mawere (2017), the deliberate impoverishment of the Eritrean people is pushing them out of the country. The concept of a ‘black hole’ in digital connectivity is also used to explain the attraction of youth from Eritrea to places across borders (Chapter 6, *Journeys of Youth in Digital Africa: Pulled by Connectivity*, by Rick Schoenmaeckers), where they can digitally

connect with their friends and family members, who are scattered around the globe (Berends, 2019; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; see also Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape: The Fuelling of Human Trafficking on the African Continent*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Gertjan Van Stam, & Antony Otieno Ong'ayo and Chapter 10, *Lawless Libya*, Van Reisen, *et al.*). The research question in this study is: *Does National Service in Eritrea constitute forced labour and does it explain the exodus from Eritrea, despite the considerable risks involved.*

Methodology

This study is based on empirical data collected in an exploratory ethnographic field study. It is based on: the field experience of the second author (1998–2012), interviews from earlier research (2012), two focus group meetings with five and six respondents (2019), and interviews by all three authors carried out from 2016–2019. Twenty-seven individual interviews were conducted in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, Uganda, Kenya, the Netherlands, Norway and Belgium using a free interview format. The interviews were in-depth interviews, carried out over three to four hours, allowing the respondents to feel at ease and speak about experiences that triggered painful memories. After the interviews, the interviewees contacted the respondents, to check that they were coping with the aftermath of the interviews. Notes were taken during the interviews and transcribed into interview reports, which were compared. Follow up interviews were carried out to further clarify the content provided. For reasons of security, quotes from the interviews have been anonymised and depersonalised. The respondents are known to the authors.

National Service in Eritrea

The National Service Proclamation (No. 82/1995; State of Eritrea, 1995) obliges all citizens between 18 and 50 years to participate in active National Service for a maximum of 18 months and in the

Reserve Military Service after they reach the age of 50.³ Hence, the working population of Eritrea are all drafted into National Service, with few exceptions:

You are not in the National Service, if you are: unfit (due to disability); classified as 'Board' (based on a decision by the Medical Board of Directors); overaged (for those overaged a special militia has been set up); or a housewife, this is why Eritrean ladies get married. (Interview 21, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 2 June 2019)

As young women and girls who have children are exempt, many opt for early pregnancy, which is encouraged by their mothers. Women and girls in the National Service are particularly vulnerable, as they are expected to serve the military hierarchy and are available for sexual services and subjected to sexual violence and rape (Kibreab, 2017a).

Although the legislation specifies that National Service is 18 months, in practice it is indefinite (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Interviewee 14 explained that he served in the National Service for 17 years (1998 to 2015). After the border war with Ethiopia finished, the troops expected to be demobilised. However, to their surprise, they were ordered to work building roads:

One day in 2002 we were given an order. We were in Massawa. The order was given to our division and six other divisions, approximately 500 men. There were no women present. At the time I was 28 years. We were given the following order: 'From today you will stop using the gun; you will be demobilised and you will be free. But before you are demobilised you will start work. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

³ The legal basis for National Service in Eritrea relies on the National Service Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995); Legal Notice 27/1996 on National Service as a Work Force (State of Eritrea, 1996a); Proclamation 89/1996 to Provide Jobs and Modalities of Re-Engagement Concerning Nationals who have properly Participated in the Active National Service (State of Eritrea, 1996b) and the Labour Proclamation No. 118/2001 (Eritrea, 2001).

The troops opposed the order, which came from the highest level of the military apparatus in Eritrea:

We protested against this order. We refused to work in construction, as we were military and not civilians. Moreover, we had not been demobilised. The order that we received was given by General Haile Samuel. His nickname is 'China'. He is a General in the Eritrean army. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

He says the protesters explained to their commanders why they felt that it was not acceptable for them to be forced to work for a construction company:

As military, we immediately agreed that we would not work without pay. [...] We did not think that we should be forced to work as civilian labourers and without salary or payment. We told the commanders that we refused to work as construction workers. We told them, we are military and not civilians. We told them that if we are a construction company, we cannot work as a normal employee, without payment. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Following their protest, the President spoke on TV (Human Rights Watch, 2009). However, the information provided was confusing; the President said that the troops would be demobilised and paid.

The General told us that this is an order. You have to stop the protest. We refused to give our guns and they stop everything for one month. They were scared of us because we still have guns. Because we were commandos. Then they brought us other information. They told us, you will be demobilised and we thought that then we could go home. I was married and I had my wife and children at home. The President also gave a speech on TV. He said that those who were demobilised would be paid. This was like an incentive to demobilise. He said, don't worry, you will go to the construction company and you will be paid. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Subsequently, the troops were persuaded to disarm. But, as soon as they disarmed, they realised they had been deceived:

We were told this by Colonel Habtu, the Commander of the 13th Division. But he said that the General and the President were lying. That they cheated us. That they demanded that the military work for free. He said that he would give us the release for demobilisation. So, we put down our guns. We thought we were demobilised. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Once the troops no longer had access to weapons, they were forced to work for the construction companies:

Then Major Merge Mir replaced Colonel Habtu and he was sent to the Corporation where you work with the military. He said: "Whether you like it or not, you will have to do it." He forced all of us to work for free. So, we had no choice. We had no more guns. We had to work for free. We worked for the Construction Company Musa Ali Corporation. [...] After six months, he [Major Merge Mir] was replaced by Colonel Debessai. He is also the leader of the Corporation Musa Ali. They are all Hegdef [PFDJ]. He tells us: "You are National Service. You are part of the military. You are not demobilised. You have to do this work". (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

The information the troops received came through military channels. It was limited and did not give them any options, moreover, they later realised that the information was false. This disinformation prevented them from considering any alternatives. The disinformation coerced the troops to disarm, after which they had no choice, but to participate in the road construction. They were clearly of the belief they were forced to carry out the work:

We were wearing military clothes all that time. [...] There was no right to do anything without approval. I think of myself as military, not as a civilian. We were forced to do the work for the Musa Ali Corporation. We built houses for the Military commanders. We built other houses and schools. We do road construction. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Interviewee 9 was a liberation fighter since 1988, before the independence of Eritrea in 1991. He was then in National Service until 2015, when he fled. He states:

I have been in active military service for all this time. You cannot distinguish between military and non-military activities; as everyone is part of the National Service, and some are allocated to military action and others to other activities. (Interview 9, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

Interviewee 16 showed a photograph of himself working in road construction as part of National Service. Pointing to the military clothes he and his colleagues were wearing in the photo, he confirmed: “In the National Service we are part of the military. We wear military uniforms. We report to the higher ranks who are our military supervisors” (Interview 16, face-to-face, Belgium, 9 December 2018).

The perception is that National Service is part of the military structure, as explained by interviewee 14:

How I see myself? I was in National Service, I was part of the military. I was not demobilised. I was forced to work and I had no free decision or free choice in the matter. I was forced to work in construction from 2002 until 2015 as part of military service. I had to do this until 2015, when I fled the country. [...] Everything is owned by the military. There are no civilian workers. The military leaders only have more money. That is all. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

National Service creates a community that is tightly controlled by the top officials of the PFDJ (referred to as Hegdef⁴ in Tigrinya), the only political party in Eritrea: “They have military clothes in the National Service for each Zoba [administrative zone]. They have also overalls for government garage people” (Interview 21, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 2 June 2019).

⁴ Hezbawi Genbar naDamokrasen Feteheh (HEGDEF)

National Service is indefinite, which means that the date of completion is arbitrary. Therefore, it is impossible to know when a person will be discharged. Without having completed National Service, it is not possible to do anything formally or legally.

I worked in the Ministry of Information. I planned my exit for a long time. One-by-one I collected the signatures of approval from various superiors. Then I went to the Minister and he signed. I was never sure if I would succeed! Then I got out! Finally, I was free! (Interview 20, face-to-face, Kampala, 20 January 2016)

As the PFDJ has total control, the legal stipulations governing National Service (Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995, see State of Eritrea, 1995) are easily disregarded. Interviewee 9 observed: “The starting date of National Service is officially 18 years, that is what the dictator says, but.... I was 14 when I was recruited for National Service, against my will” (Interview 9, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). Interviewee 11 says that he was 16-years old when he was recruited into National Service and interviewee 12 remembers his sister being recruited at age 16 (Interviews 11 and 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). Interviewee 13 explained: “They search home to home, and they take all the young people they find” (Interview 13, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). Interviewee 9 describes when he was taken by the soldiers: “I was goat herding. When I came home the soldiers took me while my parents cried and screamed. Actually, they took a lot of youth from the village” (Interview 9, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

The pay received in National Service is very low:

In the army military you receive 700 nakfa [USD 47]. But for us, there is no salary. There is 200 nakfa [USD 13] for the family directly from the government in cash, but since 2013 family only gets food (only if you are not in prison then they stop it and when you escape, they stop it). They give us 90 nakfa [USD 6], but they deduct 45 nakfa [USD 3] for camp and food, which leaves 50 nakfa [USD 3.3] as pocket money. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Stipends under National Services differ. Except for the salary paid to those working close to the highest-ranking officials (such as the President), all National Service remuneration is perceived to be inadequate to live off and support a family (see also Landinfo, 2016). Such payments are not a living wage, which thus limit the autonomy of those serving in National Service, who struggle to meet the needs of their families:

In 1999 I earned 1,790 nakfa [USD 221]⁵ as a teacher. In 2001, the teachers were moved into National Service, taken as military government workers. Then the salary became 100 nakfa [USD 7].⁶ The rent for a house for a family is 150 nakfa and you need 250 nakfa for other things. I got 150 nakfa as a teacher, less deductions of 5 nakfa for the sons of the martyrs and 4 nakfa for sports contribution. So, I got 141 nakfa [USD 10] in the hand, which is a few dollars a month. That is why I blocked my brother from becoming a teacher. My (other) brother, who is the director of the school and administrator of the subzone receives only 500 nakfa [USD 36]. (Interview 18, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 5 May 2019)

Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim (2017) call this strategy ‘deliberate impoverishment’, as it keeps people powerless, in a state of suspension:

No one goes voluntarily [to National Service], there is no choice, you are taken away violently. This also happened to me, without any choice at all, my fate was also the same as [name redacted]. (Interview 10, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

There is no alternative to National Service in Eritrea.

Warsay Yikaalo

The PFDJ also controls education in Eritrea, which feeds into National Service. In 2002, a comprehensive national development policy was announced called the Warsay Yikaalo National

⁵ In 1999, the official exchange rate was 1 USD = 8.1 ERN (April to October 1999) and 1 USD = 9.6 ERN (October 1999 to November 2000).

⁶ In 2001, the official exchange rate dropped to 1 USD = 7.25 ERN.

Development Programme, which merges military and civil labour for development. This was supplemented in 2003 by the integration of the education system into the programme. Students now do their final year of school (grade 12) at Sawa Military Camp, before entering indefinite National Service (Bozzini, 2011; Kibreab, 2014). The respondents said that in Sawa Military Camp, they spend three months doing military training, followed by six months of academic work (Interview 1, face-to-face, Kenya, 19 May 2018; Interview 2, face-to-face, Kenya, 24 May 2018). Before they can graduate, the students are required to undertake a further three months of military training. Then, depending on their results, they are deployed to either a National Service destination or one of the vocational training or higher education colleges.

National Service, Warsay Yikaalo and secondary, tertiary and vocational education programmes are all under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence, which is directly controlled by the PFDJ, the ruling party in Eritrea. This creates a situation in which the PFDJ controls the entire labour market and productive sectors and what people can do: “Everyone between 18 and 60 is restricted by law to engage in any employment, trade, or other activities, to travel within or outside the country” (Hosabay, 2016).

Control of labour and the economy

The PFDJ, through the integration of education, National Service and the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme, controls the labour provided to enterprises operating in Eritrea, which are owned by individual PFDJ top officials or by PFDJ-controlled entities such as the Ministry of Defence and Red Sea Trading Corporation, which are all directly overseen by the President. The owners of such enterprises report to Hagos Gebrehiwot (Head of PFDJ Economic Affairs, also known as Hagos Kisha) and Yemane Gebreab (Head of PFDJ Political Affairs, also known as ‘Monkey’) who are trusted by the President. All financial streams and operations are directly handled by the party’s top officials under private names and private accounts (Buisse *et al.*, 2017). As Schröder explains:

At some stage the EPLF [Eritrean People's Liberation Front] leadership must have taken the decision not to pass legislation to make the economic assets of the Front officially state-property but rather to keep ownership and control of most of them. [...] the starting point seems to have been the transformation of Section 09 of the former Department of Economics of the EPLF into the Red Sea Trading Corporation (RSTC) probably already in 1992 or in early 1993. The RSTC rapidly became the major importer and exporter of Eritrea as it received many of the lucrative government contracts without proper tender procedures. (Schröder, 2004)

In relation to the control of labour in Eritrea through the National Service, the respondents refer to private companies controlled by the top officials close to the President:

All the corporations are under Hegdef [PFDJ]. I checked all the names. There are no civilian companies. Sometimes they change the name, to ask for funding from outside. Segen Corp. Asbeco Corp, Debab Corp, all these are owned by Hegdef, and they have branch offices in Juba. They are working under the office of the President, everything is controlled. On the road construction, for instance, the Selambesi Dekambare Road, it comes under the President's office. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Economic activities fall under what is referred to as '09', run by high officials in the PFDJ, with President Isaias Afwerki at the top. Former Deputy Minister of Finance Kubrom Dafla Hosabay states:

The PFDJ has 33 enterprises. These enterprises are working openly. Trade has been shifting to 09, which is the Red Sea Corporation. The commercial sector has been increasingly taken over by the Red Sea Corporation.⁷ The PFDJ enterprises operate legally with bank accounts in Eritrea. The black market is illegal, and this is purposefully ignored. 09 [Red Sea Corporation] comes in to decide who gets the revenue from the PFDJ-mafia. The work in the illegal black market is individual, it is 'personal', but it is available as part of the overall system. It can also end up going to members of Isaias' [President Afwerki's] family, ambassadors and other

⁷ The Red Sea Corporation and the Red Sea Trading Corporation are the same entity. The term '09' is used to refer to both.

individuals. It is unaccounted for. (Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, interview, face-to-face, 18 December 2016)

The near-complete control over the economy and economic actors by the PFDJ, without any accountability, creates deep corruption and fungibility:

It looks as if it is legal, you get receipts and all that, but it is used for personal benefit. It is not to generate income for the PFDJ at the party level, but it benefits the individuals in the PFDJ directly. It is a system of the winner takes all. There is no law, it is divide and rule. Because there is no law, two generals will not agree. Without the law, there is just corruption. Anybody who can do it, will go and do it. (Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, interview, face-to-face, 18 December 2016)

The various companies coming under the Red Sea Trading Corporation, governed by the PFDJ, include Segen Construction, Asbeco Construction, Rodab Construction, Badme Construction, Gedem Construction, Des Sea Construction, Mereb Construction, Musa Ali Construction (Shabait.com, 2014) and Sawa Construction (Interview 18, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 5 May 2019). All the labour used by these companies is provided by National Service recruits (see also Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2018). Interviewee 18 shared that: “Workers who worked for these companies in 2000 would be paid 1,200–1,400 nakfa [USD 125–146].⁸ In 2005, construction workers in the National Service would earn 500 nakfa [USD 33]”⁹ (Interview 18, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 5 May 2019).

Foreign corporations also make use of labour from National Service (Interview 19, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 17 October 2016), such as the Canadian company Nevsun for Bisha Mine:

By the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008, I was assigned by Segen Construction to work in Bisha Mine. This was at the very start of the mining project. [...] To my knowledge, all work in the site was undertaken and supervised by SENET in

⁸ In 2000, the official exchange rate was 1 USD = 9.6 ERN.

⁹ In 2005, the official exchange rate was 1 USD = 15 ERN.

collaboration with Segen. My understanding is that the main mining work was contracted to SENET by the Canadian mining company Nevsun. SENET in turn sub-contracted Segen for the provision of manpower. Since there were no other privately-owned construction companies in the country, it was a must for SENET to sub-contract Segen. There was no other option. As I will explain later, the working conditions for Eritreans was extreme and unbearable. (Tesfagorgis, Hagos, Zere & Mekonnen, 2018, p. 67)

The total control by those in power not only concerns labour, but also assets and companies, which are held as the private property of those in charge (Hosabay, 2016). The Red Sea Trading Corporation, a PFDJ-owned company and formerly section '09' of the Economic Department of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (now the PFDJ), has the exclusive right to engage in import and export activities in Eritrea. This company is part of the PFDJ-controlled informal economy, identified by the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (UN Security Council, 2014). This is the entity of the PFDJ which holds a monopoly on imports and exports and is involved in often illegal trading arrangements in the region (UN Security Council, 2011; 2012). There is no government budget or public budgeting process in Eritrea, and all public or private finances are collected and handled by PFDJ individuals through private accounts (Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, interview, face-to-face, 18 December 2016; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Buysse *et al.*, 2018).

All of the companies privately owned by PFDJ officials make free use of labour from National Service. Agriculture, the main economic activity in Eritrea, is also controlled by the government:

If you have cows, you have to get the animal feed from the government, and you have to get the milk to the municipality controller. So farming is a big topic, for example, you can only be in that village where you belong. But who lives there? Everyone is in the National Service; so, there is no labour. If you are not in the right place, they stop you and take the land. The Crop and Livestock Corporation, they take the yield. So, for instance, I have 200 hectares, then they forced me to sell to a group from Hegdef [PFDJ]. My friend is in prison in Gully – they imprisoned 300 because

they sold the crops from their own farm. But the Hegdef says that it will sell the crops. (Interview 21, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 2 June 2019)

Due to the fact that nearly everyone of working age is part of National Service, farmlands and crops are often seized: “The PFDJ sold the crops of the farmers. When they protested, they were sent to prison” (Interview 18, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 5 May 2019)

In July 2019, the PFDJ-owned Crop and Livestock Corporation introduced a new version of control over herders. The head is an active member of the Defence Force, Major Kibreab Abraham (who is not a pastoralist). The following information was received on price-fixing by the corporation:

Recently I had received reliable communication from Asmara that the Government of Eritrea was attempting to fix prices for livestock. And that, in the process, was confiscating animals on the way to market. I have also been told that confiscation of livestock has happened at border crossings. (Interview 27, email, 30 July 2019)

In other informal sector jobs, people also depend on goods being made available by the PFDJ through the Red Sea Trading Corporation, which controls the flows of good (e.g., goods such as flour, sugar, or animal feed) and any other issue critical to small entrepreneurs (Interview 18, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 5 May 2019). In 2002, the bakers who used to produce bread and cakes had to choose to do one or the other. Many chose to produce cakes, as with bread they would be forced to apply prices as per Government directives; bread is rationed (personal observation by author). This dependency on goods being made available by the PFDJ has also resulted in growing levels of systemic corruption, institutionalised forced labour, and the mass exodus of Eritreans (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018):

[By] pursuing a policy of forced labour while simultaneously strangling any private sector economic initiative, the Government of Eritrea has not only failed to achieve its goal of development but has manoeuvred the country into deep economic and social crisis. (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, p. 28)

Hence, in summary, the PFDJ has total control over the production and distribution of labour, related to economic activity, both in the public and private sector.

Control of information

The PFDJ has also total control over the production and distribution of information, which is directly overseen by the President and his office (Interview 11, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). Access to phones, both landlines and mobile phones, is severely restricted in Eritrea. Phone calls are tapped and sim cards difficult to obtain; obtaining a sim card requires extensive documentation, including an ID card and property ownership papers or a house rental contract. One respondent shared how landlines are also controlled: “We also cannot phone. All the landlines are controlled by the government. They listen so you can’t say anything. You have to talk in code” (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019).

Those deployed in National Service are not allowed to have a mobile phone: “We are not allowed to have a sim card. No mobile phones” (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019). Another respondent shared: “He [my brother] has no access to mobile. They do not accept anyone to use it in the workplace. Last November we had a family emergency and there was no way to reach him” (Interview 21, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 2 June 2019).

Since 1998, communication has been subject to mass surveillance:

At the beginning of the war [Ethiopia/Eritrea border war], the day after the Israeli embassy was evacuated from Asmara, many Israelis with suitcases arrived, all working in telecommunication. They arrived with suitcases to renew the whole telephone network. Since that time, all phone lines are tapped. (Personal observation by Makeda Saba, 1998)

For National Service members, information exchange with family members is difficult, due to the lack of access to phones, as well as the limited freedom they have to visit their families:

At one point, I did not see my own parents for five years. Now I can call her [my mother], but there is no mobile phone there. There is no family, because everyone belongs to the dictator. My brother works in road construction and gets at most three or four days every now and then to visit his family. (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

Family visits are irregular and often depend on arbitrary circumstance. Some may be able to go home to visit family every few months for a few days, others can only visit for a short time over a period of multiple years. This severely restricts the possibility of a family life and for fathers to support to their families.

The lack of free media in the country, especially since 2001, was mentioned by interviewees as restricting access to alternative information. It is also an obstacle to the production and distribution of information by people in National Service. Foreign journalists occasionally obtain access to a report from inside the country, but the information journalists have access to is strictly controlled:

Sometimes journalists came to visit, and we were told to change from our military clothes into civilian clothes. They gave us normal clothes for construction workers. We were not able to answer any question. Sometimes we thought maybe we could talk to them and tell them the truth, but we had no chance. [...] One time we wanted to tell them we are military, we are not civilians, we have nothing, we are slaves. But then the translator in English tells them, we are okay. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Foreign media are not able to travel freely and are reliant on government-issued translators who, as the previous quote shows, may mistranslate what the Eritreans in the National Service say (see, for example, Hakim, 2015).

As well as it being difficult for Eritreans to produce and distribute information, information is also collected from them without their consent through the system of widespread surveillance and spies. This was documented in detail by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). The report of the Commission notes that:

The Commission gathered testimony from victims and witnesses as well as former spies. They informed the Commission that the Eritrean Government systematically recruits individuals to spy and conduct surveillance activities on individuals and entities within and outside the country. (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 91)

A witness speaking to the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea noted that spies are everywhere and can be anyone, not only constituting a system of information collection on a mass scale, but also fostering widespread mistrust within communities: “In Eritrea everyone is a spy – local housewives, farmers, etc. So, they know when you arrive and when you leave. Your own neighbours report you to the authorities” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 91).

The main task of the spies is to report on deviant behaviour. This includes behaviour by those in National Service or when a person is fleeing or avoiding National Service. When people flee Eritrea, this system of surveillance continues. One of the main instruments used is the 2% diaspora tax, which is used to establish whether or not an individual supports the government (Buisse *et al.*, 2017). News and images about what is going on in Eritrea have to be secretly smuggled out of the country (Brummelman, 2017). However, recently, limited information, including photographs of graffiti protesting against National Service (Kidane, 2019), have been leaked out of the country by groups such as Arbi Harnet (which translates as ‘Freedom Friday’, referring to a movement to stay home on Fridays as a protest against the dictatorship).

Producing misinformation (referred to as ‘03’) is part of the government’s strategy to create confusion and to keep citizens

paralysed (Buysse *et al.*, 2017). Finally, UN Human Rights bodies, such as the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, have been denied permission to enter Eritrea, and UN organisations operating in the country are denied freedom of movement. They are not able to operate under the umbrella of the United Nations Development Framework (UNDAF), but have to operate under a Strategic Partnership Cooperation Framework (UNDP, 2017), which is limited in scope.

Access to alternative information sources about Eritrea is limited and suppressed. One interviewee explained how the government has systematically limited access to alternative information:

They first started by closing the University [of Asmara] and taking all the choices from people. It is a brainwashing strategy. You get no chance to do something yourself, everything is decided by the government. But the government also tries to close off social media, even if you have the Internet, there is no Facebook or anything. You are obliged to follow government propaganda. There is only one television source. (Interview 11, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

One way in which alternative information sources have been limited in Eritrea is by strict control of the press, which escalated after a crackdown in 2001, during which the Eritrean government arrested not only political opposition, but also journalists:

I was a writer. There were still private magazines, but the censorship was very strong. In 2001, the private media sector was closed down. [...] There are journalists who have been in prison since September 2001. Now, there is only one FM-radio channel and one television channel. (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

The information distributed by the government is perceived by the respondents as propaganda to maintain control, but also to cultivate mistrust, fear, and confusion among the population (Buysse *et al.*, 2017). One respondent shared: “If you have a family, there is so much propaganda that you are even afraid of your own father. The

propaganda scares people” (Interview 13, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

The possibility of protesting to improve the situation in Eritrea is perceived as extremely limited: “Nobody can gather together, there is no freedom of opinion and no ability to speak together, everything is controlled, there is no private existence in Eritrea” (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

The Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea found that there were severe restrictions on freedom of assembly in Eritrea, including the right to protest, and political parties and trade unions are prohibited (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Civil society is also severely restricted, including the activities of foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Chapter 21, *Uncomfortable Aid: INGOs in Eritrea*, by Makeda Saba). Therefore, it can be concluded that Eritreans have none or very limited ways to exert control over their circumstances. Power is firmly in the hands of those at the top of the PFDJ and attempts at dialogue or protests usually result in imprisonment. In September 2018, the former Minister of Finance, Berhane Abrehe, who had written a book to open up discussion on the situation, was taken to prison (Solomon, 2018).

In summary, the PFDJ heavily controls the information flows in and out of the country. Through the extensive surveillance system it has put in place, it actively collects information from the general public, including those serving in National Service, while at the same time generating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

Disruption of social relationships

The PFDJ ensures that Eritreans are not able to form strong relationships by destroying trust between people and separating families:

Anyone with an education, and anyone without an education, all are always ruled together under the system of the dictator. They have destroyed our families and the

common trust. We have only built up trust since we left there. (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

Interviewees often refer to the separation of their families as a big source of anxiety, which happens because National Service recruits are placed far away from their families:

You can even see your own wife only one month per year if you are lucky, else only one month per two or three years. My own nephew was married and went on vacation to meet his wife after four years of military service – you cannot build a family like that. (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

In addition, families are separated when people flee due to the political situation:

Life isn't easy for me. I've been in Norway for 3 years and I still am not legal. I left my country after I couldn't find my husband, who used to be in the National Service and whose whereabouts still isn't known to me. I don't know where he is, and they [government forces] came and arrested me asking me where he is. I was released on bail – and they came again to arrest me, and I had to flee my country [She starts sobbing]. I had to leave my country, I left my children with the neighbours [...] And here, a life of destitution. My little sister is also in Sudan, she's in a refugee camp. She used to be in National Service. The lives of the members of my family have been wrecked because of me. (Interview 22, face-to-face, Norway, 12 September 2012)

The militarily structured control of National Service, its invasion of the private sphere, the separation of families through National Service and the lack of control over family life are all sources of deep anxiety. This anxiety is instilled during training at Sawa Military Camp, where the students finish their school and are introduced to National Service. Specifically referring to Sawa Military Camp, Amnesty International noted the military style of punishment: “Although students are purportedly there for education as well as military training, the whole ethos of Sawa is militarised. The students are subjected to military style discipline, presided over by military

commanders” (Statement made by Simon, a 23-year-old former conscript, cited in Amnesty International, 2015, p. 20).

The situation of military command lacks accountability, and no independent courts are available. Punishments are often severe and arbitrary, as reported by this respondent, who was working in National Service: “I was sent to prison, a very bad prison, Adi Abeito. I was asking a question, I was disagreeing with the commander, Captain Wedi Zemzem [Idris] about his order. Then they put me in prison” (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019).

The combination of being unable to form relationships with family members and friends, as well as the low payment and high degree of control over their lives in National Service, puts pressure on Eritreans. As they do not earn enough money to support their families; some try to escape from National Service to find work, but this is also punished:

Then again, they put me in prison in 2014. It is called Mai Aidaga. This is an underground prison. We were there with 70 people. You can hear the road over your head, when there are trucks everything is very bad. They put me in prison because I tried to escape for my family and my children. I was not able to look after them. There was no money. I earned the same pay as at the beginning and my family had no money. I tried to go home so that I could work for myself to support my family. But they captured me and put me in this prison. Then when I came out, I escaped from Eritrea. (Interview 14, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 26 May 2019)

Going to prison is not unusual for Eritreans. One respondent shared that: “Ending up in prison is normal in Eritrea” (Interview 13, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). Imprisonment can be the result of petty incidents and can depend on the whim of a superior: “You can be asked to make a cup of coffee by a higher officer, but if you refuse, you can end up in prison” (Interview 10, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019). And there is no trial: “They do what they want: there is no justice system” (Interview 12, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

Both imprisonment as well as its duration are arbitrary, and families are not informed as to the reason for imprisonment or the location of their family member. Just asking about this can lead to family members being imprisoned (personal observation by author). When people escape from National Service without permission or fail to return in time after leave, if captured, they are usually locked up for double the time they have been away. If they were absent for two months, their prison term will be four months (personal observation by author). In National Service and in the prisons, torture is used as a punishment:

There are different ways of punishing in National Service. I was punished once; they put me in Otto [a torture method where someone is tied at the wrists and ankles and banged] and they put water and sugar all over me and put me in the sun – then flies come all over your body. I also heard about the container of water, that the prisoner has to move the water from one big container to another by mouthful. They tie you for a long time and they beat you with sticks. Those who have been in Adi Abeito, near Asmara, Adesom, Mazrab, and Wia can tell you a lot about what happens when you are there. (Interview 21, face-to-face, 2 June 2019)

Another torture method that was mentioned is forcing recruits to stand in the sun for long periods of time, which is a standard procedure:

This kind of tying up of hands twisted back to your back and your legs and laying on the ground for 12 or 24 hours as a punishment in the military National Service of Eritrea has already been for about 25 years. Although it has been a daily practice as punishment in the Eritrean military service, it also applied in other civilian punishments just as we see the under-age young people have been tied up the whole day in the hot sun. This kind of punishment is just one the severe punishments, which has been carried out for years. During the whole hot day and the cold night to stay tied up like this is not only painful and intolerable punishment, but also depending on a person's body resistance, it can cause paralysis of part of your hand, trauma, disillusionment, psychological crisis, anger, instability and so on. That is why unlike many countries young refugees in many European countries, it's been said that by far and large, the Eritrean refugees have been victims of psychological instability and

trauma. (Interview with Herman Aregoi [translated from Tigrinya], from AAN Media Network, 2019)

One of the respondents was allocated through the National Service to Bisha mine where he ended up being imprisoned, alleged for something he had not done:

I was a translator in the Bisha mine in Eritrea. I was payed 2,500 nakfa per month. There was a lady who complained, but I had not done anything wrong. I then spent one year and six months in an underground prison, six months of which was in solitary confinement. I then changed prison; I was four years in prison in total. After four years I went back to the office in Bisha mine. I never had a lawyer. I had not done anything wrong. (Interview 19, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 17 October 2019)

The conditions in prison are atrocious:

I was tortured for six months. I spent my time in the Barentu underground prison. We were allowed out once a day. We had a shower and washed our clothes once a month. I had no information from my family. Then I went to the prison in Karen. It was overcrowded. (Interview 19, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 17 October 2019)

Interviewee 19 describes being tortured:

My family came to see me there. In the underground prisons we were in chains, both legs and hands. I was on my own, alone in one prison room. We received one small piece of bread in the morning and sometimes food in the evening, but not always. We were very hungry. We received one small bottle of water. They beat me during those six months. They wanted information I did not have. They beat me, they electrocuted me, they gave me electric shocks, they hit me with plastic sticks. I walked to escape – I walked for seven days. (Interview 19, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 17 October 2019)

While escaping Eritrea, Interview 19 was sold to human traffickers who extorted him. His wife also attempted to escape. He has not heard from her since.

Friends from Israel paid for me to go from Sudan to Libya. I paid EUR 1,600 to go from Sudan to Libya and EUR 2,400 to go to Italy and EUR 300 to go from Italy to Holland through Paris by train. When I escaped my wife was put in prison. She was put in prison for two weeks when I escaped. They came again and they asked her where I was. So, she escaped. She said maybe I will escape to Sudan. I have not heard from her. I don't know where she is. (Interview 19, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 17 October 2019)

As the Office of the President is fully in control of all ministries responsible for the National Service, Eritreans do not have a direct platform or way to complain or exchange information about their situation. Interviewee 10 remembers how he ended up fleeing the country alone and leaving his wife and children behind:

In 2010 my child was ill. I was in Massawa. I asked permission to bring my daughter to the hospital, but I did not get it. I went home without permission and brought my daughter to the hospital. Two military personnel came to get me, and I was put in an underground prison, a hole dug in the ground. We could hear the cars driving over our heads. In 2014, I fled with 80 people during a toilet break, we ran even though we did not have shoes. (Interview 10, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

In summary, social relationships and relationships with family are actively broken down, destroying the social structure in Eritrea,¹⁰ which maintains the power of the ruling party. The full control that the PFDJ have over the Eritrean people involves regular

¹⁰ The Catholic Bishops in Eritrea in their Pastoral Letters (Catholic Church Eritrea, 2001; 2014; 2019) consistently lament the breakdown of social and family relationships in the country as a result of the Eritrean government's policy of integrating National Service, the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and education. They also lament the government's lack of consultation with the people or community leaders and their top-down approach (see also Saba, 2019).

imprisonment and severe torture to control people and seriously undermine their relationship with their families.

Choosing to flee

Proclamation 82/1995 (Eritrea, 1995) stipulates that those who have not completed National Service are restricted from leaving the country. However, as mentioned previously, National Service is indefinite. This pushes people to leave the country illegally, resulting in situations of human trafficking and severe human rights abuses:

I'm 22, and I'm from Elaberid. I left with someone who was crossing the border in Keren. He promised me that he'd take me all the way there for free. His name is Yonas, I don't know his last name, but we met during my National Service. He was a soldier with me. (Interview 23, telephone, Egypt, 17 September 2012)

Those who leave the country are often not in control of the journey, as illustrated by the story of interviewee 24, who was abducted after serving 15 years in National Service:

My name is [redacted], I'm 35, I was in the National Service for 15 years. I was kidnapped while I was working in the fields of Ali Gidir. I don't know, those people are heartless. They brought us all here, and we just informed our families and they are scared. I have the papers issued for me by the Eritrean Army here. I can't tell you what's happened to me here, I have three kids back home and I was in the National Service for 15 years. [...] My family cried and wailed and couldn't do anything besides collecting 2,000 dollars. [...]

We took our travel papers when we were going for a break [...]. Me and this friend of mine, we went to Aligidir, because it was planting season, they came to us at night while we were resting after a busy day at work and they brandished their knives and guns and took us. They took us all the way to Sudan, we thought we were being taken to the police station in Tesenei, but they said we're in Sudan and we've been sold to slavery. They took every paper we had, those pirates. I can't take this anymore; I can't pay more as my family don't have a single cent left. I'm praying for death. (Interview 24, telephone, Egypt, 17 September 2012)

Interviewee 25 explains how, after 18 years of National Service his bad health prompted him to leave the country, after which he was trafficked on to the Sinai.

I was a soldier in Eritrea, I'm a member of the 1st round of National Service. I've been a soldier for 18 years, during which time I was afflicted by fistula and was operated on. [...] after the surgery, I was told that a slight infection or heavy work would bring back the infection, I tried explaining this to my superiors, but they would not understand or let me go, as a result, I decided to leave my country. (Interview 25, telephone, Egypt, 21 November 2012)

While fleeing Eritrea, interviewee 25 was abducted by human traffickers who then, through extortion, forced him to beg for USD 25,000 from his family, who are extremely poor (Interview 24, telephone, Egypt, 21 November 2012; see also Van Reisen, Rijken, & Estefanos, 2014).

The control by the Eritrean government is still maintained even after people have fled Eritrea. This control is exerted through their relatives, among other ways. By WhatsApp, interviewee 26 sent the following message:

My wife is taken to prison. I need to send money to my children. They are on their own. She is taken because of my writing on Facebook. They say it is best she says she does not know me; she can divorce me. I need to send EUR 1,500 to bribe someone to arrange her release. (Interview 26, WhatsApp, 2 July 2019)

In order to send the money to bribe the official to release his wife, interviewee 26 will need to use the hawala system, which is privately-owned by PFDJ top officials and overseen by Hagos Gebrihiwot (Head of Economic Affairs, PFDJ, aka Hagos Kisha) (personal observation by author; Buysse *et al.*, 2017; Interview, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, face-to-face, 18 December 2016).

Institutionalised forced labour

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea documented grave human rights violations, including in National Service (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; 2016). It specifically highlighted concerns about its “prolonged and indefinite duration”, the “abusive conditions” and “use of conscripts as forced labour” (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 20). The Commission also identified that “Indefinite military/National Service is frequently cited by Eritreans as the prime reason for leaving Eritrea” (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 20).

The view of the Commission is that National Service per se is not a human rights violation, but that the Eritrean programme has three major problems under international law:

- (a) its open-ended and arbitrary duration, which routinely exceeds the 18 months provided for in a decree issued in 1995, frequently by more than a decade;*
- (b) the use of conscripts as forced labour in a wide range of economic activities, including private enterprises;*
- (c) the rape and torture perpetrated in military camps, and other conditions that are often inhumane. (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 22)*

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women considered Eritrea’s National Service in its 2015 meeting, classifying it as forced labour and expressing serious concerns about:

- The negative impact of the indefinite period of National Service on women’s rights and at the insufficient measures taken by the State party to remedy the situation. It is particularly concerned about:*
- (a) Women and girls being forcibly recruited into National Service for an indefinite period and without formal pay, under conditions amounting to forced labour;*
 - (b) Reports that women performing National Service are frequently victims of sexual violence, including rape, committed by officers and male recruits and that women who refuse sexual advances are often severely punished;*
 - (c) The large and increasing number of Eritrean women and girls, including unaccompanied children, who flee the country and become refugees to avoid National*

Service and who frequently become victims of violence, human trafficking and smuggling;

(d) Reports that many girls drop out of school, become pregnant and/or are forced to enter into child marriages to avoid enrolment at the Sawa Military Training Centre and National Service;

(e) The proliferation of small arms and the accessibility of firearms by individuals in the framework of National Service and the impact of that situation on the security of women. (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2015)

During deliberations by the International Labour Organization (ILO), concerns were expressed that:

Some of the reasons for the desperate and dangerous decisions taken by Eritrean migrants were forced labour, prolonged military conscription, arbitrary arrests, torture, appalling detention conditions, disappearances and severe restrictions on freedom of movement in the country. (The representative) recalled that many victims of the Lampedusa disaster had been Eritreans who had run away from servitude-like conditions. (ILO, 2015)

In the UN report of the Special Rapporteur, National Service was described as: “arbitrary, extended, and involuntary in nature, amounting to enslavement” (OHCHR, 2017).

Although the Presidential Adviser to the Government of Eritrea, Yemane Gebreab, had publicly announced in 2015 that: “Eritrea would limit its military and National Service programmes to the 18 months provided for in the 1995 decree” (Bruno Kreisky Forum, 8 April 2015, cited in UN Human Rights Council, 2016, pp. 20–21), in February 2016, Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel said that there were no plans to limit military/National Service programmes. He said: “demobilization is predicated on removal of the main threat... You are talking about prolongation of National Service in response to...continued belligerence by Ethiopia” (Reuters, 2016, cited in UN Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 21).

The Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea states that it observed that the Eritrean President's Office was framing the discussion in a way that did not match the reality on the ground:

... [We have] received reliable information indicating that the Office of the President has instructed Eritrean officials meeting with foreign delegations to make the following assertions regarding Eritrea's military/National Service programmes should the issue arise: i) the programme is a National Service programme, and conscripts are only required to work in civil service positions; ii) there are no military courts or prisons; and iii) there is an amnesty for draft evaders. The Commission has received no evidence supporting these Government assertions. (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 21)

After the 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement, there was an expectation that the period of National Service would be limited, but public statements by Minister Luul Gebreab (Minister of Labour and Human Welfare) and Minister Woldemichael Abraha (Minister of Local Government) indicate that the government intends to continue with the current policy of an integrated National Service system through the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and the deployment of National Service recruits in it. During an interview with Bloomberg in September 2018, Minister Luul Gebreab appears to say that most of the army will be demobilised, but, in reality, she actually confirms the use of youth in the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme: “Definitely a small army will remain, and the others will concentrate on the developmental work as planned...” (Manek, 2018, emphasis added). Despite the lack of reform of National Service, pressure remains, including from the United Kingdom Minister of State for Africa, Harriet Baldwin, who stated that:

[...] we are clear that the general human rights situation in Eritrea, including the terms of National Service, remains a substantial concern. [...] Sustainable reform of the National Service needs to happen in tandem with an improved economic situation and job creation that the international community can support. (Eritrea Hub, 2019)

Instead, peace is expected to translate into increased large-scale projects and the Minister of Local Government, Woldemichael Abraha, confirmed the government's plan to implement large national development projects. Analysing the announcement, it also appears that there are no plans to change the coercive nature of National Service or its inhumane conditions and practices. In fact, ILO made the following observations about the institutionalisation of forced labour:

The institutionalization of forced labour was evidenced by the serious penalties incurred by Eritreans who sought to avoid the obligation, including prison sentences, suspension of rights, reprisals against family members, and non-renewal of trading licences. Forced or compulsory labour was defined in Article 2(1) of the Convention as all work or service which was exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person had not offered himself voluntarily. The Worker members reiterated their concern with regard to the impact of the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme on women and children. Although the law stated that National Service was to be performed from the age of 18, various reports indicated that almost one third of new conscripts in military training centres were below that age. (ILO, 2018)

In response to this report, a representative of the Eritrean Government stated that he: "...hardly agreed with the conclusions as they were mainly the result of unrealistic information that did not reflect reality" (ILO, 2018). As the Eritrean authorities do not accept that National Service corresponds to forced labour, this weakens the likelihood of its reform.

No change with peace: The exodus continues

Presently, Eritreans are lamenting the lack of inclusiveness in the Ethiopia/Eritrea peace process as well as the failure of the Eritrean Government to implement any internal reforms. To the contrary, a wide range of sources in the country are reporting that the authorities have intensified round-ups (called *'giffas'*) for National Service all over the country:

Independent sources with contacts in Eritrea confirm that giffas to round up children for National Service have greatly increased – in these raids, people whose papers are not in order are also arrested. Another source in the Netherlands explained that the Eritrean government has started to kidnap children from their neighbourhoods in these giffas in order to draft them into military training at the SAWA Defence Training Centre. (Melicherová, 2019)

In July 2019, Eritrea Hub reported (based on BBC Tigrinya) that *giffas* were increasing:

A new wave of round-ups of youth, so called ‘Giffas’, is under way in Eritrea. The round-ups are organised to take young Eritreans to Sawa for National Service training. [...] the round-ups [...] are particularly focused on the Western Lowlands area. The round-ups in Hgazz – South of Keren – were reported to be particularly intense. Reports of Giffas are also coming from Asmara and the Debub-region. (Plaut, 2019)

Referring to rare protests inside Eritrea against the latest round of recruitment to Sawa, the article observes that *giffas* are a preparation for the next wave of National Service recruitments:

September is usually the month that Eritrean youth are required to report for National Service training and completion of high school in Sawa, but, despite warnings by local administrations of consequences to their families as a result of failure to report for National Service, the youth is increasingly unwilling to do so. (Plaut, 2019)

The article observes that the intensified round-ups are contributing to the increased exodus from Eritrea to Ethiopia: “Recently, Ethiopian authorities confirmed that 250–300 Eritreans continue to register in Ethiopian refugee camps every day” (Plaut, 2019)

According to the BBC, the places where the Eritrean defence forces are focusing *giffas* on are Akurdet, Keren, Hgazz, and Asmara. During *giffas* they take youth from their homes or from the streets. In Hgazz, hundreds of military were engaged in the *giffas*. In Keren and Akurdet, many posters had been secretly put up saying ‘*Yiak!*’, which means

‘Enough’ (photograph held by authors). This suggests the *giffas* have been implemented in response to these protests. In various places, students are refusing to go to Sawa and have also put up placards to protest (photograph held by authors). Local administrations have started to instruct parents that they will be fined if their children do not turn up for recruitment to Sawa (BBC Tigrinya Service, 2019).

The most recent information from the Eritrean-Ethiopian border area is that:

...25 percent of the new arrivals are unaccompanied and separated children. The reason given for them fleeing the country is that the Eritrean Government has started to “kidnap the children to go to SAWA military training,” said one source. SAWA is a military academy in the Gash-Barka region of Eritrea. (Melicherová, 2019)

Melicherová (2019) reports an increased number of refugees are crossing the border as a result of the *giffas*:

A senior official from the Ethiopian refugee agency has reported that Eritrean refugees continue to arrive in Ethiopia in large numbers, 250 to 300 persons a day. [...] ‘We have challenges of shelter, Core Relief Items (CRI), water and energy alternatives,’ states the senior official. Earlier reports indicate that many young Eritreans currently flee due to the increase of raids, Giffas, to force them into the indefinite National Service. (Melicherová, 2019)

Meanwhile, various international partners have started to provide aid, in the hope that the peace agreement will lead to a change. For the first time, the European Union (EU) has decided to provide assistance directly to those in power, including the PFDJ-owned enterprises. Yet, despite the EU’s good intentions, the number of refugees has increased. Interviewee 11 explains how he sees the situation:

The European Union has given a grant of 20 million euro to the Eritrean government, but you have to understand that this money shows to our people that we have no choice but to flee. I was in Ethiopia in December last year, where I was met

by an 80-year old father who had come there from Eritrea. He told me that he had been recruited for the road construction without any payment. The road construction had already started, and my village is just next to the road, and they recruited the elderly because all the young people have fled. (Interview 11, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019)

Interviewee 12 explains that he does not think that the EU aid for road construction will help the people in his country; he refers to an Eritrean national TV documentary of the road construction: “They create work with that money, and so more people are recruited under National Service. The documentary showed the foreman on the building sites. We know them, they are all military with high positions” (Interview 11, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

According to interviewee 10, it is not possible to reform the system: “The military we get to see can’t do anything either, they are scared to talk. The apparatus and its security is the problem” (Interview 10, face-to-face, the Netherlands, 31 July 2019).

Without fundamental reform, the focus group predicted, that there will not be a decrease in the number of refugees fleeing Eritrea.

Conclusion

Although the Government of Eritrea presents National Service as a duty that is necessary to protect the country, international experts have concluded that it constitutes forced labour and is coercive in nature, because it is indefinite, and because of the harsh and arbitrary punishments that are meted out to recruits and the inhumane conditions they forced to live and work in. National Service is controlled by the military-based hierarchy, in a context in which there is no rule of law. National Service severely undermines family life and its indefinite nature, forced those serving to be away from the family home. In addition, the insufficient pay received by recruits for assigned labour undermines their ability to support their families.

National Service starts with the last year of school, when education is combined with military training in Sawa Military Camp. After their year in Sawa is completed, students are assigned to vocational schools or higher education under military command under the Ministry of Defence, or to military service. These assignments include work as teachers, in health care, administration, or for the companies that come under '09', the Red Sea (Trading) Corporation. The public and private sector are overseen by top-ranking officials in the PFDJ and the President, as private persons and through private accounts. There is no public budgeting process in Eritrea. Those in National Service experience their situation as slavery in which the labour they are forced to carry out benefits those who are in control of their situation and who can amass private wealth based on this power structure.

There are serious restrictions on the flow of information (both in and out of Eritrea) and communication. Those in National Service do not have access to a phone or sim cards and they are unable to communicate with others about their situation. Very little information can be sent from Eritrea, given the strict controls by the government and the supervision of all communication. Independent monitoring visits are complicated by restrictions imposed by the government on where monitors may go and who they may talk to. Those in National Service are afraid to speak freely for fear of punishment. Very little information and communication enters Eritrea, and there is no freedom of press, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly or independent media. The Eritrean leadership controls ingoing and outgoing information through what is called '03'.

National Service creates desperate situations, which are a fertile ground for smugglers and human traffickers, who offer their services under the protection of those in leadership in Eritrea. Those in National Service have no bargaining power and usually have little possibility to negotiate their situation. Imprisonment for the smallest infraction or for what is considered disobedience happens frequently; the punishments are arbitrary, severe and inhumane. There are frequent reports of torture and there is no independent justice system.

Those in National Service are entirely dependent on the military commanders and high-ranking PFDJ officials.

National Service has become the main reason for Eritreans to flee the country, seeking ways to escape and willing to pay to cross the border, despite the shoot-to-kill policy at the border and the dangerous onward journeys to Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and beyond. An estimated 15% of Eritreans have fled the country (Human Rights Watch, 2018), and the number of refugees fleeing has *increased* since the signing of the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in July 2018. Unfortunately, many Eritreans have end up in human trafficking camps in Egypt, Sudan and Libya.

Eritrean officials have not indicated any plan to reform National Service. To the contrary, National Service round-ups, *giffas*, have intensified of late. The fact that the peace agreement has not resulted in any meaningful changes in Eritrea, and specifically for National Service, has created a sense of despair among the people. Despite the considerable risks, hundreds continue to leave the country daily. With the limited information available, those who flee run the risk of being abducted by human trafficking networks. However, by leaving the country, they feel that there is a chance to taste a little freedom, the hope of reconnecting with family and community, and the possibility of making some decisions about their life. Therefore, based on the empirical evidence presented in this chapter, it is concluded that National Service in Eritrea can be considered forced labour and is directly contributing to the exodus of Eritreans, making them vulnerable to being trafficked. Unfortunately, it is likely that this situation will continue while President Afwerki continues his tight grip on power and control over the ‘sons of Isaias’.

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