
ERITREA

Eritrea

Population: 4.0 million (2.1 million under 18)
Government armed forces: 202,000 (estimate)
Compulsory recruitment age: 18
Voluntary recruitment age: 18
Voting age: transitional system
Optional Protocol: not signed
Other treaties ratified (see glossary):
CRC, ILO 138; ACRWC

There were reports of forcible recruitment of under-18s into the army. Punishments for deserting, evading conscription or infringements of military discipline included torture and arbitrary detention. The government decreed that secondary school students should complete their education at a school close to a military training camp.

Context

In early 2004 some 60,000 people remained internally displaced in Eritrea following the two-year border war with Ethiopia that ended in December 2000.¹ Both countries expelled an estimated 75,000 of each other's nationals during the war, some of whom continued to be subjected to torture and illegal detention.² The UN peacekeeping mission, the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), continued to monitor a buffer zone in Eritrea. In September 2003 Ethiopia rejected an international ruling on border delimitation.

A coalition of opposition groups, the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF), reportedly established a military wing with support from Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen.³ The Eritrean government was alleged to provide support to Ethiopian and Sudanese armed opposition groups.⁴

The government failed to uphold the 1997 constitution in many respects, and national elections were postponed in 1997 and 2001.

Government

National recruitment legislation

The constitution states that all citizens must "be ready to defend the country" and "complete ... National Service" (Article 25).⁵ Under the National Service Proclamation, No. 82/95 of 23 October 1995, national service is obligatory for men and women between the ages of 18 and 40.⁶ Recruitment of children under 18 into the armed forces is prohibited under Proclamation 11/1991.⁷

National service consists of six months' military service, 12 months' development service and military reserve obligations.⁸

Child recruitment and deployment

Despite the December 2000 peace treaty, compulsory military service was extended repeatedly, with aggressive roundups of new recruits and evaders, forcible conscription, detentions and ill-treatment.⁹ Street children and other under-18s were reportedly used as forced labour in military camps.

In January 2004 UNICEF expressed concern at the requirement that all secondary school students must complete their final year at a school near the main military training camp in Sawa if they wanted to graduate or to attend university.¹⁰ Access to the school was strictly controlled and an official was reported as saying he considered the students to be members of the armed forces.¹¹

In 2001 over 2,000 students were detained when they demanded reform of a mandatory summer work program. Two students had reportedly died from the harsh conditions on the program. In August 2003 over 200 students on the program were allegedly beaten for possessing bibles, and 57 of them detained in scorching conditions inside metal shipping containers without adequate food or medical care. Six students were reportedly still held in solitary confinement in underground cells in November 2003.¹²

Two former child soldiers who fled Eritrea in 2002 said that they had been conscripted at the age of 15, that about 30 per cent of recruits at the Sawa camp were under 18, and that those fleeing military service faced torture, arbitrary detention and forced labour.¹³ Asylum-seekers forcibly returned from Malta in October 2002 were alleged to have been tortured and detained in secret on their arrival in Eritrea. At least one was reportedly shot dead.¹⁴

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

In July 2002 the Eritrean National Commission for Demobilization announced the completion of a pilot project for the demobilization of 200,000 combatants over the next two years.¹⁵ In March 2004 former combatants already incorporated in the government armed forces were issued with demobilization cards and asked to continue national service until January 2005. The World Bank, a principal funder, recognized the need for a special program for combatants under the age of 25.¹⁶ The UN Security Council called for Ethiopia and Eritrea to facilitate the sustainable reintegration of demobilized soldiers.¹⁷

Other developments

In October 2001 a handbook on child protection was distributed to UNMEE forces, and some UN peacekeepers received child protection training.¹⁸ Following visits to Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2002, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict called for child protection to be included in UNMEE's mandate.¹⁹ A subsequent commitment by the Eritrean government to ratify the Optional Protocol had not been met by early 2004.²⁰ In 2003 the UN Country Team in Eritrea set up a Child Protection Working Group to coordinate child protection strategies.²¹

* see glossary for information about internet sources

- 1 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Donor information update: Eritrea*, 31 January 2004.
- 2 Human Rights Watch (HRW), *The Horn of Africa: Mass expulsions and the nationality issue*, 30 January 2003, <http://www.hrw.org>.
- 3 BBC, "New rebel force in Eritrea", 2 May 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
- 4 Ulf Terlinden, *IGAD – Paper tiger facing gigantic tasks*, February 2004; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Ethiopia country report*, 2003, http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp_AnnualUpdate.asp?conflict (subscription required).
- 5 Constitution, at UN Online Network in Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN), <http://www.unpan.org>.
- 6 Letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Child Soldiers Coalition, 31 May 1999.
- 7 Initial report of Eritrea to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/41/Add.12, 27 July 2001, <http://www.ohchr.org>.
- 8 Amnesty International (AI), *Eritrea: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists*, 18 September 2002, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>. Another source states that military service is for two years: see HRW, *Eritrea human rights overview*, January 2004.
- 9 AI, *op. cit.*; HRW, *Eritrea human rights overview*, *op. cit.*
- 10 US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003*, 25 February 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/c1470.htm>; Jonah Fisher, "Eritrea rapped for 'military' schooling", BBC News, 11 January 2004..
- 11 HRW, *Eritrea human rights overview*, *op. cit.*
- 12 UNHCR, *UNHCR Position on Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea*, January 2004.
- 13 AI interviews with former child soldiers, 25 February 2004.
- 14 UNHCR, *op. cit.*
- 15 IRIN, "Eritrea: Demobilisation Pilot Phase Completed", 2 July 2002.
- 16 World Bank, *Technical Annex for a Proposed Credit of SDR 48.1 Million (US\$ 60 million equivalent) to the State of Eritrea for an Emergency Demobilization and Reintegration Project*, 22 April 2002.
- 17 UN Security Council Resolution 1398, UN Doc. S/Res/1398, 15 March 2002, <http://www.un.org/documents>.
- 18 Information from UN source, 6 February 2004.
- 19 Annual report of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, UN Doc. E/CN.4/2003/77, 3 March 2003, <http://www.ohchr.org>.
- 20 UNMEE, Press conference by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, 12 March 2002, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmee>.
- 21 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Africa region, Quarterly reports of field offices, December 2003, <http://www.ohchr.org>.