

FOCUS ON

ERITREA



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RESEARCH CENTRE
ON CIVILIAN VICTIMS
OF CONFLICTS



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A Tigrinya wedding

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THE COUNTRY AT A GLANCE

Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa. The country resulted from the incorporation in the colonial state of Italian Eritrea, of independent, distinct kingdoms and sultanates and various northern Ethiopian vassal states of the Ethiopian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. In 1947 Eritrea became part of a federation with Ethiopia, the Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Subsequent annexation into Ethiopia led to the Eritrean War of Independence, ending with Eritrean independence following a referendum in April 1993. The almost 30 years long conflict included not only fighting but also a series of massacres resulted in thousands of civilians casualties to dissuade Eritrean rebels from action. The fighting also led to massive internal displacement in both countries, mass deportation and confinement of foreign “enemy” citizens. The humanitarian situation further deteriorated due to two Eritrean civil wars, fought during the main conflict against Ethiopia. Eritrea is a one-party state governed by President Isaias Afwerq and his party People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, which did not allowed national elections since 1993. Hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia persisted even after the peace agreement and the independence, leading to the Eritrean-Ethiopian War of 1998–2000 (resulted in about 70.000 casualties) and further border skirmishes with both Djibouti and Ethiopia. Currently, apart from its border issues, Eritrea is widely looked at for its despicable human rights records, considered one of the worst in the world. In June 2015, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea in its report to the UN Human Rights Council, described a state that rules through fear and a litany of systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations carried out with impunity by the government. The commission called on the Human Rights Council to maintain close scrutiny on violations committed in Eritrea that may constitute crimes against humanity.

FLAG

NAME	Dawlat Iritriyá (Arabic) Hagere Ertra (Tigrinya) State of Eritrea
CAPITAL	Asmara
OFFICIAL AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE	Tigrinya Arabic English
POPULATION	6.3 million
ETHNIC GROUPS	55% Tigrinya 30% Tigre 4% Saho 2% Kunama 2% Bilen 2% Rashaida 5% others
NEIGHBOURS	Sudan Ethiopia Djibouti
TOTAL OF CIVILIANS AFFECTED (2015)	n/a
GDP	USD 7.8 billion
PEOPLE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE (2015)	1.2 million
LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH	63 years
ERITREAN REFUGEES	363.077
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX	0.39 (186 / 188)
IDPs	10.000
GLOBAL PEACE INDEX	2.46 (135 / 163)
CORRUPTION PERCEPTION RANKING	154/168

INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical context

The economy of Eritrea is largely agrarian, with two thirds of the population is engaged in subsistence farming and pastoralism for livelihoods, rendering them vulnerable to climate variability. Despite being severely affected by years of conflict, the economy of Eritrea has experienced considerable growth in recent years, due to the beginning of exploitation of its extensive amount of resources such as copper, gold, granite, marble, and potash in the gold and silver. The investment done to develop transportation infrastructure has also had an important impact on economic growth. Eritrea is a member of the African Union, the United Nations, and IGAD, and is an observer in the Arab League. In disagreement with the AU over the management of the binding border decision demarcating the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the former withdrew its representative, who was appointed again only in 2011. Eritrea maintains diplomatic ties with a number of other countries, including China, Denmark, Djibouti, Israel, the United States and Yemen, although relations with Djibouti and Yemen are tense due to territorial disputes, and those with Ethiopia have been affected by distrust and mutual accusations of supporting internal armed oppositions. Eritrea is also subject to several UN Security Council Resolutions (from 2009, 2011, and 2012) imposing various military and economic sanctions, for its support to armed opposition groups in the region, such as eastern Sudanese rebel groups.

Peacekeeping missions: United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE, 2000 – 2008).

Main UN documents on Eritrea

- [UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea Report \[A/HRC/29/42\]](#), 4 June 2015
- [The Monitoring Group's final report on Eritrea \[S/2014/727\]](#), 10 October 2014
- [UN Security Council Presidential Statement calling on the Sanctions Monitoring Group to investigate reports that Eritrea had supplied arms to insurgent groups in Somalia \[S/PRST/2009/15\]](#), 18 May 2009
- [Security Council Resolution 1177 \(1998\) on the situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia \[S/RES/1177\]](#), 26 June 1998

The genesis of the conflict

Following the World War II, in December 1950, Eritrea was included in a loose federal structure under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Emperor, under the prompting of the United States through UN Resolution 390A(V). When Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally dissolved the Eritrean parliament and annexed the country in 1962, the nationalistic Eritrean movement, through the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), started fighting for independence. The ensuing Eritrean-Ethiopian War went on for 30 years until 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a successor of the ELF, defeated the Ethiopian forces and obtained an UN-supervised referendum declaring the independence of the country. The tensions at the border never really disappeared, and on 1998, following some skirmishes, the Eritrean troops entered Ethiopian territory starting a trench

warfare conflict that lasted until 2000. Most sources place around 70.000 the overall amount of casualties of the fighting, which also produced 650,000 IDPs and some ten thousands deported or interned. On 13 April 2002, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission established under the Algiers Agreement awarded some territory to each side, but Ethiopia never fully accepted the verdict. The situation escalated again when in 2005, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that Eritrea broke international law when it attacked Ethiopia in 1998. In reaction, Ethiopia and Eritrea remobilized troops along the border and expelled international observers, but the 2007 deadline passed without major events. In 2008, Eritrean troops moved across the border on Ras Doumera peninsula and Doumera Island further increasing tensions in the Red Sea.

Peace talks and agreements

The first peace talks between Eritrea and Ethiopia took place in 1989 thanks to US efforts, but fighting resumed shortly after some technical arrangements for the implementation of the OAU Framework Agreement were found. Despite this, talks continued until 1991, when after the fall of the Ethiopian Mengistu regime, a peace conference agreed on the right of the Eritreans to hold a referendum on independence. The result of the referendum held in 1993 was an overwhelming majority in favor of the independence, which was declared the same year. Before the referendum, in 1999, the Government reached a bilateral agreement with the Republic of the Sudan. After the second Eritrean-Ethiopian War, in 2000 the two countries approved the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, later confirmed in the Algiers Agreement (also called the December Agreement). This was a peace document that provided for the exchange of prisoners, the return of displaced persons, and the establishment of a Boundary Commission to demarcate the border, and a Claims Commission to assess damages caused during the conflict. The latest peace document involving Eritrea, is the Agreement between the State of Eritrea and the Republic of Djibouti signed in 2011.

THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS – STORIES

Aged 26, Mohammed recently joined the exodus after a journey to Sudan marking the end of a harrowing period of imprisonment and torture. Mohammed didn't flee the country for the money, as he had long been used to doing small jobs on the side to boost his 700 nakfa (\$66) a month salary as a civil servant. But in May 2015, after a rough encounter with two officials in plain clothes that threatened him and started loitering around his house and workplace, he started fearing their presence to be related to him having so far avoided being conscripted for the national endless compulsory military service. Mohammed and two friends decided it was time to make the dangerous trek to Sudan rather than risk being conscripted. Because of the tightly guarded border, they were soon captured and stripped of their shoes, money and phones. The soldiers brought them to Hashferay prison, where they were held in underground cells. By day they carried water and moved rocks for construction projects, or worked on farms in the sweltering heat. Meals were bread and water twice a day. At night, they slept crowded together "like matchsticks", Mohammed said. Escape was impossible: without shoes, rocks and thorns pierced their feet, making travel by foot out of the question. Guards would sometimes punish people by forcing them to run around the thorn-strewn ground beneath the trees. Mohammed managed to escape while

being transferred to a military training camp in the north-eastern city of Nakfa three months later, and spent several weeks journeying to Sudan. “If I had stayed in Eritrea, everything there would have started to seem normal,” said Mohammed, who worries about his family members still back at home. “I had to do this to be free.”¹

Araya was born in Eritrea but spent most of her childhood in Ethiopia with her family until war broke out between the two countries. Her father was imprisoned in Ethiopia, and died there soon afterwards, while the rest of the family – Araya, her brother and sister and mother – were deported back to Eritrea along with tens of thousands of other Eritreans. Araya, who was then 14, did not speak the local language of Tigrinya, and her mother, who worked as a teacher, was forbidden from practicing her faith as a Pentecostal Christian – one of many banned religions in Eritrea. She ignored the prohibition and even taught some of her students about Pentecostalism. “One day the police came to our house to arrest her,” says Araya, beginning to cry at the memory. “They started to beat her in front of us. I was angry and tried to push them away. They punched me in the eye and it started to bleed. “They took my mother, brother and sister and left me bleeding...I never heard from them again. I still don’t know what happened to my family.” After returning to Ethiopia she was told that she had lost the use of her eye, but the doctor but offered to take her back to Iraq with him where he promised to treat her and send her to school with his own children. “When we arrived [in Iraq], he didn’t treat me, he just made me work in his home – I cleaned all of it and I wasn’t allowed to go out. His wife was always threatening to kill me if her husband even looked at me.” Araya spent seven years confined before she managed to escape. Two Eritrean friends paid a smuggler to take her across Iraq’s border with Syria and from there to Turkey. She stayed at a smuggler’s house full of other migrants and refugees who were waiting to continue on to Greece, where she met a childhood friend of hers from Ethiopia, whom she married during her undocumented stay in Athens. Two years after, Araya was pregnant with their first child when he got arrested. She used the few money left for a fake passport to get to the UK. There, she received refugee status, but all steps to get her family reunited and her husband back have so far been unsuccessful. Araya is now in the process of appealing the refusal and pregnant with a second child, all her hopes are pinned on a court hearing due in 2015. Now in her late twenties, she is still waiting for her life to truly begin.²

HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

The humanitarian situation in Eritrea is the result of a mix of factors linked to the persistent effects of war and the political choices of the authoritarian government. In fact, although the country is steadily growing, its pace is far from that of most other African economies, as the country never fully recovered from the destruction of the decades of war. Currently, in spite of the absence of war, 1.2 million people are still estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance, but detailed figures are difficult to obtain, as humanitarian access is strictly limited. Human rights reports leaking from the country report about torture, arbitrary detention, and indefinite national service used to perform public labor, among other human rights concerns. Due to the regular human rights abuses and the dire economic situation, each year large numbers of migrants, often fleeing national service, depart Eritrea in search of work in Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and Yemen, becoming thus vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking.

¹The Guardian, Tale of two Eritreans offers glimpse inside Africa’s most secretive state, 17 August 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/17/inside-eritrea-glimpse-africas-most-secretive-state-two-men> (last accessed: 17.09.2015)

²IRIN, Araya’s story, 6 July 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/101714/araya-apos-s-story> (last accessed: 11.09.2015)



Eritrean countryside between Asmara to Keren

Credit: CC BY-NC-ND, Carsten Brink

Source: Flickr

Shelter

As of May 2015, reports of about 10.000 IDPs, of which 2,802 Somali refugees, being present in Eritrea have been received, although documenting the information or evaluating their needs is temporarily impossible. Eritreans are also characterized by an extremely numerous diaspora, with a total of more than 321, 000 refugees. Latest estimates by OHCHR report that some 5,000 Eritreans, including many unaccompanied minors, flee the country every month to escape government repression and lack of basic freedoms.



The Ministry of Health in Eritrea

Credit: Hans van der Splinter

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Health

Despite the grim economic situation of the country, Eritrea has achieved significant improvements in health care and allegedly managed to meet its Millennium Development Goal targets in health. In particular for child health, life expectancy at birth has increased from 39.1 in 1960 to 59.5 years in 2008, while maternal and child mortality rates have decreased and the health infrastructure has been expanded. Nevertheless, according to the few data accessible, the health service is far from being satisfactory, and malaria and especially non-communicable diseases keep raising concern, as NCD are estimated to account for 37% of total deaths in Eritrea. Due to reduced investments (health accounts for 3% of national GDP) and proper working conditions, the medical system is understaffed and the physician to population ratio is about half the average for the region. Eritrea is considered at high risk of major infectious diseases, with the most likely being food or waterborne diseases, such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever, or vectorborne diseases, and notably malaria and dengue fever.



A community water point

Credit: CC, USAID

Source: public-domain-image.com

Water and sanitation

Eritrea is chronically afflicted by draughts and its water and sanitation system has suffered from the wars and lack of proper investments. As of 2015, 57.8% of population (the majority being in urban contexts) supposedly has access to improved drinking water sources, and 42.2% to unimproved drinking water. In terms of sanitation, while 84.3% of population has access to unimproved sanitation facilities, only 15.7% has access to improved systems.



Donkeys in the Dekemhare market

Credit: CC BY 2.0, David Stanley

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Food security

The country's economy largely depends on subsistence agriculture, with two thirds of the population engaged in subsistence farming and pastoralism for livelihood, rendering them vulnerable to climate variability. It is estimated that in a year of good agricultural production, Eritrea can produce a maximum of 70 to 80 per cent of the annual cereal requirements, and in a bad year, as little as 20 to 30 per cent. Inclement weather in 2015 led to drought conditions across the country, which put under further strain a situation that is already quite grim, with about 50% of the population estimated to be below the poverty line. Eritrea's overall dysfunctional market is also due to the absence of many farmers, who are often called to perform extensive national services and high food and fuel prices. Notably, according to FAO in 2013, over 60% of the Eritrean population was reported to be undernourished between 2011 and 2013. Despite this, the Government officially denies any food shortages within its borders and refuses food aid.



The Catholic school in Asmara

Credit: CC BY 2.0, David Stanley

Source: Flickr

Education

Eritrea invests only 2.1% of GDP in education for five levels of education: pre-primary, primary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary. According to available data, Eritrea counts with approximately 824 schools and two universities (the University of Asmara and the Eritrea Institute of Technology), as well as with several smaller colleges and technical schools. However, the education infrastructure is inadequate to the needs, the education system is affected by skill shortages at all levels, and funding for and access to education vary significantly by gender and location. Literacy levels are around 73.8%, with average varying significantly based on gender and location. Education in Eritrea is officially compulsory between seven and 13 years of age, but barriers to education still exist, and include traditional taboos, school fees (for registration and materials), and the opportunity costs of low-income households.



United Nations soldiers, part of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, monitoring Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary (2005).

Credit: CC BY-SA 1.0, Dawit Rezene

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Protection

According to the few available country reports, grave human rights violations in Eritrea are grave and widespread. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Eritreans are deprived of fundamental freedoms by the authorities, and are routinely and arbitrarily arrested, detained, and tortured. Disappearances or extrajudicial executions were also reported. The Eritrean systems of national service and forced labor has been compared to forms of indefinite detention. Vulnerable groups include small-scale rural farmers, pastoralists, the urban poor, people living with HIV/AIDS, and refugees. According to data from UNICEF, landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERWs) continue to pose a threat to the population causing deaths, injuries and disabilities.



Public transport on Massawa-Asmara road near Nefasit, Eritrea

*Credit: CC, Reinhard Dietrich
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

Access

Humanitarian access in Eritrea is still very difficult, mainly for the hostility of the Government to the presence of foreign organizations, and its distaste for internal criticism and dissent. Because of this, reliable information about humanitarian needs is lacking, and activities are limited and hardly sustainable. For example, humanitarian mine action programmes in the country have been scaled down because of limited access, and international journalists have not been officially allowed into the country since 2007.



Replica of the prison cell of Dawit Isaak, exhibited at Mediedagarna i Göteborg

*Credit: CC BY-SA 4.0, Per A.J. Andersson
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

TRUTH-SEEKING PROCESSES

The Algiers Agreement established the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission in collaboration with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to settle the issue of the border with Ethiopia. On 13 April 2002, the Commission agreed upon a “final and binding” verdict and awarded some territory to each side, although some parts of its decision are still waiting to be implemented. The same body also determined that Eritrea broke international law and triggered the war by invading Ethiopia, a statement that rekindled tensions between the two countries and pushed Eritrea to expel most international presence from its territory. So far, no truth and reconciliation body has been established, the Government opposing any initiative in this direction.

FIGHT AGAINST IMPUNITY AND REPARATION

The Government of Eritrea is still expression of those forces who fought in the last wars, a continuity that hampers any process of judicial review of the violations against civilians committed during the conflict, and fosters impunity. So far, no trial or reparation process has been started for the events of the Eritrean war of independence, or the Eritrean civil wars. At international level,

the only independent body providing reparation to war victims in Eritrea is the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission. The Commission was established and operates according to the 2000 Algiers Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Commission decides through binding arbitration all claims for loss, damage or injury by one Government against the other, and by nationals (including both natural and juridical persons) of one party against the Government of the other party or entities owned or controlled by the other party that are (a) related to the conflict that was the subject of the Framework Agreement, the Modalities for its Implementation and the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, and (b) result from violations of international humanitarian law, including the 1949 Geneva Conventions, or other violations of international law.

MEMORY

The government of Eritrea established a yearly official holiday, Martyrs' Day on 20 June, as a time of national remembrance. Calling the victims martyrs is in stark contrast, however, with the fact that the authorities maintained almost absolute secrecy on the numbers and identities of those killed in war. This inspired some critics to affirm that the celebration is more about justifying the increasing militarization of the country and underline the spirit of sacrifice required to its citizens, than about helping the survivors to cope with the loss. This theory would supposedly find support in the prevalence of war military memorials respect to monuments dedicated to the victims of the conflict. Mainly, civilian victims were remembered planting trees in Martyrs Parks intended as memorials, in different parts of the country. Following the increasing trend of using information technology for peacebuilding and memorialization, and trying to find a way to bypass the strict censorship imposed by the Government, in 2005 the managers of an open Eritrean diaspora platform called Awate created an online war memorial, the Martyrs' Album, commemorating and documenting the Eritrean lives lost in the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia.

PEACEBUILDING

Between 1995 and 1997, Interpeace developed a broad peacebuilding project, mainly facilitating channels of communication between the government and the international aid community, bringing together key actors to discuss national priorities for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Since then, the heavy restriction imposed on foreign observers and organizations have severely hampered the capacity of gathering information about the vitality of civil society organizations in the country, and their capacity to engage in peacebuilding activities. In fact, President Isaias Afewerki's crackdown on reformist movements and its policy of militarization of Eritrean society made anyone engaging in dialogue and critical discussion over the past, the present and the future a potential suspect or dissident. Consequently, groups and civic organizations working for peacebuilding emerged mostly in the diaspora.



Local elections in Agordat, Eritrea

Credit: CC BY-SA 2.5, Hans van der Splinter

Source: Wikimedia Commons

“WHEN I AM IN ERITREA, I FEEL THAT I CANNOT EVEN THINK BECAUSE I AM AFRAID THAT PEOPLE CAN READ MY THOUGHTS.”

From the Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea to the UN Human Rights Council³

³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea [A/HRC/29/42], 4 June 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx> (last access: 14.09.2015)



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