



STATEMENT BY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Thousands of Eritreans, many of them young, flee Eritrea every month. This means Eritrea is losing a significant percentage of its population – by far the largest of any country not wracked by active conflict. UNHCR reported that at the end of 2016 there were 459,000 Eritreans who had claimed asylum worldwide in African states, in the Middle East, in Europe and here in the United States. Eritrea does not release population statistics, but estimations put that at more than 10% of Eritrea’s current population.

Based on Human Rights Watch research, Eritreans’ most predominant impetus for flight is to escape what is known as “national service.” By a proclamation issued in 1995, all Eritreans are subject to 18 months of national service, including six months of military training. Eritrean law requires Eritreans leaving the country to hold an exit permit which the authorities only issue selectively, severely punishing those caught trying to leave without one, including with jail time.

To be clear, limited terms of national conscription do not, in themselves, constitute human rights violations. But it is not limited in Eritrea. The Eritrean government disregards the proclamation’s time limits. Many conscripts are forced to serve indefinitely. Human Rights Watch has interviewed hundreds of Eritreans who were forced to serve a decade or more before they decided to flee -- in one recent case, a man had been in forced national service for over 17 years.

While some fortunate conscripts are assigned to civil service jobs or as teachers, many are placed in military units assigned to work on “development” projects in agriculture and infrastructure. None have a choice about their assignments, the locations or length of their service.

In the past few years, more and more unaccompanied children have fled Eritrea. When interviewed in Europe, they’ve explained they feared being forced into possibly indefinite military service. Many children told us they had observed what had happened to their fathers,

older siblings, or other close relatives who had been conscripted and didn't want to suffer the same fate.

It's not just the length of time that causes so many conscripts to flee. What happens to them during their years of service is also devastating.

Pay during national service is below subsistence, although the Eritrean government has recently announced increases for some conscripts. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry in 2015 correctly called Eritrea's national service a form of "enslavement." During service, commanders subject conscripts to physical abuse, including torture.

An 18-year-old boy, interviewed by Human Rights Watch summed up what many have told us: "We love our country, but when you finish Grade 12, you become a soldier for life. You cannot feed your family and you're the property of the army. And I did not want that, so I was forced to flee."

The abuses in national service are long standing and well-documented, and recent interviews reveal that, sadly, nothing has changed in recent years.

National service may be the leading cause of the Eritrean exodus but there are others of significance.

Citizens cannot express their views or question government policies affecting them. There is no legislative representation, no independent press, no independent non-governmental organizations to which citizens can turn. The judiciary is tightly controlled by the government. President Isaias has refused to implement a constitution approved by referendum in 1997 that confers some citizens' basic rights.

Eritreans who criticize or question government policies during government-called community assemblies, or in more limited fora, have been punished without trial or means of appeal. Suspicion alone may be enough to lead to arrest; often a prisoner is not told what "crime" he or she has committed. Indefinite imprisonment is a usual punishment, sometimes accompanied by physical abuse. Imprisonment can be incommunicado; relatives are not told of the whereabouts of a prisoner, much less allowed to visit.

Relatives of those that speak out are also punished. They are denied government ration cards to buy scarce but essential provisions.

Eritreans are punished for having the “wrong” religious beliefs. Since 2002, the government has “recognized” only four religious groups: Sunni Islam and the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches.

At times, security personnel raid private homes where devotees of unrecognized religions meet for communal prayer. Arrests and imprisonment of attendees usually follow; so, sometimes, does physical abuse. Repudiation of his or her religion is typically the price of a prisoner’s release.

Even adherents and leaders of the “recognized” religions are not necessarily immune from punishment. [as Father Thomas will already have explained to the Commission in detail.]

But unfortunately, abuses do not stop when people leave Eritrea. Fleeing Eritreans are often victimized by their smugglers especially those trying to reach the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe. Abuses are rampant in Sudan, Egypt and Libya en route and hundreds have died trying to cross the Mediterranean. Those who survived have told Human Rights Watch interviewers of horrific stories about the dangers they encountered during their journey but insisted it was worth their escape from oppression. One boy, interviewed in Italy after his three-month journey from Eritrea, told Human Rights Watch: “I fled my country [Eritrea] because of all the problems I had while I was in the army. I don’t want to be a soldier but they beat me and tortured me when I was caught trying to escape. When I finally got out I thought I would be free, but I was beaten and tortured even worse in Sudan and Libya by smugglers. Crossing the sea was terrifying, but I am so relieved to finally be here.”

There are steps that the Eritrean government could take to stem migration, and importantly address the human rights crisis that has wracked the country. Eritrea could end indefinite national service and begin the process of demobilizing conscripts. It could penalize military commanders and security officers who authorize torture and other forms of severe physical punishment. It could unconditionally release political prisoners or bring anyone it considers an offender before a truly independent court of law. It could stop interference with all forms of peaceful religious expression. It could allow establishment of an independent press and non-governmental organizations. It could publicly affirm – and enforce – rights to freedom of expression, opinion, religion, association, and movement.

Unfortunately, the Eritrean government has steadfastly refused to change. In the absence of willingness by the Eritrean government to end its abuses and bring abusers to justice, other countries should investigate and prosecute individuals suspected of committing serious crimes under the principle of universal jurisdiction and in accordance with their national laws.

Countries concerned by human rights abuses of Eritreans, and their efforts at migrating should work to undercut the Eritrean government's public excuses for repression and protect the Eritreans who have fled from being repatriated to suffer further abuse.

With a new Secretary of State confirmation underway we expect to see some change at senior State Department levels [and this could mark the beginning of a new approach on Eritrea.] During Mike Pompeo's confirmation hearing he said he was a "talent hawk." If that is the case, we hope he will fill the position for Africa Assistant Secretary quickly and nominate someone who is well versed in issues and challenges related to the Horn of Africa – and not just counterterrorism or security related ones.

In 2002 an international boundary commission was established to demarcate the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The United States was a guarantor of an armistice agreement ending a 1998-2000 border war that established the international commission. While both sides agreed to accept the findings of the international commission as binding, Ethiopia refused to accept the findings when the final decision was to award a key piece of territory to Eritrea. President Isaias uses the border issue – of "no peace, no war" – as the principal excuse for his repressive policies. While both sides have been firmly entrenched in their positions, there may be an opening for reconsideration as Ethiopia's new prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed recently expressed his desire to resolve disputes with Eritrea after, in his own words "years of misunderstandings."

The United States and other countries should urgently take steps to protect the Eritreans who have managed to flee the government's oppression, should take into consideration the pattern of serious human rights abuses in Eritrea in examining asylum claims, and ensure that no one is returned to a threat of persecution or torture.

Last September, the U.S Departments of Homeland Security and State announced an intent to repatriate about 700 Eritrean individuals. The government should take care to ensure that all of those individuals have a genuine opportunity to advance any claims for protection in light of human rights conditions in Eritrea, if they have not done so already.

By shedding light on what's happening to Eritreans in Eritrea and in countries of potential asylum, this Commission is performing a welcome public service.

Thank you.