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# **Eritrea – Drivers and Root Causes of Emigration, National Service and the Possibility of Return**

**Country of Origin Information for Use in the Asylum  
Determination Process**

*Report from the Danish Immigration Service's fact finding missions to Ethiopia and Eritrea*

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## **1. Background and methodology**

The report at hand has been produced by the Country of Origin Information unit of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) for use in the asylum determination process. The information included in this report was gathered during a visit to London in September 2014 and fact finding missions to both Ethiopia (20-27 August 2014) and Eritrea (1-17 October 2014).

### **1.1 Purpose of mission**

During the summer of 2014, Denmark experienced a sudden and significant increase in the number of asylum seekers from Eritrea. Other European countries also experienced a similar increase. Eritrean citizens have since constituted a substantial part of the overall number of asylum seekers in Europe.

The majority of Eritreans seeking asylum in Denmark state as reasons for leaving Eritrea the National Service, the condition and duration thereof, and the fact that they have left Eritrea illegally. Therefore, they fear reprisals from the Eritrean government upon return to Eritrea.

The available country of origin information relevant for the Danish caseload was published by stakeholders with no or little direct access to Eritrea. Consequently, the hitherto available reporting on the conditions in Eritrea to a large extent seems to be based on information obtained from sources that were not present in Eritrea or on interviews with Eritrean refugees abroad. In addition, some of the available information appears not to be obtained recently.

Therefore, the need for more updated and first-hand description of the conditions on the ground in Eritrea arose.

DIS thus concluded that fact finding missions to Eritrea and Ethiopia would be the preferred method for carrying out a proper assessment and a gathering of first-hand information on these issues.

The main purpose of the mission to Ethiopia was to look into the possibility of verifying the identity of Eritrean asylum seekers who had resided in UNHCR camps in northern Ethiopia before leaving for Europe. In addition, further background information about migrations patterns and the conditions in Eritrea was also obtained.

The purpose of the mission to Eritrea was twofold. First, to gather information about Eritrea and daily life in the country in order to assist the DIS caseworkers in verifying the nationality of persons claiming to be from Eritrea. Second, to explore the topics of the National Service in Eritrea, the reasons why some Eritreans are leaving the country and the possibility for Eritreans to return if they have left the country illegally.

### **1.2 Methodology**

In order to prepare and plan the missions to Eritrea and Ethiopia, the DIS conferred with other immigration authorities in Europe as well as Professor Gaim Kibreab, London South Bank University. The information on relevant interlocutors as well as practical and logistical issues obtained through these contacts was useful in the planning of the fact finding missions to both Ethiopia and Eritrea.



In Ethiopia and Eritrea, the delegation consulted representatives of Western embassies, UN agencies, international organisations, international non-governmental organisations, local non-governmental organisations, a well-known Eritrean intellectual as well as a representative from the Eritrean government. One of the Western embassies consulted in Asmara, Eritrea, is based in Khartoum, Sudan.

The interlocutors interviewed were identified by the delegation based on the expertise, merit and role of each interlocutor relevant to the purpose and content of the missions. The delegation considers that to the best of its knowledge, the consulted interlocutors represent a broad spectrum of competent sources knowledgeable on the relevant issues in Eritrea.

Consultations with the interlocutors were held in English. All interlocutors were thoroughly informed of the purpose of the mission and all interlocutors were explicitly informed that the resulting report would be published on DIS' website, [www.newtodenmark.dk](http://www.newtodenmark.dk), and thus be available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

All interlocutors agreed to receive their statements forwarded for comments, corrections and approval. Four interlocutors did not respond to the request for comments, corrections and final approval of their statements despite several reminders and attempts to contact them.

The interlocutors who did not respond are: A Western embassy (E) in Eritrea; a well-known Eritrean intellectual, Asmara; Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Asmara; International Organisation of Migration (IOM), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The statements of these interlocutors are included in the report at hand as they were sent to them.

All interlocutors are referred to according to their own request on this matter. Several interlocutors required varying degrees of anonymity or indirect referencing in order not to compromise their identity and to protect their countries' or organisations' continued cooperation with the Eritrean authorities.

The fact finding report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The report is based on the approved interview notes and other material provided by the listed interlocutors. References to available general background information about Eritrea have been included when relevant in Chapter 2 and 4.

The report reflects the views of the interlocutors and care has been taken to present their views as accurately and transparently as possible. All interlocutors' statements are found in their full extent in Annex A of this report.



## 2. Brief country introduction

The state of Eritrea covers approximately 121,114 square kilometers and is situated at the Horn of Africa, bordered by Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti. The population is estimated to be somewhere between 4-6 million but there is great uncertainty about the figure. Asmara is the capital<sup>1</sup>.

A former Italian colony, Eritrea came under British administration in 1941. Following the Second World War, Ethiopia, which historically regarded Eritrea as an integral part of its territory, intensified its claims to sovereignty. In 1952, the United Nations resolved to establish Eritrea as an autonomous entity federated with Ethiopia as a compromise between Ethiopian claims for sovereignty and Eritrean aspirations for independence. However in 1962, the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, decided to annex Eritrea, triggering a 32-year armed struggle. Following Eritrean victory in 1991, the UN supervised a referendum held in 1993 at which national independence was obtained<sup>2</sup>.

The Eritrean government is a highly centralized, authoritarian regime under the control of President Isaias Afwerki. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), headed by President Isaias, is the sole political party. There have been no presidential elections in Eritrea since the President was elected by the National Assembly in 1993<sup>3</sup>.

Two Western embassies (C, D) in Eritrea stated that the Eritrean government detains people for political reasons. However, one Western embassy (C) in Eritrea explained that there is no general climate of fear to detect in the population.

Professor Gaim Kibreab, South Bank University, London, explained that the political oppression is targeting any kind of political opposition to the state and/or ruling party, but there is no generalized random suppression against the general public.

Three Western embassies (B, C, D) in Eritrea stated that the rules and procedures in Eritrea are not applied in a uniform manner and that some laws are unclear or not even published. There is an arbitrary nature of the way the security apparatus and the justice system work.

### 2.1 Freedom of movement

Several of the consulted sources in Eritrea (Western embassies A and B; International organisation B; a regional NGO based in Asmara) stated that Eritreans do not need a travel permit to travel inside Eritrea.

One Western embassy (D) in Eritrea specified that people who have not been demobilized nor released from the National Service probably would need some kind of approval from their employer in order to travel unhindered within Eritrea.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith-Morris, Miles. Physical and Social Geography (Eritrea), in Europa World online. London, Routledge. By subscription. Danish Immigration Service. Retrieved 14 November 2014 from <http://europaworld.com/entry/er.ge>

<sup>2</sup> Historical Context (Eritrea), in Europa World online. London, Routledge. By subscription. Danish Immigration Service. Retrieved 14 November 2014 from <http://europaworld.com/entry/EE001000>

<sup>3</sup> Domestic Political Affairs (Eritrea), in Europa World online. London, Routledge. By subscription. Danish Immigration Service. Retrieved 14 November 2014 from <http://europaworld.com/entry/EE001001>



One Western embassy (E) in Eritrea stated that an individual encountered without an ID-card would be held by the police for a couple of days in order to establish his or her National Service status. It was added that the police have no computers and that access to data-bases is hampered by frequent power cuts.

International organisation (C) in Eritrea and Western embassy (C) in Eritrea explained that there are only a few checkpoints in Eritrea.

Two Western embassies (C, D) in Eritrea described procedures at such checkpoints as informal and lenient. One Western embassy (D) in Eritrea went on to explain that ID checks on routes between cities are conducted sporadically, while the other Western embassy (C) in Eritrea further elaborated that Eritreans travelling by bus are usually not checked at all and that the authorities mostly check foreigners' documents.

To illustrate the lack of check-points, one Western embassy (B) in Eritrea explained that in January 2013 there was an attempted coup in Asmara and that the armed vehicles that were used in the coup drove 120 km from Senafe to Asmara without being stopped or attacked.

## **2.2 Observations by the delegation**

During the mission to Eritrea the delegation of the Danish Immigration Service was granted permission to travel outside Asmara twice, to the towns of Adi Kuala and Adi Keih, both approximately 100 km south of Asmara and close to the Ethiopian border. On these excursions, the delegation did not experience any checks of the travel permit which all foreigners must obtain before driving more than 25 km outside of Asmara. The delegation only observed one visible check-point during its two week stay in Eritrea. The delegation was never stopped to identify themselves.

During the stay in Asmara, the delegation was able to watch CNN and BBC at the hotel and at restaurants. The delegation observed many people using smart phones. Internet was available at the delegations hotel, including in the lobby, where many non-residing guests seemed to be using it. It was possible to visit Western internet addresses, although occasional internet-black outs were experienced by the delegation.

The delegation observed many people at restaurants and cafés in Asmara, also in the evening.

Food and goods were available in the shops and markets that the delegation visited in Asmara, as well as shops on the route to Adi Kuala and Adi Keih.

The delegation experienced daily power cuts. Petrol was in short supply and many petrol stations appeared to be out of service. However, there were many cars, taxis and busses and the delegation was under the impression that petrol was widely sold on the black market.

The bus stations in Asmara were observed to be busy with a large number of city and regional busses and passengers arriving and departing. Similar observations were made during the delegation's excursions to Adi Kuala and Adi Keih.



### 3. Drivers and root causes of emigration from Eritrea

Almost all of the sources consulted in Eritrea (Western embassies B, C, D, E; a Western embassy in Khartoum, met in Asmara; International organisations A, B, C; a UN agency in Eritrea; a regional NGO based in Asmara), Ethiopia (UNHCR in Addis Ababa; UNHCR Sub Office Shire; Norwegian Refugee Council, Addis Ababa; Mr. Tamrat Kebede, Executive Director, InterAfrica Group (IAG); Swedish embassy, Addis Ababa; Western embassy F, Addis Ababa; Danish Refugee Council/Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (DRC/RMMS); International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Addis Ababa) and Kibreab in London commented on possible reasons for Eritreans leaving Eritrea.

Many of these sources (Western embassies B,C, D, E in Eritrea; a Western embassy in Khartoum, met in Asmara; International organisations A, B, C; a UN agency in Eritrea; a regional NGO based in Asmara; UNHCR in Addis Ababa; UNHCR Sub Office Shire; Norwegian Refugee Council, Addis Ababa; Kebede (IAG), Ethiopia; Swedish embassy, Addis Ababa; Western embassy F, Addis Ababa; DRC/RMMS, Ethiopia; IOM, Addis Ababa; Kibreab, London) stated that the main reasons for emigrating are the prolonged National Service, the social and economic situation in the country including the prospects for a better life in Europe or a combination hereof.

Several sources (Western embassies B,C,D in Eritrea; a Western embassy based in Khartoum (met in Asmara); an International organisation (B) in Eritrea; a UN agency in Eritrea; a regional NGO based in Asmara; Kibreab, London) stated that the uncertainties connected to the length of the National Service and the low salary make young Eritreans leave the country.

According to the sources (Western embassies B, C, E in Eritrea; a Western embassy based in Khartoum (met in Asmara); International organisations B and C in Eritrea; a UN agency in Eritrea; a regional NGO based in Asmara), socio-economic reasons behind emigration from Eritrea included limited career opportunities, low salary, poor education prospects, lack of economic development in Eritrea, as well as disillusionment with the government.

A Western embassy (E) in Eritrea stated that there is basically no organized political opposition in Eritrea.

A Western embassy (C) emphasized that the Eritrean government does detain people for political reasons and that there are reports of political prisoners that have died in prison. It was added that there is no general climate of fear to detect in the population.

Kebede (IAG) in Ethiopia mentioned that political refugees leave Eritrea because of the repressive government.

A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that “most people who leave Eritrea do so for economic reasons and because of lack of livelihood opportunities and not because of political repression”.

A UN agency in Eritrea confirmed that hardly anyone leaves Eritrea for political reasons.



## 4. National Service

### 4.1 Background

National Service in Eritrea was established in 1991 because the government wanted to mobilize the population in the nation building project after the liberation war and independence from Ethiopia. At that time, the National Service was not open-ended and most conscripts were demobilized after 18 months<sup>4</sup>.

According to a well-known Eritrean intellectual in Eritrea and Kibreab, London, following the border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, the Eritrean government in 2002 introduced the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign. From then on the National Service became 'open-ended' and with very few exemptions. The main reason the National Service has become open-ended is because of the state of "no war no peace" between Eritrea and Ethiopia<sup>5</sup>.

Two Western embassies (C, D) in Eritrea stated that the government continues to justify the National Service with the current unresolved border status with Ethiopia.

An International organisation (A) in Eritrea and two Western embassies (D, E) in Eritrea stated that the government could find it preferable to have people occupied in National Service as cheap labour.

Furthermore, a UN agency in Eritrea and a Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that the alternative to the National Service for many Eritreans would be unemployment due to a poor economy, lack of investments and a limited private sector.

### 4.2 Transition from school to National Service: Sawa

Currently, all secondary school students in Eritrea are required to take their final year of secondary school at Sawa. The students are automatically transferred to Sawa, which is located along the Sawa River in eastern Eritrea<sup>67</sup>. The school at Sawa is located adjacent to a military facility where the Eritrean Defence Forces train recruits<sup>8</sup>.

The school year at Sawa currently constitutes the main mechanism for conscription into the National Service<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Kibreab, Gaim: The Open-Ended Eritrean National Service: The Driver of Forced Migration - Paper for the European Asylum Support Office Practical Cooperation Meeting on Eritrea, 15 October 2014: [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/90\\_1416473628\\_gaim-kibreab-the-open-ended-eritrean-national-service-the-driver-of-forced-migration.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1416473628_gaim-kibreab-the-open-ended-eritrean-national-service-the-driver-of-forced-migration.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Connell & Tom Killion (2000). Historical Dictionary of Eritrea (2nd ed.).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kibreab, Gaim: The Open-Ended Eritrean National Service: The Driver of Forced Migration - Paper for the European Asylum Support Office Practical Cooperation Meeting on Eritrea, 15 October 2014: [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/90\\_1416473628\\_gaim-kibreab-the-open-ended-eritrean-national-service-the-driver-of-forced-migration.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1416473628_gaim-kibreab-the-open-ended-eritrean-national-service-the-driver-of-forced-migration.pdf)





An International organisation (A) in Eritrea added that even the President's children study at the Sawa facility.

Sources consulted in Eritrea (International organisations A and B; Western embassies C and D) confirmed that as a general rule, all young Eritreans are expected to finish their last year of secondary schooling at the Sawa facility where they also receive six months of military training.

Two Western embassies (C and D) in Eritrea stated that students at Sawa receive six months of physical and military training alongside academic classes.

A regional NGO based in Asmara emphasised that "Sawa is not a military camp but is basically the final two years of high school. There are academic classes, some physical training, marching but no weapons training as such."

Kibreab, London stated that it is possible to be exempted from the military training component but not from the National Service as such.

Regarding the specific details about how young Eritreans receive instructions regarding enrolment at the Sawa facility, none of the sources were able to provide clear and detailed information.

However, an International organisation (C) in Eritrea stated that "non-compliance with the recruitment procedures is considered a sign of disobedience." Reference was made to a recent example from Asmara concerning a young girl who did not show up at the meeting point, whereupon she was arrested and detained. The authorities informed the girl's mother that her daughter should be punished for her attempt to evade National Service. The girl was detained for one week and was not abused while in detention.

#### **4.3 After Sawa: Content of the National Service**

Several sources in Eritrea (Western embassies C and D; International organisation A and B; a regional NGO based in Asmara) stated that those who pass their matriculation exam at Sawa may continue their education in various higher education institutions and they are ex-empted from further National Service until they complete their higher education. Those who do not pass the exams continue in the National Service as civilians or in the military.

A Western embassy (C) in Eritrea explained that after exams at Sawa, it is decided "which students have qualified for tertiary education. These students do not perform additional military training apart from the six months of physical and military training [...]". The Western embassy (C) in Eritrea went on to explain that "on completion of their higher or further education, they perform National Service in a civilian capacity in a profession linked to their qualification – for example an engineer might work in the Department of Public Works, an accountant in a state-owned bank or financial institution".

An International Organisation (B) in Eritrea stated that "the students who successfully pass the matriculation exam in Sawa continue their education in various higher education institutions. Those who do not qualify for further education enter the National Service [...] and they begin with approximately six months of military training."



Several sources in Eritrea (Western embassies B and D; International organisation A; a regional NGO based in Asmara) stated that civilian National Service could include employment in government administration and institutions, hotels, hospitals, schools, factories, garages and in public construction projects such as building of dams, roads and bridges.

A Western embassy (F) in Ethiopia considered that, “based on the available information, the conditions during military [national] service are horrible”. However, the same source emphasized that “the available information was neither factual nor based on empirical work and therefore did not necessarily reflect the reality”.

A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that the main problem is the unpredictable length of the National Service which is why young people are unhappy with it.

A regional NGO based in Asmara stated that “the information in human rights reports about ill-treatment in the National Service are more often than not exaggerated.” The same source stated that contrary to existing reports, “people in the National Service are not overworked or working under slave like conditions, not beaten, subjected to torture or suffering from malnutrition”.

#### **4.4 Duration of service**

Several sources in Eritrea (International organisation B; a UN agency; a regional NGO based in Asmara; Western embassy E; Western embassy based in Khartoum; Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs) stated that the National Service either is open-ended or could be open-ended.

A Western embassy (C) in Eritrea stated that the National Service “is not really indefinite, but when it ends is arbitrary”.

A Western embassy (B) in Eritrea stated that the duration of National Service may depend on one’s specific skills and the individual employer.

A regional NGO based in Asmara and a Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that theoretically, National Service lasts for 18 months but in reality it stretches far beyond that period of time.

An International organisation (B) in Eritrea stated that “people can never be certain that they will be released after the obligatory 18 months service”.

An International organisation (A), a Western embassy (B) and a well-known Eritrean intellectual in Eritrea stated that the National Service could last for ten years or even longer.

However, statements from some sources in Eritrea indicated that the duration of National Service has become shorter in recent years:

One Western embassy (D) stated that “a broadly shared perception is that the government has eased its approach to National Service. Today it is easier to be released from service and for young people today, National Service seems to be limited to a couple of years.”



Another Western embassy (C) stated that “it had heard of people in their forties who were still in the National Service, but in general, three to four years seemed to be the norm”.

Likewise, a Western embassy (B) stated that “there are indications that persons enrolled in the National Service serve for a shorter period of time than was the case some years ago”.

Finally, a well-known Eritrean intellectual in Eritrea stated that previously, the National Service could last for over ten years. However, currently the duration of service is usually between three to five years.

#### **4.5 Salaries**

Several sources in Eritrea (a regional NGO based in Asmara; International organisation A; Western embassies C, D and E; Western embassy based in Khartoum, met in Asmara) and Kibreab, London, stated that the salary in the National Service is very low.

Several sources (a regional NGO based in Asmara; Western embassies C and E in Eritrea; Kibreab, London) stated that the monthly salary during the first 18 months of National Service is ranging from approximately 80 Nakfa up to 600 Nakfa. After 18 months it could increase to a maximum of 1500 Nakfa<sup>10</sup>.

A Western embassy (C) in Eritrea stated that in comparison, a gardener working at an embassy received 3,500 Nakfa per month. An employee at a private hotel would get 3,000 Nakfa per month and a Minister receives approximately 4,000 Nakfa per month.

Western embassy (C) in Eritrea labelled the National Service salary as ‘pocket money’.

Kibreab, London, stated that no one can survive on that salary and people in service have to rely on support from their family and possible remittances.

A Western embassy (C) in Eritrea stated that as a consequence of the low wages people working in National Service are often not very motivated and they often do not show for work.

#### **4.6 People’s Militia/Army**

Several sources in Eritrea (International organisations A and B; Western embassies A, C and E) commented on the People’s militia. According to an International organisation (A) and a Western embassy (A), the People’s Militia was established in either 2012 or 2013. According to International organisation (A), it was established for the purpose of widening the mobilization and development capacity of the country.

Several sources in Eritrea (International organisations A and B; Western embassies A and C) stated that People’s Army recruits consist of people that have been called in after being demobilised from the National Service.

An International organisation (A) in Eritrea stated that both women and men are enrolled into the People’s Army, without limitations as to the age.

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<sup>10</sup> The exchange rate early October 2014 was USD 100 to 1500 Nakfa, as observed by the delegation in Asmara.



Several sources in Eritrea (International organisations A and B; Western embassies C and D) stated that the duties for those enlisted could include guarding public buildings or working on development related projects. As an example, a Western embassy (C) referred to a local embassy staff that did not show for work one morning and it turned out that the staff member had been assigned a guard duty in the airport in Asmara that day.

An International organisation (B) in Eritrea stated that it is not possible to distinguish clearly between National Service, People's Army and the regular armed forces of Eritrea, and whether same penalties apply in the event of desertion from or evasion of service.

However, one Western embassy (D) in Eritrea emphasized that it is important to distinguish between National Service and service in the People's Army. It was further pointed out that "those enrolled in the People's Army usually have ordinary jobs, but they are periodically required to receive some military training and occasionally perform guard duties or participate in public work such as building dams".

An International organisation (A) in Eritrea stated that "members of the People's Army may be provided with [weapons], and consequently keep their weapons at home, whenever they are not called to bring them along, e.g. for tasks such as patrolling and guarding. Conscription to the Popular Army [People's Army] is the responsibility of the local authorities and recruits may be called to undergo short-time military training programs, to serve in assuring security at local level (e.g. patrolling)".

One Western embassy (C) in Eritrea stated that "the government has distributed Kalashnikov rifles to members of the militia to keep at home. The militia members are required to show once a month or every second week for physical training and at times are called to actual military training".

According to a Western embassy (D) in Eritrea, there are reports of recruitment into National Service of 40 to 50 years old people for military drills or temporary service. In some cases, they are rounded up and taken to military barracks.

#### **4.7 Round-ups of National Service draft evaders**

A Western embassy (A) in Eritrea and Kibreab, London, had heard about round-ups of evaders or deserters from the National Service in villages out in the country.

According to an International organisation (B) in Eritrea, "there was no visible evidence during day time of round-ups of suspected National Service evaders or deserters in Asmara in recent months. The same source emphasized that due to travel restrictions on international organisations in the country, the source was unable to comment on round-ups outside of Asmara. The source stated that no verifiable information was available on whether round ups take place in the evenings or during the night".

A regional NGO based in Asmara stated that approximately "five or six years ago, there was a much stricter recruitment procedure to the National Service. At that time, people of the National Service age were being stopped in police ID checks in the streets or collected by soldiers if they did not show up when called in. However, during the last five to six years, there has been a relaxation in recruitment procedures and one does not see soldiers undertaking round-ups of people into National Service any longer".



#### **4.8 Consequences for evasion/desertion from the National Service**

Several sources in Eritrea (a regional NGO based in Asmara; Western embassies A, B and D) stated that penalties for evading and/or deserting National Service were not systematic but would most likely include detention ranging from a few days to a maximum of six months. A UN-agency in Eritrea doubted that evaders or deserters were actually imprisoned.

Western embassies (C) and (D) in Eritrea emphasised that the justice system in Eritrea is arbitrary and rules are not applied in a uniform manner. A Western embassy (E) in Eritrea stated that the judicial system is not well functioning.

Western embassies (B) and (E) in Eritrea stated that the government needs the National Service work force and that the government would rather let evaders and deserters be sent back to work than imprison them. One Western embassy (B) stated that this was particularly the case during harvest time.

A Western embassy (B) in Eritrea stated that as an additional punishment, persons are deployed to undesirable posts near the Ethiopian border.

A regional NGO based in Asmara and an International organisation (C) in Eritrea stated that the punishment could be more severe if the person had deserted from a more important work in critical sectors within the National Service, as for example the fire brigade.

A regional NGO based in Asmara stated that evaders or deserters detained for three months to six months were released unconditionally from the National Service and considered “rotten apples” by the authorities since the authorities want to prevent the deserters from exercising “a bad influence on others”.

Western embassies (B), (C) and (D) in Eritrea stated that the capacity of the state and the security apparatus to enforce laws and rules relating to the National Service and control of citizens’ movement seem to be diminishing.

Information provided by Kibreab, London, suggests that until a few years ago, evaders and deserters were routinely subjected to severe punishment including torture and detention under severe conditions over a prolonged period of time. It was further added that those refusing or failing to participate in National Service would risk to lose a number of his or her citizen’s rights and, in exceptional cases, risk indefinite incarceration or loss of life.

However, Kibreab, London, also stated that over the past two to three years, the government’s attitude towards National Service seems to be more relaxed. It is now possible for evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally to return if they pay the two percent tax and sign the apology letter at an Eritrean embassy. Finally, Kibreab was aware of a few deserters from the National Service who have visited Eritrea and safely left the country again.



#### **4.8.1 Reprisals against family members**

A regional NGO based in Asmara and Western embassies (C) and (D) in Eritrea stated that they were not aware of documented examples in recent years of retributions or reprisals by the Eritrean authorities against family members of National Service evaders or deserters.

One Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that up until approximately one year ago, there were reports that relatives of evaders and deserters had been imprisoned or enrolled in National Service instead of the evader or deserter. The source suggested that this change could be attributed to either a policy change or because of the government's declining capacity to enforce the National Service. The source finally added that it would be technically difficult and politically unsustainable for the government to carry out reprisals in massive numbers against relatives of National Service evaders or deserters.

A regional NGO based in Asmara stated that "there had been reports by international NGOs on relatives of National Service deserters or evaders having been forced to undertake National Service on behalf of their relatives". The same source emphasized that "such incidents are not documented and that it is definitely not government policy to retaliate against relatives of National Service evaders or deserters. If such treatment occurred relatives would tell about it".

Kibreab, London, stated that "the Eritrean government does not as a rule harass relatives to National Service evaders or deserters. However, if the parents organized their son's escape, the authorities might in some cases detain the parents for a short time and they are released after paying a hefty fine".

A Western embassy (B) stated that "the authorities could apply pressure on family members of National Service evaders or deserters. This could include closing the family's shop or a rejection of shop license."



## 5. Return to Eritrea

### 5.1. Regularizing relationship with the government before returning to Eritrea

Many of the sources consulted in Eritrea (International organisation A; Western embassies A, C and E; Western embassy based in Khartoum, met in Asmara; Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Kibreab, London, commented on the issue of the possibility of Eritreans regularizing their relationship with the government prior to returning to Eritrea. They all stated that Eritreans that have left the country illegally have the option of regularizing their relationship with the authorities by paying a two percent income tax at an Eritrean embassy and signing an apology letter.

Kibreab, London stated that by signing the apology letter, one accepts “any penalty for the offense committed”, that is evasion or desertion and illegal exit.

A Western embassy (D) stated that in some cases, National Service evaders and deserters have restored their relationship to the authorities prior to their return to Eritrea by paying the two percent tax.

An International organisation (B) in Eritrea concurred that there is information to suggest that Eritreans abroad, including those who have left the country illegally, are able to obtain Eritrean passports at Eritrean embassies if they sign an apology letter and pay the two percent income tax levied on all Eritreans living abroad.

The same source emphasised that although it might be possible to return by paying the two percent tax and signing the apology letter, there is no information available on the specific profile of persons who are able to benefit from this practice.

According to several sources in Eritrea (International organisation A; Western embassies A, C, D and E; Western embassy based in Khartoum, met in Asmara) and Kibreab, London, this would also enable Eritreans who have evaded or deserted National Service and left the country illegally to be issued with the necessary travel documents and return to Eritrea.

Kibreab, London, specified that “any Eritrean who does not engage in any political or civil society activity against the government would be issued a new Eritrean passport, regardless of his or her National Service status”.

An International organisation (A) in Eritrea added that Eritrean embassies might refuse to accept an apology letter from common criminals.

The Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that National Service evaders and deserters have the possibility of restoring their relationship with the Eritrean government by paying the two percent tax and by signing a letter of apology. This has been done by a number of people and they have returned to Eritrea without any complications. It was added that if a person has committed a crime, due process is respected.



## 5.2. Possible Penalties for illegal exit for individuals who return to Eritrea

Many of the sources in Eritrea (International organisations A, B and C; a UN agency; A well-known Eritrean intellectual; Western embassies A, C, D and E) and Kibreab, London, commented on the consequences that evaders or deserters from the National Service might incur when returning from abroad after having paid the two percent tax and signed the apology letter.

A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea and an International organisation (A) in Eritrea stated that it is not completely clear what happens to National Service evaders or deserters when they return to Eritrea.

A Western embassy (D) stated that presently, there are no reports on returning deserters being imprisoned or otherwise severely punished.

An International organisation (B) in Eritrea stated that there were no known examples of systematic prosecution of people that had left Eritrea illegally.

An International organisation (C) in Eritrea stated that returning evaders or deserters would face detention ranging from a couple of days or up to one week, followed by reenrolment in the National Service. The same source added that returnees could be sent off to undesirable duty stations near the Ethiopian border.

Another International organisation (B) in Eritrea added that those who re-enter Eritrea with their passport acquired abroad and re-establish their residence in Eritrea would most likely be obliged to perform their National Service or join the People's Army.

A UN agency in Eritrea stated that while National Service evaders and deserters may be apprehended, the source doubted that they were actually imprisoned.

Several sources in Eritrea (A well-known Eritrean intellectual; Western embassies A, C and E) stated that once a person had restored his or their relationship by paying the tax and signing an apology letter, there would be no consequences upon return, regardless of evasion or desertion from National Service by leaving the country. A well-known Eritrean intellectual added that such a person would not be recruited or reenlisted in the National Service.

A Western embassy (E) in Eritrea added that it cannot be ruled out that the government would find desertion from the military an aggravated circumstance. However, according to the same source, there was no specific information to support that particular concern.

Information provided by Kibreab, London, suggests that until a few years ago, returning evaders and deserters were routinely subjected to severe punishment including torture and detention under severe conditions over a prolonged period of time. It was further added that those refusing or failing to participate in National Service would risk to lose a number of his or her citizen's rights and, in exceptional cases risk indefinite incarceration or loss of life. Returning evaders or deserters that were known for political oppositional activities abroad upon return to Eritrea were taken to underground cells at a prison outside of Asmara while they were under investigation.





However, Kibreab, London also stated that over the past two to three years, it is now possible for evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally to return if they pay the two percent tax and sign the apology letter at an Eritrean embassy. Kibreab was aware of a few deserters from the National Service who have visited Eritrea and safely left the country again.

### **5.2.1. Are National Service evaders or deserters seen as traitors and political opponents by the government**

A Western embassy (A) in Eritrea stated that “ordinary people who evade the National Service or desert from the service are not being prosecuted and imprisoned and they are not at risk of disappearances. That kind of treatment is reserved for people who have had some kind of oppositional activities i.e. political prisoners”.

Western embassies (A) and (C) in Eritrea stated that persons considered political opponents by the government would risk reprisals such as very long detention and prison sentences upon return to Eritrea. A Western embassy (C) was aware of political prisoners that had died in prison. It should be noted that none of the sources had information about prison conditions and the number of political prisoners currently held due to a lack of access of external observers to these facilities.

A UN agency and Western embassies (A) and (D) in Eritrea concurred and emphasised that the Eritrean government does not consider evaders and deserters as traitors or political opponents to the government.

A Western embassy based in Khartoum (met in Asmara) referred to a public statement made by the Head of the Political Office of the PFDJ, that those who have left Eritrea to avoid National Service are considered economic refugees and not political opponents.

According to Kibreab, London, the government’s oppression is targeting any kind of political opposition to the state and/or the ruling party and not the general public as such. Those targeted are persons who might be suspected of potentially mobilizing public opinion, criticize the government or sympathizing with any form of opposition.

Information provided by Kibreab, London, further suggests that until a few years ago, persons who had left Eritrea illegally and who had evaded or deserted from National Service were considered to have committed treason and were liable to a severe punishment.

However, Kibreab, London also stated that over the past two to three years, “the government’s attitude towards National Service seems to be more relaxed”. It is now possible for evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally to return if they pay the two percent tax and signs the apology letter at an Eritrean embassy. It was added that “in spite of this softer approach many evaders and deserters still do not dare to return to Eritrea”. However, Kibreab, London was aware of a few deserters from the National Service who have visited Eritrea and safely left the country again.

### **5.3. Examples of returns**

Information provided by several sources in Eritrea (Western embassies A, C, D; a Western embassy based in Khartoum (met in Asmara); an International organisation (C)) support the notion that a significant number



of Eritreans do travel back and forth between Eritrea and other countries on a regular basis with the purpose of visiting family and relatives, or for business or tourism. This is particularly the case during summer.

Kebede (IAG) in Ethiopia stated that some members of the Eritrean Diaspora could go back to Eritrea on family visits or because they feel obliged to fight for their country. However, those who return are probably connected with the government and some are allowed back because they have businesses that the government takes an interest in.

Several sources in Eritrea (Western embassies A, C, D; an International organisation (A)) found it likely that the group of people returning to Eritrea would include persons who had evaded or deserted from the National Service when they left the country.

A Western embassy (A) in Eritrea referred to an episode from June 2014 “when the Swedish air carrier ‘Fly Olympic’ went bankrupt leaving approximately 400 Eritreans with Swedish passports stranded in Asmara. The majority of the stranded passengers had originally left Eritrea illegally and had either evaded or deserted from National Service. It took some time to organize new tickets but eventually they were all able to fly back to Sweden. It is not known if they had regularized their relations with the government by paying the two percent tax and by signing an apology letter, but they were all allowed to leave Eritrea”.

According to a well-known Eritrean intellectual in Eritrea, it is not possible to denounce one’s Eritrean citizenship, despite having obtained another citizenship abroad. The same source further stated that dual citizenship is recognized in Eritrea.

Kibreab, London, emphasized that “all Eritreans with a mother or a father or both of Eritrean origin regardless of birth place and citizenship is deemed an Eritrean even against their expressed wish. It is not possible to renounce Eritrean citizenship”.

According to a regional NGO based in Asmara, “three years ago Egypt returned a large number of Eritreans by plane. The returnees had been arrested by the Egyptian authorities on the border to Israel and they were deported to Eritrea. Egypt filled up several commercial planes each carrying more than 150 passengers. Upon arrival in Eritrea the women were free to enter Eritrea while the men were taken to a detention camp for questioning on why they had left Eritrea. The men were detained for approximately two weeks after which they were free to return to their own communities. However, only half a dozen or so were tried at the criminal court for perceived illegal economic activities”.

According to Kebede (IAG) in Ethiopia and Kibreab in London, persons who have not participated in oppositional political activities abroad and persons who in any way are connected to the government would be more inclined to return to Eritrea on visits. Gaim Kibreab was aware of a few National Service evaders who had visited Eritrea and safely left the country again.

#### **5.4. Recent developments**

Several sources in Eritrea (Western embassies A and D; an International organisation (A)) stated that the Eritrean Government recently has changed its approach to migration issues and has become more understandable towards citizens leaving the country.



An International organisation (B) in Eritrea and a well-known Eritrea intellectual in Eritrea considered that the reason for this shift in attitude was the government's desire to encourage Eritreans to return to Eritrea.

An International organisation (B) in Eritrea considered that the Eritrean government is increasingly realizing that the exodus of mainly young men and women has reached a scale that threatens the development of Eritrea, as well as that the government is in the process of leaving its position of isolation and gradually opening up to the international community.

The Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that "Eritrea has some human rights issues and that one of the real issues is the open-ended National Service". The ministry added that the National Service is being discussed in the government but no specific information about whether or when it would undergo change was provided. Finally the ministry stated that "the Eritrean government and the EU and the embassies of the European countries are in an ongoing and constructive dialogue".

A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea stated that a broadly shared perception is that the government has eased its approach to National Service and that it is now easier to be released from National Service, which today seems to be limited to a couple of years for most young people.

A Western embassy (A) in Eritrea emphasized that the government's attitude towards deserters and evaders in Eritrea has changed for the better. As such, evaders and deserters are not subjected to protracted imprisonment, not exposed to physical harm and finally, not considered as political opponents. The source further stated that this change has not yet been reflected in any of the available human rights reports on Eritrea.

Kibreab, London, stated that over the past two to three years, "the government's attitude towards National Service seems to be more relaxed". It is now possible for evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally to return if they pay the two percent tax and signs the apology letter at an Eritrean embassy. It was added that "in spite of this softer approach many evaders and deserters still do not dare to return to Eritrea". However, Kibreab was aware of a few deserters from the National Service who have visited Eritrea and safely left the country again.

Kebede (IAG) in Ethiopia considered, based on testimonies from people who had left Eritrea, that there had not been any improvement regarding National Service in recent years.

A well-known Eritrean intellectual in Eritrea stated that due to a change in regulations concerning exit visas about two years ago, it is now unproblematic for Eritreans living abroad and/or Eritreans holding dual citizenship to obtain an exit visa in Eritrea.

A Western embassy (D) in Eritrea explained that the Eritrean government recently has opened up to the world and loosened the control it exerts over its citizens. It is no longer obligatory to declare foreign currency in the airport and the government encourages foreign investments and joint ventures.

Many of the sources consulted in Eritrea (Western embassies A, B, E; a Western embassy based in Khartoum (met in Asmara); a UN agency; an International organisation (A); a regional NGO based in Asmara; a



well-known Eritrean intellectual) as well as a Western embassy (F) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, stated that most of the available reports on the human rights situation in Eritrea do not reflect the recent changes in Eritrea. According to these sources, such reports should therefore not be considered representative of an accurate image of the current situation in Eritrea regarding issues such as National Service, illegal exit and the general human rights situation.



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## Notes from meetings with sources consulted in Eritrea

### International Organisation (A)

#### Daily life/economy

An international organisation explained that in general, it is perceived that the space for international co-operation is widening.

In Asmara, and the country, there is scarcity of water, heating and electricity and these supplies are often shut down temporarily and without notice. However, people accommodate to the difficult situation and nobody dares to complain about it. It was added that all kinds of everyday commodities are for sale in the cities but prices are quite high. Credit cards are not used in Eritrea and people have to go to the bank to take out money. Bank accounts are obligatory for people working for the state.

There are (semi) privately owned companies and hotels in Eritrea, but they are few. Some of those companies, mine companies and small scale factories could be employing staff from the National Service. The same accounts for some hotels.

Eritrean society can best be described as a 'class-less society', and this is also how the Eritrean government would like to present it. As such, there is no upper-class in Eritrea, and there are no slum areas. Even the President lives in a moderate environment and his children study in Sawa and not in some high-end school in the USA or Canada. If one should identify some privileged groups, it would be the veterans who fought in the liberation war and the Eritrean Diaspora who are welcome to return to/invest in Eritrea. Those who leave the country are mostly male, young and well-educated people who see no job opportunities in Eritrea. In the rural areas it is mostly youngsters trying to avoid National Service who leave the country. It was added that 80% of the population are either peasants or pastoralists. In many villages single female headed households dominate because the men are serving their National Service in other regions of the country, or, may have hidden or left the country.

#### National Service

Most people below the age of 50 are working either for the government or for private companies, or they are enrolled into Military National Service. Normally you will have to work for the National Service when you become 18 years of age. The age of enrollment into the National Service is not clearly defined and some are working for the National Service for up to ten years and more before being 'demobilized'. Within this system, the economy is getting advantage of cheap labor force as the salary from National Service is very low.

All young men and women are sent to the Sawa training center at completion of 11<sup>th</sup> grade in school. Based on the exam results, it is decided who qualifies and is allowed into the various institutions of higher education, or Military service. Others may be found more suitable for physical work, such as construction and farming, and attributed accordingly.



### People's Army

In 2012 the government established the People's Army with the purpose of widening its capacity for mobilization and self-reliant development of the country. Recruits to the People's Army are persons who for various reasons have been exhumpted of/ demobilized from the National Service and have thus lost their National Service income. Both women and men are enrolled into the People's Army without limitations as to the age. Members of the People's Army may be provided with, and consequently keep, their weapons at home whenever they are not called to bring them along, e.g. for tasks such as patrolling and guarding. Conscription to the Popular Army is the responsibility of the local authorities and recruits may be called to undergo short-time military training programs, to serve in assuring security at local level (e.g. patrolling), or else be appointed for construction work at a dam or other major sites of national relevance.

Everything in Eritrea is highly regularized. If an employee wishes to be employed somewhere else, he or she will have to be issued a so-called 'release paper' from the employer. To open a private business, a shop, or else one has to apply to the government and will also need a release paper if enrolled into the National Service as well as a license to open a private business. Free education and access to health care and further state-provided social services, and privileges all require adherence to National Service and/or other qualification foreseen by the state. Those enrolled in the People's Army would have to document that they have attended required military training and call-ups for duties.

### Detention/prisons

It is very difficult to conclude anything about detention conditions in Eritrea. Currently, it is not possible to judge whether the prisons are bad or not as conditions are undocumented. No international observers have been granted access to prisons since 2009. At that time Eritrean prisons were not worse than in other African countries and inmates had access to fresh air and were given sufficient food. There have been, and are ongoing negotiations with the government regarding renewed access, and independent monitoring

### Diaspora/Returns to Eritrea

An International organisation explained that there are indications of Eritreans having been repatriated from Israel and other places to Eritrea. However, no one really knows what may happen to people returning. Concern was expressed as to what could happen if the Nordic countries conclude that the situation in Eritrea has improved.

The official statement is that all Eritreans are free to return to Eritrea, but of course they would have to participate in the development of the country including the National Service.

It was stated that the right way to legalize a stay abroad, should one have left Eritrea illegally, is to pay the two percent income tax and sign an apology letter. Having done so, one can be issued a passport and legally enter and leave Eritrea without facing harassment or repercussions. Accordingly, deserters who have left Eritrea illegally, use this procedure to restore their relations with the government. Obviously, it cannot be excluded that there may be authorities who refuse to accept an apology letter if the person in question is a



common criminal. However, the general feeling is that the authorities within the past year have become more relaxed and understanding towards their young people who have left the country.

It was recalled that any people in Eritrea are dependent on remittances from relatives abroad as there is a lack of sufficient income in the country. The Diaspora is playing a key role in the Eritrean economy. Almost all construction work, including house construction, is almost exclusively financed by diaspora money.

#### Border crossing to Ethiopia

Regarding the shoot-and-kill policy allegedly practiced at the border to Ethiopia it was stated that information on this might have been partly true previously, but that people are no longer being shot at just because they try to cross the border into Ethiopia.

In general people in Eritrea are disillusioned about the ruling party, the government and the fate of their country, one of the reasons often heard for opting to leave. However, there are no exact figures on how many people are leaving Eritrea. Statistics and figures are a big mess in Eritrea. Not even an official population figure exists, but most sources would estimate that currently, the total population in Eritrea is approximately 3½ million people. It is possible that there could have been an increase in the number of people leaving Eritrea recently, but there is no reliable data on this. On the other hand, it is a new phenomenon that youngsters and even children of five to six years of age are showing up in Ethiopia or Sudan after having crossed the border illegally. International organisations such as UNHCR have no any reliable data on the trends or the numbers of these border-crossings, as many people move without any reporting. However, the estimate of between 5,000 and 10,000 people leaving Eritrea on a monthly basis seems to be in the very high end.

#### Political prisoners

No international human rights observers have had access to Eritrea for many years and this indicates that these observers cannot report in a balanced manner. They rely on information provided by the diaspora or by Eritrean refugees, often without questioning the statements' reliability, i.e. 'where and when' an incident might have occurred. Many of the detainees considered "political" are feared to be "lost" as they will probably not be allowed to be monitored by the ICRC or other international organisations involved in monitoring of detention conditions.

#### Opening up

Today it is possible to speak out openly in Eritrea about the migration issue. An example of a gradual openness is the fact that Eritrea participated with a high level delegation in the recent *Regional conference on Human Trafficking and Smuggling in the Horn of Africa*, held in Khartoum. This fact should be seen as an official recognition that there is a migration problem from/related to Eritrea.





### Education

The University of Asmara continues to teach a limited number of subjects, while other faculties have been split up in a number of decentralized colleges e.g. medicine, technology and agriculture. It is said that student demonstrations in 2001 contributed to that government decision. Japan and India have since 2012 supported the development of infrastructure, standards and curricula, and provided qualified teaching personnel. Basically, the curricula and standards at the university are egalitarian and allow for free access for anyone providing [provided that they have] the required qualifications, both men and women.



## **International Organisation (B)**

### National Service, People's Army and the armed forces

The Mission was able to establish, from generally available information, that all students go to Sawa to complete the last grade of secondary school. The students who successfully pass the matriculation exam in Sawa continue their education in various higher education institutions. Those who do not qualify for further education enter the National Service, unless they are exempted for other reasons, and they begin with approximately six months of military training. After the military training, some are selected for continuation of military-related duties in various parts of Eritrea and others continue to perform National Service as civilians.

There is lack of clarity on timeframes of different components of National Service or whether rules and procedures are applied in a uniform manner to all recruits. Although the timeframes are not clear, anyone may be demobilized, i.e. released from the National Service, and free to take up whatever jobs available to them.

Information suggests that, although demobilized, one may at any time be called in for service in what is referred to as the People's Army. The People's Army is essentially a militia or a neighborhood watch militia, which may also be requested to undertake development/rehabilitation related projects. Especially following the January 2013 incident (Forto Incident), the People's Army has increasingly filled the gap that was left when a sizable portion of the army was reportedly pulled out of Asmara. Since then, members of the People's Army were also observed to take over the role of guarding of various public buildings.

From discussions with the International Organisation in Eritrea, it was not possible to distinguish sharply between National Service, People's Army and the regular armed forces of Eritrea, and whether same penalties applied to desertion from these institutions

An international Organisation in Eritrea explained that the main problem with the National Service is that in some cases it may be 'open-ended', i.e. people can never be certain that they will be released after the obligatory 18 months service. It was pointed out that people may have mixed motives to leave the country. It may not only be the National Service that is leading Eritreans to leave the country; deteriorating socio-economic conditions also play a role in the decision to leave, which needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

### Round-ups

In recent months, there was no visible evidence during day time of round-ups of suspected National Service evaders or deserters in Asmara. Due to travel restrictions on international organisations in the country, the International Organisation in Eritrea was unable to comment on round-ups outside of Asmara. There was also no verifiable information available on whether round-ups take place in the evenings or during the night.



### Reentry into Eritrea

The international community in Eritrea is unable to monitor the situation of National Service evaders and deserters who have left the country. Therefore, those consulted were unable to comment on treatment upon return or the accuracy of publicly available reports on this issue. There is information to suggest that Eritreans abroad, including those who left the country illegally, are able to obtain Eritrean passports at Eritrean Embassies if they sign an “apology” letter and start to retroactively pay the two percent income tax levied on all Eritrean citizens living abroad. However, there was no information available to those consulted on the specific profile of persons who are able to benefit from this practice, i.e. whether deserters or evaders could benefit. It was deemed very unlikely that those who have a fear of persecution would be approaching Eritrean Embassies to acquire a passport and consequently try to re-enter the country. There were no known cases of prosecution for illegal exit for individuals who acquired an Eritrean passport based on the above-mentioned procedure. It was added that those who re-enter Eritrea with their passports acquired abroad and re-establish their residence in Eritrea would most likely be obliged to perform their National Service or join the People’s Army.

### Leaving Eritrea

From discussions with an International Organisation in Eritrea, it seems that the Eritrean government is increasingly realizing that the exodus of mainly young men and women has reached a scale that threatens the development of Eritrea. The government is in the process of leaving its position of isolation and is gradually opening up to the international community. There is also increasing willingness to engage the UN Country Team, including UNHCR, on issues related to trafficking of Eritrean citizens. The very recent accession to two UN Conventions – on torture and transnational organized crime and the latter’s Protocol on trafficking in human beings – as well as the government’s engagement in various international fora is an expression of this new orientation.

### Freedom of movement/border crossings

An International Organisation in Eritrea confirmed that there is general freedom of movement throughout Eritrea for nationals. Foreigners require a travel permit to travel 25 km beyond Asmara. There are no real checkpoints in the country except for sensitive areas, such as those closer to borders. Nationals travelling to some areas close to the border could be asked to demonstrate proof that they live there or that they have legitimate reason for travelling. However, Eritrea has a long and porous border to Sudan and Ethiopia and it may be fairly easy to cross the two borders.



## **International organisation (C)**

### Economic situation

An International organisation stated that Eritrea is very safe compared to other African countries as the culture of the Eritrean people generally shuns crime. Crimes like violent theft and robbery are not common even though the people in general are rather poor. The country is small, it has a small population and the capital Asmara is not much populated. This is also a reason why one does not see packed and filthy slum areas in Asmara. The poverty gap is difficult to see in Eritrea. Unemployment is high, and there is no significant private sector activity.

Few checkpoints or roadblocks exist and one does not easily see any ID checks in the streets. Many people are employed in the security sector but they are reportedly not sufficiently compensated for their work.

The old generation i.e. the people who fought the war for independence still rules Eritrea, but the younger generation looks to a different kind of nation building from guns and fighting to education and economic opportunities. The young generation is looking for opportunities such as education and jobs, but this is what is missing in today's Eritrea. Lack of opportunities and the prospect of living a decent life is what makes the young generation look to Europe. Approximately 60 per cent of all Eritrean families have relatives outside the country and there is a strong perception of how life is in Europe. By the end of the day many youngsters ignore the risks involved in travelling to Europe. It is a precarious journey from Eritrea to Sudan, Egypt and Israel or to Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya. To estimate the number of Eritreans leaving their country for Europe each month is very difficult. The living conditions are worsening in Eritrea, and the economy is not doing well. Electricity is restricted, every day there are disruptions for several hours and it has gotten worse the past couple of years.

### Reentry of Eritreans living abroad etc.

Many Eritreans abroad return to their homeland for 'tourism', i.e. visiting families and relatives. Eritreans abroad are closely connected to their country of origin.

### Desertion and evasion

Lack of cooperation with the National Service will now and then be punished. As an example of what may happen to an evader, reference was made to a recent incident in Asmara. A young girl did not show up at the meeting point and she was arrested and detained. The girl's mother came to the prison in order to have her daughter released because the daughter was needed to look after her younger siblings at home. The request was rejected by the prison authority. The mother was told that her daughter should be punished for her attempt to evade National Service. The young girl was not abused or victim of other violations while detained. She was released after one week in detention. It was added that non-compliance with the recruitment procedures is considered a sign of disobedience. The punishment could be more serious depending on the specific circumstances, e.g. if a person has deserted from more important work in National Service.



If a National Service evader or a deserter who has left Eritrea illegally returned to Eritrea, he or she would be detained for a short period of time, i.e. a couple of days or one week, and then re-enrolled in National Service. As an additional punishment, they could be sent off to duties at military posts near the Ethiopian border.

### Shoot-to-kill

The International organisation had no hard facts concerning the so-called “shoot-to-kill” order to Eritrean soldiers at the border to Ethiopia.

### Agriculture

Land tenure in Eritrea is a small scale activity, but it provides an income to the many small farmers. All land is government owned and this ensures that land grabbing does not exist in Eritrea. The government is distributing the land to avoid that the more well-to-do gradually acquire all the good land while the less fortunate would end up with the poor land. The whole agricultural sector is based on small scale agriculture and small plots of land.



### **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eritrea**

A number of factors must be taken into consideration when trying to understand why so many Eritreans travel to Europe. According to the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the two most important factors are pull factors. First of all, Eritreans receive preferred treatment as they are automatically granted asylum in Europe. A secondary effect of this is that many non-Eritreans e.g. citizen of Kenyan, Ethiopian and Djibouti pretend to be Eritrean citizens when they apply for asylum in Europe. Secondly, the perception amongst many young people in Eritrea is that it is easy to earn money in Europe and the economic situation in Eritrea is not very good for the time being. The solution is on the one hand that Europe should stop granting asylum on a prima facie basis to all Eritreans, and on the other hand the economic situation in Eritrea must improve making it more attractive for young Eritreans to remain in their home country.

The border question with Ethiopia remains unsolved as Ethiopia refuses to recognize the internationally demarcated border. So far the Ethiopian non-compliance with the decision of the international society concerning the border issue has had no consequences and nobody be it USA, EU or AU has confronted Ethiopia with that. The “no war, no peace” situation is unsustainable and needs to be resolved.

At the same time Eritrea is under UN sanctions for allegedly supplying arms to al-Shabaab in Somalia despite the fact that no proof has been put forward. It was argued that Eritrea has an interest in stable governments in the region and there is no rational explanation for the accusations of arms support to al-Shabaab. The Eritrean economy is in stagnation because of the effects from the sanctions. The country has many resources such as minerals and a potential fishing industry. But most important is that the 30 years of liberation struggle has cemented the notion of the state of Eritrea. Eritrea is an island of peace in the region. Different ethnic groups and adherents to different religious beliefs live together peacefully.

Commenting on the question of treatment upon return to Eritrea of citizens who have left the country illegally and who have either evaded or deserted from National Service, the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that if a person has committed a crime, due process is respected. National Service evaders and deserters have the possibility of restoring their relations with the Eritrean government by paying the two percent tax and by signing a letter of apology. This has been done by a number of people and they have returned to Eritrea without any complications.

A lot of misinformation about Eritrea is in circulation. Ethiopia and some Diaspora societies are responsible for the distorted and wrong image Eritrea has had abroad. Some international human rights organisations have published extremely critical reports on the human rights situation in Eritrea despite the fact that they have never set foot in the country and they rely heavily on biased sources of information. It was admitted that Eritrea has some human rights issues, but no country including Eritrea is 100 percent “clean”. But Eritrea should not be blamed for imaginary human rights violations made up by its adversaries. One of the real issues is the open-ended National Service. National Service is being discussed in the government but when it will undergo changes is impossible to state. The Eritrean government and the EU and the embassies of the European countries are in an ongoing and constructive dialogue where the parties take turns choosing the topics for discussion. National Service will definitely be taken up.



## **UN agency**

### Nationality identification

It was acknowledged by a UN agency that there is a possibility that maybe one out of ten UNHCR registered refugees in the Shire camps in northern Ethiopia could be from other nationalities, including Somalis, Sudanese or any other tribes with similar features. It is extremely difficult to establish the nationality of asylum applicants who claim to come from Eritrea as they share the same language and culture with various groups in the region right across the borders.

### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

Basically, the vast majority of the people who leave Eritrea do so for two reasons. The first reason is that the poor economic situation in Eritrea has led many to look to Europe for a better life. The second reason is the National Service program in Eritrea. The uncertainty concerning the duration of the service together with the low salary make many young people look for alternatives to spending several years working for a meager pay. Hardly anyone leaves Eritrea for political reasons.

### National Service

The available country of origin information concerning National Service as well as other human rights related issued is published by international human rights organisations that have never been in Eritrea and they base their information primarily on statements from Eritreans who have left the country.

Until the border question is resolved and the relations with Ethiopia have been normalized, it is difficult to discuss reforms of the National Service program. Before the 1998-2000 war, people gladly entered National Service. But that was before the National Service became opened-ended. The government apparently found it preferable to have people occupied in National Service than to let them loose facing limited employment in the private sector. If a significant number of people in National Service are to be demobilized, there should be a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program, to find alternatives for the youth, but the government does not have the money for that kind of large scale programs. UN agencies are approaching partners to start youth program to support, youth employment, income generating activities, micro credit and vocational training by rehabilitating the youth centers across the country. This will create alternatives to indefinite youth service and possibly normalize the service to the usual two years.

National Service evaders and deserters are maybe penalized if apprehended, but it was doubted that they are actually imprisoned. It was added that the government does not consider emigrants as traitors.

### Economy/policy

The situation in Eritrea from independence in 1991 to the border conflict with Ethiopia in 2000 could be characterized as a "honeymoon" period. The economy was booming and relations to Ethiopia were good. There was a widespread feeling of self-reliance and the country was moving fast forward. Since 2000, Eritrea has been a limping country. The economy could easily improve with the discovery of minerals if other factors like the security situation get better. The war led to situation where the Constitution and the par-



liament have been suspended and different institutions are yet to be established for example the human rights commission and others

Since the last war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, Eritrea has been preoccupied with security and the economy has become paralyzed. Ports are not operational, the electricity supply is not reliable with constant power cuts, and business activities are declining and unemployment increasing. The Eritrean government became increasingly paranoid with security concerns. Then came the international border decision which Ethiopia did not comply with and the status of “no war, no peace” between the two countries created more uncertainty. On top of that, UN imposed sanctions justified with the allegation that Eritrea supplied arms to al-Shabaab in Somalia. The reaction from the Eritrean government was to retreat into the corner and stay away from any international cooperation. Consequently, the Eritrean government almost closed down, the UN was about to close down, NGO’s were leaving and some embassies were moving out of Eritrea.

In 2013-2014, the UN and the government renewed their relationship after a long time of negotiations, they agreed on the future cooperation and the UN is now able to stay in Eritrea after signing the cooperation agreement (SPCF).

On the sanctions issue, Eritrea has been asked lately to allow the visit of the monitoring group, however, the Eritrean government believes that the UN Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group set up to monitor Eritrea’s compliance with the UN resolutions concerning alleged support to al-Shabaab, is actually promoting a regime change in Eritrea and the government has no trust in the monitoring group. Recently, a letter by one of the experts in the group openly talking of regime change did not help. It is understood that since then, the expert has been asked by the UN to resign

The Eritrean government’s understanding of human rights is broader than the narrow perception of limiting human rights to only political and civic rights. For the Eritreans, human rights emphasis is on food, health and education more than political civic rights. It is possible that while engaging Eritrea if the conversations start from where they feel comfortable and also from their engagement with the universal periodic review in Geneva (UPR) in which they are actively participating, may be the next steps in tackling the issues on human rights could be possible. It would be good to have a two track approach where discussions on the UPR continue while advocating for Eritrea to respect different other council decisions. Respecting this difference may make it possible to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Eritrean government considering that the government has accepted some recommendations in the UPR process.

The government is very cautious of liberalization; opening up too much may bring other problems like corruption and other malice. It is worrying to note that already there is a black market for fuel and currency exchange.

The disagreement concerning the border conflict with Eritrea is highly placed between the top leaders. The peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia have grievances since they fought against each other but these can be overcome. It was added that if Eritrea returned to IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] the organisation could play a constructive role.





Both countries could be considered oases of stability but the two countries should be made to reconcile. It is possible if initiative is taken by someone or some people that they both trust, maybe a conversation between them can start. Eritrea and Ethiopia are important for the regional political and security situation. Eritrea, because it is at the red sea and keeps strong security for the sea, it does not tolerate fundamentalism and therefore could be a good partner.

Especially it [Eritrea] can influence regional stability. Ethiopia is also a big country with a big market playing a great role in supporting [the fight against] fundamentalism. For the two countries to play a meaningful role to regional peace, they must be at peace with each other. At least they should not do anything to destabilize each other or resume conflict. Once each of them is carrying on their own business, there is potential for them to cooperate again.

### Education

The standard of education in Eritrea is actually not bad. But college teachers are not paid regularly making it difficult to attract proper teachers and the relatively high standard of education will start to drop because of lack of resources. Partners should support Eritrea in this area to allow the youth to benefit from good education since this may reduce migration.

### Prisons

A UN agency in Eritrea had no first hand information concerning Eritrean prisons and other detention facilities, but the impression was that prison and detention conditions could match or be better than some other African countries. They may not be at the standard of the western countries because the whole country is generally poor. But all [of this] is hearsay; there is no information to validate the statements because there is no access.



### **Regional NGO based in Asmara**

Martyr's Day is celebrated on 20 June throughout Eritrea. People put candle lights along the pavement so the whole city area is illuminated. Hardly any family did not lose a member in the war. However, Martyr's Day is not a military parade; there are candle-lights, music, dancing and speakers but no guns. It is a most beautiful and collective celebration cementing the ties among the Eritrea people, but it is also an illustration of the Eritrean elite being 'prisoners of the past'. The ruling elite are made up of the old fighters and they seem unwilling to free themselves from the experience of the liberation struggle against Ethiopia and the 30 years of no-war, no-peace. In the time of history Eritrea has been repeatedly let down by the international community and the country did not receive much support during the liberation struggle or later on. For that reason a concept of self-reliance developed and the ruling elite is partly still stuck in that concept. The wars with Ethiopia provide excuse for everything e.g. the suspension of the Constitution and the parliament. As one young man said "they are celebrating the past, but what about the present and future?" The young generation does not see any future in Eritrea and the perception of the "grass is greener elsewhere" particularly in Europe is wide-spread among the young generations in Eritrea. It was added that all countries in the Horn region are dysfunctional in varying degrees and all have human rights and other issues, so Eritrea is not the only country in which human rights violation are particular serious or common.

### Religion

The government and the people of Eritrea do not hide their differences. They celebrate the nine ethnic groups and the main religious groups. It is both official policy as well as social tradition there is always a church next to a mosque. Officially, all established religious groups are recognized in Eritrea, but when radical Islamic Jihadists attacked Eritrea from bases in Sudan the government illegalized this group. The Islamic Jihadists were responsible for beheadings of Eritrean army officers, terror attacks and other criminal activities. In July 2014 there was an attack on a hotel in Eritrea near the border to Sudan, but today the Islamic Jihadists are still hosted by the Sudanese government inland and at a distance from the border areas and still their camps are not dismantled but situated further into Sudan.

As a result of the activities by Islamic Jihadist, the Eritrean government is deeply concerned about all extremist religious/political and therefore decided to illegalize the group. Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'i and the Muslim Wahhabis are all illegal in Eritrea. The Protestant Church is officially recognized in Eritrea and it has a church in Asmara. The government is very sensitive about any issue that could create division between the populations. Groups who are considered to create division are labeled "fringe groups" and the government does not allow them any room. The fringe groups are mostly found in Asmara.

Jehovah's Witnesses are considered a fringe group not because they refuse to take up arms and receive military training, but because they are considered a threat to the national unity. Previously the government accepted the Baha'i society but since the rise in episodes with Islamic Jihad, the government is reconsidering everything. Five or six years ago the members of the Baha'i society could hold marriage ceremonies in privacy and it was tolerated by the authorities. If that happened today they would be arrested.



## National Service

Approximately five or six years ago there was a much stricter recruitment procedure to the National Service. At that time people in the National Service age were being stopped in police ID checks in the streets or collected by soldiers if they did not show up when called in. However, during the last five to six years there has been a relaxation in recruitment procedures and one does not see soldiers undertaking round-ups of people into National Service any longer. The change in the government's policy regarding National Service is a real change because there is an increasing understanding of the problem with the open-ended service and the way it affects the young generation.

The government and the ruling party have to some degree realized that something has to be done regarding the exodus of people from Eritrea. In the last three years there has been recognition that young people are needed for in Eritrea and that the exodus has reached a level that could threaten the economy of the country. Since last year there has been consent within the ruling party to deal with the problem and rumor has it that the government is considering returning to the original and 18 months of National Service that is stipulated by the law. The problem is both the open-ended service within the National Service, and the general belief among youngsters that the 'pasture is greener' on the other side of the fence. In some cases people have been working in the National Service in the ministries, in government garages or as technicians for eight or more years for a petty salary of 600 Nakfa per month (about 28 Euros).

The source of information explained that he has an employee who was released from National Service after six years. The employee had worked in a government owned garage as a mechanical for those years. His monthly salary was 500 Nakfa. He is now free to take up whatever job he may find, and he can apply for a passport and an exit-visa should he wish to go abroad. Theoretically, the National Service is 18 months, but in reality it could be much longer. Initially, everyone who is recruited to the National Service will be after attending Sawa camp. It was emphasized that Sawa is not a military camp, but is basically the final two years of high school for students from all over the country with about 22 thousand students. The students receive academic classes, some physical training and they learn to march in formation, but they receive no training in using arms as such. Those who graduate with merits from the Sawa camp may take up university studies and they are exempted from National Service. Those who do less well in school continue with National Service and they will do their services at various government institutions, hotels, factories, garages, and as teachers in schools etc. or in the military.

The Eritrean government has stated that it has accepted and fully implemented the International Border Commission ruling in accordance with the Algier Agreement signed with Ethiopia and witnessed by UN and all major world powers. However, Ethiopia has not implemented the agreement. For that reason Eritrea is in a state of "no war, no peace" with its southern neighbor.

The information in human right reports about ill-treatment in the National Service is more often than not exaggerated. People in National Service are not overworked or working under slave-like conditions, they are not beaten, subjected to torture or suffer from malnutrition. There is no obvious discrimination between men and women. Also about two years ago it was decided that women should have the right to undertake their duties within their home district. That privilege is not shared by men.



### Penalty for evasion and desertion

The penalty for desertion and evasion from National Service is not well documented, and there is no clear code of procedure or jurisprudence. The penalty may vary depending on who you are and where you are serving your National Service, i.e. desertion from critical sectors such as the fire brigade would probably be considered a more serious offence than deserting from work in a government run garage or the Ministry of Agriculture. No-one will be killed or punished physically by beatings, rape or other forms of human rights violations. In recent years the most likely penalty for desertion from National Service would be detention for three to four months particularly for women.

Those who desert or evade National Service and who are caught on their way out of the country are brought to detention camps where they will stay here for three to six months. They will then be released unconditionally. They are not returned to National Service as they are regarded as 'rotten apples' by the authorities. The authorities want to keep deserters away from people who are in the National Service to prevent the deserters from exercising a bad influence on others. It was emphasized that the conditions in detention camps are much better than conditions in regular prisons, and the conditions in the detention camps cannot be said to violate the inmates' basic rights. Prison conditions are very tough in Eritrea, but there are no reports of sexual abuses, beatings and torture in the prisons. Every prisoner is given four loafs of bread per day as well as beans or lentils.

There have been reports by international NGOs on relatives of National Service deserters or evaders having been forced to undertake National Service on behalf of deserters or evaders. However, such incidents are not documented and it is definitely not a government stand or policy to retaliate against parents or other family members of National Service evaders or deserters. If such treatment occurred relatives would tell about it.

### Shoot-to-kill

The shoot-to kill-policy at the border to Ethiopia reported by international NGOs does not exist any longer, if it ever has been practiced. The source has never heard of this being a policy at the border and he has never heard of someone being shot while trying to get to Ethiopia. Instead, relatives share the news when individuals reach a neighboring country as they receive phone calls from community members and extended family.

### UN sanctions

There is no proof that Eritrea was behind provision of weapons to al-Shabaab in Somalia. The source's friends in Eritrea are of a similar opinion. However, it is true that Somalia was very supportive of Eritrea during its struggle for independence. Somalia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the UAE were the closest supporters of Eritrea, and Eritrea is obligated to these countries, especially Somalia and Sudan. But Eritrea did not support al-Shabaab; the only support to Somalia was accommodation of participants at peace-conferences and the organisation of conferences. Even the UN has unofficially recognized that there is no solid evidence of Eritrean arm supplies to al-Shabaab. Eritrea has no planes, ships that could carry arms to



al-Shabaab and the country has no land borders to Somalia. In addition, both France and the USA have large surveillance stations in Djibouti that could easily pick up information about Eritrean arms being transported to al-Shabaab if that had taken place.

#### Illegal exit/returns

Three years ago Egypt returned a large number of Eritreans by plane. The returnees had been arrested by the Egyptian authorities on the border to Israel and they were deported to Eritrea. Egypt filled up several commercial planes each carrying more than 150 passengers. Upon arrival in Eritrea the women were free to enter Eritrea while the men were taken to a detention camp for questioning on why they had left Eritrea. The men were detained for approximately two weeks after which they were free to return to their own communities. However, only half a dozen or so were tried at the criminal court for perceived illegal economic activities.

The Eritrean government is at last increasingly aware that there is a problem with the youth. In other countries in the region the governments do not bother about them. There is no country in the Horn of Africa where everything is perfect, but Eritrea and Ethiopia are the only two countries in the region which has a national idea, project or vision. Unfortunately, the war between them has damaged that idea or vision. National Service in Eritrea is more an expression of a dysfunctional society than a blatant violation of human rights. All countries in the region are dysfunctional in varying and many respects, but to label Eritrea as Africa's North Korea is completely wrong. The government and the ruling party are interested in international issues, the developments in the region's countries, has effectively contributed to peace efforts in Darfur, Eastern and South Sudan, and the country is opening up for the outside world.

The country is unique in the Horn of Africa region in that it is safe, with no crime to speak of and no corruption – in clear difference from most other capitals in Africa.

#### Freedom of movement

There is complete freedom of movement for everyone in Eritrea without road blocks. Citizens do not have to register in hotels and only foreigners have to obtain a travel permit and register at hotels. Three or four years ago there were some checkpoints near the border to Sudan. The purpose of these checkpoints was to clamp down on contraband from Sudan. The checkpoints have now been removed.

Any Eritrean can cross the border to Sudan on his or her ID-card (except those who are doing their National Service must obtain an exit visa). There is no need for a passport to enter Sudan. However, one has to be a genius to find out where the border is as it is not demarcated. The border to Sudan is more than 1,000 km long and people just cross on foot or on donkeys.

#### ID cards

All Eritreans above the age of 18 are issued national ID-cards regardless of where in Eritrea they live.



## **Well-known Eritrean intellectual**

### Diaspora

A well-known Eritrean intellectual explained that he is an Eritrean national, but he also holds a passport of a European country. He returned from Europe to Eritrea in the late 1990's. It is not possible to denounce one's Eritrean nationality despite having obtained a nationality abroad. Dual citizenship is recognized in Eritrea.

The source explained that he travels freely in and out of Eritrea on his Eritrean passport, but he needs an exit visa each time because of his Eritrean passport and citizenship. It is unproblematic for Eritreans who are living abroad or Eritreans who has a dual citizenship to obtain an exit visa in Eritrea. Previously, it was much harder to get an exit visa, but about two years ago regulations were changed, thus making things much easier. The source added that he has an Eritrean ID-card.

The source explained that persons who left Eritrea illegally can return to their country without fearing any consequences. According to the law illegal exit is penalized, but the government has a somewhat relaxed 'amnesty' attitude toward such people and in reality they are not penalized. The reason for this relaxed attitude is that the government wants people to return to Eritrea. Such persons have to pay the two percent income tax and sign an apology letter. Having done this no one will be arrested upon return. In addition such persons will not be recruited to the National Service. The source explained that he has a close relative living abroad and this relative has been visiting Eritrea repeatedly after having paid the two percent tax and signed an apology letter. The relative can travel in and out of Eritrea without consequences.

### National Service

In the late 1990's the National Service was not open-ended. The period of National Service was then 18 months. However, when the war with Ethiopia began one would be called in for service until the war was over. It was added that reporting by international NGOs on National Service has been exaggerated, especially the reporting on arrests of young people who have evaded or deserted from the service.

During the border war with Ethiopia and even afterwards, i.e. in times of tension National Service could last for up to more than 10 years. But now National Service usually lasts for between three to five years.

### Penalty for evasion/desertion

It was emphasized that it would be incorrect to judge Eritrea on the basis of the situation in rich Western countries. It is important to understand the Eritrean context. Eritrea cannot behave like European countries, and there have been lots of problems, including human rights problems, in Eritrea. However, it is unrealistic to expect Eritrea to match international standards, including human rights standards. There are examples of deserters who have been arrested and imprisoned in Eritrea, but in general everyone knows what to do and not to do when it comes to National Service. The source added that he knows of a student who deserted the National Service and was arrested. The student was transferred to the Sawa camp to complete his National Service. After that he returned to his studies. Many government officials, teachers, nurses etc. are returning to their jobs after having served at the National Service.



## **Western embassy (A)**

### Human rights reporting

A Western embassy (A) explained that the public available human rights reporting regarding Eritrea is rather old. The more recent reports seem to recycle outdated information. In addition to that, even the UN special rapporteur had limited access to reliable sources of information and consequently had to rely extensively on interviewing Eritrean refugees outside of Eritrea.

### National Service

The mainstream human rights reports are describing a situation in Eritrea facing National Service evaders and deserters that is no longer representing the real situation. The situation has changed to the better. Evaders and deserters are not imprisoned for a protracted period of time and they are not exposed to physical harm.

Ordinary people who evade the National Service or desert from the service are not being prosecuted and imprisoned and they are not at risk of disappearances. That kind of treatment is reserved for people who have had some kind of oppositional activities i.e. political prisoners. It was emphasized that the government does not consider National Service evaders or deserters as political opponents. The change in the government's attitude towards emigrants has not been recognized by human rights organisations and it has not yet been reflected in any of the available human rights reports on Eritrea.

### Round-ups

Concerning rumors of round up of young people who have evaded or deserted from National Service the Western embassy (A) stated that it had heard of such round-ups in villages out in the country. The USA travel advice warns US citizens of Eritrean origin of the risk of round-ups because of recent reports.

### People's Army

Recently the government announced a call up for military training in the People's Army. There is no further information about this. However, the People's Army militia consists of people in the forties and fifties who have been demobilized from the National Service. The militia has been established in order to bring a part of the population into the security apparatus and the protection of the state. After the January 2013 attempted military "coup" - the circumstances in that event are not clear - the People's Army was established. Some see the People's Army as the President's attempt to be less dependent on the army. However, it is doubtful that the President should have any fear of a real threat against him.

### Diaspora visits

Many members of the Eritrean Diaspora have been recognized as political refugees in Europe and many of these people travel to Eritrea on visits and they leave the country again legally without experiencing any kind of problems. However, prior to such visits in Eritrea they have to pay the two percent Diaspora tax and



sign an apology letter whereby they restore their relations with the Eritrean government. It is probably not true that people who have done so are at risk of being detained upon arrival in Eritrea.

In June 2014 the Swedish air carrier Fly Olympic went bankrupt leaving approximately 400 Eritreans with Swedish passports stranded in Asmara. The majority of the stranded passengers had originally left Eritrea illegally and had either evaded or deserted from National Service. It took some time to organize new tickets, but eventually they were all able to fly back to Sweden. It is not known if they had restored their relations with the government by paying the two percent tax and by signing an apology letter, but they were all allowed to leave Eritrea.

#### ID cards

Eritrean citizens are probably required to carry their national ID card at all times, but it was stressed that Eritreans can travel freely throughout the country.





## **Western embassy (B)**

### Diaspora

According to a Western embassy (B), approximately 50% of all extended families in Eritrea have a family member living abroad. Going abroad has been a tradition since at least World War II. Thus, a well-established network between the Diaspora and families in Eritrea has been in operation since then.

The two percent income tax levied on members of the Diaspora is considered a 'rehabilitation tax' by the government intended to help financing the rebuilding of the country. It should be remembered that other countries charge their citizen fees for issuance documents such as passports as well.

### Emigration patterns

Since 2013 there has been an increase in the numbers of Eritreans leaving Eritrea. The major cause for this is the so-called Mare Nostrum, i.e. the Italian navy's operations where asylum seekers are being picked up in the Mediterranean Sea and transported to Italy safely. Thus, it has become much easier and safer for asylum seekers to cross the Mediterranean and get to Italy, many of whom are Eritrean nationals. The biggest risk to their lives is the way through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya. In addition to that close to 100% of all Eritreans are granted asylum in Europe.

According to a Western embassy (B), 99.9% of all Eritrean asylum seekers in Europe are economic refugees. The extended families, which may comprise 50 persons, merge their savings in order for them to send a bright young relative, usually a man, to Europe. It is an investment and it is expected that the young man will send remittances back to his family in Eritrea. As long as the family knows that he will be granted asylum, they will not hesitate to send him off. But if the outcome was not given, the family would think twice before they send the young man to Europe. It was emphasized that the human rights situation in Eritrea is no worse than in most other African countries and poverty in Eritrea is not worse than in other African countries. There are no mass violations of human rights in Eritrea, and European countries do not grant protection to everyone from Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic or Egypt. In this respect, it could be argued that the Eritrean government has a point when it states that Eritrean asylum applicants received preferential treatment in Europe.

Commenting on Norway's recent policy towards Eritrean asylum seekers, the Western embassy (B) stated that the Norwegian announcement of a possible return agreement with Eritrea had a huge psychological effect and it effectively drove down the number of Eritrean asylum seekers in Norway. That happened despite the fact that no one has been deported from Norway and despite the fact that though Eritrea accepts voluntary returns, especially when the returnees are given some money, it does not accept forced returns. It was added that Eritrea will not give assurances regarding human rights and it will not allow European countries to monitor unsuccessful asylum seekers who have been returned to Eritrea.

### National Service

Eritrea is up against a powerful enemy. Ethiopia has much better international relations than Eritrea, and lack of military equipment has forced Eritrea to establish a National Service program which encompasses all



able-bodied citizens between the age of 18 and 50 at some time in their lives. Apart from the defense of the state, National Service has a civilian dimension as many in the service work in ministries, and in public construction projects such as building of dams, roads and bridges. However, the few years spent in National Service may imply that it is very difficult for many people to plan for their lives. It would be a great step in the right direction if the Eritrean government would clarify precisely how long time one has to serve in the National Service. So far this has not happened, but one cannot fairly say that Eritrean government is responsible for mass violations of human rights.

Regarding the duration of National Service a Western embassy (B) explained that there are no written laws regulating this. National Service is a very 'foggy' issue, and when one will be released from National Service, i.e. demobilized, depends very much on one's specific skills and the individual employer. However, there are indications that young people are now released from National Service after a shorter period of service than was previously the case.

#### Propaganda

The embassy (B) emphasized that Eritrea has fallen victim to a massive propaganda campaign from other countries, especially Ethiopia and its allies, as well as from the Diaspora and Eritrean asylum seekers. Human rights reports from international NGOs either lack knowledge of Eritrea or they are part of the propaganda against the country. The human rights situation in Eritrea is not as bad as it has been described. It was added that reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are mostly based on sources outside of Eritrea, especially parts of the Diaspora including asylum seekers and refugees.

It was reiterated by the Western embassy (B) that only very few Eritreans have genuine reasons for claiming political asylum abroad. If the Western European countries do not halt its policies of granting asylum automatically to more or less all Eritrean asylum seekers they will see a steady increase in the number of Eritreans coming to Europe. When Eritreans hear that their sisters and brothers are being granted asylum in Europe they will soon decide to go as well, and Europe will see a huge increase of Eritrean asylum seekers in the time to come.

#### Political prisoners/evaders/deserters

Regarding reports that approximately 10,000 persons are imprisoned in Eritrea for various reasons the Western embassy (B) stated that this figure is grossly exaggerated. Eritrea is not worse than most other African countries. It is the same story everywhere, and no-one can tell what happens in any place and any country in Africa. Concerning the reports on the 10,000 prisoners in Eritrea, the Western embassy stated that all the international reports published by various international NGOs quote or copy each other and they are mainly based on statements from Eritrean refugees who are not the best sources of reliable information. It is a fact that Eritrea has no capacity to take care of 10,000 prisoners irrespective of whether they are imprisoned for political or criminal reasons, not to mention draft evaders and deserters. Eritrea is victim of a huge propaganda war.



The Western embassy (B) would not exclude that a National Service evader or deserter would be detained, but this would be for symbolic reasons rather than for legal reasons. The authorities would prefer to state an example rather than detain evaders and deserters systematically. It was added that the authorities are turning a blind eye to many of those who for various reasons evade or desert National Service because they are needed during harvest time or for other reasons. Detention of individual National Service evaders and deserters is purely to show the people who is in charge in Eritrea, i.e. the ruling party. Detained evaders and deserters are normally released after a few days, and as an additional punishment they are sent off to duties at military posts near the Ethiopian border. It was added that many evaders and deserters would most likely have preferred to stay in detention rather than be deployed to the border areas. It was added that even if the government wanted to arrest and prosecute evaders and deserter, it does not have the capacity to do so.

The authorities could apply some pressure on the family of a deserter in order to persuade him or her to return to his work. This pressure applied could be too close the family's shop or rejection of some license e.g. to keep a shop. The government's interest is not to imprison evaders or deserters but to have them work for the country.

#### Illegal exit/"Shoot to kill"

Regarding the 'shoot-and-kill' policy applied in the border regions to Ethiopia a Western embassy (B) stated that there could be anecdotal reports about someone having been shot near the border. However, such stories are most likely not true as it is hard to believe that Eritrean soldiers would shoot at a fellow citizen. The government wants to stop the exodus from Eritrea, but not by shooting those attempting to leave via the border to Ethiopia. Instead, it has begun to open up to the international society in order to find a viable solution to the problem.

Many Eritrean refugees are indebted to their traffickers and agents when they arrive in Europe. Some may have a debt of between 3,000 and 20,000 US\$. The Western embassy (B) found it very unlikely that the debt could be as high as 40,000 US\$ as some sources have stated.

The Western embassy (B) stated that the usual price for sending a person to Europe varies a lot, but it can be fixed between 5.000 and 10.000US\$. The maximum amount of money paid for the travel is approximately 25,000 USD which would include travel in a Land Cruiser and VIP treatment.

#### Agriculture/economy

A Western embassy (B) explained that there is a small private sector in Eritrea. Everything is regulated by the state and people need licenses for everything. In addition, there is a lack of energy and the water supply is insufficient. The Nakfa is not convertible which is not conducive for foreign investments. The young generation who did not fight in the liberation war are less nationalistic than the older generation, and they find that Eritrea has very little to offer in terms of a better life. There is not really a free labor market in Eritrea as the government is controlling the National Service. Thus the economic climate is very dry and this is another push factor in Eritrea.



There are national companies which buy part of the harvest at fixed prices. It is very difficult for the farmers themselves to transport their harvest to markets in the cities. All land in Eritrea is owned by the government, but it is the farmers themselves who till the land and who earn their living from the land. The individual farming families help each other with ploughing and harvesting. Harvest is a time-consuming activity as it is done by hand.

Corruption is almost absent in Eritrea and the lowest in all of Africa. Even government ministers live at the poverty level.

When asked why people in Eritrea are not protesting against the rather poor living conditions, i.e. lack of economic prospects as well as the daily struggle to get by because of rising fuel prices, lack of electricity and so on, a Western embassy (B) explained that Eritreans are a proud and decent people, and they do not rebel against their own government, they only want jobs, education and social welfare. It was added that the revolution and the war against Ethiopia is an important part of the curriculum in the Eritrean education system. However, people have reached a point where they are so fed up with the situation that if Eritrea was invaded by Ethiopia, people would probably accept that without too much opposition.

Most of the young people in Eritrea are wearing modern western clothes, especially in Asmara and other cities. These clothes and shoes are not produced locally. They are almost exclusively sent to Eritrea by people in the Diaspora. There is a cloth factory in Asmara, owned partly by an Italian company and partly by the Eritrean government. This factory employs a large number of workers etc. Those employed at the factory are not in the National Service.

#### Freedom of movement

There is freedom of movement for all citizens in Eritrea. People can go wherever they want and they do not need a travel permit (as foreigners do). There are no limitations, except for some military zones close to the borders. Previously there was a risk of being questioned or arrested when travelling across the country, but for the last two years there have been no such incidents. The country is now opening up and the government is less paranoid. It was added that another reason for the absence of checkpoints and police forces is due to the fact that Eritrea cannot afford to pay salaries to security and police forces. Thus, the security apparatus is slowly breaking up. The soldiers who used to man the checkpoints are now put in work elsewhere. The attempted coup in January 2013 illustrates the point. Armed vehicles came from Senafe 120 km from Asmara without being stopped or attacked. No one reacted. That is not a security apparatus that is able to suppress an entire population.



### **Western embassy (C)**

A Western embassy (C) estimated that somewhere between three million and three and a half million people live in Eritrea. No reliable official figure exists.

A Western embassy (C) stated that recently the Eritrean government has shown a greater inclination to engage with the international community after isolating itself for many years. Two examples include: the AU-sponsored Regional Conference on Human Trafficking and Smuggling in the Horn of Africa held in Khartoum and the renewed cooperation with the EU both in implementation of the European Development Fund programme and over migration issues.

### Figures and estimates

An increasing number of Eritreans are leaving Eritrea. Based on known numbers registering with the UNHCR in neighbouring countries, and an estimate for those who did not register, it was assessed that up to between 5,000 and 10,000 Eritreans leave the country every month. Approximately 5% of the Eritreans who applied for asylum in the Western country (C) presented a passport and a visa – the remainder of asylum applicants had entered the country clandestinely.

A Western embassy (C) considered that the answer to the question why so many Eritreans suddenly decided to apply for asylum in Denmark lies in Europe rather than in Eritrea. It was added that Sweden, Norway, Germany and United Kingdom all have significant Eritrean Diaspora communities and these countries have traditionally been destination country for Eritrean asylum applicants.

A Western embassy (C) stated that the recent increase in the number of Eritrean asylum applicants in Denmark could be closely related to the fact that the Norwegian Deputy Justice Minister visited Eritrea in June 2014. According to press reports the discussions were related to the issue of repatriation to Eritrea of approximately 500 Eritreans. Following that visit the number of Eritrean asylum applicants in Norway decreased. It is likely that some of the Eritrean asylum applicants have shifted their intended destination from Norway to other countries such as Denmark.

### Push factors

According to a Western embassy (C) the main driving forces behind the outflow of Eritreans is not limited to the National Service program in Eritrea. Poor education prospects as well as poverty combined with the hope for a better future abroad are the major reasons why Eritreans decide to go abroad. It was clarified that Eritrea actually has a fairly high standard of education and the country has a reasonable skilled labor force, but the problem is that unemployment is high. It was added that Eritrea despite its expressive focus on self-reliance is a food deficit country that needs to import food to feed its population. In some rural areas humanitarian assistance is needed and malnutrition is a serious problem especially amongst children.

A Western embassy (C) emphasized that the two main reasons why Eritreans leave their country in high numbers is the stagnant economy as well as a reluctance to perform National Service for a protracted period of time. The young aspirant Eritrean men are looking for a better life in Europe or North America because the options they have in Eritrea for the moment are very limited.



### National Service

A Western embassy (C) stated that all Eritreans at the age of 17 years go to Sawa for the 11<sup>th</sup> and final year of schooling. For six months they receive some physical and military training as an integral part of the final year in school. That is why many young people are found in the refugee camps in Ethiopia.

A Western embassy (C) explained that when the exam results are ready after 11<sup>th</sup> grade in Sawa it is decided which students have qualified for tertiary education. These students do not perform additional military training apart from the six months of physical and military training that is an integral part of the 11<sup>th</sup> year in school in Sawa. Instead, on completion of their higher or further education, they perform national service in a civilian capacity in a profession linked to their qualification – for example an engineer might work in the Department of Public Works, an accountant in a state-owned bank or financial institution.

A western embassy (C) explained that the government's justification for the National Service is the unsettled situation with Ethiopia and the "no peace, no war" status between the two countries. If that is the case it could be argued that the compulsory enlistment of people into National Service is not a violation of the fundamental human rights, not even if the service is indefinite and including people at old age. However, there is no possibility of conscientious objection to the National Service in Eritrea, nor is there a possibility of performing an alternative service by choice. Furthermore, it seems to be arbitrary when people are released or demobilized from National Service, whether from a military or civilian role, after serving the obligatory 18 months. In practice people would apply to their employer or military commander for demobilization. If he or she approves the recommendation to demobilize a person, the recommendation would be sent to the central authorities for final approval. But the guidance on what reasons would justify a recommendation for demobilisation are internal only and in reality a large part of the decision to demobilize people is left to the individual employer or military commander. It was added that National Service is not really indefinite, but when it ends is arbitrary.

A Western embassy (C) had heard of people in their forties who were still in National Service, but in general three to four years of National Service seemed to be norm today. The problem is that the government and state owned companies have become dependent on the National Service labor force because of the low wages. As a consequence of the low wages, people working in National Service are often not too motivated and they often do not show for work.

A Western embassy (C) stated that some demobilized people stay in the same work as they were during the National Service but being paid a regular wage. However, most people would leave their old jobs and look for work in other places. The salary during the obligatory 18 months of National Service is mere 500 Nakfa per month which is just pocket money. After the 18 months the salary increases to a maximum of 1,500 Nakfa per month, depending on the role. In comparison a gardener working for the embassy would receive 3,500 Nakfa per month. It was added that government ministers according to unconfirmed information are paid 4,000 Nakfa per month. In reality, Eritrean society is very egalitarian and especially the older generation has a very strong community feeling. However, it is less likely that the young generation shares that feeling to the same extent.



A western embassy (C) stated that National Service draft evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally can choose to regularize their relationship with the government by signing an apology letter and by paying a two percent Diaspora tax. By doing so they will be issued an Eritrean passport and they can enter the country legally for family visits or other purposes. Paying the two percent Diaspora tax is a prerogative for obtaining an exit visa in order to leave Eritrea again. National Service evaders and deserters are not punished upon return to Eritrea if they have regularized their status in this way. It was added that almost all Eritreans have a very strong sentiment of their nation and belonging to Eritrea. That is why many Eritreans who have once left the country illegally wish to be able to return home at some point.

A Western embassy (C) had never heard of any sort of retributions or reprisals by the Eritrean authorities against family members of National Service evaders or deserters.

#### Political opposition

According to a Western embassy (C) some political opponents to the government or openly critics who are living abroad are definitely too afraid of reprisals by the Eritrean government to return home. The justice system in Eritrea is to some extent arbitrary and there are reports of political prisoners who have died while in prison.

A Western embassy (C) stated that the Eritrean government does detain people for political reasons, but there is no general climate of fear similar to that found under authoritarian regimes elsewhere to detect in the population. In private conversations people gladly criticize the government, and if they choose to keep quiet in public that is an expression of discretion as much as than an expression of a general fear of being exposed to reprisals for criticizing the situation in the country.

#### Diaspora visits

Especially during the summer the airplanes flying to and from Asmara are packed with Eritrean Diaspora people who are coming home for holidays. Some of these people must have had some kind of conflict or fall out with the Eritrean authorities, i.e. by evading or deserting from National Service or by exiting Eritrea illegally. It was concluded that the ones who have a real fear of returning to Eritrea must be very outspoken opponents or critics of the government.

#### People's Army

A Western embassy (C) stated that it had heard rumors that the President's body guard was made up of some extraordinary group, but it was considered unlikely that the President would be protected by the newly established militia also called the People's Army. It was added the President is not surrounded by heavy security.

According to a Western embassy (C), even people who have been demobilized from National Service are liable for continued service in the People's Army militia. The government has distributed Kalashnikov rifles to members of the militia to keep at home. The militia members are required to show once a month or every second week for physical training and at times are called to actual military training. As an example a



local embassy staff did not show for work one morning and it turned out that the staff member had been assigned a guard duty in the airport in Asmara that day. It was added that the obligation to occasional militia duties reportedly has an upper age limit of seventy as long as people are physically fit for the duty.

#### Economy/education

According to a Western embassy (C), there is very little evidence of government ministers or other prominent people being wealthy. Actually no one is wealthy in Eritrea. There is little evidence of corruption and humanitarian aid workers report startling few cases of corruption.

A Western embassy (C) stated that for many countries a large Diaspora is important to the economy. The remittances from the Diaspora are keeping the urban population in Eritrea afloat and its importance is hard for the government to ignore. It was added that the official exchange rate is one-third of the black market rate which means that the government in reality effectively retains two-thirds of the value of remittances that reach Eritrea via official channels.

According to a Western embassy (C) the young generations of Eritreans do not accept the austerity that their parents were and are ready to endure and they are not ready to make the kind of self-sacrifices that their parents did during the liberation struggle and afterwards. The situation today between the generations who experienced the liberation struggle and the young generations has clear parallels to the youth rebellion in Europe in the 1960'ies one generation after the Second World War.

A Western embassy (C) stated that the university has not been closed but the faculties have been dispersed to several institutions of higher education around the country. In general Eritreans are greatly committed to education.

#### Freedom of movement

A Western embassy (C) stated that there are very few checkpoints in Eritrea and according to the experience of the embassy, it is mostly foreigners who have their documents checked by the authorities. Eritreans travelling by bus are usually not checked at all and the procedures at the checkpoints are very informal.

Eritrean police are not very visible. The impression of the embassy was that the police do not "shake down" people for money as is the case in many other countries in Africa. Traffic fines are paid at the police station which illustrates that petty corruption by individual police officers is not common. Eritrean police in Asmara are probably less corrupt than the police in other countries in the world.

#### Shoot-to-kill

A Western embassy (C) found it unlikely that the official "shoot to kill" is actually being implemented at the external borders. From time to time there are rumors that people who have tried to cross the borders illegally are being shot at, but these rumors have not been confirmed by credible sources. It was emphasized that in fact many soldiers at the border to Ethiopia desert from their posts and leave Eritrea illegally.





### Nationality

A Western embassy (C) found it likely that Ethiopians present themselves as Eritreans and apply for asylum in Europe. It is very difficult to distinguish between Eritreans and Ethiopians especially if the latter are from the Tigray region in the northern part of Ethiopia where most people share the culture and language with the Tigray people in Eritrea.



## **Western embassy (D)**

### Political prisoners

It was stated that the Eritrean government is not a gentle regime and some people are imprisoned for political reasons though the number of political prisoners is not in the thousand. Most people who leave Eritrea do so for economic reasons and because of the lack of livelihood opportunities and not because of political repression.

The main problem in Eritrea is the arbitrary nature of the way the security apparatus and the justice system work. Some people are detained and imprisoned without charges and there are reports of disappearances. Laws are in place but they are often implemented in an obscure manner. Some laws are not published, some are unclear and sometimes they are interpreted arbitrarily by some petty bureaucrats.

### National Service

Apart from the search for a better life abroad, the main driving force for young Eritreans is the National Service program. The National Service is unpredictable and in principle indefinite. There are reports of recruitment into National Service of 40 to 50 years old people for military drills or temporary service. In some cases they are rounded up and taken to some military barracks. In principle, National Service cannot exceed 18 months, but in reality it stretches far beyond that period of time. The main reason for this extended National Service is that the people who are employed in government institutions and public work places while in National Service are a very cheap labor force. In average a person in National Service is paid 15 USD per month. However, if the National Service was limited to 18 months, most people would not be able to find ordinary employment due to the high unemployment rate in the country.

A broadly shared perception is that the government has eased its approach to National Service. Today it is easier to be released from the service and to young people today National Service seems to be limited to a couple of years.

The Eritrean government justifies National Service with the unresolved border dispute with Ethiopia.

### Penalty for evasion and desertion

People who have evaded National Service are at risk of being identified as such. In that case, they could be picked up and taken to the barracks to be enrolled in National Service. However, there is no information about severe penalties for trying to evade National Service.

For at least one year there have been no reports about relatives of National Service evaders or deserters being exposed to reprisals by the authorities. Before that there were reports that relatives of evaders and deserters were imprisoned or enrolled in National Service instead of the evader or deserter. This change could be attributed to either a policy change or because of the government's declining capacity to enforce the service. It would be technically difficult and politically unsustainable for the government to carry out reprisals in massive numbers against relatives of National Service evaders or deserters.



### The People's Army

It is important to distinguish between National Service and service in the reserve army i.e. the People's Army. National Service is obligatory to young people who reach the age of 18 years. All conscripts are taken to SAWA where they receive six months of military training. After that it is decided how they should serve the remaining 12 months of National Service i.e. either in the military or in a civilian job depending of the skills and competences of the individual conscript. The old backlog of adults who have worked in the civil service for several years is the main problem. They are often considered a valuable and cheap labor force and employers are reluctant to assist them in being demobilized from National Service. Recently, it seems that more and more are released from National Service after serving a shorter period of time. It was added that the unpredictable length of National Service is considered the main reason why young people today are unhappy with the National Service program.

People who are enrolled in the People's Army usually have ordinary jobs, but they are periodically required to receive some military training and occasionally perform guard duties or participate in public work such as building dams.

### Economy

It is possible for some to find employment in the private sector, but it is not easy as the economy is in a poor state. For the moment the private sector cannot accommodate jobs for the large group of young people in Eritrea. It was added that neither the nationalized sector is able to provide ordinary employment in hotels or factories to people if they were to be released from National Service. Some factories close down temporarily because of lack of electricity and raw materials. As a consequence even people who have been released from National Service often find that there is little prospect for gainful employment if staying in Eritrea.

### Diaspora visits

Many Eritreans who live abroad at some point return to Eritrea either to visit family and friends or to start up some business or invest in some project. This includes people who have either evaded National Service or deserted from the service. It is not completely clear in all cases what happens to National Service evaders or deserters when they return to Eritrea. However, in some cases National Service evaders and deserters have restored their relations to the authorities prior to their return to Eritrea by paying the two percent Diaspora tax and by signing an apology letter. In some of these cases people have returned to Eritrea even shortly after they evaded or deserted from the service and left the country illegally. It was emphasized that evaders and deserters are not considered political opponents by the government and at present, there are no reports that deserters are imprisoned or otherwise severely punished.

On one hand there is no feeling of oppression or fear to detect in the general population in Eritrea, but on the other hand there is no press freedom and political rights are restricted. It is illustrative that the country's official name is "State of Eritrea" – the name does not include terms such as "democratic" or republic. However, not much police is visible in the cities or in the country side. It could be that some security offic-



ers work in the streets dressed in civilian clothes, but if that is the case one should expect to see them doing ID checks or making arrests which is not the case.

### Corruption

Corruption is very limited compared with other countries in the region, and it could be said that poverty is egalitarian. There is no elite in Eritrea who has accumulated great wealth and who gladly show its wealth to the observer. The government has a genuine intention to keep the living standards at an equal level and it is serious in its efforts to distribute food to the parts of the country where there is a need for humanitarian assistance. It was added that the state's revenues stem from the Diaspora tax and from joint ventures between the state and foreign mining companies. Since 2011 the mining of gold and now copper has generated revenues to the state budget. On the other hand food import which Eritrea depends on is expensive.

The construction activities in Eritrea are limited because of the poor state of the economy. But some housing projects have been started and the Diaspora is investing money in these projects. However, the housing that has been constructed is too expensive to ordinary people. It was added that it is possible to buy and sell property as a private person, though the legal status of such transactions is somewhat unclear.

Recently, the Eritrean government has opened up to the world and loosened the control it exerts over its citizens. For example there was tight control with foreign currency until two years ago. Today it is allowed to carry up to 10,000 USD into the country and there is no obligatory declaration of foreign currency in the airport. The government has opened up for foreign contacts, investments and joint ventures such as the mining projects that are running or in the pipeline.

It was emphasized that to have significant economic development the government needs to change its economic policy which in practical terms means a liberalization of the economy. The Diaspora is divided in the question of whether or not to engage with the government in rebuilding the Eritrean economy.

Previously, the government of Eritrea was not concerned about emigration and in fact it made money from it because of the Diaspora tax. Now the government has realized that the level of the continuous out flux of people is unsustainable in the longer term.

According to diplomatic sources, up to one million Eritreans live in Sudan, including second- and third-generation emigrants. Many of them are integrated into the local society and economy. There is also a sizeable number of Eritreans in South Sudan, where they work in the industry and for example the water supply sector in South Sudan is controlled by Eritreans.

### Freedom of movement

To people who are demobilized or released from National Service there is complete freedom of movement internally in Eritrea. People who are in the service would probably need some kind of approval from their employer if they are to be sure that they can travel unhindered inside Eritrea. However, the risk of being revealed if travelling without approval from an employer depends on the control of ordinary citizens. There is no doubt that the government would like to control such movements, but it does not have the capacity



to do that effectively. ID checks when travelling between the cities are sporadic and quite lenient. It would be the exemption to find Eritreans who have not been issued a national ID card. The government would in some form or shape reach even remote villages through vaccination programs and subsidized food programs.

#### 'Shoot-to-kill'

Eritrea is in a state of "no war, no peace" and technically still at war with Ethiopia. The border between the two countries is highly militarized, but nevertheless, some Eritreans cross the border illegally to Ethiopia. It is not sure whether the Eritrean military could control the border much more efficiently, even if it wanted to.

There have been no confirmed reports about shooting at people who were leaving the country illegally. It cannot be excluded that individual soldiers at the borders have shot against people crossing the borders illegally, but if there is a shoot-to-kill order – which the Government denies - then is not being enforced systematically. If this was the case, it would be known through family contacts. It should be remembered that even soldiers at the borders occasionally desert and leave the country.

Finally, it was considered that the soldiers in the border region are not likely to shoot at people who could even be their relatives or friends.



## **Western embassy (E)**

### Human rights reporting

Credible information about Eritrea is hard to come by and you never know what to believe and who to believe. The problem is that everybody has an axe to grind. One of the most used sources of information about the real situation in Eritrea is refugees who have left the country. As a source of credible information refugees are dubious sources as they are ready to say whatever will benefit them in their effort to be granted asylum. However, it is clear that there are reasons for being disappointed with the Eritrean government. The Constitution has not been implemented which the government has excused with the war against Ethiopia. The judicial system is not well functioning and people are imprisoned and released without any announcements, making it difficult to monitor the human rights situation in the country.

### National Service

One major push factor that explains the exodus of young Eritreans is the national service that has become open-ended. In addition, the salary, while in national service, ranges from 80 to 450 Nakfa per month. At the same time pull factors such as the image of a prosperous life in the West play an important role. Recently CNN and other television channels broadcasted the news that Denmark is the happiest country in the world. People in Eritrea watch this and of course they want to leave Eritrea and go there.

There is basically no organized political opposition in Eritrea and to most people human rights are limited to access to health care and food supplies. If asked many Eritreans would say that there is a large security set-up in the country but you don't see any police in or outside of Asmara. It was added that the frequently mentioned figure in human rights reports of 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea is difficult to harmonize with the reality on the ground. The government needs the cheap national service work force, and rather than imprison evaders and deserters, the government choose to occasionally round them up and put them back to work. It was added that none of the human rights NGO have set foot in Eritrea for many years and they quote each other making it impossible to establish the original source of the information. In addition to that human rights organisations and even the UN special rapporteur rely extensively on opposition groups in the Diaspora as well as Eritrean asylum applicants and refugees who really cannot be considered reliable sources of information about human rights in Eritrea.

Just a week ago a number of people in Asmara receive a notice to appear for some military training. The majority did not show up as requested by the authorities and the ones who did show up were told to go home because they were too few to go ahead with the training.

The governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia are trying to destabilize each other. If a formal and real peace could be agreed, that would test the sincerity of the Eritrean government. If there was a peace, there would be no excuse for the national service program and for not implementing the Constitution. But a peace requires that Ethiopia hands over the area surrounding Badme, as ruled by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission.



### Diaspora visits

Eritreans who have left the country illegally and who may have evaded or deserted from national service have the option of returning home if they pay a fee and sign a letter of apology. If the person's relation to the government has been duly re-established, he or she would not be persecuted or risk reprisals upon return to Eritrea. However, it cannot be ruled out that the government would find desertion from the military an aggravated circumstance. But there is no specific information to support that particular concern.

It is almost impossible for young people in the age between 15 and 40 to be issued a passport in Eritrea. However, once people have left the country illegally, it is quite easy to be issued a passport at the Eritrean embassy in Khartoum provided that the fee i.e. the two percent Diaspora tax has been paid.

### Economy

Basically, Eritrea survives economically on the remittances from the Diaspora communities in the West and other places and everybody who has the opportunity to go to the West would rather give it a try than staying behind in Eritrea where the prospect of a better life is bleak.

A government minister in Eritrea earns 4,000 Nakfa per month, and a medical doctor earns approximately 1750 Nakfa. Various social welfare benefits for refugees in Europe is somewhere between 400 and 600 Euro which according to the official exchange rate is between 5,000 and 8,000 Nakfa.<sup>11</sup> It was added that most Eritreans abroad make use of unofficial channel to send remittances to family and friends and by doing so, the value of the money is tripled using black market exchange rates.

### ID checks

Concerning ID checks it was stated that the police have no computers and access to databases are hampered by frequent power cuts. It could be the case that an individual who is found without an ID card would be held by the police for a couple of days to establish his or her national service status. It was added that some groups are exempted from national service. These include pregnant women and women with children, sole providers for the family, disabled people and people with health issues et cetera.

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<sup>11</sup> The official exchange rate is 1USD:15ERN. The unofficial or black market rate is 1USD:53ERN



### **Western embassy, Khartoum (met in Asmara)**

The ambassador of a Western embassy based in Khartoum gave the following impressions:

He explained that he had visited Asmara four times over the last year. A recent visit comprised a delegation from the embassy's home country. The overall purpose of this visit was to gain a better understanding of the refugee situation, including signaling to the Eritrean authorities the growing challenges stemming from the exodus of Eritrean nationals from Eritrea to Europe. Discussions regarding this subject are ongoing.

### Diaspora

Members of the Eritrean Diaspora communities often appear closely linked to their country and their families in Eritrea. Many seem to be traveling to Eritrea and back home again.

Regarding the issuance of Eritrean travel documents at the Eritrean embassy in Khartoum, the ambassador of a Western embassy in Khartoum mentioned that there appears to be a praxis whereby applicants for passports, upon having paid the two percent income-tax and should they have evaded or deserted the National Service they will also have to sign a letter of apology, may be issued an Eritrean passport. They then appear to be able to enter and leave Eritrea.

### Emigration

Possibly as many as 3,000 to 5,000 Eritreans are now leaving their country each month, and this is gradually being realized by the Eritrean government as a problem. The government all in all seems more concerned about the very large emigration and the consequences of this situation than it was a year ago. The sheer volume of emigration is now so large that Eritrea risks losing a whole generation. The emigration at the current level, if these figures are right, means that Eritrea is losing approximately one percent of its population in one year. In addition the loss of youngsters for National Service appear to put the National Service system under serious pressure as well as damaging the image of Eritrea abroad.

Concerning the emigration from Eritrea several pull factors as well as push factors can be identified. Important push factors are the general paucity and poverty, the open-ended National Service and the general lack of economic development hampering socioeconomic development, especially employment and career opportunities. These factors motivate especially young people to leave Eritrea. The pull factors are above all the prospect of a better life in Europe, the perception that the 'grass is greener on the other side' and they hope to replace the prospect of being recruited to the National Service and a very low salary for years to come with a better socio-economic prospect in Europe.

It was emphasized that a slight change in the government's attitude seems to have occurred circa two to two and a half years ago, concerning Eritrea's relations with the international community. There was a slightly increased willingness to engage more, on a selective basis, with some countries as well as the UN system. This appears to be a positive shift from the previous period where the Eritrean government tended to isolate itself even more than now. Today a very few government representatives may, in private conversation, even acknowledge that the reason behind the emigration from the country is not only a matter of pull factors but that push factors play a role as well.





The government of Eritrea is participating in the international conference in Khartoum and has engaged in the EU Horn of Africa anti-trafficking initiative. This also seems an indication that the present system is under increasing pressure and that the government may feel pressured to engage in a dialogue. In addition to that Eritrea has just ratified three UN Conventions – on transnational organized crime, on torture and on human trafficking.

#### Political prisoners

Several observers doubt that there could be as many as 10,000 prisoners of Eritrean nationality in Eritrean custody. This figure has recently been reported by some international NGOs. There is a significant number of political prisoners in Eritrea but it is difficult to ascertain how many they are or under what conditions they are kept.

#### National Service

Recently Yemane Gebreab, Head of the Political Office of the PFDJ and reported to be very close to the President, stated that those who have left Eritrea to avoid National Service are considered economic refugees not political opponents. Yemane Gebreab also expressed the wish to stop the trafficking of Eritrean asylum seekers through Sudan and Libya. It is damaging for Eritrea that its young generation is leaving their country.

Many Eritreans are very affectionate of the Scandinavian countries. Denmark, Norway and Sweden are highly attractive to Eritreans. Besides, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find employment in Italy. Much of the available information regarding human rights issues in Eritrea, and especially regarding issues related to evasion and desertion from National Service, stem from Eritrean asylum applicants and refugees abroad. International human rights observers may frequently quote each other, meaning that the information in some cases could be imprecise. Over all, it is very hard to obtain accurate information about emigration and refugees as well as other issues, owing to censorship, lack of openness, very weak or no civil society and very little international access.



## Notes from meetings with sources consulted in Ethiopia

### Danish Refugee Council/Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) was one of the founders of RMMS in 2011 and DRC is hosting the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS).

DRC/RMMS explained that Ethiopia recently became the largest refugee hosting country in Africa. The recent RMMS report "Going West" documents a significant movement of people out of the Horn of Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Explaining why Eritreans leave Eritrea in increasingly larger numbers DRC/RMMS pointing to two recent developments in Eritrea. Firstly, in July 2014 the Italian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Eritrea and discussed increased bilateral cooperation and coordination with the Eritrean government. That visit attracted attention among the Eritrean Diaspora who feared that the discussions could involve talks about forced return programs. Secondly, the opening in July-August 2014 of direct Turkish Airline flights between Istanbul and Asmara was interpreted as a potential means of facilitating forced returns to Eritrea.

DRC/RMMS also pointed to several regional drivers behind the increase in the number of Eritreans who migrate. Firstly, the security situation in South Sudan has deteriorated and Eritrean refugees in South Sudan are overlooked as other refugee groups have attracted attention. Secondly, in August 2014 Sudan deported 30 Eritreans including six persons who were registered refugees by UNHCR to Eritrea. Thirdly, Israel has increased the incentive for its voluntary return program up to 3,500 USD under which asylum seekers, who are mainly Eritreans, are sent to Uganda under a bilateral agreement between the two countries.

DRC/RMMS explained that Eritreans in Ethiopia are in a special situation compared to other refugee groups in Ethiopia. For instance they have access to education, however, they receive no further assistance and have no prospect of local integration, therefore their long term prospects and durable solutions are limited which forces people to move on. Eritrean refugees are left to themselves, and there have been no examples of refoulement of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia to Eritrea. It was added that the ruling party in Ethiopia is dominated by northerners, and the president is party [partly] of northern origin. In general, Eritreans are accepted as refugees out of solidarity.

Commenting on the impact of the deteriorated security situation in Libya on the refugees' movement DRC/RMMS stated that in some instances Christians increasingly are being targeted by the warring militias. Eritreans often have cultural/Orthodox Christian marks on their face and they are easily identified as Christians. The insecurity in Libya is pushing the Eritrean refugees north, and boat departures continue to increase from Libya as the role of the central authorities weaken.

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<sup>12</sup> Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, Going West; contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe, mixed migration research series; explaining people on the move, 5 Study June 2014, [http://www.regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/rmms\\_publications/Going\\_West\\_migration\\_trends\\_Libya\\_\\_\\_Europe\\_RMMS.pdf](http://www.regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/rmms_publications/Going_West_migration_trends_Libya___Europe_RMMS.pdf)



DRC/RMMS stated that some members of the Eritrea Diaspora are funding the refugees' migration to Europe. It is common knowledge that up to recently Italy does not register the refugees who are arriving and neither do the Italian authorities take fingerprints. Malta as the other European country that is first to receive Eritrean refugees take fingerprints and conduct the registration according to the procedures.

DRC/RMMS explained that the combination of local and regional developments leave little choice in the minds of Eritreans in Ethiopia but to try to migrate to Europe. In addition to that there is no significant resettlement taking place from the Eritrean refugee camps in the northern part of Ethiopia and it is hard to get a residence permit by family reunification in Europe leaving applying for asylum as the obvious option.

According to DRC/RMMS an increasing number of Eritrean children leave Eritrea and they are younger than before. Some of the reasons minors are being driven to leave are documented in the latest ICG report.

DRC/RMMS stated that poverty in Eritrea is widespread, and no one in Eritrea can transfer cash to relatives in Ethiopia. The money to pay for the journey to Europe by and large comes from the Diaspora. It was added that it is not possible to transfer money out of Ethiopia, at least not legally. It is even hard to make transfers using the informal money transfer systems.

DRC/RMMS described the journey to Europe as a step-by-step project where people on the move receive money from family members in the Diaspora along the way. Sabha in southern Libya has been a major hub, where people either earn some money to finance the next leg of their journey or where they receive money from relatives.

According to DRC/RMMS families and even local communities apply pressure on children to leave Eritrea for Europe. Parents view such arrangement as a long term investment for the good of the family, and attempts – programs and information campaigns – to prevent the outflow of Eritrean children fall on infertile ground. It was added that social media are often used to share strategies concerning migration.

DRC/RMMS emphasized that it is the Diaspora that is paying and keeping the migration of Eritreans going, and any information campaign should therefore involve the Diaspora.

DRC/RMMS believed that many Eritreans might consider that the time is right for migrating to Europe. Several factors support that view: The poor security situation in Libya, the Italian "Operation Mare Nostrum" means that the risk of drowning during the sea crossing has reduced, and finally the chances of being granted asylum is very good as long as the present regime in Eritrea is in power.

DRC/RMMS explained that most people leaving Eritrea do so to evade the country's compulsory national service and are therefore mostly young and mostly men. However, there has been a growing trend of young women, families and minors also risking their lives to leave the country originating from a wider cross-section of society. The patterns of mobility take people into Ethiopia and Sudan, with recent reports indicating that traffickers may encourage younger children to leave Ethiopia by not charging them a fee; their families are then extorted when the children arrive in Sudan.



DRC/RMMS explained that Eritreans move between the camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. They also leave the camps and the region to travel on to Libya in the hope of reaching Europe. These extraordinary levels of mobility are driven by the political and social conditions in Eritrea and there are strong economic drivers to “facilitate the exit of ever greater number” as noted by ICG in its most recent report. These economic drivers include payment of ransom to government-aligned Rashidas, paying funds to be smuggled and the eventual payment of 2% diaspora tax or remittances back into Eritrea. There is possibly no other country in the world where such a combination of drivers exists to encourage out-migration through irregular means.



### **IOM, Addis Ababa**

IOM explained that it does not have a representation in Eritrea. UNHCR's presence in Asmara is very limited.

IOM explained that family reunifications take place in Eritrea by ICRC. ICRC undertakes risk assessments and assists children to be reunited with their families in Eritrea. The Eritrean authorities have in principle accepted to let children outside Eritrea be reunited with the assistance of ICRC, but IOM was unaware as to how this function.

According to IOM there are several factors that make people flee Eritrea:

- Fear of being recruited to the National Service
- Fear of imprisonment if their children go missing
- Pressure from the Diaspora
- Hope of a better life – poverty
- Finally, there are some, especially children, who cross the border to Ethiopia by mistake

IOM explained that Eritrean refugees have their mind set for Europe even before they embark on their long journey, not for countries in the neighboring region. This is the reason why one can see a huge secondary movement of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia towards Europe. This secondary movement is normally well organized. Traffickers, i.e. brokers, are well connected in a network stretching from inside Eritrea to the refugee camps in Ethiopia and from there all the way through Sudan and Libya to Europe. Some brokers are closely affiliated with families in Eritrea, and the first broker in the refugee camp could be an Eritrean refugee. They offer the potential refugees a 'free service' for the journey from Eritrea to the camps in Ethiopia and further on to Sudan. Here the refugees are passed on to other brokers who will send the refugees on to Libya.

IOM was uncertain as to how the brokers make profit from their 'free services', but it is clear that the refugees gradually become indebted to their brokers. There are even reports of brokers threatening to kill children if their families do not pay money to them. These brokers are taking advantage of the difficult living conditions in Eritrea, and very often they personally know the families of those children and youngsters they are trafficking to Europe. However, there are also a lot of families in Eritrea who approach the brokers by themselves, mainly to avoid their children being recruited to the National Service.

When asked if there are reports of brokers having retaliated by intimidation or violence because of lack of payment of the debt IOM stated that it had no information regarding this.

IOM is present in some form in Mai-Aini, Shire, Endabaguna, Adi-Harush and Hitsats [camps].

IOM had not heard of Diaspora Eritreans travelling to Eritrea. However, IOM-staff are regularly travelling in and out of the Eritrea. According to IOM it is only those Diaspora Eritreans who have paid the 2 % income tax and cooperate with the government that can travel in and out of the country.



Regarding resettlement of Eritrean refugees IOM explained that the USA has only accepted resettlement of minors to the country. IOM emphasized that there is no option for the children in the refugee camps and added that resettlement only takes place on a case-by-case basis. It was added that no one has been assisted by IOM to return to Eritrea out of fear of being arrested upon return to Eritrea.

IOM explained that it assists stranded Eritrean refugees in for instance Sudan and Libya to return to the refugees camps in Ethiopia. UNHCR, Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and IOM are working together on this issue, and ARRA accepts returns of Eritrean refugee children as well as adults who have stranded on the way to Europe. Even though a refugee has returned to the camp in Eritrea he or she will very often try to endeavor on the journey to Europe once again. A survey among Eritrean refugees in the camps in Ethiopia showed that approximately 70 % of them were aware of the risks associated with the journey, but they also strongly believed that they would be able to overcome these risk and that they would not fall victims of banditry, slavery, militias or other sufferings. IOM emphasized that because of this it is imperative to do everything possible to change the attitudes and perceptions among Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. It was added that most refugees do not fully comprehend the magnitude of the dangers involved in the journey to Europe.

According to IOM it is quite normal that an Eritrean refugee who successfully made it to Europe is indebted to the broker network by up to approximately 40,000 USD. The entire trip could involve up to five brokers. However, the asylum seeker would never disclose this fact when he or she is being interviewed by an immigration authority in Europe.

IOM emphasized that trying to explain why for instance Denmark suddenly see a considerable increase in the number of Eritreans asylum seekers is purely speculation. It is basically a question of where the brokers or smugglers decide to take the asylum applicants, and maybe they have put their eyes on Denmark for no apparent reason.

Concerning the actual border crossing into Ethiopia IOM stated that the refugees are apprehended by the Ethiopian authorities and a brought to a registration center. From there they are taken to UNHCR's registration center, Endabaguna, and finally they are accommodated in one of the refugee camps.



## **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Addis Ababa**

### Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps

Since 2012 the NRC has been present in the refugee camps in Shire in Tigray Province in northern Ethiopia. These camps are all quite unique as the vast majority – if not all – of the refugees are youngsters. The camps are not traditional refugee camps; they are more like youth camps. Only very few families live in the camps. It was added that majority of the Tigray-speaking Eritreans go to camps in the Tigray-speaking area in Ethiopia – i.e. Shimelba, Mai-Aini, Adi-Haroush and Hitsat – while Afar-speaking Eritreans go to camps in the Afar-speaking areas.

Regarding services and assistance provided to the refugees NRC explained that one has to realize that almost [all] of those Eritrean refugees we speak with in Ethiopia have no intention of staying in the camps for an extended period of time. Upon arrival in the camps the vast majority of the refugees readily state that they will be moving on as soon as suitable for them. However, NRC is assisting refugees staying in the camps with number of interventions including the Youth Education pack that contains vocational training, life skills, literacy and numeracy subjects. Vocational training involves more than seven skills including carpentry, sewing, metal work, cooking etc. Recently NRC succeeded in graduating 530 students under the youth education program. The 530 students stayed in the camps for twelve months before graduation. NRC emphasized that it tries to work with refugees on elements that may reduce the secondary movement of refugees. Most often the young refugees are unaware of the hardships that they will encounter during their long journey through Sudan and Libya, and across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. This journey is a very dangerous undertaking.

NRC explained that the vast majority of the 530 graduates have started making livelihood activities in the camps following the distribution of the startup kits however few may have left the area for unknown destinations. Some of them work for the NRC while others find work outside the camps. However, as refugees are not entitled to work permits and thus to work outside the camps, NRC is negotiating with the Ethiopian refugee authority, ARRA, and other government bodies in order to provide Eritrean refugees with work-permits once they have graduated. NRC and other international NGOs are putting emphasis on how to reduce the secondary movement of the Eritrean refugees. Improving the conditions in the refugee camps and the “out of camp” scheme together with offering job opportunities would reduce secondary movement. In addition to this NRC also has a Liaison Office at the AU level which could examine options for Eritrean refugees in other African countries than Ethiopia.

NRC explained that so far it has not reached an official agreement with ARRA regarding the out of camp scheme for the Eritreans yet will strive to push for a solution towards the same direction.

NRC found it rather frustrating to see that the refugees it is assisting today may be gone tomorrow. There is an influx of people from Eritrea to Ethiopia, then a secondary movement to Europe, and no solution to the problem. Most Eritreans who flee from Eritrea are influenced by the diaspora in Europe and North America. They are being told what to do and they will move on, even though they will face horrendous challenges during their journey.



Although NRC does a lot to inform Eritrean refugees about the risks involved in the journey to Europe secondary movement still continues. This movement will not be reduced until donors are prepared to assist. It will be extremely difficult to address the problem unless a coordinated effort involving a number of countries takes place. A multi-national effort is a must if things are to change to the better.

### Migrating to Europe

Regarding sponsoring of Eritrean refugees' journey from Eritrea to Ethiopia and onwards to Europe NRC explained that although the refugees are poor they are being financed by traffickers (like any other migrants may have experience in this region) to whom they will be indebted. The debt eventually has to be paid either by the person or by his or her relatives. The diaspora is also engaged in the sense that many Eritrean refugees have relatives in Europe who send them money. NRC added that those refugees, who do not have anyone to support them, are probably the ones who stay in the camps for an extended period of time. During this stay they may take on some work that then is not considered illegal or join a vocational training program like the ones that NRC runs.

NRC stated that the border crossing from Eritrea to Ethiopia is the most difficult and dangerous part of their journey and maybe the [the most difficult and dangerous] one among all the journey[s] up to Europe. When asked if it is possible for refugees leaving Eritrea to bribe the military manning the checkpoints, NRC stated that Eritrea is not a corrupt country like other African countries. To claim that high ranking military persons are corrupt and involved in facilitating illegal emigration is not supported by factual knowledge. However, it could be that an individual checkpoint commander or officer would accept a bribe and facilitate a border-crossing.

NRC explained that Eritrea and Sudan has signed an agreement concerning visa free travel between the two countries. All that is needed for an Eritrean citizen to cross the border, regardless of age, is an Eritrean ID card. In Sudan it is easy for Eritreans as well as Ethiopians to find employment as domestic workers.

Question: is it possible even for draft evaders and deserters from national service to cross the border to Sudan? Answer: I do not know

### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

NRC explained that the main reasons why so many Eritreans are leaving their country are:

- Escape from a bad life, in particular the National Service
- Search of better livelihood
- Civil rights in Europe
- Push from families in Eritrea
- Pull from relatives in Europe
- NRC explained that it is worried about Eritrea. Things are going nowhere and the country is poor. When the present government is gone there is a real risk that a devastating power struggle might take place. The humanitarian, human rights and political situation could become even worse than





today. This is also the reason why NRC and international observers are analyzing the situation continuously and cautiously.

Question: Are you aware if the Eritreans coming to Ethiopia have their origin in certain parts of Eritrea. Or is it so that they come from a variety of places in Eritrea? Answer: Not sure about this

Question: Have you heard of members of the Diaspora returning to Eritrea for family visits or holydays? Answer: Have no information about this.



## **Swedish embassy, Addis Ababa**

### Migrating to Europe

The Swedish embassy explained that the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia is known to be very militarized with minefields in some areas. It is very likely that in order for a person to cross the border some border guards or military personnel must be involved, i.e. bribed. On the other hand it must be assumed that the border between the two countries in certain areas is quite porous. The embassy did not know of cases where persons crossing the border have been shot or killed by Eritrean border guards or military.

According to the Swedish embassy the vast majority of the Eritrean refugees travel from the refugee camps in Ethiopia through Libya and across the Mediterranean to Italy. Many migrants including Eritreans arrive in Italy during the spring and summer months when it is safest to cross the Mediterranean. In general it has become easier for migrants/refugees to cross the Mediterranean since spring 2014, and as most of them are not being registered in Italy as asylum seekers, they continue their journey into Europe, including to Denmark.

The Swedish embassy expressed surprise that the number of Eritrean asylum applicants in Denmark has increased significantly within the last few months, and added that there is no apparent reason for the sudden increase in Denmark. Recently, Sweden has witnessed a very large increase in the number of Eritrean minors applying for asylum. It is equally difficult to point to one single explanation for this increase.

### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

The Swedish embassy considered that one plausible explanation for Eritreans leaving Eritrea in increasing numbers could be the poor socio-economic situation in the country as well as conscription to National Service. However, the embassy had no information about any recent changes concerning National Service in Eritrea. It was added that solid facts about the situation in Eritrea are hard to come by.

### Diaspora visits in Eritrea

The Swedish embassy had no information as regards alleged visits in Eritrea by members of the Eritrean Diaspora.



### **Tamrat Kebede, Executive Director, InterAfrica Group (IAG)**

#### Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) had heard of cases where people have used bribes to pass through military check points on their way to Ethiopia. However, there is no hard evidence to support the view that the Eritrean bureaucratic system as such is corrupt.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) stated that he knows many Eritreans who are employed in the informal sector e.g. in hotels and other industries in especially the province of Tigray [in Ethiopia] where they share language and culture with the Ethiopian local population.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) explained that Eritrean refugees are not allowed employment within the government. However, many refugees find employment in private companies i.e. in the informal sector especially the province of Tigray where they share language and culture with the Ethiopian local population. It is likely that some of the refugees transfer money to their families in Eritrea. There are many Eritreans living in Addis Ababa.

#### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

According to Tamrat Kebede (IAG) it is not possible to point to one or two particular groups of Eritreans as the ones who leave the country. Men and women, professionals and ordinary civilians are found amongst the people who leave Eritrea and so are children and youngsters. The refugees are mostly aged between 18 and 35 even though it is not purely the youths that are leaving Eritrea. People with high education and people with no or little schooling are represented in the outflow of Eritreans and they come from various regions in Eritrea. Poverty and recruitment into the National Service are the main reasons for leaving Eritrea.

Illustrating the character of the Eritrean government Tamrat Kebede (IAG) pointed to the case of a prominent figure in Eritrea who many years ago in a conference criticized the Eritrean judiciary. He was promptly removed from his office and has had no job ever since. In fact he was lucky that he was not arrested. He was later allowed to travel to visit family abroad, but his wife and children had to stay in Eritrea, probably to secure his return to the country.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) explained that Ethiopia has become a transit point for Eritreans who are trying to go to North America or Europe. Basically, there are two groups of Eritrean refugees: Economic refugees and political refugees. The economic refugees include people who are looking for opportunities outside of Eritrea and who at times are trying to avoid National Service and at times seeking a better life. Political refugees are the ones who leave because of the repressive Eritrean government.

Concerning the National Service in Eritrea Tamrat Kebede (IAG) stated that he did not believe that there had been any improvement. At least there is no indication hereof based on the testimonies from people who have left Eritrea. It was emphasized that the issue is rather speculative. Tamrat Kebede considered that if there had been any improvements, one should expect a decrease in the outflow of people leaving Eritrea. On the contrary the outflow is increasing.



Tamrat Kebede (IAG) emphasized that National Service is not the sole reason why Eritreans leave the country. The education opportunities are not so encouraging and economic opportunities are more readily accessible to “party loyalists” than to the ordinary citizens. The latter would be inclined to look for opportunities outside of Eritrea. It was added that the living conditions for the average Eritrean are deteriorating. The inflation is high making daily life difficult and unemployment is equally high at least for people who are not connected with the ruling party.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) summarized the major push factors:

- High inflation
- Limited employment opportunities
- Fatigue among the diaspora means less remittances to relatives in Eritrea
- New national identity, all the wishes/dreams that people had are now gone
- Lack of education opportunities

Commenting on the role of the Eritrean Diaspora Tamrat Kebede (IAG) stated that it does not see any future for its relatives in Eritrea and people feel compelled to take any risk in order to escape. This idea is widespread not only among the Diaspora but also in the Eritrean population.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) stated that a part of the Eritrean Diaspora would stop paying the 2% tax if only they had no relatives in Eritrea. Members of the Diaspora fear that their relatives will be held responsible by the Eritrean authorities if the tax is not paid.

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) questioned whether the Diaspora is a pulling factor. Previously the Diaspora would cry out “come out and I will help”. Today the Diaspora is not as supportive towards relatives en route to Europe as it used to be. It is questionable that the Diaspora is a decisive factor enabling the secondary movements out of Ethiopia. Tamrat Kebede doubted that all members of the Diaspora have the means to receive extended family members and contribute significantly in financing their journey to Europe. Of course, the Diaspora could provide some money to close relatives, but it is more likely that the families in Eritrea sell their property and belongings to help a family member to leave the country. When people are desperate enough and when they are determined to leave Eritrea they are ready to do whatever is necessary. It was added that the exodus out of Eritrea is not an organized one, and the perils during the long journey to Europe including the boat trip across the Mediterranean only reflect the magnitude of desperation and hopelessness felt by so many Eritreans. The push factors are the core of the problem.

#### Diaspora visits in Eritrea

Tamrat Kebede (IAG) stated that some members of the Eritrean Diaspora could go back to Eritrea on family visits or because they feel obliged to fight for their country. However, those who return are probably connected with the government and some are allowed to return because they have businesses that the government has an interest in.



## **UNHCR in Addis Ababa**

### Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that in recent years approximately 800 to 1,000 Eritreans refugees have arrived in Ethiopia on a monthly basis. However, in 2014 the number of arrivals increased to between 2,000 and 2,500 per month. The number decreased in August 2014 back down to 1,500. There has also been a corresponding increase in the number of minors coming from Eritrea to Ethiopia. Currently, UNHCR has registered a total of 73,680 Eritrean refugees in its Shire operation. In reality, though, it is known that fewer Eritreans than this figure are actually living in the four refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia. To establish the actual number of Eritrean refugees in the four camps UNHCR is planning to soon undertake a monitoring exercise in cooperation with the authorities.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that Eritrean refugees (as with other refugees) are generally required by the Ethiopian authorities to live in the refugee camps. Refugees must have a pass permit issued by the government to travel outside of the camps.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that the government does allow refugees to live in urban areas, usually Addis Ababa, for security, health or humanitarian reasons. If necessary, those referred to Addis Ababa for medical reasons may also be accompanied by another refugee acting as a caregiver. These refugees are generally provided financial assistance by UNHCR. Approximately 2,600 refugees reside in Addis Ababa on this basis, including Eritreans. In addition, through the government's Out-of-Camp Policy (OCP), it is possible for Eritrean refugees to reside outside of the camps as long they have resided in the refugee camps for six months, have no criminal records and can identify a sponsor to support them. Approximately 2,800 Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa are part of the OCP programme, with another 185 refugees residing in Mekele. Finally, refugees are also allowed to reside outside of the camps to pursue university studies. Today the total number of refugees on university scholarships, including Eritreans, is 2204, with 54 having graduated in 2014.

An unknown number of refugees, including Eritreans, live in Addis Ababa without the necessary permission.

According to UNHCR in Addis Ababa the Ethiopian government allows refugees access to education on the same conditions as Ethiopian nationals. The government pays 75% of the costs of studying, while UNHCR covers the remaining 25%. This programme began with Eritrean refugees, but was later expanded to include refugees from all nationalities.

UNHCR stated that the OCP programme is a very positive project, which would ideally be expanded to other nationalities and improved. While the OCP programme provides an alternative to camps, refugees are not authorized to work in Ethiopia, which often makes it difficult for refugees to support themselves, regardless of the presence of their sponsors. Many refugees find ad hoc employment in the informal sector.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that large numbers of Eritrean unaccompanied children arrive in Ethiopia, with a significant increase being noted in 2014. The number is currently at least 150 children per month. In



addition to this there are a lot of young Eritrean men being granted refugee status, most of whom are draft evaders or deserters.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that unaccompanied minors were initially accommodated in a designated area of the Mai-Aini camp. Over the past year, though, UNHCR has been working to diversify the care of these children by, e.g., increasing family care arrangements with relatives, creating “community care” arrangements where shelters with unaccompanied minors are interspersed with those of families who agree to watch over them, and by using independent living where possible for older children. Eritrean unaccompanied minors began to arrive in significant numbers in Ethiopia back in 2008. Some of the children have been resettled to the USA, with a target of 100 Unaccompanied Children (UAM) in 2014. The general resettlement targets for Eritrean refugees from the Shire operation is 850 persons in 2014 and 1000 in 2015. Reunification of unaccompanied minors with family members in Eritrea is difficult, but it is hoped that some (voluntary and safe) returns might be possible in the future.

According to UNHCR in Addis Ababa, it is known that some Eritrean unaccompanied children leave Ethiopia for countries further afield. In order to minimize secondary movement, both of refugee children and adults, UNHCR is working on improving the conditions in the camps.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that when Eritrean refugees cross the border to Ethiopia they are apprehended by the Ethiopian military or border officials. They are kept for a few days in one of the temporary reception centers along the border before they are registered and sent to the Endabaguna reception center and then on to the refugee camps.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that few Eritrean refugees have an Eritrean passport when they arrive in Ethiopia. When informed that relatively few Eritreans present an Eritrean ID card when they apply for asylum in Denmark, it was suggested that perhaps those refugees originated from areas of Eritrea where ID cards were not issued.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that the Ethiopian government is not known for pushing people back across the border to Eritrea. UNHCR is unaware of instances of refoulement from Ethiopia to Eritrea.

### Migrating to Europe

According to UNHCR in Addis Ababa, an unknown number of registered Eritrean refugees travel to Europe through Sudan and Libya. Previously, many went to Israel through the Sinai desert, but it is believed that this number has reduced significantly. Today, it is understood that many Eritreans move to Sudan, either directly from Eritrea or through Ethiopia, and then move onwards to Libya. However, it is almost impossible to track this secondary movement.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that it is presumed that some Eritrean refugees arrive in the camps with the purpose of leaving as soon as possible. It is believed that unauthorized movements out of the refugee camps, either to Addis or other countries, is more significant for Eritrean refugees than for other nationalities, but there is no clear data on this. The refugee camps in the Shire operation are not noticeably worse



than those in other refugee camps in Ethiopia, although its newest camp, Hitsats camp, still lacks many key services.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that in some cases the Ethiopian government has readmitted Eritrean refugees who were apprehended and detained in Egypt to the refugee camps in Ethiopia. A number of these refugees reported having been kidnapped for ransom or in other ways abused on their journey north. UNHCR added that it has received reports of horrendous abuses against Eritrean refugees who have traveled to Europe from their country of origin.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that the Eritrean Diaspora plays an important role in encouraging secondary movements, as some may provide refugees in the region with a rosy picture of life in Europe. There is a perceived sense of hopelessness amongst many of the Eritrean refugee youth, which encourages movements out of the camps, be they to Addis Ababa or other countries.

Commenting on the role of the Diaspora UNHCR in Addis Ababa explained that some relatives abroad send remittances to the unaccompanied children in the camps. It is believed that they encourage them to leave the camps in order for them to join their relatives in Europe.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that many Eritrean refugees who decide to leave Ethiopia do so due to limited opportunities for work or local integration in Ethiopia. Even those refugees who benefit from government-subsidized university studies in Ethiopia may decide to leave the country due to their inability to work lawfully in the country.

#### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that it had no information suggesting that any changes concerning National Service in Eritrea has taken place in recent years.

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that particularly teenage Eritrean refugees have stated as a reason for flight from Eritrea their fear of being enrolled in the National Service.

#### Diaspora visits in Eritrea

UNHCR in Addis Ababa had no information concerning visits to Eritrea by Eritreans who have been granted asylum in Europe.

#### Verification

UNHCR in Addis Ababa stated that it can verify an individual's registration as a refugee in Ethiopia if the asylum applicant in Denmark gives his or her consent. UNHCR has done the same for other European countries in the past. It was added that, in the Shire operation, refugee identity cards have only been issued to Eritrean refugees in the Shimelba Camp. Refugees residing in Shimelba camp have generally lived in the camp for many years, with more limited movement outside of the camp. Eritrean refugees residing in the other camps in the Shire operation are issued ration cards, but no other kind of Government/UNHCR documentation. Plans are underway to issue them refugee identity cards as well.



## **UNHCR Sub Office Shire**

### Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps

UNHCR Sub Office Shire explained that UNHCR runs four camps in the Tigray Region accommodating Eritrean refugees – Shimelba, Mai-Aini, Adi-Haroush and Hitsats.

- The Shimelba camp was established in May 2004. Approximately 6,000 refugees are registered by UNHCR.
- The Mai-Aini camp opened in May 2008. Approximately 18,000 refugees are registered by UNHCR.
- The Adi-Harus camp opened in March 2010. Approximately 29,400 refugees are registered by UNHCR-Adi-Harus was a tented camp until June 2012 when houses were built of mud bricks.
- The Hitsats camp was opened in May 2013. Approximately 19,946 refugees are registered in the camp

It was added by UNHCR Sub Office Shire that UNHCR has registered 185 Eritreans who have benefited from the “Out of Camp Policy” (OCP). In addition currently 2,204 Eritrean refugees are admitted in various Universities. Altogether, approximately 3,000 registered Eritrean refugees live in Addis Ababa.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire explained that it tries to encourage the Ethiopian government to expand the number of refugees who may be encompassed by the OCP. In addition UNHCR also encourages refugees to undertake skills training while in the camps. These initiatives are all attempts to anchor the refugees in the camps, i.e. to avoid secondary movements. For those who meet resettlement criteria, resettlement as a durable solution will be pursued. UNHCR has submitted for resettlement about 100 Eritrean unaccompanied children, with a similar number planned for 2014.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire explained that Eritreans who cross the border into Ethiopia are brought by Ethiopian soldiers to one of five temporary reception centers in the border area. From west to east the centers are: Humera, Shiraro, Adinebri, Dibdibo and Kerseber. From these centers Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) will bring the refugees to the UNHCR registration center, Endabaguna, where detailed registration process is carried out first by ARRA [then] the UNHCR. Usually, the refugees stay in the Endabaguna registration center for one day and up to a maximum of three days if time is needed to locate family members in the camps. The period of time spent at Endabaguna can be longer for unaccompanied minors, due to the need to undertake a best interest assessment and identify appropriate care arrangements in the camps.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire explained that there are 18 entry points or natural trails into Ethiopia from Eritrea. During the rainy season, crossings become difficult due to flooded rivers and generally hostile weather. This reduces the number of arrivals from June to the end of September. The western part of the border, i.e. from the mountains in the east to the border to Sudan in the west, follows the Tekezé River (Setit River) making it difficult to cross into Ethiopia during the rainy season.





UNHCR Sub Office Shire stated that unaccompanied minors usually arrive in groups of three to five children who know each other. Adults with unaccompanied minors also cross the borders in groups, but normally they do not know each other.

According to UNHCR Sub Office Shire the number of Eritrean refugees arriving in Ethiopia have increased recently. From January to April 2014 the average monthly number was between 1,000 and 1,500 people. From April to June 2014 the average monthly number rose to between 2,000 and 2,500 people. It was added that during the rainy season (from June to the end of September) the number usually decline. UNHCR added that there was a huge increase of arrivals during the month of June 2014 as compared to previous years.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire stated that an increasing number of Eritrean unaccompanied minors as young as five-six years of age arrive in the camps. The monthly average arrival rate is from 60 to 80 unaccompanied children. However, in general the camp population is between 18 and 45 years old. Approximately 80% of all Eritrean refugees in the camps are children or young men.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire explained that in total 1,448 unaccompanied minors are living in the camps. Some are catered for in 'group care' (505 children in Mai-Aini), while other live in 'kinship care' (169 children in Mai-Aini and 69 in Adi-Haroush). A smaller number of children live independently in the camps. Altogether there are approximately 1,500 children in the camps. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), UNICEF, and UNHCR are all involved in the care-taking of these children.

#### Migrating to Europe

According to UNHCR Sub Office Shire, it is believed that some Eritrean refugees may have already made up their minds concerning going to Europe even before they reach the refugee camps in Ethiopia, although it is impossible to know exact numbers. Some will have organized their transport clandestinely using syndicates or organized human smugglers operating between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya. Many, especially youngsters, arrive in the camps with no clear idea about Europe. However, once in the camps they are encouraged by other refugees to go to Europe. Unfortunately, many refugees have a false image of life in Europe, and that misperception of life in Europe is not corrected by the Eritrean Diasporas in Europe who continue to support and encourage secondary movement from Ethiopia.

UNHCR Sub Office Shire stated that another main challenge is the limited services that the refugee camps offer. Together with the absence of prospects of local integration and the exclusion from the formal labor market in Ethiopia these are the major push factors affecting the Eritrean refugees' migration.

#### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

UNHCR Sub Office Shire stated that in general Eritrean refugees refer to the National Service as their reason for applying for protection.

#### Diaspora visits in Eritrea

UNHCR Sub Office Shire did not have specific information about Eritrean Diaspora members visiting Eritrea.



## **Western embassy (F)**

### Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps

A Western embassy (F) explained that Eritrean refugees are not allowed to work in Ethiopia. However, those who have a sponsor to vouch for them may attend school, and study at universities but still not work in e.g. Addis Ababa. On the other hand, the refugee camps are not fenced camps and in reality many leave the camps within weeks either for illegal work or for going to Europe.

### Migrating to Europe

A Western embassy (F) stated that its national immigration authorities saw a major increase in the number of Eritrean asylum applicants earlier this year, i.e. just some months before a similar increase was registered in Denmark. However, this sudden increase in Europe should be seen in the light of the fact that there was a major increase in the number of Eritreans who enter into Ethiopia and Sudan. UNHCR registered between 500 and 600 Eritreans in Ethiopia in May 2013, but in May 2014 UNHCR registered approximately 2,500 Eritreans in Ethiopia. It was added that most Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia leave the country rather quickly.

A Western embassy (F) explained that the migration route used by Eritreans through Saudi Arabia to countries in the Middle East was closed by the end of 2013, and many Eritreans were deported to Ethiopia by Saudi Arabia. It was added that another route through Egypt to Israel is also more or less closed now as Israel has changed its policy towards asylum seekers. Furthermore Egypt also deported illegal immigrants from Eritrea to Ethiopia (they were allowed to choose between Eritrea and Ethiopia and had to pay for the flight ticket themselves).

Altogether this may explain why Europe has seen a tenfold increase of Eritreans asylum seekers within the last 12 months. However, there is no clear explanation why one European country would see a dramatic increase in the number of Eritrean asylum seekers whereas other countries would see a decline or no change. It was added that Eritreans usually arrive in Europe in 'waves'. They are accumulated in 'safe houses' in Libya as well as Sudan and then sent by boats across the Mediterranean each second or third week. It was added that Sudan recently deported 30 Eritreans. This may affect the Eritreans currently living in Sudan and incite them to leave Sudan in larger numbers.

### Reasons for leaving Eritrea

A Western embassy (F) stated that the available information suggests that evasion of National Service and desertion is punished severely as is illegal exit of Eritrea, but the information is not factual information based on empirical work and it does not necessarily reflect the entire reality on the ground in Eritrea. It is considered that the conditions during military service are horrible. It was added that no one seems to know how long recruits will have to serve when they are being enrolled into the National Service.



### Diaspora visits in Eritrea

According to a Western embassy (F) there are indications that the Eritrean government has an economical interest in Eritreans leaving the country because the government imposes a 2 % tax on its Diaspora population. The Western embassy (F) did not have information regarding its Eritrean Diaspora visiting Eritrea.



## Note from meeting with a source in London

### Professor Gaim Kibreab, London South Bank University

#### Political opposition/economy

The Eritrean government is an oppressive regime. The oppression is targeting any kind of political opposition to the state and/or the ruling party expressed in any form or suspected of being entertained. However, the general population although traumatised and harassed by the dictatorial proclivities and policies of the regime, there is no generalized random suppression against the general public. Those targeted are persons who might be suspected of potentially mobilizing public opinion, criticize the government or sympathizing with any form of opposition.

The regime is politically stable, but the country's economy is on the brink of collapse, but there is no reason to believe that the political system will collapse as a result soon. However, remittances and the two percent income tax are both important contributors to the fragile economy. Many families have someone abroad who sends money back home. It was clarified that payment of the two percent income tax is not a precondition for a Diaspora's possibility to visit Eritrea. The tax is required for obtaining state and municipal services such the issuance of passports, inheritance documents, property deeds, birth certificate, renting a car, etc.

There are some small private companies in Eritrea, but the reality is that the private sector of the economy has collapsed. Private construction work has stopped since April 2006 when the government withdrew the licenses of all contractors, civil engineers, architects, etc. Previously people serving their National Service were 'hired' out to the private sector, but this has almost stopped completely as there is no viable private sector any longer. However, conscripts are still hired out in the agricultural sector. Thus, employment opportunities are diminishing. Small, private traders exist, but they are in reality only front men for the firms of the PFDJ. Today, the government and the ruling party are the only major employers in Eritrea, and the vast majority of government employees are persons serving their National Service. It has been the government's policy to ensure that it is the sole employer of labor in Eritrea.

#### National Service

All young people begin National Service in Sawa. Based on Gaim Kibreab's own interviews<sup>13</sup> with young people who have fled Eritrea, it seems that there are two ways to be drafted into the National Service. First, students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade go to Sawa for their 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Second, young people in the country-side and villages are drafted or rounded up. The latter group consists of rural people, mainly small farmers and pastoralists. Those who abscond from the service and draft evaders are also rounded up and often taken to the Meiter camp first for detention and then for military training.

At school and in Sawa all students are taught about the liberation fight and its leaders, the history of the ruling party and about the leaders of the party. They also receive military training.

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<sup>13</sup> Gaim Kibreab explained that he last visited Eritrea 10 years ago and that he would not dare to visit Eritrea today.



It is possible to be exempted from military training not from national service. A person who suffers from physical disability or mental infirmity can be exempted from the military training component but not from national service. This is also dependent subject to the approval of the military committee that certifies that the person concerned is so ill that he/she cannot undertake military training. However, the said person is required to perform national service in the civil sector. Only former combatants are formally exempt from national service. However, since the war broke out in 1998, this exemption has been forfeited. There are unconfirmed rumors suggesting that some pay bribe to get exemption on the grounds of mental or physical unfitness. National Service is not as effectively enforced as before. A few people with money or connections are able to obtain leave permits and these are extended repeatedly so that the holder may stay away from their assignments. However, those who do so are vulnerable to being exposed. It was added that the government tends to turn a blind eye to Muslim National Service evaders from the remote areas, such as the Afar and Hadendewa and rural Muslim women. This should be read bearing the following caveat in mind. Given the fact that there is no rule of law in Eritrea, it is very difficult to predict the behavior of the state. Nothing is predictable as most practices are not based on stated policies. Hence since there is no policy that exempts Muslim women, it cannot be said with certainty that they are exempted.

Eritreans who were born abroad or who were born before 1994, i.e. before the introduction of the National Service, are free to return to Eritrea, but they are obliged to perform National Service if they stay in the country for more than one year. This will apply to anyone, even those who may hold dual citizenship. It is important to note in this connection that all Eritreans with a mother or father or both of Eritrean origin regardless of birth place and citizenship is deemed an Eritrean even against their expressed wish. It is not possible to renounce Eritrean citizenship. Children below the age of nine are not issued exit visa. If children above the age of nine leave Eritrea illegally the government considers them as National Service evaders.

The salary in National Service is maximum 450 Nakfa per month, i.e. after 18 months No one can live of that salary and to many Eritreans remittances are therefore important.

The indefinite nature of the national service and the brutal punishment regime meted to terrify conscripts with the aim of rendering them obedient to authority in combination with the low pocket money they receive in the national service contribute to the decision of thousands to flee in search of protection and better life. The finding of the survey I conducted among deserters of the national service clearly show that had it not been for the indefinite service, the large majority would have never considered to leave the country. on the dangerous journey to Europe because the only perspective in Eritrea is a life on survival level. Given the multi-causal nature of the drivers of forced migration, it is futile to attempt to isolate a single factor as being the main reason that has been driving the Eritreans to take imminent risks to their lives.

#### Penalties in National Service evasion/desertion

Persons who have left Eritrea illegally and who have evaded or deserted from National Service are considered to have committed treason and are liable to a severe punishment.

Draft evaders/deserters are routinely subjected to torture and detention under severe conditions over a prolonged period. In reality, punishment for desertion or draft evasion is extremely severe. Whoever refus-



es or fails to participate in National Service loses citizen's rights, such as the right to own or cultivate land, to work or be self-employed, and gain access to travel documents and exit visa. In other words, whoever does not perform national service is stripped off all forms of citizenship rights. In fact, over time, refusal or failure to perform national service can result in indefinite incarceration and in exceptional cases to loss of life.<sup>14</sup>

Upon return to Eritrea, draft evaders or deserters are usually taken to underground cells at the Adi Abeito prison outside of Asmara while they are under investigation, i.e. if they are known for political oppositional activities abroad and their National Service records are found. People have been known to be detained for one, two or three years and they are exposed to bullying and torture. Finally, deserters are sent to Sawa to continue their National Service. It could be that evaders must stand up to less bullying than deserters, but that is just an assumption. It was added that National Service is a cornerstone in the Eritrean government's nation building project, but it is not very effective any longer.

In the past two to three years the government's attitude towards National Service seems to be more relaxed. It is now possible for National Service evaders and deserters who have left Eritrea illegally to return to their country. They must go to an Eritrean embassy and sign a repentance letter in which they accept any penalty for the offense committed. In addition they must pay the two percent Diaspora tax. Finally, they are obliged to participate in public festivals in Eritrea. In spite of this softer approach many evaders and deserters still do not dare to return to Eritrea. Individual circumstances play a role as well. Persons who did not participate in oppositional political activities abroad and people who are connected by family bonds or in other ways with government officials or members of the ruling party would be more inclined to return to Eritrea on visits. Gaim Kibreab was aware of a few deserters who have visited Eritrea and safely left the country again. These are invariably people who have been naturalized in their countries of asylum.

The Eritrean government does not as a general rule harass relatives of National Service evaders or deserters. Generally, it is families that are targeted by the state or its agents for varieties of reasons or suspected for having organized the flight of their offspring or relatives that are targeted. The authorities might in some cases detain the parents for a short time and are released after paying a hefty fine.

When asked to comment on the apparent paradox that Eritreans in large numbers cross the border to Ethiopia illegally while at the same time there are reports of soldiers being under order to 'shoot-to-kill', Gaim Kibreab explained that it is a very complex issue. People use smugglers or local people including herders who know the mountains and how to avoid the soldiers. Besides, most flights take place at night and at that time most soldiers are busy keeping their heads down. It was added that even soldiers cross the border to Ethiopia.

### Corruption

Some of the military commanders, 'the Colonels' are very corrupt and unfortunately the President has allowed them to run the country because he needs them on his side. Some individuals within the judiciary

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<sup>14</sup> Gaim Kibreab, *The Open-Ended Eritrean National Service: The Driver of Forced Migration*, Paper for the European Asylum Support Office Practical Cooperation Meeting on Eritrea, 15-16 October 2014, Valletta, Malta



are corrupt and so are individuals in authorities that are responsible for housing, visa issuance and recently the military. However, it cannot be said that the government bureaucracy as such is corrupt. Given the dearth of press freedom and freedom of speech and expression, the truth is nobody knows.

National Service commanders are acting with impunity which also means that there is no fixed set of rules regulating the service.

### Passports

When Ethiopia some years ago began to issue Ethiopian passports to Eritrean citizens in the neighbouring countries, Eritrea began to issue passports at its embassies in Khartoum and Nairobi. Eritreans who need an Eritrean passport often approach their embassy in Khartoum. If they sign the repentance letter (letter of regret) and show proof of having paid the Diaspora tax, any Eritrean who does not engage in any political or civil society activity against the government would be issued a new Eritrean passport, regardless of his or her National Service status.