

Eritrea: two students die in government clampdown

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Two students have died and up to 2,000 others are being detained in a detention camp following protests against the government. The camp in Wia, 30 kilometres from the Eritrean port of Massawa, is located in a desert region, and temperatures can reach as high as 49 degrees Centigrade (120 degrees Fahrenheit). It is reported that the students are being detained without adequate food, water and shelter.

Yirga Yosef and Yemane Tekee, who both died of heat stroke, were students at Asmara University in the country's capital. The 2,000 students were arrested and detained at the desert camp for refusing to sign up for a compulsory work programme organised by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) government, and for demanding the release of the student union chairman Semere Kesete.

The students were arrested either in their dormitories or outside the high court where they had gathered to attend a court hearing involving Kesete. They were kept overnight in a soccer stadium before being bussed out to Wia.

Kesete was arrested on July 31 for giving a speech at a graduation ceremony, in which he criticised the obligatory nature of the government's summer work programme. He also condemned the inadequate facilities at Asmara University and the government's interference in its affairs. The forced labour programme, which consists of students being sent to areas damaged in the recent war fought between Eritrea and Ethiopia, is organised under the "Situational Assessment Programme" and is financed by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

After the mass arrests, police broke up a meeting outside Asmara University of anxious parents who had gathered to demand the release of their children. One

woman whose son and daughter are being detained desperately pleaded, "They have taken them to a very hot place, with no food, no water. It is 49 degrees there. More will die. They must take them out of that place—that's what we're begging".

Another mother said, "My son is there. I have nephews and nieces there. They are being punished just because they asked for their rights. The government just wants to show its strength."

The president of Asmara University, Woldeab Isaak, condemned the action taken by the students and called it "illegal".

The PFDJ government's brutal action against the students is part of a national clampdown that has also led to the arrest of journalists and oppositionists. After gaining independence by breaking away from Ethiopia in 1993 with the support of the Western powers, the PFDJ declared that this would lead to the establishment of a "peaceful, just, democratic and prosperous" Eritrea. But over the last eight years the nationalist politics of the PFDJ (mirrored in Ethiopia by the EPRDF—Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) whipped up anti-Ethiopian chauvinism and led to a two and a half year war that cost the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers and displaced one million people. It has inflicted terrible misery and suffering on the people of Eritrea and has brought the country to the brink of economic collapse.

Over the last few months, a major political crisis has developed within the PFDJ ruling elite. The Central Committee (CC) recently split, after 15 of its members issued an open letter accusing President Issaias Afwerki of operating in an "illegal and unconstitutional" manner and of moving towards a dictatorship.

The 15 CC members, who present themselves as reformers, are seeking to blame Afwerki personally for

the social and economic catastrophe that the country is facing. They are calling for a constitutional government and “free and fair elections” that will lead to a “transparent, accountable, institutionalised and legal administration”. Particular criticism is made of the Special Court, a secret institution set up by presidential decree in 1996. Another presidential decree at the beginning of this year set up a Special Committee of Investigation to deal with those committing “crimes against the state”. It can overrule the decisions of other courts, and can send cases to the Special Court, where the accused may not even be allowed to appear in person.

The 15 represent a section of the Eritrean bourgeoisie who are seeking to distance themselves from Afwerki and are concerned about the growing resentment to his rule. They are all long-standing members of the PFDJ and its forerunner, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) who supported the war with Ethiopia. It is probable that the opposition to Afwerki within the ruling clique reflects concerns over the loss of support from the West. Those who have recently criticised Afwerki include the Eritrean ambassador to Sweden, Norway and Finland, who resigned her post, and the ambassador to Germany, who was recalled and may face prosecution by the Special Court. Afwerki is known to favour closer relations with Arab countries and hopes to join the League of Arab States.



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