

Eritrea faces societal collapse

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A United Nations report has exposed the dreadful conditions in Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa, that have prompted hundreds of thousands to flee the country. By mid-2014, there were nearly 360,000 Eritreans registered as refugees worldwide by the UN, out of a population of just 6.3 million.

Eritreans are victims, alongside migrants from other North African and Middle Eastern countries, of brutal wars stoked by US imperialism and its European allies in their bid to control the region's energy resources. They are second in number only to Syrians seeking a safe refuge in Europe. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, nearly one in five of the 200,000 migrants who made the crossing to Europe last year were Eritreans.

The 484-page report by the UN's Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the result of a year-long investigation. It was based on 550 interviews in third countries and 160 written submissions because the Eritrean government refused to cooperate. Many people declined to provide evidence to the OHCHR, even anonymously, fearing reprisal. It details "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations, forcing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee the country." These abuses were carried out by President Isaias Afwerki's "totalitarian" government, which rules without accountability or the rule of law.

Afwerki has been in power since independence in 1993. Since then, there have been no elections, opposition parties have been banned and the media suppressed.

The report argued that, collectively, Afwerki's ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice Party, the military, the national security office, the police, and government departments have operated a system that leads to arbitrary arrests and detention. Torture and even enforced disappearances are the norm. Even those who have committed no crime could end up in arduous

and indefinite national service that amounts to forced labour.

Eritrea's foreign ministry denounced the UN report as a "vile slander" and a "cynical political travesty." It said that the allegations were "totally unfounded and devoid of all merit." The report was, in addition, an attack "not so much on the government, but on a civilized people and society who cherish human values and dignity."

The study found that the government's policy of conscription can leave young people trapped indefinitely in the army. Some interviewees said they had served long terms as conscripts, including one who had served 17 years. Those who try to flee the country are treated as "traitors." There is a shoot-to-kill policy on the border. The OHCHR said people were still being shot in 2014, including children, although the government says it has ended the policy.

Conditions at the military training camps are dire, and sexual violence against women and girls is rampant. Many underage students are subject to forced labour under the threat of death, leading the OHCHR to conclude that, "forced labour in this context is a practice similar to slavery."

"The commission also finds that the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour may constitute crimes against humanity," it adds.

The UN report contradicted the controversial Danish report *Eritrea—Drivers and Root Causes of Emigration* that concluded that many Eritreans were fleeing for economic reasons. The report caused outrage and was widely discredited as politically-motivated, designed to deny asylum status to Eritreans, with the UK using it to argue that Eritreans are no longer in danger if they return home.

The OHCHR said that it was these conditions that caused hundreds of thousands to flee the country: "In

desperation, they resort to deadly escape routes through deserts and neighbouring war-torn countries and across dangerous seas in search of safety... To ascribe their decision to leave solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire situation of human rights in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people.”

The desperate situation in Eritrea is part of the ongoing fragmentation and disintegration of the countries in the Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti. The Horn is an arena of intense great power rivalry for the control of oil reserves in neighbouring countries and the sea route through the narrow Bab al-Mandeb straights through which much of Europe’s oil passes. The United States and its European allies are engaged in a ferocious struggle with China for control of the region’s oil resources.

Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1993 after a bitter 30-year long civil war, but without a properly drawn up settlement or agreement about long sections of the borders. Both countries became client states of the US, with Ethiopia, home to 90 million people, becoming the biggest sub-Saharan recipient of US aid. America was one of only a handful of states to establish an embassy in Eritrea, in large part because its sea port Massawa occupies a strategic position immediately opposite Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea, commanding the route to and from the Suez Canal.

The economic paths of Ethiopia and Eritrea soon began to diverge, leading to disputes and a full-scale war—just five years after independence—over Badme, a remote but fertile area said to contain gold and industrial minerals. The war brought economic ruin to two of the poorest countries on the planet, as they spent millions re-arming. This had a devastating impact on living standards, with a widening gap between rich and poor and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

The war spilled over into neighbouring Somalia, a country that all but disintegrated thanks to the political machinations of competing imperialist powers during the colonial and Cold War eras, and the IMF interventions in the 1980s that wrecked Somalia’s pastoral economy and led to the civil wars and famine that have bedevilled the country ever since. In their search for allies, Ethiopia and Eritrea supported opposing factions in Somalia, leading to a proxy war

that was to continue until 2009, involving sponsoring rebel groups in each other’s countries.

Eritrea fell foul of the US, which backed Ethiopia as its key strategic ally in the region.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea war ended in 2000 after the loss of more than 100,000 lives, following an Algerian-brokered mediation and arbitration that largely ruled in Eritrea’s favour. Ethiopia never honoured the agreement, leading to a stalemate, occasional military flare-ups, and heavy militarisation on both sides of the border and the cessation of trade between the two countries, depriving landlocked Ethiopia of access to Eritrea’s Red Sea ports.

The “Ethiopian threat” served as a much-needed justification for Afwerki and his clique’s dictatorship, as they profited from the country’s mineral resources.

In 2008, US President George W Bush declared Eritrea a “state sponsor of terrorism” for its backing of al-Shabab in Somalia, which Ethiopia was then fighting on Washington’s behalf. This triggered US economic sanctions. The following year, at US behest, the UN passed Resolution 1907 imposing sanctions against Eritrea, leading Eritrea to become an international pariah.

This has had a devastating impact on the impoverished country, where the average per capita income is about \$550 a year, according to the most recent World Bank figures.



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