



ODUMUNC 2014 Issue Brief for the Human Rights Council



Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

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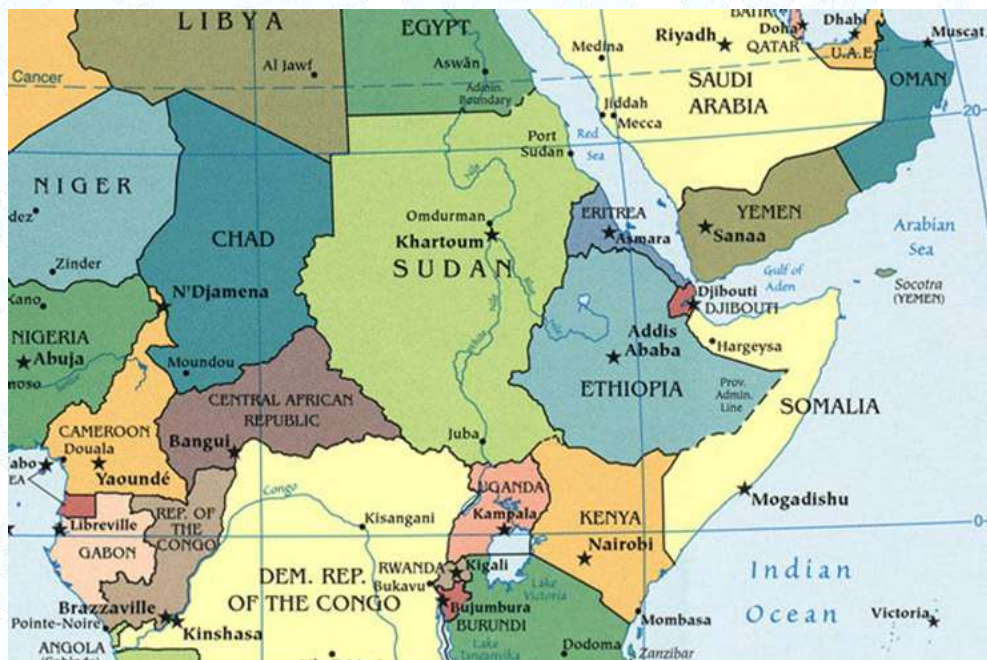
Introduction

Eritrea, located on the Horn of Africa, has a long history of conflict, particularly along ethnic lines. The state is mineral-rich. This, combined with its strategic location bordering the Red Sea, has caused the state to remain susceptible to external resource competition. The extensive external influence, as well as the perpetually volatile situation in the Horn of Africa has resulted in internal tumult. Eritrea is accused by multiple states and international organizations of gross human rights violations in its treatment of political prisoners, religious dissidents, and suffocating media restriction.

Eritrea is a member of most universal international organizations and regional organizations including the African Union. While its status as a sovereign state is not disputed, even by Ethiopia from whom it gained independence in 1993 after a long and bitter war, the country has emerged at the center of a wide range of international issues. These include support for al-Shabaab, the extreme Islamist movement that controlled Somalia for much of the 2000s.

Although al-Shabaab was forced from much of the country by the African Union (AU) and the new Somalia Federal Government (SFG), it remains active, attacking AU peacekeepers and the SFG, and is blamed for terrorist attacks in Somalia and Kenya, including the extraordinary raid on Nairobi's Westgate Mall in September 2013.

Figure 1. Africa showing Eritrea



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Eritrea's support for al-Shabaab is attributed to its goal of balancing Ethiopia, from whom it gained independence and remains locked in rivalry. With Ethiopia supporting the AU and SFG, Eritrea's leaders appear to view support for al-Shabab as way to balance and limit Ethiopians regional influence.

The Eritrean government also has been widely criticized for harsh authoritarian rule over its own people, including draconian restrictions on the news media and social media, arbitrary arrest of opponents. These problems have given the country a reputation for the most draconian rule in Africa, possibly the world. Authoritarian government is associated with the rule of President Isaias Afewerki President of Eritrea since it became independent in 1993, and his ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Figure 2. Eritrea



History and Background

Over the centuries, Eritrea's geographic location made it highly susceptible to invasion. Once the scramble for Africa began in the 19th century, Italy quickly occupied Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Somalia. In 1936, the region became known as Italian East Africa. However, in 1941, the Italians were ousted by the British, further perpetuating regional volatility. In 1951, Britain was forced by UN Resolution 390A(V) to relinquish its control of Eritrea and the state was federated with Ethiopia, becoming a province of Ethiopia in 1962. This long history of government usurpations and colonization set a foundation for future volatility in the region.

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Eritreans, unhappy with the Ethiopian government, began an independence movement in 1961, which eventually erupted in to a 30 year civil war. The United Nations supervised a referendum vote in Eritrea (UNOVER) in 1991 in which Eritreans overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence from Ethiopia. Eritrea became internationally recognized as an independent state in 1993.

Despite independence from Ethiopia, from 1998 and 2000, a violent border conflict became a full-fledged war, resulting in thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees. At the end of the war, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission was formed by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The Commission awarded the Badme, the original flashpoint of the conflict, to Eritrea, although Ethiopia also gained minor territorial concessions. Although both states agreed to the territorial settlement as well as a comprehensive peace agreement, tensions continued.

Since 2000, the status of UN peacekeeping operations in the area have been on and off. Eritrea refuses entry of any human rights organizations in to its country and continually restricted fuel and other vital resources to starve off UN peacekeepers in the Badme, resulting in the abandonment of the United Nations Missions to Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2008. The UN has repeated warned of the possibility that the conflict will again flare up. Skirmishes have since broken out amongst Eritrean and Ethiopian forces as well as between Eritrean and Djiboutian forces. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have admitted to supporting radical groups inside of the other's territory. The border remains in contention, although Eritrea still occupies the Badme.

Eritrea's government is dominated by a single party, The People's Front for Democracy and Justice. Laws prevent the formation of alternative political parties, although the constitution provides a framework for a multi-polar state. Isaias Afewerki has been president since 1993. Afewerki's nationalistic regime has maintained dictatorial control over state media, has a long history of religious persecution, suppression of political dissidence, torture, and suppression of international human rights organizations.

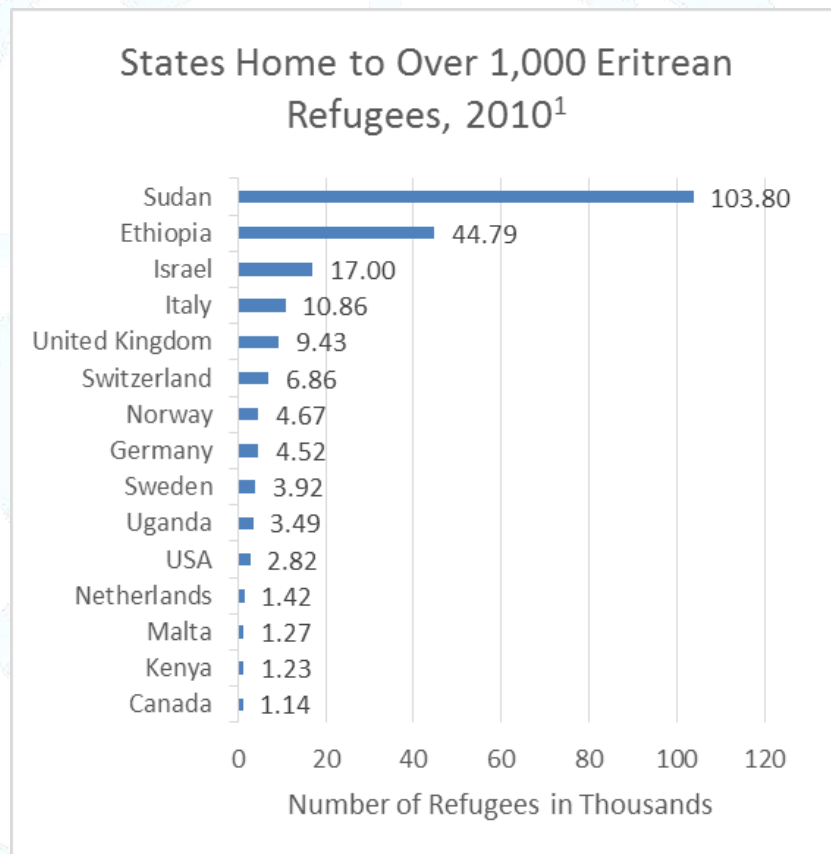
Figure 3. Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, addressing the United National General Assembly



Current Situation

As of 2012, over 251,000 refugees had fled Eritrea and millions are considered internally displaced. Eritrea is also suffering a massive influx of refugees, mainly from Somalia and other regional states that live in overpopulated refugee camps. The majority of Eritreans flee Eritrea due to overwhelming persecution, torture, and suppression of religious or political dissidents; a complete lack of free media; and the refusal of the government to grant human rights organizations entrance in to the country.¹

Figure 4: Eritrean Refugees Worldwide



¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees and People in Refugee-like Situations Originating from Eritrea from 2000 to 2010," <http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/dataQuery/reportData.asp?rptType=1>

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Political Persecution

Eritrea is a single-party state, dominated by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), headed since 1993 by president Isaias Afewerki. The nationalistic regime extends dictatorial control over state media, and brutally punishes all political and religious dissidents. Although the 1997 constitution provides a framework for a multi-polar government, the Afewerki regime refuses to enforce the constitution, claiming it is still at war with Ethiopia. The government uses this justification outlaw all elections, thus preventing political competition. Elections were set for 2001, but the government declared that elections must be postponed until the resolution of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict.

All political dissidence is punished by arrest and solitary imprisonment. It is widely believed that no political prisoners have yet been formally charged by the government nor have they been brought to trial. In 2001, Afewerki ordered a purge of the PFDJ, resulting in eleven arrests from the party elite who had supposedly questioned Afewerki's leadership. Widespread arrests of political adversaries continue and, while some are set free, most remain incarcerated. All released prisoners are ordered to remain quiet about their experiences while detained.

International human rights organizations such as the Human Rights Watch accuse the Eritrean government of stashing well-known political prisoners in hidden underground prisons. The rest are packed in to shipping containers or prisons. Confinement conditions are deplorable and prison guards have been accused of indiscriminate psychological and physical torture including sleep deprivation and being suspended from trees.

Religious Persecution

The government recognizes and sanctions four religions: Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Eritrean Lutheran, and Sunni Islam. Any other religious practices are openly persecuted by the government. Those caught practicing an 'unapproved' religion in secret are subject to imprisonment, torture, and death. The Eritrean government justifies its actions by claiming persecuted religions have not registered. However, the government perpetually denies all requests for recognition.

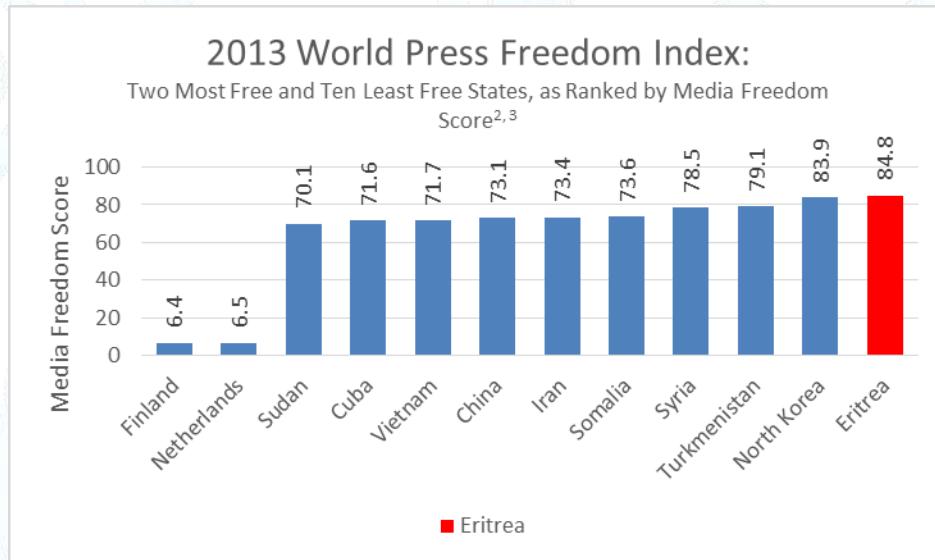
In 2002, the government cracked down on non-approved religions, outlawing all religious institutions except for the four aforementioned religions. Persecution intensified in 2005 to crack down on offshoots of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, mainly composed of modernizing clergy. Many of those arrested from 2002 onward are beaten and placed in prison without trial. Many Christians are arrested for attending public worship and possessing Bibles. Also in 2005, as a direct result of these crackdowns, the US identified Eritrea as a country of particular concern for religious freedom, and imposed sanctions upon the government.

Freedom of the Press

The 2010 Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders, classifies freedom of the press in Eritrea as the most restrictive on Earth, even more so than North Korea. There is no

privately owned news media in Eritrea, as independent news media was outlawed in 2001. The state-owned media outlets censor incoming information and highly restrict outgoing information.

Figure 5: 2013 World Press Freedom Index



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Military Conscription

All Eritrean men between 18 and 45 are required to serve a minimum of two years in the military. However, each man’s period of service is perpetually prolonged until he serves a lifetime. The government periodically sweeps through towns and cities to round up men who have evaded the compulsory draft. The men rounded up in these sweeps are detained without trial and tortured. Conscripts are used for public works projects but are also used as forced labor on government and military farms. In 2005, the government rounded up family members of children who had failed to report for their compulsory military service. Many were beaten, imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

Role of the UN

Eritrea was admitted to the United Nations in May 1993. There are multiple UN agencies active within Eritrea including UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR, and WFP. While the government is averse to outside humanitarian aid, organizations such as UNICEF are diligently working to

² Reporters Without Borders, “2013 World Press Freedom Index,” <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html>, (accessed 2 October 2013).

³ Note: The lower the index score, the more freedom the state experiences and vice versa.

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increase education, provide clean water, enforce the ban on female genital mutilation, and provide food to thousands of internally displaced persons and foreign refugees.

Pertinent Resolutions

Security Council Resolution 1907, passed in 2009, in response to widespread accusations that Eritrea was funding the radical Islamist group al-Shabab as well as its refusal to withdraw troops from the Djibouti-Eritrean border. The resolution imposed an arms embargo, restricted travel of government leaders, and froze the assets of many of the country's political and military elite. The African Union widely supported the imposition of sanctions.

In 2012, a UN group reported that, for the past year, there had been no evidence of direct Eritrean funding or involvement with Islamist radicals. China, Russia, and South Africa have expressed support for the lifting of sanctions. However, they currently remain in place.

In December 2011, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2023, condemning Eritrea's efforts to destabilize other states, namely Ethiopia, by ceasing funding and support to al-Shabab. It also prohibited Eritrea from using either the diaspora tax or mining revenues to commit human rights violations or fund fringe groups.

The Security Council repeatedly reaffirms the mandate of the body which monitors the enforcement of sanctions in Somalia and Eritrea. The mandate was most recently renewed in 2013 by Resolution 2111.

Country Positions

African Union

Much of the world looks to Africa for leadership on its own continent. But the African Union (AU) and its member states often hesitate to challenge the domestic affairs of their fellow members. Countries more anxious about maintaining their sovereignty often look to China or Russia for support. Other AU members will press on human rights issues, such as Ghana, Senegal and South Africa. Others prefer to have pressure come from abroad—typically from the members of the European Union or the United States.

China

Eritrea has economic relationship with China, who has repeated cancel portions of Eritrean debt. In 2007, Eritrea and China signed an economic deal to remove tariffs on Eritrean exports to China and the extension of technological assistance to Eritrea to build healthcare infrastructure. In the past, there have been high-level visits among Eritrean and Chinese elite. China strongly supports the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, and hesitates to press Eritrea. But it also is known to join international coalitions—or at least get out of their way—when consensus for action is very strong and broad. China will often watch Russia for leadership on such issues.

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Europe

Despite its colonial heritage, Eritrea's relations with Italy and the rest of the members of the European Union are less tense than relations between Eritrea and the US. However, due to their own strong commitment to universal human rights, many European states strongly support sanctions in Eritrea, either directly by sending aid or indirectly by voting in favor of relevant UN proposals. They have not sought overthrow of President Afewerki or the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula

Eritrea has been locked in militarized conflict with neighboring states for upwards of a decade. Conflicts have included a recent breakdown in relations with Sudan, a war with Yemen, and an ongoing border dispute with Djibouti. While relations with Yemen and Sudan have more or less normalized, Eritrea's relations with its other neighbors, including Djibouti and Ethiopia have continued to degrade.

President Afewerki is accused of supporting al-Shabab within Somalia through monetary and small arms deals. Afewerki is also accused to arming militants and sending them on raids in to Ethiopia along with allowing various separatist rebel groups asylum. Ethiopia publically accused Eritrea of supporting a plot to bomb an AU summit in Addis Ababa in 2011. However, WikiLeaks has released documents which imply the US has intimate knowledge that Ethiopian forces planted the bombs. Tensions remain high.

Israel

Israel maintains an embassy in Eritrea and Eritrea maintains an embassy in Ramat Gan (a suburb of Tel Aviv), Israel. Israel has previously referred to Eritrea as a strategic regional ally, specifically because its territory is home to the only friendly port on the Red Sea. Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have thus far fled to Israel.

United States

In the early 2000's, the United States considered Eritrea friendly, exhibited by high-level talks between former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Eritrean president Afewerki. However, relations worsened in 2008 when Assistant Secretary of State Frazer accused Eritrea of being a state sponsor of terrorism and proposed adding Eritrea to the American list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (SSTs). In 2009, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton accused Afewerki of supplying weapons to the terrorist organization al-Shabab. This accusation was promptly followed up by a UN and African Union arms embargo.

Since 2001, the United States has withheld all non-humanitarian aid to Eritrea after multiple local embassy staff were arrested and never released. The US has imposed symbolic weapons sanctions against Eritrea in response to the overwhelming religious persecution in the country.

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