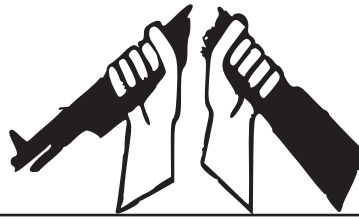


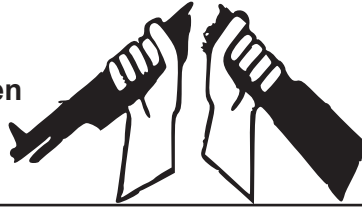
war resisters' international
internationale des résistant(e)s a la guerre
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Eritrea

Conscientious Objection and Desertion

A documentation by Connection e.V., Germany
War Resisters' International
and the Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative



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Eritrea: Conscientious Objection and Desertion

In autumn 2004, the Germany based Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative and Connection e.V. published a documentation on conscientious objection and desertion in Eritrea (1). The core of this documentation, the interviews with refugees from Eritrea, who managed to escape from violence and war, and who now face the European Unions anti-asylum policy, give a very moving impression of the plight of young Eritreans, male and female, who grow up in an extremely militarised environment.

War Resisters' International took up the issue of conscientious objection and desertion in Eritrea for the first time in its CO-Update e-newsletter No 4, December 2004 (2), and published one of the interviews, which are included in this documentation, two months later (3).

The material included in this documentation shows that the situation in Eritrea needs our attention urgently. We welcome that Eritrean refugees organised themselves in the Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative, as this gives international networks such as War Resisters' International a partner in the country – although in this case in exile, as any open opposition in the country, even more so antimilitarist opposition, is impossible.

War Resisters' International is pleased that Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab, one of the founders of the Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative, agreed to represent War Resisters' International at the 61st session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, where he will highlight the situation of conscientious objectors in his country.

The documents in this booklet show in such an obvious way that Eritrea does not recognise the right to conscientious objection in any way, so that it does not need to be spelled out again here. It also seems obvious that this issue cannot be solved on its own – the Eritrean governments attitude towards conscientious objectors just reflects in general its attitude towards its citizens: mistrust, denial of basic human rights, and denial of human dignity.

War Resisters' International hopes that this documentation will contribute to raising awareness over the situation in Eritrea, and to generate report for Eritrean antimilitarists, human rights activists, and refugees in their struggle for a more peaceful and just society in their country.

Andreas Speck
War Resisters' International

Notes

(1) The German booklet is available from Connection e.V., Gerberstrasse 5, 63065 Offenbach for €5 plus postage.

(2) <http://wri-irg.org/pubs/upd-0412.htm>

(3) <http://wri-irg.org/pubs/upd-0502.htm>

For the right to conscientious objection

Presentation for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

61st session, Geneva, 14 March – 22 April 2005

Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab

Mr Chairman

I'm representing War Resisters' International. We conduct research on conscientious objection to military service in many countries. Last year, we undertook a preliminary survey on the issue of Eritrean conscientious objectors. We learned that there are thousands of Eritrean conscientious objectors and deserters.

In Eritrea the right of conscientious objection is not recognized by law with the present government. Some members of religious groups such as the Jehovah Witnesses are in custody since more than 10 years because of their convictions to refuse to serve in the military. They never had a hearing in court.

Arbitrary detention, torture, deployment at the front line, forced labour - all without any hearing - have been common ways to punish deserters and objectors. A very often used way of military punishment is to tie victims and to lay them in the sun for days or sometimes weeks.

Furthermore relatives of deserters are threatened to push their children to send them to their units.

Although it is difficult to know the exact number, thousands from the army are evading the military service. They declare their objection through various means. They conscientiously object, desert or flee the military dictatorship. A lot of the deserters are asking for political asylum in foreign countries.

We request the UN Commission on Human Rights to take note of the continuous violations against conscientious objectors and that it take further measures to ensure that conscientious objectors and deserters get asylum protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees.

We also request the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to investigate the situation of conscientious objectors and other members of the army, particularly in Eritrea.

And we request the Eritrean government that it comply with Commission Resolution 1998/77: and in particular that it

- I. releases immediately all conscientious objectors;
- II. recognizes the right to refuse the military service on reasons of conscience, including profound convictions, arising from religious, ethical, humanitarian or similar motives;
- III introduces an alternative service compatible with reasons for conscientious objection.

Thank you very much

Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab is an activist with the Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative, based in Germany, and represented War Resisters' International at the Commission on Human Rights

Eritrean Anti-militarism Initiative in Germany

Yohannes Kidane

Acknowledgement

The initiation of our initiative would not be achieved had it not for the cooperation of Rudi Friedrich from connection e.V, Frau Mechthild Gunkel from Evangelical Church and Mrs Antje Becker a private lawyer. I would like to thank my colleague Abraham Gebreyesus for his all rounded support and his dedication to our initiative.

Almost all the materials compiled in the report are gathered from the different web sites of international organizations who advocate for the right of Conscientious Objectors. I am in dept for all of these resources. I would like to acknowledge and thank the owners of the following web sites. www.Wikipedia.org, Pax Christi International, Amnesty international, CCW (Center on Conscience and war), Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, www.objectors.org, and www.nisbco.org.

1. Background

1. 1. Conscientious Objection (CO) and Conscientious objectors (COs)

History has witnessed that governments have the power to make their citizens fight any type of war. And on the other side philosophers, theologians, politicians and other citizens of the world have debated the question of war for years. Some people believe that they cannot participate in or support any wars or particular wars. Many young men and women have also serious questions about whether it is right to take part in war. All these mean that the questioning youths and others are conscientious objectors. They may not know the term, or that there is such a thing as conscientious objection to war. If one finds out that he or she is against war so strongly that he or she cannot be part of it, then he or she is conscientious objector. And they are not alone.

In our world of today there are many conscientious objectors have been imprisoned for refusing to participate in wars despite the fact that Conscientious objection needs to be seen in its reality as a conscientious affirmation of the value of human life and of service to human needs.

Internationally Conscientious objection is recognized in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion etc.". However, the issue of Conscientious Objection is controversial many government are refusing to accept the right to Conscientious Objection. The discussion of the right to conscientious objection to military service would seem to represent a negative response to governmental programs. Most governments are always against Conscientious Objection and conscientious Objectors as they have the fear that it may lay an obstacle to their interest. COs are always prone to imprisonment, deportation and harassments. However there are different international institutions, which are established to advocate for the right of COs. In addition May 15 every year is internationally dedicate to world COs.

Conscientious Objection many of different in degrees, people differed on the ways they oppose war. The different types objectors are classified based on their way of resistance to war. Let us see some of them.

Conscientious Objector: These are persons who for reasons of conscience or profound conviction arising from religious, ethical,

moral, humanitarian, philosophical, political or similar motive refuses to perform armed service or any other direct or indirect participation in wars or armed conflicts.

Non-combatant Conscientious Objectors: These are persons who, by reason of religious, ethical or moral belief, are conscientiously opposed to killing in war in any form but who do not object to performing non combatant duties (such as being a medic) in the armed forces. These people are reassigned to non-combatant duties in the Armed Forces or, in the event of a draft, are trained without weapons and assigned to non-combatant service.

Conscientious Objectors to paying for war: These are people whose consciences forbid them to pay the military portion of their taxes because of ethical, moral and religious beliefs. Many impoverish themselves by living below taxable levels, others suffer garnishment, court appearances, property loss, and, in some cases, imprisonment.

Selective Objectors: These are persons whose consciences would not permit them to participate in what they believe to be an "unjust" war but do permit them to participate in what they believe to be a "just" war. These people might believe it is immoral to serve in a capacity where they would be responsible for developing or using nuclear weapons. Or they might decide they couldn't morally participate in a particular war, such as one in which civilians or civil societies were a major target.

Nuclear Pacifists: These are persons whose consciences would not permit them to participate in a nuclear war, or what they believe would likely become a nuclear war. Some nuclear pacifists are opposed to all war because of their stand that any war fought today could lead to the use of nuclear weapons.

1. 1. The Eritrean Background

In 1994 the government of Eritrea has promulgated a national service proclamation, which is mandatory to citizens between the ages 18 to 40. Since then youngsters in this age group has been recruited for the Eritreans military national service in different rounds that comes every six months. The national service proclamation mandates an eighteen months service. Six months of this is a military training in a training camp called Sawa, (located in a remote semi-desert area, where the average daily temperature is above 34°C) in Western lowland of Eritrea. After military training, the National Service trainees are dispatched to different parts of the country and serve for 12 months. So far it is estimated that more than 200,000 Eritreans have gone through the National Service and it is still continues.

Participants of the National Service witness that candidates, specially in the rounds that follows after the out brake of the border war with neighbouring Ethiopia, are brutally mistreated in the whole process of recruitment, drills and in the actual service by the training camp drill sergeants and latter by military command officers. Women appeared to be sexual mistreatment and harassment by military officials both during their drill and after dispatch in the army. A number of under age children and secondary school children are also drifted into the army forcefully.

By and large until 1998 the number of the Conscientious Objectors was very limited to some religious groups such as the Jehovah Witness. Because of their conscientious objection to participation in military service Jehovah's Witnesses were the first to face imprisonment and harassment. In this case in July 1994 about twelve Jehovah Witness opposed to go to Sawa and participate in the military training. All of them were imprisoned in modified Cargo shipment containers within the training camp (Sawa). The temperature within this containers reaches above 40 degree centigrade. Intimidated by the harsh treatment nine of them were later agree to go to the drills while the only three remained in the prison as they determined to their decision and refuse to attending the military training. They are still languishing

in these containers for ten years.

At present daily routines in Eritrea are arbitrary detention, forced recruitment of young people including under age young high school children and the brutal drafting, disregarding for the right of Conscientious Objectors and all forms of human rights and a lack of all constitutional rights. The persecution of religious minorities is increasing. Independent NGOs, human right groups or international observers are not tolerated. Investigations demanded by Amnesty International and other organisations are not granted.

In Eritrea today to Conscientiously Object war is a taboo. COs are considered as cowardice and people who lack patriotism. There is no such alternative equivalent civilian service. There is known a provisional criminal law where one can be judged for desertion up to five years, in times of war up to death penalty. But the officers are punishing arbitrarily, without a hearing, without a judgement and using forced labour, sending to the front line and indefinitely imprisonment. The right to conscientious objection is not granted.

After the border war with neighbouring Ethiopia in 1998-2000, which claimed tens of thousands of life from both sides, the number of Conscientious Objectors within the Eritrean military increased. At this time, there are thousands of Eritreans who objected the military service and military. They are forced to leave their country and living in exile, considerable numbers of them are here in Germany seeking political asylum.

2. Who we are

We are conscientious objectors from Eritrea, living in Germany. We advocate for a peaceful future and the right to Conscientious Objection in Eritrea. Our initiative is independent from any Eritrean organization, political or otherwise. We are open to all individuals or groups who want to be engaged in our initiative and work toward common aims.

We are organizing our selves as an action group advocates for the right of Conscientious Objection. We advocate for a non-violence way of struggle and are struggling to be a voice for the voice less. We work based on the basic principles of grass-roots democracy. Our initiative sees itself as an antimilitarist or anti-war organization independent of any party politics. We speak for the concerns of the Eritreans Conscientious Objectors who have been tormented and executed for decades.

We witnessed the results of every military dispute in our region are: hunger, impoverishment, displacement of people, land mine hazards, confiscation of property, flight, trauma and other vast suffering for the civilians and others.

We, the initiators, firmly believe that after more than three decades of armed struggle for the independence of Eritrea, and the war against Ethiopia on the so called border conflict, the Eritrean people are aware the effect of war more than any other people in our region. It is precisely those wars, which lie at the root of the misery on the entire territory of Eritrea. We believe that it is this war, which has been bringing about the displacement, hunger and the impoverishment of the people who have been heavily traumatised by deportation and expulsion from their native land, by flight and mining of the ground.

3. We are looking for

We stand for a new politics in Eritrea in which all-social groups and organizations participate in advocacy for a peaceful process on the basis of human rights. For a complete constitutional ban on every kind of war-promoting propaganda and action, and on all forms of ethnic, political, social, cultural, racial or economical discrimination against Conscientious Objectors.

We want to work for a non-violent, democratic process in Eritrea and respect for conscience. We believe that all forms of war and military oppression are hindering the peaceful development in our region. Our action as well as the structure of our initiative is based on grassroots principles. We are working in collaboration with experienced organization and similar groups in Germany and are planning to make contacts with similar groups in other



Yohannes Kidane

countries.

We say the consciences of those who choose to be nonviolence should be respected. We speak out for the right of refusing any form of war. The consciences of those who believe in the possibility of a just war, but who are convinced that the war in which they are asked to serve is unjust in aim or method should be respected.

We say objectors to military service should be accorded alternative civilian service, which are not of longer duration than the term of military service, under civilian supervision. Conscientious objectors who reach their position during military service should be released to alternative service. Governments, which enforce conscription, should be urged to provide alternative civilian service, which is not punitive.

Thus we sharply condemn the continuing resort to war during any crisis that could be solved in a peaceful manner. More over, we condemn warfare and the permanent abuse of human rights in Eritrea. Our initiative will publicly denounce those nations responsible for supplying the arms for the warriors or supporting a military decision in Eritrea. We call for an immediate stop to all forms of collaboration on their part.

We believe that conscientious objection, which in Eritrea so far has been persecuted with death penalty or long-term prison sentences, is one of the ways in which every Eritrean may help to bring about peace. It thus tries to spread the word in its different forms. Our group is convinced: The more men and women publicly declare their unwillingness to fight in a war – and thus refuse to kill in whosoever name – the better the chances to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and achieve the assurance of peaceful liberation Eritrea.

4. Our aims

Our effort is to achieve the realization of the following Eritrea.

1. We work for the complete adoption of the right to Conscientious Objection in the Eritrean constitution.

2. We work to establish Eritrean Conscientious Objectors and military deserters national association, there by a national network for Conscientious Objectors inside and outside of Eritrea, which have in mind a lasting peace on the basis of human rights and the right to refuse forced recruitment, militarism and war in Eritrea

3. We work to build confidence within the Eritrean Conscientious Objectors, there by enable them on finding a way of self-finding ways and enable them to say what I did is right and I am not alone.

4. We work to establish a definition for Conscientious Objectors and military deserters in the Eritrean perspective.

5. We work to establish ways of counselling and supporting conscientious objectors and their families, who want to declare their conscientious objection on political, religious or other grounds.

6. We work to provide relevant information and periodical report about the situation of Conscientious Objectors in Eritrea for the international community.

7. We work to aid objectors who are compelled to leave their country of origin because of their refusal to perform military service in achieving asylum.

8. We work to facilitate the immediate release of conscientious objectors imprisoned because of their conviction.

9. We work for the complete ban of child soldiers recruitment .

5. What can you do?

- Develop a respect conscientious objection and conscientious objectors.
- Share what you learn with family, friends, coworkers, places of worship, and the media. Help people understand that COs are not traitors or cowards but people living out their faith and following their consciences.
- Talk with your child and other young people before they enter the military.

6. Our Venues

Our venues are Seminars, Public events, Discussions forums and Publicity. We are trying to approach our audiences in many languages as possible. We are working to establish strong connection back home. Our events are open to the public. Cooperative event planning with other organisations is welcomed.

The Eritrean Antimilitaristic Initiative group in cooperation with Connection wants to organize a workshop to promote the issues and concept of Conscientious Objectors and military deserters.

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"I was tied up with the number eight"

Henok Estifanos

I was born in Asmara in 1980. My father is a doctor, my mother a nurse. I went to the Amanuel School from 1st - 7th grade, and to the Halai School from 8th to 11th grade, which I finished with my school leaving examinations (A-levels) in 1997.

I was called up for the National Service in Sawa on 9th September 1997. There we got a six months basic training that also included a political education. After the basic training, we were taken to Alitena Mereb on 6th May 1998, together with our commander Isayos Amanuel.

We were told that the war in Adi Murug had begun. We were afraid, cause we had never experienced war before. I was woken up at 4 o'clock in the morning. They had obviously read my file. It said: "Henok, you will be trained to handle large cannons", the so-called Mortars. I was transferred to Senafe, close to Minah. There we got a three-month training for the handling of large caliber cannons. I did not have a big interest in that, particularly since I was missing my family. The others felt in a similar way, so they pressured us. Myself and a comrade, Hadgu, were constantly observed. I said to Hadgu: "Do not let him provoke you. Until we come out of this, you do not have a chance and you must obey him." The group leader heard this and made a note in our documents.

We both had good knowledge of mathematics due to our school education, which we could use well for the training. We put in more effort and solved all mathematical questions. Finally we finished the course as the best ones. Then the pressure diminished somewhat. On 12 May 2000 the 3. Invasion began. We were in constant readiness and had to bring the cannons to the front. At 23.30 o'clock, when the invasion began, were we in Aigar. We had not noticed it at all: An opposing clearing-up unit had approached us closely. We organized a group. I participated in the group as a Mortar expert and was instructed to take a booklet and my calculation with me. We stayed away two days and two nights. On 19 May the 12th division occupied the whole area. I should prepare the cannon now: Speed: 6,40; Cannon attitude: 45; Balance: 30 milli. On 22nd the war really started. I could not imagine this up to then.

The others were simply killed. That is unforgettable for me. It was an indescribable, a bad feeling. On 24th in the morning they told us we should withdraw from Menokseto to Senafe, approximately 25 kilometers. Normally one takes the large gun barrel. Another the cannon car, the third one the seat, I, as the group leader, should only carry one pair of binoculars and a booklet with me. If we would leave any part behind, we would have had serious difficulties. When we withdrew, Negassi Abraham was shot, who was responsible for the seat. This meant we had to leave the seat there and marched on, without food or liquid, to Keskessei. We arrived there at 11 o'clock in the morning. We were tired and hungry. But the invasion of the opponent became stronger and stronger. Usually the Mortar is served by 4 soldiers. But since the invasion was so strong, we were instructed to only serve the cannon with two people. All others should go to the front with their rifles. Then I saw that Hadgu was in danger.

He served another cannon close by and wore a special jacket, so that the opponents assumed he is an officer. They had him in the visor and constantly shot at him. I yelled something to him, but he could not hear me, because he did not hear anything from the loud shooting. So I went to him and got him away from his position. This was also noticed by the group leader and he made a note. When the peace treaty was signed, it began to become calmer. We heard about it on the radio. The group leader transferred Hadgu to operate cannons with a middle caliber, the Doshka. Nevertheless we could meet from time to time. Our family is well known in Asmara, because my father was a physician.



One is even addressed to as a son of the doctor, as Wodie Hakim. My brother was also well known. My comrades however did not know that I was his brother and spoke about the fact that he was killed. That shocked me very deeply. Suddenly I thought: Now there is nobody left from my family. I had only one thought left: To save myself and run away.

On 10th June I was transferred to Hired, brought between Segeneti and Adi Keyh. I was supposed to attend a further course in military strategy. A comrade, who knew me and my brother, said to me: "Why are you constantly being sent on a course? Someone must have you in the visor. Something will happen with you." That made me alert. I tried to make contact with my sister. I wrote her a letter that she could come and visit me. When she came, my brigade leader said to her: "He's not here anymore, he has been transferred." But my sister did not let them fool her. She contacted acquaintances of my father with the artillery and has finally written a short letter to me: "I am Mona Lisa, I am here, come." I went to my commander, in order to ask for permission to meet her. He said: "Do not go. She is a civilian and lives in Asmara. You would only disclose secrets." He did not want anything that had happened to come out. That was the actual reason, why he had refused and in the end he said to me: "You are a soldier. Your brain and your body are controlled by us." I answered it: "If I don't have any rights, I am lost for the country. If I do not do things voluntarily, I cannot do anything for the country." "You are just talking nonsense" he replied. I had such a longing to see my sister that I went away from my

unit on my own. I even told my commander: "I'm going." "You should not do that. When you return, you will have bad consequences." he answered. I replied: "Do whatever you want, I'm going."

I spoke with my sister for a long time. She asked about our brother, but I could not tell her that he had been killed. It was already so difficult for both of us. I told her he was transferred and sent her back to Asmara. Afterwards I had to rinse my stress, so I went to Asmara, drank alcohol and returned to the barracks only around one clock at night. When I arrived I heard: "Stand still!" Then I was tied up in the number eight way and was left to lie there for three days and three nights. Since then I was called "Mandela" by others in my unit. Afterwards I had several arguments with my commander. He constantly pressured me.

My sister came once more with acquaintances from the unit. I spoke with her and said: "If there is an opportunity to escape and come to Asmara, then I'll come. But do not tell that I will come. Don't mention it to anyone." I waited for a good opportunity. During the training I did not have an opportunity because I also had to dig ditches. The trainings started at noon, and in the afternoon we went into the ditches. I found out now that there would be also a training for the flat country in Baka. I saw that as chance

to flee not only to my sister but also to flee from Eritrea in general. I waited for that. At that time Hadgu had conflicts with the sub-unit commander and was tied up several times. His clothes was taken off, he got tied up and they poured milk over him. Then mosquitoes came and stung him.

I was not allowed to comfort him. If I was close to nearby, I said to him: "This will also pass. It will be ok again." But it was bad to look at him. Such things happened to Hadgu several times. Morally he was at the end, particularly since he didn't have any brothers and sisters, he was brought up in difficult circumstances, his family was poor. More frequently he said: "During all this time I could have helped my family." I answered: "We are still alive. That is the main thing." Every time the subunit commander saw us together, he separated us. It meant: "You are trying to exchange secrets." I did not come to the course for the time being. Instead we had to march for two days. Hadgu's sole became an open wound. Whoever could not keep up any longer, had to gather at some other place. There I got separated from him. Since then they said to me: "With whom will you talk now?" I said: "You are nevertheless also my friends." I could talk with Hadgu about internal things, however not with the others. That could not be done, since everyone got spied on. With the others I could talk only about general things.



Then we heard on the radio that Hadgu had fled to Ethiopia. When this message came, my situation worsened. Since then I was always observed. There was always someone with me, even while I was urinating. Later I was fortunately sent to the course in Baka. I had a marching order, procured to me however I managed to get a permission from a friend under the hand, to go to Asmara for two days. This meant I had left the unit without proper approval, since it was not an official permission. I did not go to my sister, but to my granny. I washed myself, cut my hair, so I would look differently. Soldiers came to see my sister, even in civilian clothes, and asked for me. She answered: "Well he is grown up and in the military." I could hide myself, since young people from the neighbourhood would see the military police and warned me on time.

I stayed in Asmara for a month. In the meanwhile the unit was transferred towards Baka into the proximity of Teseney. I managed to get a friend's permission, in order to go to Teseney. There I had to watch out, since there are many civil soldiers, whose task is, to introduce themselves as people who help escaped soldiers like me. However, they only take the money and then bring you to a unit, instead to the Sudan. So I did not to go to Teseney, but to Baronto and observed the situation there. I found out that orders were given that everyone should be arrested, who has a permission of a unit, which is not stationed there. It became impossible for me to the Sudan over Teseney. In June 2001 I went back to Asmara.

On 20 June I started moving towards the Sudan again. I continued to go to Keren, to Teseney and to Tebeldia. There I asked around. I found a Mufti, which accepted me, since I presented myself as a Muslim. He wanted 2,500 Nakba from me, in order to take me there. First I stayed one night with him. Later he asked me: "Can you march well?", No problem ", I answered. Then we walked from Tebeldia to Mailuba to the border with Sudan. When I arrived at Hafir in the Sudan, I was glad and knew that I had saved my life. I phoned my friends in Khartoum and finally had to pay 65,000 Sudanese Pounds, in order to get there. In Khartoum I was already expected. When I saw my friends, I knew that I was out of danger.

We sat together, talked about our bad experiences and said: "We are like newly born." I telephoned with family members from the USA and told them, how much money I needed in order to save myself. They transferred the money to me, so I was able to come to Germany with freight trucks. I work for two hours a day at present. My application for asylum was rejected and I was requested to go to the Eritrean Embassy, to apply for a passport - in order to be exiled. I refused. Now I am being continuously threatened and my papers only get extended for a month at a time. I do not know, what comes after that. If they want to push me out, they should kill me before that. Otherwise I will not go.

Interview with Henok Estifanos from 26 May 2004, translation: Yonas Bahta, copy: Rudi Friedrich

I've had enough of the war



Bisrat Habte Micael

I was born on 10 January 1981 in Asmara. I went to Hatsey-Yohannes School until 5th grade, for 6th and 7th to the Awet School, and for the 8th to 11th grade to the Halai School.

When I finished the 11th grade and took my school leaving examination [A-levels], I was just 15 years old. I did not have to repeat any year, and had jumped a few classes.

We were told that we would get the results of the school leaving examinations only after basic training in the National Service. That's why at the age of 15 I joined the military, hoping that my exam results were good and I could leave after basic training to study. Thus, in 1996 I was recruited for National Service as part of the fifth recruitment round and brought to Sawa for basic training.

Some of the girls there had run away from home and joined the National Service, although they were still minors. Sometimes the parents came to take their daughters back home. But the authorities always refused that. They said: "She came to us on her own. Now she stays here." Even when the girls wanted to return home later, they were not allowed to.

The time in Sawa was hard. It was the rainy season and the facilities at Sawa were poor at that time. Many became ill, and got hepatitis. Especially women frequently got a hiccup, we call this *lewti*. Even when ill we were forced to take part in the roll-call. Only when you were very seriously ill was it possible to get a post-

ponement from National Service. We were forced to take part in military exercises until we were completely exhausted. They did not care whether you would die or not. Relatives of high ranking officers were treated differently. They got exempted from military service even without being ill.

Many girls were raped. There were girls who adapted themselves to the situation and made advances to officers out of their own initiative, to avoid being raped. There were only male officers. Those who didn't comply, who rejected the men were given the worst work or sent into the war. The girls who had been raped but didn't want to comply were sent to the front too. The girls who were compliant and pretty were treated well. Often they got pregnant involuntarily.

After six month of basic training I came to the 381st division. First I was supposed to work in the administration, but then I was sent to the front line. This surprised me. I assumed that I would serve a total of 18 month of military service. After deducting holidays, this would have meant 8 month after the end of basic training, which the soldiers usually serve in agriculture. I also had applied for holidays. But my superior wanted to prevent me from doing this. He wanted me to cook for him and to be his puppet. I refused that. So I didn't get any holidays, and was sent to the front line instead.

We were in Baka, in the area of Girmaik. Those girls who refused to play the housewife had to stand on guard service for 3-4 hours at night as a form of punishment. Those young men who wanted to help them were punished too – they were ordered to stand at attention in the sun for an entire day.

The other girls, who played along with the game, were treated well. They got a good room, a nice bed, and got holidays every month to visit their families. But there were only very few who played along. Most refused. We always thought: we would do military service and then go back home.

There were conflicts between the old fighters, the *jikaalo*, and the conscripts. The old fighters accused the conscripts: "You just want to be among yourselves". They put pressure on us because we, who had gone to school together, supported each other.

Those who could stand it no longer, who wanted to see their family, fled in the end. Some returned on their own, others were caught by the military police and punished with the helicopter or the number eight [1]. In some cases they were doused with milk, before they were ordered to stand in the sun for hours. They were called *kobleit*, outlaws, deserters.

I too was once punished with the number eight and was forced to lie in the sun for a whole day, because I had refused to do the housework for my commander. I had not deserted. But a commander had an eye on me. When I expressed criticism, they said that this was against the law. I was put in bonds and put into the sun, because I did not comply.

After serving 18 months in military service, we had to stay on for two additional months. Then the war began. It is difficult for me to describe this. It was horrible. For example, there was a rule that when soldiers were wounded, the *jikaalo* had to be brought to the field hospital first. They were taken out of the front line first, not the common soldiers. Once five or six young soldiers died because of this. They just had been left there.

When the unit withdrew from the front for a break, some went to their families without authorisation. When they returned and the unit had been sent back to the front, these soldiers were sent directly to the front as a form of punishment. Others were even executed.

This is what happened when two people wanted to get married. The family and the bridal couple had agreed on a date, had informed the unit commander and asked for holidays for the wedding. In Eritrea a wedding is a very important event. But the bridal couple got their holidays refused. So they went unauthor-

ised to marry. The military sent an entire unit to the wedding to arrest the bridal couple, instead of at least waiting until after the wedding. They were sent directly to the front.

I have had enough of the war. I reported ill, although that meant I had to stay there and couldn't go home. After several requests and complaints I finally got five days of holidays, but I stayed away for 10 days. Then I got very scared. I returned. As punishment I had to carry a big water container up and down a hill for a full week.

In May 1999 the unit commander tried to rape me. I screamed and others came to help me and prevented it from happening. I demanded that he be punished, but it was his responsibility to pass on my complaint to his superiors. He did not get punished.

After the 2nd invasion our unit received training and did a course on financial auditing. I served in the administration of the unit and checked its income and expenses. My superior put me under pressure and told lies about me, because I did not comply to his demands. For example he accused me to have stolen money, although he didn't leave any money. He passed on this kind of accusations to his superiors, so that I would be punished. It was unbearable. Therefore I went to my family in Asmara. After one month I was arrested, and was brought to the police station in Gegjeret. After that I was sent to Adiabeto. I demanded repeatedly: "I want to be brought to my unit. If I am to get punished, then I want to get punished there." However, after some weeks I was able to escape from the prison in Adiabeto and went to Adisegdo.

I managed to stay there for more than a year. I had to hide all the time, guests were not allowed to see me, and I could not leave the house. The neighbours were not supposed to see me, so that they could not report me to the police. During this time I got in contact with friends of my father, who gave me opposition papers, for example from the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front).

Because I had been gone for a long time, the authorities put pressure on my father, and finally arrested him.

With the help of his friends, I was finally able to flee to Sudan. I dressed in the way girls from the villages normally dress, and was brought by car to Teseney. There I stayed for one more week to prepare the rest of my flight. Then I went over the green border to Sudan.

In Sudan too I feared to be arrested. The Eritrean president Afewerki had given order to arrest deserters and to bring them back to Eritrea. The Eritrean government demanded that young people who had fled to Sudan be handed over. Sometime the Sudanese government complied with this request and deported young people to Eritrea. Some of the deserters were shot, some simply disappeared.

Also the Eritrean Secret Service is active in Sudan, and sometimes kidnaps Eritrean secret carriers, but also common soldiers. In addition, the Sudanese soldiers, for example in Kessela, are corrupt. Because of the conflicts between Sudan and Eritrea, they do not care what happens to deserters. Those who won't give them money are arrested and brought back to the border. Deserters can't even expect help from the United Nations. Deserters have to go into hiding far away from the big cities or they have to leave the country. Therefore many youths try to go through the Sahara to Libya, and try to cross the sea in inflatables – under great danger of drowning. But even those who escape are in danger of being returned. Malta deported 200 refugees to Sudan. From there they were handed over to the Eritrean authorities. Nobody knows where they are. Luckily, some youths were able to escape again to Europe. And luckily now they are allowed to stay in Europe.

In Sudan I stayed for one month with a relative in Khartoum. With his help I was able to get to Germany with the help of people smugglers.

Here in Germany I am fine. I have found rest. My application for asylum, however, has been turned down by the authorities. I am appealing against the decision, but I don't have much hope.

I don't know how my family is doing, and I am really worried. I cannot phone them or write, because they are probably watched. I am scared that my family might get even deeper into trouble if

the authorities knew that they had helped me. I don't have any information about my father. I do not know if he is still alive. My siblings have been called up for National Service. My mother is on her own. I do not know how they can bear it.

Interview with Bisrat Habte Micael from 28 May 2004, Translation from Tigri into German by Yonas Bahta and Abraham Gebreyesus. Translation from German to English by Andreas Speck
Source: Connection e.V./Eritreische Antimilitaristische Initiative: Dokumentation: Eritrea: Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Desertion

Notes

[1] The helicopter and number eight are common torture techniques. Amnesty International describes them as follows:

"The helicopter": the victim is tied with a rope by hands and feet behind the back, lying on the ground face down, outside in the hot sun, rain or freezing cold nights, stripped of upper garments. This is a punishment allocated for a particular number of days, the maximum reported being 55 days in the Dahlak Kebir island prison, but it is more often one or two weeks. The prisoner is tied in this position 24 hours a day, except for two or three short breaks for meals and toilet functions.

"Otto" (Italian for "eight"): the victim is tied with hands behind the back and left face down on the ground, but without the legs tied. (from: 'You have no right to ask' – Government resists scrutiny on human rights)

„After the liberation we didn't realise the true face of the government”.



Weldu Habtemicael

I was born on 25 February 1977, in Adi Kefelet. I went to school there until the fifth form. My father was a farmer. Later we opened a shop as well.

In 1997 I got the call up for National Service. Though I didn't want to serve in the military service, I was forced into six months of basic training in Sawa. After basic training I was attached to division 48 at Girmaika, where there was a heavy gun brigade, called the "Rechasch-Brigade". I served my whole time in this brigade.

As the invasion started, we were moved to Omhager, then to Shambuco, and at last to Haicota, where we acted in air defence. At the third invasion I was in Maikokah Shilalo in the region of Shambuco.

There are great differences between the conscripts and old fighters. The new soldiers are seen as inferior and they are permanently degraded, with the consent of the superiors. We new soldiers are treated like dirt. Only asking an innocent question gets you insulted, beaten, arrested, tied with number eight and tortured in the sun, or assigned the hardest work. It's better to say nothing.

Some days after the beginning of the third invasion we were de-

feated by Ethiopian units. We had to retreat. In basic training we were told: "In a difficult situation you shouldn't leave the heavy guns. You have to fight or you have to destroy the gun." This was what I was faced with. Because we were surrounded, we didn't see any way out. Also there wasn't a vehicle that could remove the heavy gun. We decided to destroy it. Then we fled. Afterwards we got new guns. When it was quieter we came to Baronto.

I was interrogated because we destroyed the heavy gun. I repeated what I learned in training. They believed me because others witnessed the situation, so luckily nothing happened to me. If they had not believed me, I would have to pay for the gun. If you lose only one cartridge, you have to pay for it from your own pay.

There was a similar case that I want to report. After the first days of the third invasion, some comrades of another unit were defeated by Ethiopian troops and fled in the direction of Teseney. Two of their transporters got stuck in the sand. The transporters were full of weapons. The commander of the unit was 200 meters ahead and ordered the troops to destroy the transporters. Two of the soldiers tried to free the guns, but a third destroyed them. This was investigated after the ceasefire.

The soldier who destroyed the transporters deserted. The others were accused now to leave the weapons to the Eritrean army. Proceedings were held on high level. At last, as was reported, the two who tried to free the transporter were executed.

It was strange that this had happened although the witness could not be interrogated. Police arrested him a few months later at home and returned him to his unit. When he fled, he took a Kalashnikov with him, but after his arrest he claimed that he had lost it. There was no investigation of his desertion whatsoever; he was allowed to move around freely. I myself tried to get something out of him. He answered: "Nothing happened. I keep that under my hat." I was really surprised how he had been treated.

After the ceasefire the independent newspapers reported a lot about the situation in Eritrea. They wrote about the G15. We read it. We got angry about it. Then they came to us and forbade us to read the newspapers, although they were not banned. They forbade us to get informed about other political opinions.

On 9 August 2002, they organised a meeting to inform us about the situation in Eritrea and the G15. They said the G15 were traitors and accused them of cooperation with Ethiopia. Early we had been told that as soldiers we shouldn't take a position. So I got angry suddenly – I didn't know why – and I stood up: "Why do you tell us that now? Why do you talk accusingly about them? You want to bring us to your side. But you told us before: "You shouldn't take a position as soldiers, be neutral." Why do you want to convince us of your position now?" It was totally spontaneous. A high-ranking commander ordered me to sit down.

After the meeting, the military police came, arrested me and brought me to Baronto. They accused me, first, that I was close to the G15. Second, that I had cooperated with the Ethiopians and that is why I had destroyed the heavy gun. Third, they reproached me for disturbing the meeting, saying I acted illegally.

On 10 August they informed me about the charge. The leader of my unit betrayed me. He said now that I had destroyed the heavy gun. He wanted to protect himself. Suddenly he didn't want to know anything.

In the prison in Baronto I knew one of the guards. He was in Sawa with me and was scared to see me. He gave me a note, saying: "I want to do the same as you – run away. I will take you with me. You are in trouble."

I didn't say anything and destroyed the paper. When he was on

guard at lunch time, he could speak with me by pretending to look in a totally different direction. He said: "If we go out to piss, you should come by my side. Later you just start to run. I will shoot after you and then run after you. The others will have to look after the other prisoners. So, you will run and I will shoot. That's the way to get away from here. Be prepared." Because there aren't any toilets, in the evening three guards accompany a dozen prisoners to relieve themselves outdoors. He was one of them.

On 12 August, three days after my arrest, I did exactly as my comrade said. We escaped. Then we went further on as friends.

There are many examples of prison conditions for soldiers. Some soldiers disappear, some commit suicide, some are shot without trial. A friend of mine who deserted was caught by military police the next day. He was tied the whole day with number eight and laid in the sun. It was so hot. He was there such a long time. He bled from the nose and mouth. He didn't give in. So he got three more months of prisons. His head was shaved. He had to do the hardest work, like digging holes in the ground – without any sense – as another form of punishment. Finally, he didn't see a way out and shot himself.

In the prison in Baronto were also prisoners who were accused of being associated with the G15. Whoever is imprisoned there will either be brought somewhere unknown or will be killed. The treatment is very harsh. I was frightened. It could have happened to me too. I already had a plan to flee. I knew that they associated me with the G15. This is a heavy accusation. Many of these prisoners disappeared.

Soldiers who have to do three months of hard labour are slightly better off. Their work is like brainwashing, so that they accept their guilt and obey. There were also many penalties for small things. This effected mostly new recruits serving their National Service.

The government doesn't care about the population. I will mention only one example: Students were ordered to work in the fields. A lot of them got malaria, so that they refused the next mission. I can not accept this government because I experienced for myself what the whole population has to experience. If it's going well for us and all were treated similarly we wouldn't have refused. The army in particular treated us like idiots and tried to brainwash us.

After the liberation we didn't realise the true face of the government and not for years after. Only when the situation became bad for me did I see that the situation around was worse. Then I realised it and it clicked. It was after the third invasion and after they arrested me.

I could have gone to the Sudan where a maternal uncle lives. But he said: "Here they can catch you, too. Here are security forces of the government, too. Perhaps you will be kidnapped." My uncle then helped me escape to Germany.

In Germany I am active in the ELF-RC. I saw the war. It is no solution. You can only die or lose. Even a victory means casualties. Many died. What we need is peace. This we could reach in peaceful ways. The government could be brought down by peaceful means. Therefore I'm in an organisation which is speaking up for non-violence and democracy. I'm engaged with this group in the moment.

I was refused asylum by the federal office of Germany, but I live in Bad Homburg and get social help. After a year in Germany, I have the right to work, so that I can look for a job now.

I can't go back to Eritrea, not only because of my situation, but also because I'm engaged here. Everyone knows it, particularly the government. You also can find pictures of me on the internet.

I only speak out of hope for my people, who are oppressed by the government: I hope that the truth will come to light. Those living in Eritrea don't have a chance to learn it. The truth has to be exposed there and internationally.

Interview with Weldu Habtemicael, June 4, 2004. Translation: Rudi Friedrich. The German version was published in: Connection e.V. (editor) Offenbach, Germany: Eritrea: Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Desertion, November 2004

„I won't take a gun in my hand anymore“

Musse Habtemichael

I was born on 24 March 1981 in Adikefelet. The first five forms I went to school in Adigebrai, for the sixth and seventh form to the school Himbirti, for the eighth and ninth form in Mainefhi. My parents are farmers. Later we opened a shop as well.

In April 2000 I was called up for national service in the 13th round. I was brought to Gatilay where I received only one month basic training. I then came to a unit of the 32nd division. I was a service man in the 1st brigade, 2nd bataillon, 1st unit, 2nd group. At the time of the 3rd invasion we were stationed in Igla in the region of Senafe at the frontline near Salambesa. There were heavy fights. Suddenly there were so many dead.

After the ceasefire some of the students went back to school. Though I still was a student, I was refused to join them, because I was already of age. I also had asked for a discharge, because my parents are very old and didn't have a person looking after them. This was refused too. I could not even leave for vacation to visit my family.

In 2002 some of us were chosen to be "Koblenti", military police men. We had the order to search for AWOLs and objectors at their home and to hand them over to the administration. This was also dangerous for ourselves. Some of those arrested received heavy sentenced. When they were released, some tried to kill some of us.

My comrades and me didn't like the work. We began to refuse. But we were told: "This is an order. You have to do it." After we had repeatedly followed the order to go into every house of a quarter, to knock at the doors and to bring out juveniles, we protested, because we didn't want to do it any more. A meeting was held. Those who spoke up during the meeting disappeared. Probably they were arrested. Nobody knows where they were brought. We assumed that they would also arrest others who would ask about their whereabouts. We were frightened and didn't ask.

In some cases we got addresses of persons who had deserted from particular units. Sometimes we also surrounded entire quarters and controlled every house. At first the quarter was surrounded. Then we went from house to house and got all out on the street, everybody. Everyone was checked. If someone was a student, he/she had a student card and was allowed to leave. If someone was an adult and a worker you looked for his worker card. If he or she had nothing to show, he/she would be brought to a military unit. Some stayed with their children. We had to take them out of their family and take them from their children. This hurt me. Some were ill. We took them too and brought them to their division. There they were put in prison. Some of the sick persons died.

This happened sometimes and I got frightened for myself. Then I declared: "I won't do this work any more." As a reason I said that I fear for my life to be killed from persons who I had brought to prison. My superiors answered: "You have to do this." I said: "I don't do it." Again they said: "You have to do this." I answered: "I don't do it any more."

After my refusal I was arrested and brought to the prison of Adiabeto. There I stayed for two months until the end of February 2003. Four of us – including myself – were asked several times if we would take up the work again: "Did you really think about it? Will you take it up again?" We refused again.

After two months they brought us to Teseney. There they locked us in a container for 15 days. At daytime it is too hot, at night it is too cold. Our skin started to get rash. Later they made us work on road construction between Teseney and Haykota.

Since October 2002 there was a struggle between Eritrea and Su-



dan. Soldiers were stationed at the border in case of war. Now they gave us weapons and brought us to the front line, where the escalation started. This was a kind of penalty.

When I got my weapons I said: "I am fed up to the back teeth. I don't want war any more. I saw at the 3rd invasion, this only brings death, injuries and destruction. I won't take a gun in my hand any more, even if you shoot me."

They answered: "You are playing with your life. You will be shot, if you refuse." I gave back: "I don't mind. If I will be shot, it will be better. Then I have my rest at last. I don't want to live a life like this. I don't like to experience what I already experienced." It didn't mind, whether they would shoot me or not. I played with my life.

All others took up weapons. I refused and didn't get a weapon. I stayed with the unit at the front line. The superiors told me: "You will get your penalty. You will see." I stayed with the unit and was watched all the time, what I was doing, to which person I was speaking. It was the same for the others. They were not allowed to work as guards in the night, because this would have given them a chance to flee.

There was one person who wasn't punished. I won him as a friend. Bit by bit I could tell him about my situation. He insured me that he wanted to help me. If he was on guard he would take me with him.

He did it. He had his gun in the hand, I was unarmed. When we reached the border of Sudan we had to throw away the gun to cross the green line as civilians. On 12 February 2003 we went to Kessela. On the next day we found an Eritrean with a delivery van who took us to Khartoum. I could find out the address of my uncle and went to him.

In Khartoum I was frightened, too. It was said that persons were kidnapped by security forces from Eritrea which stayed in Sudan and in Khartoum. With the help of my uncle – the same as of my brother – I could flee on. He were afraid and didn't want that I

stayed in Khartoum. He said: "I will help you to go to Europe." I didn't know where. With his help and refugee smugglers I came to Germany.

I arrived in Germany on 6 April 2003. On 8 April I applied for asylum and came to Gießen. In the beginning I didn't have any information about Eritreans living in Germany. Later I could learn and look for oppositional groups. Finally I found a group/party which is acting in the way I imagine: without any gun, without bloodshed, without war, with peaceful means to bring the power to the people. This is my conviction. I'm active now in the ELF-RC.

Those living in Eritrea are not recognised as human beings. This government is not able to go on peaceful ways. Human beings are forced to fight in the war, are arrested, tortured, they die, are mutilated, die of starvation. I wish that Eritreans can live in democracy and peace and without any fear. I also demand that the powers that are give the power to the people. I hope for my people that this will be possible one day.

Two of my brothers and sisters have been arrested, too. It's said that they were helping us to flee. Nobody knows where they are. My parents informed me about that. I am afraid for them.

Now I live in Fulda. My asylum application was turned down because they didn't believe me. I don't have the opportunity to go to school until now. I just can work for two hours a day. Because the working place is in Frankfurt (100 kilometers away), I have to spend half of my wages on travel tickets.

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My torture in the sun

Saed Ibrahim

I was born in Asmara on 12 December 1978. From the first to the sixth grade I attended Jalia School, from the seventh to the eleventh grade I went to Kidsi Mariam School.

In 1993 I left school and, with the help of some relatives, was able to open a small shop of my own. In 1996 I was drafted into the national service in Sawa.

During basic training the food was bad and so was the training. Our instructors did not stick to the training program but, for example, they had us wash their clothes or fetch water, forcing us to submit to their will. There wasn't enough to eat. Spoilt flour was used for baking.

After six months of military training, we went on a military march of more than 120 kilometers from Ketan to Sahel. Then we were taken to Nakfa to dig trenches for 15 days. It wasn't clear what we did that for; the trenches were completely useless. Moreover, it was cold out there but we didn't get any blankets, so sometimes we were forced to use earth to cover ourselves with.

After that I came back to Division 2001, 2nd Brigade, 1st Battalion, 3rd Unit, 2nd section. We were deployed at Ambori in the Dembelas area, because the Jihad (Eritrean Islamic Jihad, EIJ), a small, Sudan-based insurgent group that has mounted attacks in the north and west since 1993, were there and conflicts were very likely.

After a month we had to set out on a recce of the area. As for food, the leader of the battalion ordered us to make provisions for ourselves by seizing the local population's sheep or goats. We were expected to help ourselves without paying. We were dispatched without food, water and any other supplies. I thought to myself: "I'm here to defend the people, not to rob them or steal their livestock." I did not agree.

In November 1997 I was relocated to Mensura to attend a military course, where we were taught the American system of fighting in small units. That was two months before my service was supposed to end. Later I grasped that we had been attending this course in preparation for war. They had either foreseen or planned the war. At the end of December I was sent back to my unit. The deputy of the head of the division, Brigadier Abraham Andom, nicknamed Afahn, summoned an assembly to give a lecture on the party PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice – the sole political party in the country), which had been in power at that time. Sergeant Serai, who had been in charge of reconnaissance and education, reported that the population in both the Sefa and Badime area were not doing well. The Brigadier's comment on this "Well, we will take care of that. If they want to have it their way we can also resettle them to Mekele."

Until the end of March we were always on alert and had to train in the American system in order to prepare for the war.

In early April veterans, who had been called up for national service during the first until the fourth draft wave, were drafted. As a pretext it was stated that they were to be involved in development measures. Actually, they were called up for war and sent to us. The 2nd Unit was to survey a whole area stretching from Katsaiy, via Shambuco to several places near Mensura. The 3rd Unit, we ourselves, were brought into action in Hatsino in the direction of Mendefera. One group from the 2nd Unit went to Sefa to negotiate with the Ethiopians. They were engaged in a conflict. Six of them died including Sergeant Sergai. That was how the war started.

On 6 May we were marching from Hatsino to Badime. The other battalions moved into their positions. The 2nd Battalions, in which the six had died, moved to a position near this area but did not return to the front. On 12 May we attacked Badime. We marched until we got to Dembegedamu, 18 to 20 kilometers on Ethiopian soil, occupied the area and moved into positions there. After one week Division 381 relieved us. We were relocated to



Zorona.

Initially, there wasn't much to be done. We dug trenches. The unit's leaders had us do private jobs, such as helping to grow vegetables. After harvest we had to pay for these vegetables with our own money. The proceeds went into their pockets. An engineer who was serving military service was assigned to build a house for them.

I had accepted to do national service. I was an Eritrean and ready to be a soldier and fight a war for a good cause, that is if Eritrea was really in danger. But now I was to die while others forced people to work for them, which made them richer and richer. I didn't see why I should sacrifice my life. I should have been released from national service. Instead, I was made their servant. The situation grew worse and worse. The superiors' faults emerged more and more clearly. But they stuck together. A leader of a section can get away with keeping a young woman to cook for him – and not only for cooking. At the same time, at home he might be a father of three sons and have a wife. The women had to accede to their every wish. Some accepted this in order to survive. Others defended themselves. "If I want to work, I could also do this for my family. As a female soldier I'm doing something else." These women gave us courage. However, after that, they were not doing very well because they were constantly being harassed.

A leader of just a section has the authority to enforce his will on women. The men also have to do jobs for him. With the leader of the unit it is even worse, all the more when it comes to a battalion leader. The situation was getting more and more insufferable.

I started to oppose. I said, "I'm doing military service. Although I don't agree with what is going on, I'm a soldier. Why do you have me work for your private interests? I don't see the sense of it."

I was arrested, released, re-arrested. Once I was detained for three months and had to work in the fields from 6 am to noon and from 2 to 4 pm together with 22 other soldiers. It was meant to be as a sort of brainwash. We harvested tomatoes and onions. Other soldiers' punishment was to dig trenches. We had

to work in the fields instead. The harvest, which the leader of the brigade claimed to be his, was sold to the unit and the unit had to purchase it from him.

Later on, they offered to promote me to section leader. This was not because they thought I was cut out for the job but because they wanted to catch me out at some time. I had to take on this job and lead a section of four soldiers.

At that time, it was February 1999, the second invasion began. We were in Onoshahok when there was uninterrupted fire for 1½ days. Fortunately, I made it out of there unhurt. In my section a man and a woman were injured. She was sent to the front because she had refused to submit to her leaders.

We were stationed there until May. Then I was supposed to attend a course for unit leaders in order to lead a unit of 12 to 13 people. I refused. I didn't want to be involved in private business and I didn't want to oppress my friends.

Milk, sugar, sun. The ordeal begins

Because of this I was arrested. They poured a mixture of milk and sugar over me, tied me up and exposed me to the sun continuously for two and half days. The days were very hot and the nights extremely cold. My skin got burned, blisters developed on my face. I also had a terrible headache. Because of the pain I almost fainted. A doctor appeared and called for medical treatment. Initially, the battalion leader rejected this demand. The doctor said: "I cannot take the responsibility. In case something happens you will be responsible." Then the battalion leader agreed to medical treatment. They took me to a military hospital, peeled my skin, cleaned my flesh with disinfectant, and gave me tetracycline and antibiotic tablets. This was it.

I stayed in hospital for two weeks. In spite of the tablets I got an infection. It got very ugly. For punishment they didn't treat me properly. Eventually, they took me to a military hospital in Alla. There I wasn't able to see anything with my left eye for about four months. I tried to have the battalion leader prosecuted but never received a response.

Sometimes my wounds healed, sometimes they got infected again and blisters reappeared. It was a continuous up and down. Eventually, I was granted sick leave lasting months so that I was able to travel to my family. I applied for a discharge, which was rejected on the grounds that as soon as I recovered I would be sent back to the front.

So I stayed at my parent's place and couldn't find a way out. Could I be treated in the Sudan if I went there? I had no idea. Therefore, I stayed in Asmara. There I contacted oppositional groups in order to do something against the government. I became an active member of ELF-RC. Due to my state of health I wasn't able to do much but I distributed periodicals and pamphlets. I also participated in clandestine meetings.

In June 2002 the small group in which I was active was discovered. We were having a meeting but I was late. I saw the police arrest the head of the group and take him away. Our contingency plan had been that if anyone got apprehended, all the other members of the group should go underground within 24 hours. I had to stick to the rule. This is why I fled to Sudan before they were able to get hold of me.

Relatives of mine have been living in Sudan for years. Some of them have even been naturalized. Their businesses are thriving; they were shocked when they saw me and the state of health I was in. With their financial help I was able to come to Germany, where I arrived in July 2002.

At present, I'm staying in Wächtersbach. I work two hours a day and I'm an active member of the oppositional group ELF-RC. I've had an interview with the Federal Office for the Recognition of Refugees. At that time it wasn't possible for me to explain my situation the way I can do it today. The Federal Office rejected my case but my proceedings are still pending. I haven't had my trial before the administrative court yet.

Translation: Thomas Stiefel

„I'm against war in principle“

Ruta Yosef-Tudla

I was born on 27th November 1987* in Asmara and grew up with my four siblings. My mother, Tseheinesh-Berhe, died in 1996, my grandmother on the mother's side in the year 2001. In the same year, my father was arrested and imprisoned without explanation. Up to the sixth grade I attended school at the Mekanegennet School, afterwards at the Hadnet School and for the eighth and ninth grade at the Keihbarih School.

After my mother had died, my grandmother on the mother's side took care of us. But I had to help her with it and therefore I had to interrupt schooling in the year 2003. After she had also died, my grandmother on the father's side came to us. She comes from a village and so I had to assist her and could not go to school.

I did very badly in Eritrea. When we applied to the authorities, we didn't get any answer. Our will was not heeded. We should do only that, what they demanded from us. I want to quote some examples of it:

Twice a week we had to attend a military training for two to three hours in school. Sometimes a long march or training in the school. Schoolgirls were also brought to Gahtelay, where it is really hot and where you can die with thirst. Two of my classmates died there.

Especially during the war, almost all students were conscripted compulsorily. They were brought to Sawa and to the front-line shortly before the O-level. Some were killed in action, some suffered injuries and are now disabled. Some also came back and were allowed to finish the school. Meanwhile they altered the school system in a way that the last class for the preparation of the high school diploma takes place in military camps.

The authorities wanted for a while that the population donates blood. They said in the radio and television that this is a good deed and happens on voluntary basis. But we were forced to, as well as the students who didn't want to donate. Otherwise they were flunked out of school or got other difficulties.

The 24th of May is the day of the liberation. This day is celebrated enormously. In the television it is shown that all teenagers celebrate the independence and perform well learned exercises. Three months before the independence celebration the teenagers therefore were taken from school. Whoever did anything wrong was beaten. Once, even the parents proceeded against it. They said that their children are refused to attend school. Mothers demonstrated although they are not allowed to. They said: "Our girls are detracted from our education. So they will be regarded badly in the society. Therefore they should continue the school and should be left to our education again. If they have to practice something similar, then only on voluntary basis." Because the mothers had demonstrated, they were regarded as opponents of the independence. Some of them were arrested.

There is no freedom of speech. There is no religious freedom either. Some religious sects, like the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Full Gospel, were simply prohibited and were closed.

Especially for women the situation is difficult. Some were brought forcefully to Sawa for the basic training. There they were treated like slaves and also raped. Christians became pregnant from muslims - and vice versa. Some were disowned by their families. The women can hardly endure all this. So some killed themselves, others their child, and some became crazy.

Those can live in Eritrea without problems, which belong to families that associate to the executives or have much money. The children of the rulers, of the generals, of the officials and of other high-ranking people are protected of the conscription to war. All others must die in the war. In my eyes, this is not correct. All this has deterred and scared me.

Because I had interrupted school, I wasn't allowed to go further to school. Instead, I should be forced to serve the national service. Some teenagers were simply even recruited forcefully on the street.

So the time came that I would have been called up for the national service. Because of several reasons, I was clear in my

mind that I didn't want to do it. On the one hand I am halfhearted by nature. I was also educated religiously so that it would be a sin for me to participate in war.

Furthermore I am against war in principle. I don't know at all, why war is waged. Who dies and who's in a safe place? The rulers, the members of their families and their children are in a safe place. The others must die. Is there a meaningful war at all? However, war is insane at all. I am totally against war, for example also in Rwanda. The war results in dead persons and poverty. The children suffer from it.

When I still went to school, I had to help for a while in a big hospital. We dressed the wounds of war-injured persons. There I experienced, for instance, how two siblings were wounded so heavily that they died. Their nurse was on duty. She went mad as she saw this. I experienced there many dreadful things and I saw severe injuries. It was harrowing and for me another reason to reject the national service.

Moreover two of my siblings had been called up for the war and we didn't get any message from them – till now.

Another reason was that my father was arrested without any explanation. At this moment we were not at home. Later the soldiers came once again in order to search the house. Then I asked them: "Why did you arrest him? Where is my father?" Instead of answering me, I was beaten. So far, we don't know where our father remains.

So I was in a difficult situation because of the threatening conscription. A friend of my father promised to help me to get out of the country. I was able to go with him to Sudan in the year 2003. I didn't remain long in the Sudan, just for one or two months.

I don't feel fine since I came to Germany. I live in a small village, Seeheim-Jugenheim, near Darmstadt. I have always difficulties with the social welfare office. I am not allowed to visit my friends or family. I had applied to be redistributed to a new accommodation. It was also agreed to me that I could move to relatives. But my application was finally rejected. Now, I am often not in the camp. Therefore, the welfare was already shortened already several times.

* The German authorities altered the date of birth arbitrarily to 1 January 1987, because Ruta Yosef-Tedla could not provide evidence of her identity.

Interview with Ruta Yosef-Tedla, June 2, 2004. Translation: Axel Heinemann. The German version was published in: Connection e.V. (editor) Offenbach, Germany: Eritrea: Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Desertion, November 2004



Amnesty International:

'You have no right to ask'

Abuses of military conscripts

Amnesty International's main concerns about national military service in Eritrea are the non-recognition of the right to conscientious objection; arbitrary detention without charge or trial in harsh conditions of possible conscientious objectors or prisoners of conscience; the use of torture as a standard military punishment; sexual violence against women conscripts; and the reported conscription of children into the army.

Torture and arbitrary detention of conscripts and deserters

A former military detainee, conscripted from school in 1995, described to Amnesty International how he and a group of seven other conscripts had presented a petition to officers complaining about use of soldiers for officers' private gain. As a result, they were detained for over a year in Tehadesso army prison near Mendefera and tortured. He said one soldier was arbitrarily executed and women conscripts were also detained there and their heads shaved for refusing to have sex with commanders.

Amnesty International is concerned about the arbitrary detention without charge or trial in military prisons of hundreds of possible conscientious objectors or prisoners of conscience. Some were detained for evading conscription. Others performing their national service or members of the armed forces were detained for military offences punishable under military law, such as being absent without leave (AWOL) or disobeying an order. Detainees also included those arrested on opinion-based political grounds, such as criticising the government's or military conduct of the war, requesting demobilization to pursue a civilian employment career, or supporting the calls for democratic reforms. Some women conscripts were also reportedly detained for refusing sexual advances by officers. Several former conscripts and EPLF veterans who have given testimonies to Amnesty International on abuses within the army reported that there was no form of military justice system operating. No-one accused of an offence or punished had the benefit of any form of military trial, and all punishments were arbitrary and summary.

The legal penalty for evading conscription or assisting evasion is two years' imprisonment, as set out in the national service regulations of 1995. In practice, offenders are punished administratively by local commanders without any form of trial, legal recourse or opportunity for appeal or redress. The forms of punishment consist of torture and arbitrary detention for an indefinite period. Although these punishments are unlawful and abuses of human rights, they are well-known to government and military officials and the public, and no army officer has ever been punished for employing them. Amnesty International has received testimonies of standard army torture practices particularly from recently released prisoners who have experienced or seen them.

The families of conscription evaders are often punished too – again without any legal or judicial reference – for allegedly assisting them to escape. Fathers or mothers or other relatives have been unlawfully detained in secret for short or long periods without charge or trial when their son or daughter fled the country, sometimes being held as a virtual hostage to try to force the wanted person to surrender.

Offences by members of the armed forces, including conscripts who are also under military jurisdiction, are subject in theory to military law. Penalties for a range of military offences are set out in the former Ethiopian penal code adopted at independence. These include up to five years imprisonment for desertion, except "in time of emergency, general mobilisation or war", where the penalty may be death "in the gravest cases" (article 300). The death penalty is also applicable to mutiny "in time of emergency, general mobilisation or war" (article 312). The offences in similar circumstances of "demoralisation of troops" (article 324),

cowardice in the face of the enemy (article 325), and capitulation by a commanding officer (article 326) are punishable by prison terms or, in exceptional circumstances, by death.

In practice, courts martial do not function in the armed forces. Offenders are punished by order of local commanders with torture and arbitrary detention. Amnesty International has also received allegations of extra-judicial executions ordered by local commanders and carried out in front of military units for what might be serious military offences.

Forced conscription

National military service is a key government policy of nation-building. It represents continuity of military-oriented mobilization by a predominantly EPLF government after the liberation war into the independence era (1).

In November 1991, the new EPLF government issued regulations to make national service compulsory for all citizens. The first intake of national service was in 1994 and it continued in staged phases since then. Under the revised national service regulations of 23 October 1995 (2).

There are exemptions from national service for EPLF veterans and the disabled (3). National service is postponed for those in higher education (whose graduation certificates are not presented until they have completed national service) and people with registered medical certificates. There is no exemption for conscientious objectors. Eritreans expelled from Ethiopia during the war were given temporary exemption only. Eritrean citizens returning from abroad and those with dual nationality are not exempted (4). In practice, national service has been extended indefinitely by administrative decision since the war with Ethiopia, when conscription was accelerated, military training was shortened, and development service was converted to active military service. Post-war demobilization plans to be funded by the international community were postponed by the govern-

A former soldiers reports

In May 2000 I was sent to a rehabilitation centre [military prison] at Tessenei for protesting against the war. I and about 30 others were arrested for talking among ourselves about why we needed this war. This was because I was having nightmares from my work in the medical unit with wounded patients. On the first day there I was beaten. Beating is a normal thing. I was also kicked on any part of my body. Then I was tied for three days in the 'otto' method. My feet were tied, and my hands were tied separately behind my back, and I was left outside in this position for three days continuously, lying on my front, except for short periods for two meal-times and two toilet breaks each day. This was not so bad as 'helicopter', where the hands and feet are also tied together behind the back.

"I saw others tied too, some very tightly. I saw one whose veins in his arms burst and blood flowed out. They just left him there and forgot about him. When the veins burst they took him away and we didn't know what happened to him. Sometimes the veins swelled up because of the sun, and burst.

"One day while I was in the army, three soldiers were brought in front of us and shot. We were told they were traitors but we were not told what the charges were. They had no trial and we didn't know who they were or what they had done." (Former conscript soldier.)

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ment as a result of the continuation of the border dispute with Ethiopia and post-war political tensions. The army is thus expanding each year. Some observers claim the Eritrean armed forces at around a third of the able-bodied work-force.

Conscription is enforced by the regional administration through "round-ups" (known as giffa in the Tigrinya language) where police search houses, work-places and streets and detain suspected evaders to check their identity documents, and at military road blocks on main roads. Shooting has been reported of people trying to escape conscription. Young persons are required to register at the age of 17 and are usually refused exit-permits when they approach conscription age. Exit-permits are only issued on proof of completion of national service or payment of a bond as security for return to Eritrea to perform national service.

In additional measures related to the aims of national service, the government requires final year (11th grade) secondary students and all university students to do up to 2-3 months summer vacation work service (with pocket money) on development projects. In August 2001 hundreds of University of Asmara students were beaten for refusing a summer work project and made to work in harsh conditions at Wia and Galaalo military camps in eastern Eritrea, where two died from heat stroke. In August 2003, 57 school students on a summer vacation work project at Sawa army base were imprisoned in containers for possessing bibles and belonging to minority churches.

From 2003, an extra final year (12th grade) has been added to the school system, which all students will attend at Sawa military training centre, reportedly under military authority and including military-type training. At the end of this final boarding year of secondary education, there is competitive selection for higher education and immediate entry to national service for the rest (who are the majority). National service will include military duties as well as participation in the new "Warsai Yikealo" scheme of development work linking EPLF veterans and the new recruits ("Warsai").

In January 2004 the UNICEF representative in Eritrea criticized this militarization of education as a violation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (which aims to promote the best interests of the child), because it separated children from their families and forced them into a military environment (5).

No right to conscientious objection

The government's refusal to recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide for alternative civilian service has affected particularly members of the Eritrean congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses, who refuse military service as a principle of faith. Other individuals opposed to military service on the grounds of conscientious opinion or belief, either when being conscripted or during national service, are also denied an option of alternative non-military service.

The right to conscientious objection to military service is inherent in the right to freedom of opinion and belief set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 19) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The UN Commission on Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Committee (which oversees implementation of the International Bill of Human Rights) have both urged all governments to guarantee that individuals objecting to compulsory military service, because of their conscientiously-held beliefs, are given the opportunity to perform alternative service.

Conscientious objection when advanced in support of an asylum claim from someone evading or escaping compulsory military service is recognized in international refugee law as a valid ground for asylum (6).

Sexual violence against women conscripts

There have been allegations from former conscripts of a pattern of sexual violence against female conscripts. Female conscripts are reported to have been subjected to sexual abuse including

Three Jehovah's Witnesses held since 1994

Three Jehovah's Witnesses who refused military service are among the longest-held prisoners of conscience, held since 1994. Paulos Iyasu (who had willingly completed 18 months development service but refused military service), Isaac Moges and Negede Teklemariam, have been held incommunicado in Sawa military base since 24 September 1994. Two others, Aron Abraha and Mussie Fessahaye, were forcibly conscripted in May 2001 and in 2003 respectively, and are detained in army custody.

Jehovah's Witnesses were also more generally accused of not having joined the EPLF armed independence struggle and not respecting the national flag. For this, the President issued a directive in October 1994 arbitrarily stripping them of their basic civil rights. The government expelled them from government employment and accommodation, denied them access to government services including schools and hospitals, and refused them the official identity cards, essential for daily life and administrative procedures, and passports. This denial, despite being semi-concealed from international attention by not being issued in any official gazette, was confirmed in speeches and actions.

In March 1995 the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued the following statement: "The Jehovah's Witnesses lost their right to citizenship because they refused to accept the Government of Eritrea and the laws." The statement accused them of not fighting in the liberation struggle, refusing to vote in the independence referendum and refusing to do national service - "they will not have rights equivalent to any other citizens" (1). This official position was reiterated in 2004 by the head of the President's office: "There are no restrictions on religion. I think the problems were with the Jehovah's Witnesses early on, because they said they didn't recognize the temporary government, they refused to vote yes or no or to take part in the political process here during the referendum. Their number is very small, they publicly said they don't recognize the temporary government and the government's response was, okay, if they do not recognize the temporary government, the government will also not recognize them..."(2).

(1)BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 4 March 1995, quoting the official Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea in Tigrinya.

(2)Interview with Yemane Gebremeskal, UN IRIN news agency, 1 April 2004.

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rape. Amnesty International has received reports that some of the new female recruits were selected by commanders for sex under duress, through being threatened with heavy military duties or being sent to the battle-front during the war or to a remote and harsh posting, or being denied home leave. In some cases, this may be termed rape or possibly sexual slavery because, although it may not have consisted of physical violence, it was coercive within a command and discipline system where women had little or no opportunity to resist. There was no mechanism for complaining to the military or civilian authorities, and when complaints were made, no action was known to have been taken to stop and prevent this practice, which appears to have been widely known. In some cases the women became pregnant and were sent home to their families. They were then subject to extreme social dishonour in the community as unmarried mothers. Women played an important part in the EPLF's liberation struggle in both military and civilian roles and there was an official commitment to gender equality in the EPLF and its social policies. This was reflected in the terms of national service after independence, which was established for men and women equally, although there was considerable resistance to female re-

Military banned from religious practices

The reason for the 2003 crackdown on minority churches was never given by the government but it appeared to be partly linked to government action against young people trying to avoid military conscription. Young people have been trying to hide from conscription and have deserted in considerable numbers, although only the Jehovah's Witnesses among the minority religions have a faith-based principle of refusal of military service. Dissatisfaction with national service, especially the military part of it, as well as conversion of conscripts to become "born-again" Christians, have reportedly been increasing in the army.

Detainees attempting to practise their faith in prison or in military service have been severely punished, including by torture. Former detainees have told Amnesty International of confiscation and burning of bibles and audio-cassettes.

One former prisoner who had previously been detained in the army and was later detained in Dahlak Kebir island stated that some prisoners on Dahlak Kebir who belonged to different minority faiths were punished for secretly having bibles in the prison and their bibles were burned in front of them. His own Orthodox Church bible had been confiscated and burnt in front of him. This was, he said, in accordance with a military order during the latter part of the war that "serious action will be taken against anyone caught with a bible or singing hymns or praying". There had been a religious revival during the war with a number of conscripts becoming "born again" Christians. Some conscripts who disobeyed were punished. According to the same informant, Muslim prisoners on Dahlak Kebir island were allowed to perform their regular prayers, but when Christians complained against being singled out, Muslims were stopped from praying too.

Over 80 national service conscripts belonging to minority churches are reportedly currently detained in various military prisons on account of their faith.

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recruitment from Muslim communities, especially among the Afar of Dankalia region on the Red Sea coast. Resistance on the grounds of religious belief, cultural traditions of family honour, or protecting women from sexual harassment and violence in the army, sometimes led to violent confrontations during conscription round-ups. The government appears to have subsequently stopped forcible recruitment of young Muslim women in these areas.

There was an official statement at the end of 2003 that women were to be demobilized but this has reportedly not been implemented.

Child soldier recruitment

"I was recruited in 1999 at the age of 16 in a round-up in Keren when I was still at school. They knew I was not yet 18 and still doing my studies but during the war many were taken who were under 18. We were forced to go and had no choice. I went to Sawa. There were many others under 18 and a few as young as 14. The very young ones were trained separately but I was put with all the others. Girls were trained separately."

Two asylum seekers recently described to Amnesty International their recruitment as child soldiers. One said how she had been recruited at the age of 15 in June 2002 at her home, despite protests from her mother that she was needed there. She was taken to Sawa army camp and performed mainly domestic duties. She escaped to Sudan while fetching firewood. The other said he had been conscripted in April 2000 at the age of 15 while at school in Asmara. He said that after three weeks military train-

Recruited at the age of 16

"I was recruited in 1999 at the age of 16 in a round-up in Keren when I was still at school. They knew I was not yet 18 and still doing my studies but during the war many were taken who were under 18. We were forced to go and had no choice. I went to Sawa. There were many others under 18 and a few as young as 14. The very young ones were trained separately but I was put with all the others. Girls were trained separately."

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ing at Sawa, he was sent to the war front. He escaped to Sudan in 2002 while on home leave.

Both Amnesty International and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (7) have received reports that child soldiers under 18 years were conscripted during the war, although the Eritrean government denied it (8). Amnesty International has received reports of some continued conscription of children under 18 years since the war (9).

Notes:

- (1) See, for example, "From guerrillas to government: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front", David Pool, London, 2001. During the liberation war, the EPLF recruited volunteers and maintained integrated military-civilian structures in the liberated territory it controlled. These included orphanages, schools, medical facilities and development institutions. It had mass political organizations of women, youth and students among the refugee diaspora, and a relief and humanitarian arm, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA).
- (2) Proclamation 82/1995, published in the Eritrean Gazette, 23 October 1995
- (3) Previous regulations had contained further exemptions which were withdrawn
- (4) The government reportedly treats Eritrean identity cards for voting in the 1993 independence referendum as evidence of citizenship.
- (5) BBC, 30 January 2004
- (6) The UNHCR Handbook (Geneva, 1999) sets out conditions for recognition of conscientious objectors and national service or army deserters as refugees
- (7) Report to the UN Security Council, 2002, www.child-soldiers.org.
- (8) The EPLF had recruited and used child soldiers during the liberation war, mainly those raised and educated in the Red Flames schools in Sudan or the liberated territories for war orphans and abandoned children. The practise of recruiting child soldiers seemed to have been discontinued after independence.
- (9) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Eritrea, forbids states from recruiting children under 15 years and participating in hostilities, and its Optional Protocol (2002), not ratified by Eritrea, raised the age limit to 18 years. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, ratified by Eritrea, defines a person under 18 years as a child and prohibits military recruitment of children

Secret Prisons in Eritrea

- Wenjel Mirmera ("special investigation"), a special security section in the 2nd police station in Asmara, which itself is known as Karchele (from *carceri*, the Italian word for prison);
- a special security section in the 6th police station in Asmara;
- an 800-inmate prison on Dahlak Kebir, the main Dahlak island on the Red Sea, 7 kilometres from the main town of Nakua: used for army deserters, military and political prisoners and consisting of eight large iron-sheet buildings;
- several army prison with underground cells, such as Haddis Ma'askar and Mai Temenei;
- Tsererat prison in Asmara, mainly for EPLF veterans, held in underground cells;
- "Tract B" (also known as "Track B"), a former US storage facility near the airport in Asmara, holding EPLF veterans, conscripts, alleged armed Islamists, and people accused of forging identity documents or smuggling army deserters out of the country.

Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners

"Robel Goniche, a young man from Asmara [deported from Malta and detained at Adi Abeto prison] was shot at the edge of the compound trying to escape and later died. All 27 who tried to escape were badly beaten, flat on the ground, until some were bleeding on the head with teeth and lips cut. One had an arm broken, which never healed straight, and another had his leg cut with a bayonet." Former Adi Abeto detainee deported with him from Malta.

"Ermias [detained in Dahlak Kebir island, a returnee from Germany] escaped twice. After four days free in his second escape attempt he was caught trying to get a boat out of the island. 10 guards surrounded him and two other captured escapees, including Habtom Tekleab, an ex-Malta deportee. They beat them in front of us until they were vomiting blood. They tied them in 'helicopter' method for 55 days outside in the heat. Ermias' skin colour changed, his body swelled and he couldn't walk. For the first two days he was refused food, but the prisoners fed him. I don't know if he is still alive." Former Dahlak Kebir island detainee.

Amnesty International has received new and consistent reports of the widespread and systematic use of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, particularly by the military against national service conscripts. Torture is used as a standard form of military punishment. Prisoners are commonly beaten but the special and principle torture method is "tying". This was previously used by the EPLF as a punishment within its own forces during the liberation struggle and has been extended since independence. Some of these torture methods are similar to those used by the Ethiopian security forces against suspected supporters of the Eritrean liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Amnesty International has documented torture and ill-treatment of prisoners through interviewing released or escaped prisoners, though it cannot reveal their names due to fears of reprisals against them, even outside Eritrea, or against their families inside Eritrea. More information is beginning to emerge despite the government's secrecy, intimidation, security control and restriction of investigative access to the country. The secrecy in which political prisoners are detained, to the extent that virtually all are detained incommunicado and have effectively "disappeared", makes them particularly vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment, and at severe risk to their physical integrity or even their lives. Medical treatment for torture injuries or illnesses caused or exacerbated by prison conditions is not provided in any of these places of detention beyond the most minimal medication dispensed by medical assistants. Referrals to hospital are difficult to obtain, long-delayed and rarely result in satisfactory treatment.

Torture methods

The most commonly described torture method is tying with rope, and the most common form is nicknamed "the helicopter". It can take different forms and other forms of tying also have different names.

"The helicopter": the victim is tied with a rope by hands and feet behind the back, lying on the ground face down, outside in the hot sun, rain or freezing cold nights, stripped of upper garments. This is a punishment allocated for a particular number of days, the maximum reported being 55 days in the Dahlak Kebir island prison, but it is more often one or two weeks. The prisoner is tied in this position 24 hours a day, except for two or three short breaks for meals and toilet functions.

"Otto" (Italian for "eight"): the victim is tied with hands behind the back and left face down on the ground, but without the legs tied.

"Jesus Christ": the victim is stripped to the waist, wrists tied, and standing on a block with hands tied to a tree branch; the block is removed, leaving the victim suspended with the feet just off the ground in a crucifix-like posture. Beatings are inflicted on

the bare back. This is said to be an extremely severe torture, restricted to only 10-15 minutes to avoid serious lasting injury. This method was first reported from Adi Abeto prison in 2003.

"Ferro" (Italian for "iron"): the wrists are bound behind the back with metal handcuffs while the victim lies on the ground face down and is beaten with sticks or whipped with an electric wire on the back and buttocks.

"Torch" or **"Number eight"**: inside a special torture room, the victim is tied up by wrists behind the back and with the feet bound; a stick is placed under the knees and supported on a framework on both sides horizontally, and the body is turned upside down with the feet exposed. The soles of the feet are beaten with sticks or whipped. (This was a common punishment in Ethiopia and pre-independence Eritrea under the Dergue.)

Torture used in interrogations of political prisoners held in security prisons has allegedly also included electric shocks and sexual torture – a coca-cola bottle filled with water and tied to the testicles.

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Atrocious prison conditions

Political prisoners are held in numerous built or make-shift prisons throughout the country, mostly secret with access prohibited and not officially designated as prisons. Many of these prisons are underground. They are under the control of the military or the internal security service, including at the main Sawa army base. Some political prisoners are held incommunicado in secret security sections of official police stations or of officially-designated prisons (such as in Sembel prison in Asmara). In contrast, prisoners for suspected ordinary crimes in official civilian prisons and police stations are normally allowed family visits and food, and their conditions broadly conform to international standards.

Members of the armed forces and national service conscripts are held in military prisons, including custodial "rehabilitation centres" in army units. One of the most frequently-named prisons holding recently-arrested political prisoners is Adi Abeto prison near Asmara. This is used for conscripts, returned asylum seekers, and members of minority churches.

The security service is also said to control many secret "safe houses" in Asmara and other towns which are used for short-term detention and interrogation.

Metal shipping containers, brought from Assab and Massawa ports and used elsewhere for ordinary purposes such as for storage or even as shops, offices or homes, are now widely used to accommodate the expanding number of prisoners and also for punishment purposes. They have been reported at Sawa military training centre (where 57 religious prisoners were held in containers in mid-2003), Adi Abeto prison, Dahlak Kebir prison, Mai Serwa, Alla near Decamare, Mai Edaga near Decamhare, Mai Temenei in Asmara, Tehadasso army prison, and other prisons.

Amnesty International: "You have no right to ask"

The Times & The Sunday Times, Malta

Malta deportees tortured in Eritrea, Amnesty says

An Eritrean who had been deported from Malta in late 2002 was on his return beaten, tied in the "helicopter" position and tortured in groups of 10 to 15, according to a report being published by Amnesty International today.

The report Eritrea: You Have No Right To Ask, claims that the 220 Eritreans deported from Malta in September and October 2002 were among those who faced torture and punishment on their return.

Women, children and those over the conscription age limit of 40 were released after some weeks in Adi Abeto prison. But the rest of the Malta deportees - mostly army deserters - were kept in "incommunicado detention and torture", according to the 47-page report.

At the time, the Maltese government had said it had not been aware of any mistreatment of the illegal immigrants on their return to Eritrea. Of those repatriated, 170 had not applied for refugee status.

Amnesty claimed prisoners were tortured as the standard punishment for evading or escaping conscription or for a military offence or while being interrogated about suspected alleged political opposition.

It said the Eritrean government was resisting scrutiny on human rights and those objecting to the government had to endure torture methods with nicknames such as "the helicopter", "Jesus Christ" (a position resembling crucifixion) and "number eight".

The report is built on the narrations of several inmates and their alleged harrowing experiences.

Amnesty said the deportees were detained on arrival at the airport in Asmara, the Eritrean capital. They were then taken to the nearby Adi Abeto military detention centre.

Some 180 of them were kept in detention and tortured over a period of two-and-a-half months. Some tried to escape but were recaptured; three were shot, with one man dying from his wounds.

In December 2002, all remaining detainees were transferred to a secret detention centre on the main Dahlak Island in the Red Sea, where they were subjected to forced labour.

Some were moved to secret mainland prisons in July 2003, from which several later escaped across the Sudan border.

Robel Gonictie, a young man from Asmara who was deported from Malta and detained at Adi Abeto prison, was shot at the edge of the compound trying to escape and later died, according to another detainee deported with him from Malta.

"All 27 who tried to escape with him were badly beaten, flat on the ground, until some were bleeding from the head with teeth and lips cut. One had an arm broken, which never healed straight, and another had his leg cut with a bayonet," the report claims.

Another deportee from Malta spoke of his detention in Adi Abeto prison: "We were beaten and mostly were tied in the 'helicopter' position and tortured in groups of 10 to 15. We were tied up day and night, except for three short food and toilet breaks. I was tied up for two weeks. One of us got very ill with bronchitis and there was no medical treatment... Some got paralysed in the arms and legs".

Ermias - detained in Dahlak Kebir Island, a returnee from Germany - escaped twice.

In his second escape attempt he was caught trying to get a boat out of the island. Ten guards surrounded him and two other captured escapees, including Habtom Tekleab, an ex-Malta deportee.

"They beat them in front of us until they were vomiting blood. They tied them in 'helicopter' method for 55 days outside in the heat. Ermias' skin colour changed, his body swelled and he couldn't walk. For the first two days he was refused food but the prisoners fed him. I don't know if he is still alive," a former Dahlak Kebir island detainee was reported as saying.

An ex-Malta deportee and former detainee in Haddis Ma'askar

army prison near Sawa had this harrowing story to tell: "After seven months in Dahlak Kebir Island, in July 2003 we were taken to the mainland in small groups and to different prisons.

"I was sent to Haddis Ma'askar. We were kept in handcuffs. I was held in a 2x2 metre underground cell holding myself and another prisoner. It was very hot with no light and we had no shoes. "There were about 1,000 prisoners there, some in big cells holding 200. The building was completely underground, fairly recently built. Prisoners were there for different offences - deserting from the army, spying for Ethiopia, etc.

"We were occasionally taken to work - fetching firewood, for example. We had to perform toilet functions in the fields around. Other prisoners were told we were 'Jihad' (armed Islamists) and they did not know we had come from Malta. I escaped with another prisoner during a toilet break and reached the Sudan border after three days."

Walta Haile, another ex-Malta deportee who had been tortured, tried to commit suicide at Massawa by tying his own hands and jumping into the sea last December.

"He got caught in the ship's propeller and his face was badly cut. He was taken out of the sea and we didn't hear of him again, maybe he died," a former inmate claims.

Another spoke of his experience as he was shuttled out of Malta. "That night at 3 a.m., we were woken up, handcuffed, and taken to the airport - some even without their shoes. There were two

Over 110 Eritrean nationals forcibly returned from Libya

The Libyan authorities are reported to have forcibly returned over 110 people to Eritrea on 21 July. It is feared that they are now in secret, incommunicado detention in military camps, where they are at serious risk of torture. At least 200 Eritrean nationals currently detained in Libya are also feared to be in imminent danger of forcible return. All were reportedly hoping to travel on from Libya to seek asylum in Europe.

It is feared that many Eritrean nationals held in detention centres in Kufra, Misrata, Tripoli and elsewhere, as well as others living in Libya, are at imminent risk of forcible return to Eritrea. This fear is compounded by reports that members of the Libyan security forces may have been searching for Eritrean nationals residing in the country, apparently with a view to arresting and deporting them. About 40 of those returned on 21 July were reportedly arrested in a street round-up in Tripoli in recent weeks. They were apparently convicted of drug- and alcohol-related offences, which they denied, and deported the same day. At least another 40 had been detained for longer in detention centres in Misrata and Tripoli, apparently for illegal entry. Others in the group had been detained since June, when the boat in which they were attempting to reach Italy was forced back by dangerous sea conditions.

Most of the detainees are believed to have either deserted from military service or evaded conscription. Military service is compulsory in Eritrea for all men and women aged 18 to 40, with further reserve duties later. It consists of six months' military service and 12 months' development service. The people forcibly returned on 21 July were reportedly taken to the remote Gelalo prison in eastern Eritrea, where conditions are harsh and temperatures are extreme.

Amnesty International: PUBLIC AI Index: MDE 19/012/2004, 28 July 2004, UA 232/04 Forcible return/fear for safety/fear of torture

Maltese special force soldiers to each prisoner, holding our arms. "Some of us were crying but the soldiers were laughing and joking in their language," he claimed.

When they landed at Asmara, the airport was quiet and there were no relatives to meet them.

When the Maltese aircraft left, the soldiers took them in a military bus to Adi Abeto prison. The women, girls and children were separated. There were interrogation rooms and we were called one at a time, with two guards, one asking the questions, the other doing the beating, he claimed.

"There were plainclothes security officers at the airport and they took us to a reception area when the plane returned to Malta. Then soldiers came and put us on buses and took us to Adi Abeto. Our relatives didn't know about us or our returning to Eritrea and there were none at the airport."

"Three women - deported from Malta in advanced pregnancy - gave birth at Adi Abeto prison but they were not even given blankets. They were not held there for long but we don't know what happened to them.

"The rest of us all had interrogations and beatings and torture. We were asked why we had left Eritrea, why we had spoken against the government and we were beaten with leather and rubber whips if we denied their accusations."

In response to Amnesty International's concern at the time of the deportations, the Maltese government had said it was "not in possession of any evidence that any ill-treatment was afforded to the Eritreans repatriated from Malta" and that the Eritrean Director for Refugees "was reported to have rejected any allegations of ill-treatment".

The London-based group Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights had said at the time that the Home Affairs Ministry was wrong to believe that the Eritreans sent back home were not under threat.

EHDR-UK executive director Dawit Mesfin had said the government had "misjudged the whole event and ended the hopes of freedom-seeking Eritreans unreasonably".

The report goes on to mention that the Maltese authorities were heavily criticised for their treatment of the Eritreans and other migrants and asylum-seekers, at a time when Malta was applying to join the EU and, therefore, expected to comply with asylum standards and establish refugee status determination procedures more in line with international standards.

Since then, however, the government has taken several steps to soften its stance towards illegal immigrants.

In December 2003, most of the remaining Eritrean asylum-seekers were taken to a non-custodial hostel. The rest were released in February 2004 and resettlement is being considered for all 105 Eritrean asylum seekers still in Malta.

More Eritreans arrived in Malta in April after encountering difficulties at sea.

The Times & The Sunday Times, Malta, Wednesday, May 19, 2004

Eritrean asylum-seekers at risk

Amnesty International considers the following categories of people would be particularly at risk of arbitrary detention (some as prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence), torture and ill-treatment, or possible extra-judicial execution:

- members and supporters or suspected supporters (at all levels, not just those holding official positions) of the ELF or other groups in the armed Eritrean National Alliance;
- members and supporters of new political opposition groups such as the EPLF-DP (now the EDP) or the "democratic reform" movement in general;
- journalists who had criticized the government;
- national service conscripts and members of the armed forces deserting from the army;
- people evading and refusing conscription on account of their opinions or beliefs;
- members of persecuted minority Christian religions (especially Jehovah's Witnesses);
- Muslims suspected of links with armed Islamist or ELF opposition groups – even without substantive evidence of such involvement;
- people who had previously been imprisoned for political reasons and ignored threats to desist from opposing the government;
- anyone known or suspected to have criticised the government or the President;
- anyone suspected of disloyalty to the government – even the act of applying for asylum abroad would be regarded as evidence of disloyalty and reason to detain and torture a person returned to Eritrea after rejection of asylum.

In addition, two categories of Eritreans affected by the war and continued tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia would be at risk of human rights violations if forced to return to Eritrea:

- those who wished to remain in or return to Ethiopia as Ethiopian citizens (after living there for all or most of their lives and having no ties to Eritrea) but were en masse denied this by Ethiopia and stripped of their Ethiopian citizenship;
- those of mixed Ethiopian-Eritrean families (of which there are many): families were broken up by the expulsions from Ethiopia during the war, where the Ethiopian spouse/parent stayed in Ethiopia in fear of the risks of moving to Eritrea, or where marriage to an Ethiopian or someone of part-Ethiopian descent might lead to their being refused entry to Eritrea, discriminated against in Eritrea or suspected of having Ethiopian government links; some had no ties with Eritrea and did not wish to become Eritrean citizens.

Amnesty International: "You have no right to ask"

ERITREA Thousands of people held at Adi Abeto army prison

Thousands of people arrested on suspicion of evading military conscription and held at Adi Abeto army prison are thought to be at serious risk of torture and ill-treatment. At least a dozen prisoners have reportedly been shot dead and many more were wounded following a disturbance at the prison.

On 4 November Eritrean security forces in the capital, Asmara, indiscriminately arrested thousands of youths and others suspected of evading military conscription. The arrests took place in the streets, shops and offices, at roadblocks and in homes.

Those arrested were taken to Adi Abeto army prison just outside Asmara. Conditions in this military holding centre are harsh, with severe overcrowding, little food or sanitation. Many detainees have reportedly been forced to sleep outside in the very cold weather without blankets or shoes. Prisoners have no access

either to their families or to lawyers.

Towards midnight on 4 November, a prison wall was apparently pushed over by some prisoners, possibly in an escape attempt. Soldiers opened fire and shot dead a number of the prisoners, wounding many more. On 8 November, the Minister of Information said that two prisoners had been killed. Other sources claim at least a dozen people were killed, and that bodies were buried without being returned to their families. Those wounded were taken to hospital and held incommunicado under military guard.

Amnesty International: PUBLIC AI Index: AFR 64/008/2004, 9 November 2004, UA 301/04 Fear of torture / Incommunicado detention / Arbitrary killings

UNHCR

Position on Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea

January 2004

BACKGROUND

Following a UN-supervised referendum, the State of Eritrea declared independence from Ethiopia in September 1993. This had been preceded, in 1991, by the end of the protracted war of independence, which had caused hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to leave their country in search of protection, notably in the neighboring countries. These changes triggered the urge amongst the refugees to return, and already in 1992 as many as some 70,000 Eritrean refugees returned spontaneously to their home country.

In 1995, the Government of the State of Eritrea signed an agreement with UNHCR to initiate a voluntary repatriation project. In addition, the Government of the State of Eritrea took a number of measures to create conditions conducive for the voluntary return of its nationals who had sought asylum abroad. These actions included, inter alia, the proclamation of the right and freedom of every Eritrean national to return to Eritrea without fear of persecution on account of having been a refugee. The Government also announced its commitment to facilitate refugees' voluntary repatriation and to assist in their re-integration. As a result of these measures, including the safeguards provided in the agreement between UNHCR and the State of Eritrea, many more Eritrean refugees were able to repatriate to Eritrea. A Tripartite Agreement for the voluntary repatriation of refugees between UNHCR and the Governments of the State of Eritrea and the Republic of Sudan was signed in April 2000.

However, in May 2000 a full-scale war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the wake of the military conflict that had started two years earlier, due to an unsettled dispute on the demarcation of the border as well as other political and economic factors. As a result, a number of Eritrean nationals who were resident in the area of conflict became either displaced internally or refugees in neighboring countries, principally Sudan. Eritrea and Ethiopia signed an Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities on 18 June 2000, which was followed on 12 December 2000 by a Comprehensive Peace Agreement resulting in the establishment of a Temporary Security Zone under United Nations supervision between the two countries. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, which was also established in the peace agreement, delivered its delimitation decision on 13 April 2002. However, this decision is disputed by Ethiopia, with the result that the border demarcation has been suspended. The Temporary Security Zone between the two countries continues to be monitored by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), whose mandate was recently extended until 15 March 2004 by the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, within days of the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement, the "new" Eritrean refugees began to repatriate. From July to November 2000, 58,000 refugees returned, 27,600 through the organized voluntary repatriation programme, and the remainder did so spontaneously. Nearly 33,000 persons were assisted to return from Sudan in 2001 and some 19,000 persons in 2002. In October 2002, the voluntary repatriation from Sudan to Eritrea was suspended, due to armed clashes in Sudan close to the Eritrean border (Kassala State). The operation was resumed in June 2003 and continues to date. At the time of issuing this note, some 35,000 refugees in Sudan, who have registered for voluntary repatriation, are waiting to return.

On 8 May 2002, UNHCR announced that the "ceased circumstances" cessation clauses, under Article I. C. (5) of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and Article I. 4. (e) of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, would be applicable to Eritrean refugees as from 31 December 2002. The cessation clauses apply to Eritreans, who fled their country as a result of the war of independence which ended in 1991 or the border conflict between

Eritrea and Ethiopia which ended in June 2000. Hence, the application of the cessation clauses is limited in scope and does not extend to the refugees who fled and are not able to return to Eritrea on other grounds, i.e. well-founded fear of persecution.

SITUATION IN ERITREA (1)

Eritrea is a one-party state which, throughout its independence, has been ruled by the People's Front of Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), formerly called Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), led by President Isaias Afewerki. The Constitution that was ratified in 1997 provides for democratic freedom; however, its provisions in this regard are yet to be implemented. National elections, originally scheduled for 1997, have not been held. The draft electoral law and the draft law regulating the formation and activities of political parties, prepared in 2001, have not been acted upon (2), and the National Assembly elections scheduled for December 2001 were postponed indefinitely (3). Officials have stated that the elections have been delayed because of continuing tensions with Ethiopia and problems caused by dissidents and the private press (4).

In September 2001, the government clamped down on increasing criticisms of the government by arresting eleven members of the National Assembly for voicing their opposition to government policies (5). Ten journalists were also arrested in the same month, when the government shut down all the privately-owned news media (6). In the two years since, many more individuals have been arrested – including civil servants, businesspeople, journalists, former freedom fighters, and elders who had sought to mediate between the government and its critics – either because of their ties to the dissidents or their perceived political views (7). Many of them – including the above mentioned groups arrested in September 2001 – and allegedly scores of political prisoners detained in previous years, remain held incommunicado in secret detention places without charge or trial (8). At least 14 journalists were reported to be in prisons in Eritrea as of 17 September 2003, which qualified the country as "the biggest prison for journalists in Africa" (9). Dozens of other journalists fled abroad (10).

In August 2001, the government cracked down on a students' demonstration against the compulsory student vacation work programme under the national service regulations (11). Approximately 450 students were detained and subjected to a work programme under harsher conditions than the original programme (12). Reportedly they were not provided adequate food, water or shelter, and two of them are said to have died from heat-related causes (13). The students were released between September and November 2001, except for their leader, who was held incommunicado in detention in a secret location until he managed to escape to Ethiopia in August 2002 (14).

According to the Eritrean law, national military and development service is compulsory for 18 months for both men and women aged between 18 and 40. In practice, it has become indefinite as no meaningful demobilization has taken place so far. There is no right to conscientious objection (15). The government has deployed military police throughout the country using roadblocks, street sweeps, and house to house searches to find deserters and draft evaders (16). The government has also reportedly authorized the use of extreme force against anyone resisting or attempting to flee (17). There have been reports of resistance, especially by parents of draft-age girls, which resulted in deaths of both soldiers and civilians (18). In some instances, authorities are said to have arrested or detained for several hours or even days individuals, including pregnant women, children under age 18, and citizens of other countries, who were not subject to national service obligations or had proper documentation showing they had completed or were exempt from national service (19). It

is reported that the army resorted to various forms of severe physical punishment to force objectors, including some Jehovah's witnesses, to perform the military service (20). The punishments used against deserters, conscription evaders and army offenders reportedly included such measures as the tying of the hands and feet for extended periods of time and prolonged sun exposure at high temperatures (21).

The comprehensive drafting appears to have become the main cause of the flight of asylum seekers (22). It has also had an impact on the Eritrean society at large. For instance, the drafting of many civilians into the national service, including court administrators, defendants, judges, lawyers, and others involved in the legal system, has reportedly had a significant negative impact on the judiciary (23). In 2001, the High Court was reduced from 7 benches to 3 benches, and provincial, zone and village court personnel were reduced by 40 per cent (24). Even before these developments, the judiciary system was reported to be weak and subjective to executive interference (25). There exists a system of special courts, which have banned defence counsel and the right of appeal, allowed the executive branch to mete out punishment without respect to due process, and sometimes subjected the accused to double jeopardy (26). The judges of the special courts are senior military officers, most of whom have little or no legal experience (27). The special courts have jurisdiction over some criminal cases, but the Attorney General has also allowed the special courts to retry civilian court cases, including those decided by the High Court (28). In July 2001, the President of the High Court (Chief Justice) made public criticisms about the government interference with the judiciary and the illegality of the special court system (29). He was dismissed by the Minister of Justice on 7 August 2001 (30).

There are four major religions in Eritrea: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism and the Evangelical Lutheran (31). For several years, the small community of Jehovah's witnesses has been reported to be harassed, discriminated against and subjected to detention, because of their refusal, on religious grounds, to vote or participate in national service (32). In May 2002, the government reportedly ordered several minority churches, referred collectively as the "Pentes" (including Born Again Christians, Pentecostals, Full Gospel and other small Protestant groups) to close down (33). They were required to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs and receive authorization to reopen (34). Although the churches reportedly complied with the registration requirements, which included providing extensive details of members and funds, and were informally allowed to continue to worship (35), none of them were known to have been officially registered by 19 September 2003 (36). Instead, it is reported that, particularly between February and May 2003, hundreds of members of more than twelve evangelical churches were arrested (37). They were reportedly tortured and ill-treated in order to force them to sign statements abandoning their faith (38). The members were also told that their prayer meetings and church gatherings were illegal (39). They were reportedly held without charge or trial, contrary to the human rights protections (which also guarantee religious freedom), under the laws and Constitution of Eritrea (40).

On 19 and 20 August 2003, over 200 teenage school students from all over Eritrea, who were sent to Sawa Military camp in western Eritrea for a compulsory 3-month summer course under new pre-National Service education regulations, were allegedly beaten for possessing bibles (41). 57 of them, 27 girls and 30 boys, are said to have been arrested and put in unventilated, over-crowded and extremely hot shipping containers, without adequate food or medical care (42). Six of them were still reported to be held in underground cells in solitary confinement as of 27 November 2003 (43). In total, over 330 members of minority faiths were believed to be detained in different parts of the country at that time (44).

SITUATION OF RETURNEES

a) Refugees who have returned voluntarily under UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme

UNHCR monitors the return of refugees in the context of its organized voluntary repatriation programmes. In this context the returnees have been well received and assisted to re-integrate. UNHCR's monitoring activities have not revealed any incidents of reprisals or persecution perpetuated by the Government of the State of Eritrea against refugees who voluntarily elected to return to their country, and did so under the auspices of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme. A few returnees have been, apparently by mistake, drafted to national service "prematurely" (the Eritrean government has generally provided for a one year leave from drafting for the returning refugees), but they have usually been released after interventions by UNHCR and its governmental implementing partner. The voluntary repatriation programme continues and UNHCR hopes to be able to assist as many refugees as possible to repatriate, including the remaining 35,000 refugees who are currently registered for voluntary repatriation in Sudan.

b) Persons deported to Eritrea

Between 30 September and 3 October 2002, 233 persons were deported from Malta to Eritrea. 170 of them were reported not to have sought asylum, whereas 53 had been rejected in the asylum procedure (which was not known to UNHCR at the time). They were reportedly arrested immediately on arrival in Asmara and taken to detention incommunicado. The Eritrean authorities neither acknowledged the detentions nor revealed the whereabouts of the detainees to their families or the public (45). Subsequent reports have suggested that those with children and those over 40 (the conscription limit) may have soon afterwards been released, but that the remainder were – and still are – kept in incommunicado detention in secret places, described as halls made of iron sheets and underground bunkers. According to different sources, the detainees were deprived of their belongings (including shoes and clothes to change), subjected to forced labor, interrogated and tortured (e.g. by beating, tying up and exposing to sun as described above). The dwellings are said to be congested and lack any facilities for personal hygiene. Food and water provided for the detainees are inadequate and unclean. Consequently, many of the detainees have succumbed to illnesses, notably various skin conditions and diarrhea. Medical treatment is said not to be available. Some detainees are believed to have died of their diseases and/or injuries. At least one person was allegedly killed by shooting during an escape attempt (46).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on various reports, it appears that the human rights situation in Eritrea has seriously deteriorated in the past two years (47). Human rights violations continue to be reported, inter alia, with regard to the treatment of opposition political groups and movements, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, arbitrary detention and detention conditions (including reports of torture, ill-treatment and forced labor), and treatment of draft evaders/deserters (48).

Against this background, it appears that the deportees from Malta to Eritrea may have faced persecution owing to an imputed political opinion, conscientious objection or other reasons. It cannot be excluded that future deportees would face a similar risk.

It is again emphasized that the scope of the cessation clauses for Eritrean refugees announced by UNHCR in May 2002 is limited to persons who fled their country as a result of the war of independence which ended in 1991, or the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia which ended in June 2000. Other Eritrean refugees, i.e. those fleeing persecution, remained and continue to be unaffected by the cessation clauses. It is also underlined that the applicability of the cessations clauses is always rebuttable and, upon request, each individual case is to be examined on its merits. In this context, the possibility of a valid sur place claim should not be excluded.

In light of the above, UNHCR recommends that asylum claims submitted by Eritrean asylum seekers should undergo a careful

assessment to determine their needs for international protection. It is also recommended that states refrain from all forced returns of rejected asylum seekers to Eritrea and grant them complementary forms of protection instead, until further notice. This position will be reviewed in the second half of 2004.

UNHCR: Position on Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea, January 2004

Notes:

- (1) This section is intended to give a short overview of the situation in Eritrea and the recent developments. It is not meant to substitute for eligibility guidelines and does not deal with groups at risk – some of which are not mentioned at all – in any comprehensive manner.
- (2) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea
- (3) European Parliament Resolution on Eritrea, 7 February 2002
- (4) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea
- (5) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; Human Rights Watch: Escalating crackdown in Eritrea: reformists, journalists, students at risk, 21 September 2001; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; European Parliament Resolution on Eritrea, 7 February 2002; Inter-Parliamentary Union: Resolution adopted unanimously by the Governing Council at its 173rd session (Geneva, 3 October 2003)
- (6) Human Rights Watch: Cease persecution of journalists and dissidents, 16 May 2002; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; European Parliament Resolution on Eritrea, 7 February 2002; Reporters Without Borders: Eritrea – 2003 Annual Report: Reporters Without Borders: Two years without independent press, 17 September 2003
- (7) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea; Human Rights Watch: Cease persecution of journalists and dissidents, 16 May 2002; Human Rights Watch World Report 2003: Human Rights Watch: Eritrea: Release Political Prisoners, 17 September 2003; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; Amnesty International Report 2003: Eritrea: Amnesty International: Eritrea: Human rights appeal for 10th independence anniversary, 19 May 2003; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003
- (8) Ibid; Inter-Parliamentary Union: Resolution adopted unanimously by the Governing Council at its 173rd session (Geneva, 3 October 2003)
- (9) Reporters Without Borders: Eritrea – 2003 Annual Report: Reporters Without Borders: Two years without independent press, 17 September 2003, Reporters without borders: Fifteen journalists still held in utmost secrecy, 20 August 2003
- (10) Ibid; Amnesty International Report 2003: Eritrea
- (11) Human Rights Watch: Escalating crackdown in Eritrea: reformists, journalists, students at risk, 21 September 2001; US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; European Parliament Resolution on Eritrea, 7 February 2002
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002
- (15) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003
- (16) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Ibid; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Human rights appeal for 10th independence anniversary, 19 May
- (21) Ibid.
- (22) Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003
- (23) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) Ibid.; Human Rights Watch: Escalating crackdown in Eritrea: reformists, journalists, students at risk, 21 September 2001; Amnesty In-

- ternational: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002
- (26) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002
- (27) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002
- (28) Ibid.
- (29) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; Human Rights Watch: Escalating crackdown in Eritrea: reformists, journalists, students at risk, 21 September 2001
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002
- (32) Ibid.; US Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report 2002: Eritrea
- (33) Ibid.
- (34) Ibid; Amnesty International: UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (35) Amnesty International: UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (36) Amnesty International UA 272/03: Eritrea: Twelve members of the Eritrean Bethel Church, 19 September 2003; Amnesty International: UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (37) Ibid.
- (38) Ibid.
- (39) Ibid.
- (40) Ibid.
- (41) Amnesty International UA 269/03: Eritrea: 57 male and female students – members of minority Christian churches, 18 September 2003; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003; Amnesty International: UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (42) Amnesty International UA 269/03: Eritrea: 57 male and female students – members of minority Christian churches, 18 September 2003; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003
- (43) Amnesty International: UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (44) Ibid.
- (45) Amnesty International: Malta: The Government should suspend deportations of Eritreans, 10 October 2002
- (46) Sources withheld for security reasons
- (47) US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001: Eritrea; Human Rights Watch: Escalating crackdown in Eritrea: reformists, journalists, students at risk, 21 September 2001; European Parliament Resolution on Eritrea, 7 February 2002; Human Rights Watch: Cease persecution of journalists and dissidents, 16 May 2002; Amnesty International: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002; US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002: Eritrea; US Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report 2002: Eritrea; Inter-Parliamentary Union: Resolution adopted unanimously by the Governing Council at its 173rd session (Geneva, 3 October 2003); Reporters Without Borders: Eritrea – 2003 Annual Report; Human Rights Watch World Report 2003; Amnesty International Report 2003: Eritrea; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Human rights appeal for 10th independence anniversary, 19 May 2003; Reporters without borders: Fifteen journalists still held in utmost secrecy, 20 August 2003; Human Rights Watch: Eritrea: Release Political Prisoners, 17 September 2003; Reporters Without Borders: Two years without independent press, 17 September 2003; Amnesty International: Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups, 18 September 2003; Amnesty International UA 269/03: Eritrea: 57 male and female students – members of minority Christian churches, 18 September 2003; Amnesty International UA 272/03: Eritrea: Twelve members of the Eritrean Bethel Church, 19 September 2003; Amnesty International UA 348/03: Eritrea, 27 November 2003
- (48) Ibid.

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSC)

Global Report: Eritrea

There were reports of forcible recruitment of under-18s into the army. Punishments for deserting, evading conscription or infringements of military discipline included torture and arbitrary detention. The government decreed that secondary school students should complete their education at a school close to a military training camp.

National recruitment legislation The constitution states that all citizens must "be ready to defend the country" and "complete ... National Service" (Article 25) (1). Under the National Service Proclamation, No. 82/95 of 23 October 1995, national service is obligatory for men and women between the ages of 18 and 40 (2). Recruitment of children under 18 into the armed forces is prohibited under Proclamation 11/1991 (3).

National service consists of six months' military service, 12 months' development service and military reserve obligations (4). **Child recruitment and deployment** Despite the December 2000 peace treaty, compulsory military service was extended repeatedly, with aggressive roundups of new recruits and evaders, forcible conscription, detentions and ill-treatment (5). Street children and other under-18s were reportedly used as forced labour in military camps.

In January 2004 UNICEF expressed concern at the requirement that all secondary school students must complete their final year at a school near the main military training camp in Sawa if they wanted to graduate or to attend university (6). Access to the school was strictly controlled and an official was reported as saying he considered the students to be members of the armed forces (7).

In 2001 over 2,000 students were detained when they demanded reform of a mandatory summer work program. Two students had reportedly died from the harsh conditions on the program. In August 2003 over 200 students on the program were allegedly beaten for possessing bibles, and 57 of them detained in scorching conditions inside metal shipping containers without adequate food or medical care. Six students were reportedly still held in solitary confinement in underground cells in November 2003 (8).

Two former child soldiers who fled Eritrea in 2002 said that they had been conscripted at the age of 15, that about 30 per cent of recruits at the Sawa camp were under 18, and that those fleeing military service faced torture, arbitrary detention and forced labour (9). Asylum-seekers forcibly returned from Malta in October 2002 were alleged to have been tortured and detained in secret on their arrival in Eritrea. At least one was reportedly shot dead (10).

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

In July 2002 the Eritrean National Commission for Demobilization announced the completion of a pilot project for the demobilization of 200,000 combatants over the next two years (11). In March 2004 former combatants already incorporated in the government armed forces were issued with demobilization cards and asked to continue national service until January 2005. The World Bank, a principal funder, recognized the need for a special program for combatants under the age of 25 (12).¹⁶ The UN Security Council called for Ethiopia and Eritrea to facilitate the sustainable reintegration of demobilized soldiers (13).

Notes

(1) Constitution, at UN Online Network in Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN), <http://www.unpan.org>

(2) Letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Child Soldiers Coalition, 31 May 1999.

(3) Initial report of Eritrea to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/41/Add.12, 27 July 2001, <http://www.ohchr.org>.

(4) Amnesty International (AI), Eritrea: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, 18 September 2002, <http://web.amnesty.org/lib->

<http://www.ohchr.org>. Another source states that military service is for two years: see HRW, Eritrea human rights overview, January 2004.

(5) AI, op. cit; HRW, Eritrea human rights overview, op. cit

(6) US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003, 25 February 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/c1470.htm>; Jonah Fisher, "Eritrea rapped for 'military' Schooling", BBC News, 11 January 2004.

(7) HRW, Eritrea human rights overview, op. cit.

(8) UNHCR, UNHCR Position on Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea, January 2004.

(9) AI interviews with former child soldiers, 25 February 2004.

(10) UNHCR, op. cit.

(11) IRIN, "Eritrea: Demobilisation Pilot Phase Completed", 2 July 2002.

(12) World Bank, Technical Annex for a Proposed Credit of SDR 48.1 Million (US\$ 60 million equivalent) to the State of Eritrea for an Emergency Demobilization and Reintegration Project, 22 April 2002.

(13) UN Security Council Resolution 1398, UN Doc. S/Res/1398, 15 March 2002, <http://www.un.org/documents>.

UNHCR

Letter to the Darmstadt administrative court, Germany

(...) Regarding your request if we have information on the so-called "Malta-refugees" that they only or mainly because of the accusation of desertion or evading of the national service were arrested after their return, we would like to point out the UNHCR Position on Return of Rejected Asylum-Seekers to Eritrea. On page 6 you will find a compilation of the findings of UNHCR; further information you could find in a detailed report of Amnesty International from May 2004 (Eritrea – "You have no right to ask" – Government resists scrutiny on human rights), where the fate of the asylum seekers returned to Eritrea is reported. Furthermore we would like to inform you that, according to information from our central office, 40 of the concerned persons could reach Sudan after their release or escape. There they were accepted as mandate refugees by UNHCR and UNHCR recommended to go to a third country because Sudan is not seen as a safe asylum country. (...)

UNHCR: Letter to the administrative court in Darmstadt, Germany, 17 August 2004. Extract. Translation: Rudi Friedrich

US Department of State

Country Report Eritrea

Eritrea is a one-party state that became independent in 1993 when citizens voted overwhelmingly for independence from Ethiopia. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which led the 30-year war for independence, has controlled the country since it defeated Ethiopian armed forces in 1991; its leader, Isaias Afwerki, is the President. The EPLF became the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and redefined itself as a political party in 1994; it is the sole political party in the country. Presidential and legislative elections have been continuously postponed. The Constitution, ratified in 1997, provides for democratic freedoms; however, its provisions were not implemented by year's end. The judiciary was formally independent; however, it was weak and subject to executive interference. (...)

The Government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit serious abuses. Citizens did not have the ability to change their government. Security forces were responsible for disappearances. There were some reports that police resorted to torture and physical beatings of prisoners, particularly during interrogations, and police severely mistreated army deserters and draft evaders. The Government generally did not permit prison visits by local or international human rights groups. Arbitrary arrests and detentions continued to be problems; an unknown number of persons were detained without charge because of political opinion. The use of a special court system limited due process. The Government infringed on the right to privacy. The Government severely restricted freedom of speech and press, and limited freedom of assembly and association. The Government restricted freedom of religion for non-sanctioned religious groups and restricted freedom of movement. Human rights groups were not allowed to operate in the country. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued to be problems, and female genital mutilation (FGM) remained widespread despite government efforts to discourage the practice. Members of the Kunama ethnic group also faced government and societal discrimination. The Government restricted workers' rights. Child labor occurred. (...)

The Constitution, which has not been implemented, and the Penal Code prohibit torture; however, there were numerous reports that police resorted to torture and physical beatings of prisoners, particularly during interrogations. During the year, police severely mistreated and beat army deserters, draft evaders, and members of particular religious groups (see Section 2.c.). Police detained deserters and draft evaders and subjected them to various disciplinary actions that included prolonged sun exposure in temperatures of up to 113 degrees Fahrenheit or the binding of the hands, elbows and feet for extended periods.

There were reports that women drafted to the national service were subjected to sexual harassment and abuse. (...)

There were substantial but unconfirmed reports that hundreds of draft evaders and national service escapees were being held in makeshift prisons around the country. Multiple observers reported up to 1,500 detainees at a prison adjacent to the offices of the Commanding General who oversees Military Operational Area #5 (Central Zone and surrounding areas).

The Government continued to arrest and detain members of non-sanctioned religious groups, some of whom have been in detention for more than 9 years. (...)

The drafting of many civilians, including court administrators, defendants, judges, lawyers, and others involved in the legal system, into national service continued to have a significant negative impact on the judiciary. The High Court was reduced from 7 benches to 3, and regional, sub-regional, and village court personnel were reduced by 40 percent in 2002. (...)

The special court system ostensibly was created to reduce a growing backlog in the civilian court system; however, in practice special courts, which banned defense counsel and the right of ap-

peal, allowed the executive branch to mete out punishment without respect for due process. Judges in the special courts were senior military officers, most of whom had little or no legal experience. They based their decisions on "conscience," without reference to the law. There was no limitation on punishment. (...) The Attorney General also allowed special courts to retry civilian court cases, including those decided by the High Court, thereby subjecting defendants to double jeopardy.

The Government does not excuse individuals who object to national service for religious reasons or reasons of conscience, nor does the Government allow for alternative service. The Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against the small community of members of Jehovah's Witnesses because of their refusal, on religious grounds, to vote in the independence referendum or the refusal of some to perform national service. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses were subject to dismissal from the civil service. (...) Members of Jehovah's Witnesses were also frequently denied passports and exit visas, and some had their identity cards revoked or were not issued them at all. (...)

At year's end, an estimated 11 members of Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly remained in detention without charge, including 6 allegedly detained during the year, for failing to participate in national service. Although the maximum penalty for refusing to perform national service is 3 years' imprisonment, three of the individuals have been detained for more than 9 years. Of the members of Jehovah's Witnesses detained, 10 were reportedly held at Sawa Military camp and 1 in prison in Asmara. (...)

The law requires that women between the ages of 18 and 27 participate in national service (...). During the year, efforts to detain women draft evaders and deserters decreased. According to some reports, women drafted for national service were subject to sexual harassment and abuse. In 2002, most women in the national service were scheduled to be demobilized; however, many were still serving at year's end. In addition, hundreds were required to continue serving in government ministries. (...)

The Government added an additional grade to secondary school during the year and required that all students attend their final year at a location adjacent to the Sawa military training facility. Students who do not attend this final year of secondary school do not graduate and cannot sit for examinations to be admitted to university. (...)

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor, including by children; however, there were unconfirmed reports that it occurred during the year. All men between the ages of 18 and 45, and women between the ages of 18 and 27, were required to participate in the national service program, which included military training and civilian work programs. In addition, some national service members were assigned to return to their civilian jobs, while nominally kept in the military, because their skills were deemed critical to the functioning of the Government or the economy. These individuals continued to receive only their national service salary. They were required to forfeit to the Government any money they earned above and beyond that salary. High school students also were required to participate in a paid summer work program.

Source: U.S. Department of State: Eritrea. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2003
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 25, 2004

Note

The report of the U.S. Department of State says that women are eligible for conscription from 18 to 27 years. This cannot be found in any other report. All other reports and institutions say that women and men are eligible for conscription from 18 to 40 years.

Human Rights Watch

Eritrea

Members of Pentecostal Christian churches have been arrested for possession of bibles or for communal worship. The government closed all religious institutions in May 2002 except for those affiliated with the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) churches and Moslem mosques. At the end of 2003, there were reliable reports that over 300 members of unrecognized churches were incarcerated.

Forced National Service

All Eritreans between the ages of eighteen and forty-five must perform two years of compulsory national service. In practice, however, the time for service is repeatedly prolonged. There are frequent sweeps to round up evaders. Beginning in 2003, school students must complete their last year of schooling at the military training camp at Sawa, in western Eritrea. The commander of the facility said the students are considered members of the Eritrean Defense Forces. The government sometimes uses national service as retribution for perceived criticism of government policies. An Eritrean reporting for the Voice of America (VOA) had his press credentials withdrawn on July 8, 2003, and was sent to Sawa for national service after he cast doubt on the government's reports that family members had "celebrated" when the government finally released the name of war dead almost

three years after the end of hostilities. VOA claimed that the reporter had previously completed national service and was exempt from further call-up for medical reasons.

Prison Conditions and Torture

Because of the volume of arrests, prisoners are often held in improvised cargo containers. At Aderser, near Sawa, prisoners are held in underground cells. At least six high school students were also reported incarcerated in solitary confinement in underground cells at Sawa. In addition to psychological abuse, escapees report the use of physical torture at some prisons. Prisoners have been suspended from trees, arms tied behind their backs, a technique known as almaz (diamond). Prisoners have also been placed face down, hands tied to feet, a torture known as the "helicopter." Prison visits by international human rights organizations are prohibited.

Source: Human RightsWatch: Eritrea. January 2004. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/21/eritre6987_txt.htm

The Right to Refuse to Kill

War Resisters' International's work in support of conscientious objectors

Conscientious objection

Conscientious objection has always been at the very centre of WRI's policy. WRI's declaration not to support any kind of war is a call to refuse to serve in any military or armed forces, a call to conscientious objection.

War Resisters' International supports all conscientious objectors, whether they are willing to perform a substitute service (in countries where this option exists) or not. War Resisters' International does not judge a person's motives to refuse to kill, and values a person's individual decision not to take part in war and preparation for war as an important step to end wars.

No to war

WRI will never endorse any kind of war, whether it is waged by a state, by a "liberation army", or under the auspices of the United Nations, even if it is called a "humanitarian military intervention". Wars, however noble the rhetoric, are invariably used to serve some power-political or economic interest. We know where war leads -- to suffering and destruction, to rape and organised crime, to betrayal of values and to new structures of domination. War Resisters' International's programme The Right to Refuse to Kill combines a wide range of activities to support conscientious objectors individually, as well as organised groups and movements for conscientious objection.

Supporting COs in prison: co-alerts

In many countries, prison is still the fate of conscientious objectors. Thousands of COs are still in prison -- in South Korea, Israel, Finland, Spain, and many other countries. Despite many countries having introduced laws on conscientious objection, many COs still face imprisonment, because they either don't fit into the authorities' criteria, or they refuse to perform any alternative service. War Resisters' International supports conscientious objectors who are imprisoned because of their conscientious objection, or face repression by the state or state-like entities. Co-alerts, sent out by email as soon as the WRI office receives information on the imprisonment or trial of a conscientious objector, are a powerful tool to mobilise support and protest. Co-alerts are available by email (through the web interface at <http://wri-irg.org/mailman/listinfo>) or on the internet at wri-irg.org/cgi/news.cgi.

Supporting COs on the run: CO Asylum

Conscientious objectors often have to leave their country in order to flee from prosecution and imprisonment. However, conscientious objection is rarely accepted as a reason for asylum, and COs soon find themselves in danger of being deported back to their home country -- into the very situation that made them leave.

War Resisters' International demands the recognition of conscientious objection as a reason for asylum. War Resisters' International supports asylum seekers in their asylum claim through providing information on military service and the punishment for draft evasion and conscientious objection.

CONCODOC

WRI, as part of a coalition of CO support organisations, is hosting CONCODOC (CONscription and Conscientious Objection DOcumentation Centre), a worldwide documentation on the situation of conscription and conscientious objection. It is the only one of its kind in the world. You can read all 180 CONCODOC country reports at wri-irg.org/co/rtba/; some reports are also available in Spanish.

Supporting CO movements & international campaigns

All over the world new movements for conscientious objection are emerging. War Resisters' International sees support to new CO movements -- solidarity actions, training of CO activists, and the exchange of experience -- as one of its most important tasks. During the 1990s these activities focussed on support to the CO movement in Turkey (especially during the imprisonment of Osman Murat Ülke), and on the Balkans. These struggles are not over yet, but new CO movements are emerging in South East Asia, Latin America, Israel, and in Africa. All these CO movements need international support.

War Resisters' International coordinates two international days of action, which both focus on support to peace activists and conscientious objectors.

15 May - International Conscientious Objectors' Day

15 May was first celebrated as a day of action in 1982. The day focusses on the struggle for the right to conscientious objection, and WRI usually highlights one particular struggle each year, while at the same time remembering those who served this cause in the past.

1 December - Prisoners for Peace Day

Prisoners for Peace Day is a way to support those imprisoned for their stand against war and war preparations, by sending greeting cards to prisoners, and raising public awareness of prisoners for peace.

Prisoners for Peace Day was introduced in the 1950s, but its roots go back to the 1920s, when WRI called for sending Christmas greetings to prisoners. You can read a history of Prisoners for Peace Day at wri-irg.org/co/pfphist.htm or view the current year's and past years' lists and campaign packs at the Broken Rifle/Prisoners for Peace homepage.

WRI merchandise

You can order merchandise from War Resisters' International by filling out this form and sending it to War Resisters' International, 5 Caledonian Rd, London N1 9DX, Britain – together with a cheque made out to War Resisters' International in £,€,US\$. Or order online at <http://wri-irg.org/shop/shop-uk.htm>. All prices include postage.

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