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# ERITREA

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## State of Eritrea

**Population:** 4.4 million (2.3 million under 18)

**Government armed forces:** 201,800

**Compulsory recruitment age:** 18

**Voluntary recruitment age:** 18

**Voting age:** 18<sup>1</sup>

**Optional Protocol:** acceded 16 February 2005

**Other treaties ratified (see glossary):**

CRC, ILO 138, ACRWC

***Forcible recruitment of under-18s had previously been reported. However there was no recent information, due to severe restrictions on access to independent observers by the government.***

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## Context

The 2000 Algiers Agreement,<sup>2</sup> ending war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, established a 25-km-wide demilitarized zone known as the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) and created the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia deployed an additional seven military divisions to the border in December 2004<sup>4</sup> and tensions between the two countries steadily escalated.<sup>5</sup>

The Boundary Commission suspended its operations in March 2005, citing Ethiopian non-co-operation over demarcation,<sup>6</sup> and indicated that it would close in November 2007 unless it was allowed to proceed to demarcation.<sup>7</sup> The peacekeeping capacity of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1320 (September 2000), was severely limited by Eritrean restrictions on its movements, and its force was reduced to 1,700 peacekeepers in April 2007.<sup>8</sup>

By October 2007 Eritrea maintained 4,000 troops in the TSZ, in violation of the Algiers Agreement, and an estimated 120,000 troops in the border area.<sup>9</sup> Ethiopia maintained an estimated 100,000 troops along the border. An increase in the number of cross-border abductions and missing persons, including children, was reported. This was attributed in part to the Eritrean government's conscription campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Eritrea provided military assistance to the Somali armed group Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which seized control of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, in June 2006. There were reports of military assistance and links between Eritrea, the UIC and two Ethiopian opposition groups – the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Ethiopia provided Eritrean opposition groups, including

the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front, with training and arms, and the Shiraro and Shimbela refugee camps in Ethiopia were used as recruiting grounds by Eritrean opposition groups.<sup>11</sup> The Eritrean government faced the threat of armed opposition from the Ethiopia-based Eritrean Democratic Alliance.<sup>12</sup>

In 2006 the government decided to return the large majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their villages of origin in the TSZ. Despite the danger posed by the presence of landmines, and tensions relating to the stalemate over demarcation,<sup>13</sup> by May 2007 the number of IDPs was reduced to 12,000 due to the government's promotion of returnee programs.<sup>14</sup>

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## Government

### National recruitment legislation and practice

The forcible recruitment of under-18s had previously been reported, but there was no recent information due to severe restrictions imposed by the government on access to independent observers.

The constitution stated that all citizens had to 'be ready to defend the country' and 'complete ... National Service' (Article 25). Under the National Service Proclamation No. 82/95 of 23 October 1995, national service of six months of military training and twelve months of military service was obligatory for men between the ages of 18 and 40.<sup>15</sup> However, in practice national service remained extended indefinitely. Conscript reserve duties extended to the age of 50 and former Eritrean People's Liberation Front veterans were also subject to recall.<sup>16</sup> Recruitment of under-18s into the armed forces was prohibited under Proclamation 11/1991.<sup>17</sup> The law prohibited children under the age of 18 from performing certain dangerous or unhealthy labour.<sup>18</sup>

The government required that all students attend their final year of secondary-school at a location adjacent to the Sawa military training facility. Students who did not attend this year could not graduate. Many students elected to repeat grades to avoid being forced to go to Sawa.<sup>19</sup> Other Eritreans at the age of conscription and final year secondary school students fled the country in their thousands or went into hiding.<sup>20</sup>

The authorities instituted harsh measures to counter the widespread evasion of military service and desertion by thousands of conscripts. Police searches and round-ups were carried out, and in mid-2005 the government made hundreds of arrests of family members of children who had not reported to the military training camp at Sawa for their final year of high school or had not reported for national service.<sup>21</sup> This continued into 2007 and relatives were released only on payment of a large financial bond and the surrender of the missing conscript. Thousands

of military conscripts accused of desertion were arbitrarily detained without formal charge, held incommunicado and frequently tortured.<sup>22</sup> A non-governmental organization (NGO) reported that 161 young Eritreans were shot and killed trying to escape Wia Military Camp in June 2005.<sup>23</sup>

Exit visas, which were required for leaving the country, were rarely granted to men of military age.<sup>24</sup> During 2006 the government began refusing to issue exit visas to some children who were 11 and older, on the grounds that they were approaching the age of eligibility for national service.<sup>25</sup>

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## Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

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A demobilization program which began in 2000 was managed by the National Commission for Demobilization and Reintegration Program (NCDRP), established in 2001 by presidential decree.<sup>26</sup> As of December 2006, some 104,400 soldiers had been demobilized,<sup>27</sup> while the initial target was to reduce the 300,000–350,000 military personnel by approximately 200,000.<sup>28</sup> It is not known whether there was any child DDR in this program. In June 2007 it was reported that demobilization was suspended due to tension in the region and Eritrea's strained relations with Ethiopia.<sup>29</sup>

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## Developments

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Eritrea's Second and Third Periodic Reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that the minimum recruitment age was 18, and that full-time students and those who were temporarily medically unfit could have their service deferred.<sup>30</sup>

UN Security Council Resolution 1767 (2007) provided for the extension of the peacekeeping mandate of UNMEE until January 2008.<sup>31</sup>

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## International standards

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Eritrea acceded to the Optional Protocol on 16 February 2005. Its declaration stated that the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces was 18.<sup>32</sup>

- 1 CIA, "Eritrea", *World Factbook*, [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).
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- 3 International Crisis Group (ICG), "Ethiopia and Eritrea: preventing war", Africa Report No. 101, 22 December 2005.
- 4 Ibid.

- 5 UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, UN Doc. S/2005/142, 7 March 2005; UN Security Council Resolution 1622, UN Doc. S/RES/1622 (2005), 13 September 2005.
- 6 UN Security Council Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, UN Doc. S/2005/400, 20 June 2005.
- 7 ICG, "Ethiopia and Eritrea: stopping the slide to war", Africa Briefing No. 48, 5 November 2007.
- 8 UN Security Council Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, UN Doc. S/2006/140/, 6 March 2006.
- 9 "Stopping the slide to war", above note 7.
- 10 UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, UN Doc. S/2007/440, 18 July 2007; UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea, UN Doc. S/2006/749, 19 September 2006; Report of the Secretary-General, 7 March 2005, above note 5.
- 11 "Stopping the slide to war", above note 7.
- 12 "Eritrea", *Amnesty International Report 2007*.
- 13 "Horn of Africa: the way forward", *New Routes*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2007), [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).
- 14 OCHA Regional Office for Central and East Africa, *Displaced Persons Report*, Issue 1 (January–June 2007), [www.nrc.ch](http://www.nrc.ch).
- 15 UK Home Office Border and Immigration Agency, Country of Origin Information Report, Eritrea, 22 October 2007, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk).
- 16 "Eritrea", above note 12.
- 17 UK Home Office, above note 15.
- 18 US Department of State, Country reports on Human Rights Practices 2006, Eritrea, 6 March 2007, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 "Eritrea", *Human Rights Watch World Report 2007*.
- 21 "Eritrea", *Human Rights Watch World Report 2006*.
- 22 "Eritrea", above note 12; confidential source, February 2008.
- 23 Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights, "Brutality beyond imagination", 29 July 2005, <http://ehdr.org.uk>.
- 24 "Eritrea", above note 12.
- 25 US Department of State, above note 18.
- 26 Eritrea – Demobilization and Reintegration Program, World Bank report No. P1D10371, 2001, [www-wds.worldbank.org](http://www-wds.worldbank.org).
- 27 UNDP, "Technical assistance to demobilize soldiers", Eritrea project fact sheet, November 2006, [www.er.undp.org](http://www.er.undp.org).
- 28 Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), "Eritrea's economic survival", summary record of a conference held on 20 April 2007, [www.chathamhouse.org.uk](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk).

- 29 UN/Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (UN/OSAA), "Overview: DDR processes in Africa", Report of the Second International Conference on DDR and Stability in Africa, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 12–14 June 2007, [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).
- 30 Second and third periodic reports of Eritrea to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/ERI/3, 23 October 2007.
- 31 UN Security Council Resolution on the Situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, UN Doc. S/RES/1767 (2007), 30 July 2007.
- 32 Declaration on accession to the Optional Protocol, [www2.ohchr.org](http://www2.ohchr.org).