

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

12 July 2016

### ERI105580.E

Eritrea: Information on military structure, including ranks; reason and process for advancement among ranks and transferring between areas, particularly to the Sudan border area; information on the logistics unit and the unit responsible for patrolling the Sudan border area, including duties, ranking officers, unit names and training provided (2009-2016)

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#### 1. Structure

Sources indicate that the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) is divided into the Eritrean Ground Forces (or the Eritrean Army), the Eritrean Navy, and the Eritrean Air Force (US 16 June 2016; UN 5 June 2015, para. 282). Sources further note that the Eritrean Army constitutes the main component of the EDF (ibid.; Warner 2013, 700) and is the most developed "because of its role in waging the country's continuous border wars with [its] former (and current) adversary Ethiopia" (ibid.).

According to sources, the EDF's smallest organizational structure is called *mäsri* (also spelled *mäsri* or *mesre*), which is composed of approximately 10 soldiers each (UN 5 June 2015, para. 283; Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77). In his doctoral dissertation on national mobilization and surveillance in Eritrea, Dr. David Bozzini, a postdoctoral visiting research fellow at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) whose research focuses on Eritrean transnational politics, states that each *mäsri* has a soldier that acts as the leader of the unit (ibid.). A report on the Eritrean national service produced by the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo) however, identifies the *gujile* as the smallest organizational structure with around five to seven soldiers each (qtd. in EU May 2015, 33). Sources indicate that three *mäsri* form a *ganta* (also called *group*), or platoon (Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77; UN 5 June 2015, para. 283), each with a strength of about 30 to 45 soldiers (ibid.). Sources further state that three *ganta* form a *ḥayl* (also spelled *haile* or *haili*), or company, with about 100 soldiers each (ibid.; Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77) and are often equipped with heavy weaponry (UN 5 June 2011, para. 283). According to Bozzini, each *ganta* and each *ḥayl* are commanded by a career or ranking officer called "boss" (Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77). Sources indicate that groups of *ḥayl* units form a *botoloni*, or battalion (ibid.; UN 5 June 2015, para. 283), each composed of between 300 and 400 soldiers and led by lieutenants or majors (Norway qtd. in EU May 2015, 33). Clusters of *botoloni* units then form a *brgedä* (also spelled *bregda*), or brigade (UN 5 June 2015, para. 283; Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77), each composed of between 900 and 1,000 soldiers and led by colonels (Norway qtd. in EU May 2015, 33). Sources indicate that the *brgedä* are organized into *kflä särawit* (also spelled *kifleserawit*), or division (Bozzini 23 May 2011, 77; Norway qtd. in EU May 2015, 33), with about 5,000 soldiers each (or more during wartime) and led by brigadier generals (ibid.). A UN Human Rights Council report on human rights in Eritrea indicates that "[t] heir brigades supposedly form a division, with three divisions then forming a corps" (UN 5 June 2015, para. 283). According to the same report, there is no information on the current number of divisions within the EDF (ibid., para 282). Sources indicate, however, that the Eritrean Army has four corps (*kflä särawit*) with 20

infantry brigades (*brgedä*) each, in addition to one commando division and one mechanized brigade (ibid.; US Sept. 2005, 15).

### 1.1 Divisions and Names

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) [1], Eritrea is divided into four "military operation[al] zones," and each zone is headed by a general (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016, 11). However, other sources indicate that Eritrea is divided into five "military operation[al] zones" (Norway qtd. in EU May 2015, 33; UN 5 June 2015, para. 284) or "command zones" (ibid.). A European Asylum Support Office (EASO) report on Eritrea states that the five military zones are labelled as follows:

- Zone 1: Gash-Setit,
- Zone 2: South,
- Zone 3: West,
- Zone 4: East, and
- Zone 5: Centre (EU May 2015, 33).

According to a 15 February 2013 report by *Africa Confidential*, a newsletter publication based in London, UK, that covers politics and economics in Africa, the names of Eritrea's military zones and their commanders are as follows:

- Zone 1: Gash-Setit, commanded by Major General Haile Samuel, also known as "'China'";
- Zone 2: West, commanded by Brigadier General Fitsun Gebrehiwot;
- Zone 3: South, commanded by Major General Umar Hassan, also known as "'Teweel'";
- Zone 4: East, commanded by Major General Gerezgiher Andemariam, also known as "'Wuchu'"; and
- Zone 5: Centre, commanded by Major General Filipos [also spelled Philipos] Woldeyohannes (Africa Confidential 15 Feb. 2013).

The UN Human Rights Council report provides the organization of these zones, and their commanders in the year 2013, as follows:

- Zone 1: Gash-Barka, commanded by Major General Haile Samuel, also known as "'China'," who was reportedly removed from his duties in 2014;
- Zone 2: West, commanded by Brigadier General Teklai, also known as "'Manjus'," who was reportedly removed from his duties in 2014;
- Zone 3: South, commanded by Major General Umar Hassan, also known as "'Teweel'," who was later arrested in 2013 and allegedly died in prison in 2014;
- Zone 4: East, commanded by Major General Gerezgiher Andemariam, also known as "'Wuchu'," who died in April 2014; and
- Zone 5: Centre, which includes Asmara, commanded by Major General Philipos Woldeyohannes, who was later appointed Chief of Staff of the EDF (UN 5 June 2015, para. 284).

Information on the names of current commanders of the "military operation[al] zones" could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. Sources indicate that President Issayas Afwerki "routinely" changes the commanders of each military zone in order to encourage rivalries amongst the army's leadership, make cooperation difficult, and prevent generals from developing too close of a rapport with units in divisions under their command (UN 5 June 2015, para. 284; *Africa Confidential* 15 Feb. 2013).

An International Crisis Group (ICG) report on Eritrea indicates that commanding generals "hold absolute power over their regions, with little oversight from the centre" (ICG 28 Mar. 2013, 15). Similarly, the UN Human Rights Council report states that generals "have gained power since the border conflict with Ethiopia, to the extent that they supersede civil administrators in many regions" (5 June 2015, para. 284). The BTI report notes that commanders of military zones "had some influence on government policies, especially in the field of regional administration" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016, 11). According to the same source, these generals are involved "in illegal activities for personal profit such as smuggling goods and selling them in the black market, as well as the trafficking of Eritreans fleeing the country" (ibid.). For more information on the involvement of high-ranking military officers in illegal activities, see Response to Information Request ZZZ105031.

### 1.2 Ranks

The International Encyclopedia of Uniform Insignia Around the World, a website that provides illustrations of rank insignia, badges and other military labels (International Encyclopedia of Uniform Insignia Around the World n.d.b), provides the following ranks for the EDF for the year 1993: Private First Class,

Corporal, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, Master Sergeant, Lieutenant Second Class, Lieutenant First Class, Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, Major General (ibid. n.d.a). Further and corroborating information on the ranks could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. A 2014 article published by Awate.com, a California-based Eritrean news website whose goal is to "provide Eritreans and friends of Eritrea with information that is hidden by the Eritrean regime and its surrogates" (Awate n.d.), reported that, on 3 April 2014, Major General Philipos Weldeyohannes was promoted to the rank of "full general," and that "[t]he Eritrean army never had lieutenant generals or major generals directly become full generals" (ibid. 3 Apr. 2014). The Awate.com article also states that Sebhat Ephrem, Eritrean Defense Minister, holds the rank of "general" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Promotion within the EDF

Information on the rationale and process for advancement in rank and transfer between areas, particularly to the Sudan border region, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The UN Human Rights Council report, which provides anecdotal information from interviews conducted in Eritrea, cites one interviewee who was a former conscript assigned to the civil service, as stating that the army imprisoned him for one year, including three months in solitary confinement, for asking to be transferred to a more "meaningful assignment" (UN 5 June 2015, para. 484). According to the same source, the interviewee was beaten during imprisonment (ibid.). The UN report further cites information collected from other interviews as reporting that conscripts who fail the exam in the Sawa military training camp, or who undertake military training elsewhere, and who do not have any specific skills, are assigned to a military unit such as the naval force or heavy artillery (ibid. para, 1346). According to the same source, illiterate soldiers reportedly get assigned to remote areas (ibid.). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 3. Logistics Unit and Unit Responsible for Patrolling the Sudan Border Area

Information on the logistics unit and the unit responsible for patrolling the Sudan border area, including ranking officers and unit names, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The *Africa Confidential* article indicates that the Eritrean border with Sudan is controlled by Zones 1 (Gash-Setit) and 2 (West) that were, "until recently," commanded by Brigadier General Teklai Kifle "'Manjus'" and Major General Gerezgiher Andemariam "'Wuchu'," respectively (*Africa Confidential* 15 Feb. 2013).

*Africa Confidential* reported that the head of logistics in the Defense Ministry at the time of publishing was Major General Asmerom Gerezgiher (ibid.). A UN Security Council report on Somalia and Eritrea indicates that, according to interviews conducted by the UN Security Council Monitoring Group with a former senior Eritrean official in March 2014 and a former general "with active contacts within the military" in August 2014, "weapons in the logistics department of the EDF are being systematically transferred to TPDM [Tigray People's Democratic Movement]" (UN 13 Oct. 2014, para. 76). The TPDM is an organization that seeks to "establish a popular democratic government of Ethiopia where rights of nation and nationality are respected and narrow nationalism abolished" (TPDM n.d.). The report notes that the information concerning weapons transfers between the EDF and TPDM could not be verified (UN 13 Oct. 2014, 7). Additional and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

### Note

[1] The BTI "analyzes and evaluates whether and how developing countries and countries in transition are steering social change toward democracy and a market economy," based on the assessments of "country experts" (Bertelsmann Stiftung n.d.a). Bertelsmann Stiftung is a "private operating foundation" based in Germany that funds projects that "contribute to social reform" (ibid. n.d.b).

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Affiliated legal advisor at the International Law and Policy Institute; Associate Researcher at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex; Doctoral Candidate at Harvard University; Independent Researcher; Lecturer of politics and international relations at the University of Edinburgh; Professor at the Tilburg School of Humanities; Professor of refugee studies at London South Bank University; Researcher at the African Studies Centre at the University of Oxford; Visiting Scholar at the African Studies Center at Boston University.

**Internet sites, including:** *Africa Research Bulletin*; Africa Review; AllAfrica; Amnesty International; Asmarino Independent; eoi.net; Eritrea – Ministry of Information; Eritrea.be; Factiva; Farajat; GlobalSecurity.org; *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*; Horn Affairs Network; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center; *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*; MilitaryBudget.org; NationMaster.com; Norway – Landinfo; *Sudan Tribune*; Switzerland – State Secretariat for Migration; TesfaNews; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Department of State, Embassy in Asmara.

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Date modified: 2016-01-05