

Ethiopia

Response to Information Request Number:	ETH01003.ZAR
Date:	10 January 2001
Subject:	Ethiopia: Information on <i>kebele</i> (<i>kebele</i>) control of the population in Ethiopia; and freedom to travel for Ethiopians of Eritrean origin or heritage
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
Keywords:	Ethiopia / Citizenship / Deportation / Expulsion / Freedom of movement / Immigration policy / Minorities / Nationality / Passports / Referendums / Right to a Passport / Right to leave and return to one's country / Travel documents

Query:

Would it be possible for an Ethiopian of Eritrean descent to go unnoticed in Addis Ababa for two years and to travel in and out of Ethiopia to neighboring countries on a frequent basis?

Is it normal for an Ethiopian of Eritrean descent to be arrested and released with a warning numerous times and then procure an exit visa and renew their passport without difficulty because they were never formally arrested by *kebele* (*kebele*) officials?

Response:

Overview: In the two years between the outbreak of fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1998 and the cessation of hostilities in mid-June 2000, some 60,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin were expelled from Ethiopia. (See, Amnesty International, "Ethiopia and Eritrea: Human Rights Issues in a Year of Armed Conflict," 21 May 1999; Last, *BBC News*, "Ethiopia Resumes Mass Deportations," 6 July 1999; *BBC News*, "Storm over Eritreans' Repatriation," 29 October 1999) The number of people of Eritrean origin or heritage living in Ethiopia prior to the armed conflict was estimated to be between 200,000 and 500,000-so a rough estimate of between 12 and 30 percent of people of Eritrean expelled during this two-year period gives some idea of the scale of the expulsions and the threat felt by these residents. Thousands of others avoided expulsion by moving 'voluntarily' to Eritrea while others fled to neighboring states (Pearce, *BBC News*, "Plight of the Stranded Eritreans," 4 November 1999).

The criteria for the expulsions-which took place without any due process of law-were extremely broad: any indication that an individual had ties of birth or heritage to Eritrea, had voted in the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence or had "helped Eritrea in any way" would make that person a target for expulsion (Klein, *Mass Expulsion from Ethiopia*, 1999, p.11). Men, women and children, young and old, urban and rural residents, from a very wide range of professions and occupations, were expelled with little distinction made as long as the connection with Eritrea could be proved or inferred to the satisfaction of the security forces carrying out the expulsions. (See, Klein, *Mass Expulsion from Ethiopia*, 1999; Legesse *The Uprooted*, 22 February 1999; U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999*, 25 February 2000)

Although in most cases a person of Eritrean origin living in Ethiopia would not be

distinguishable as "Eritrean" since many Eritreans and (particularly Tigrean) Ethiopians share language, culture, and religion, nonetheless, the relatively stable nature of many communities and the role of the *kebelles* in social control would in many cases make the identification of Eritreans relatively straightforward. A forthcoming INS Resource Information Center *Question and Answer Series* on the expulsions discusses ways in which people of Eritrean origin could be identified for expulsion:

The *kebelles* play a significant role in social control in Ethiopia and played an important part in the expulsions and oversight of people of Eritrean origin during the period of the armed conflict with Eritrea. But, as a query response from the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board notes (citing an advisor in the office of the Ethiopian prime minister), there is a good deal of variation in the level of organization of the five to six thousand *kebelles* in the country. For example, "Issuance of new *kebele* cards varies greatly from one *kebele* to another." The response also notes "control of movement is particularly severe in rural areas" (Government of Canada, Immigration and Refugee Board, 30 September 1996) which supports information provided in other sources that hiding one's Eritrean origin would be more difficult in the rural areas.

In a telephone interview, a counselor at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C., gave his opinion that *kebele* membership was stronger in the rural areas-where the communities are more tightly knit and where there are more likely to be active benefits from programs linked to the *kebelles* (certain food-for-work and environmental protection programs were given as examples)-than in the cities. He also stated that membership of a *kebele* is not obligatory and there is not a fine for not registering with the *kebele* (Counselor, Embassy of Ethiopia, Telephone Interview, 8 January 2001).

Ethiopian government control of people with links to Eritrea was strengthened with the August 1999 requirement for "All Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin over 18 years of age who had taken part in the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence" and "those who had been granted Eritrean citizenship . . . to register with the Security, Immigration and Refugee Authority (SIRAA) and complete residence application forms." After registration, they received identity cards and residence permits for six months (U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999*, 25 February 2000, 188 & 194). In February and March 2000, SIRAA ordered Eritreans living in Ethiopia to renew their residence permits for the next six months and warned it would take "necessary legal measures" against Eritreans who failed to do so (UN, IRIN, "Horn of Africa: IRIN News Briefs," Friday 3 March 2000). A person of Eritrean origin who had not voted in the 1993 independence referendum and was not an Eritrean citizen would not be required to register under these regulations.

Difficulties in traveling abroad: People of Eritrean origin living in Ethiopia have been limited in their ability to travel freely in and out of Ethiopia. The State Department reports that Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin have been able to obtain exit visas-which are required before departing the country-but often are not permitted to return to Ethiopia (U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999*, 25 February 2000, 194).

However, according to a representative of Amnesty International who has followed closely human rights developments in the Horn of Africa, "Ethiopia has been refusing to let Eritreans leave," for Eritrea or elsewhere, and has not "to my knowledge granted exit visas, as this would mean recognizing the Ethiopian citizenship of many of them" (Representative, Amnesty International, E-mail communication, 15 August 2000). The information officer at the Eritrean Embassy in Washington, D.C., also stated that Eritreans had not been allowed to leave Ethiopia voluntarily for third countries. "A lot left illegally--to Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan; some tried to pay bribes to get visas; some people have gone into hiding" (Information Officer, Embassy of Eritrea, Telephone Interview, 12 September 2000). In a telephone interview, an official at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C. confirmed that once the conflict began, people of Eritrean origin were not permitted to get Ethiopian passports and, if they were in possession of

them, would not be allowed to use them and would have to return them, since "they were Eritreans, not Ethiopians" (Second Secretary, Embassy of Ethiopia, Telephone Interview, 8 January 2001).

A Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board query response (citing an Ethiopian Embassy official in Ottawa) stated "in order to obtain a passport in Ethiopia, a person must normally present an identity card by his or her local kebele, which serves as proof of address, or in the absence of such an identity card, a letter from the local kebele . . . A person must have a valid passport in order to receive an exit permit, which is stamped on the passport" (Government of Canada, Immigration and Refugee Board, "Ethiopia: Procedures for travelling within and leaving Ethiopia," 16 November 1999).

In a telephone interview, a counselor at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C., confirmed that a letter from the *kebele* is required to obtain an Ethiopian passport-the letter being to confirm that the individual resides at a particular address in that area rather than to be an approval of the granting of a passport. The Embassy official also stated that while the passport itself has a space for name, occupation, place and date of birth, residence, etc., that in many cases the section for "place and date of birth" would contain only the year-not the month or the place of birth. He indicated his view that a person of Eritrean origin would not have a problem traveling in and out of Ethiopia "unless he was seen as a security threat, or had debts to settle" (Counselor, Embassy of Ethiopia, Telephone Interview, 8 January 2001).

Role of *kebelles* in arresting, maintaining information on individuals: In a telephone interview, a second official at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C. stated that the *kebelles* are not responsible for making arrests and that the police force is the body that carries out arrests and maintains records of arrests. This official stated that while in the 1970s and 1980s the *kebelles* had been a "controlling force" in the communities, today their role is "typically administrative." He acknowledged, however, that during the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the *kebelles* had played an important role in keeping tabs on people of Eritrean origin. He also stated that once the conflict began, people of Eritrean origin were not permitted to get Ethiopian passports and, if they were in possession of them, would not be allowed to use them and would have to return them (Second Secretary, Embassy of Ethiopia, Telephone Interview, 8 January 2001).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee or asylum status.

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