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Eritrea: Activities of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), specifically whether the EPLF committed human rights violations; whether certain actions of the EPLF were condemned by the international community or human rights organizations (1977 - 1994)

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Background

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), also misidentified in media sources as the Ethiopian People's Liberation Front (MIPT 26 July 2006a; *The Times* 30 Apr. 1991; *The Washington Post* 27 Oct. 1987), was a national liberation movement that fought for Eritrean independence from Ethiopia (*Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 200; see also *The Europa World Year Book* 2006 2006, 1632). The EPLF was created in 1970 following a split from the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), another organization fighting for Eritrea's independence (MIPT 26 July 2006b; *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 200; *Political Handbook of the World 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 366). In 1991, the EPLF gained control of Eritrea and formed a provisional government (*ibid.*; *The Europa World Year Book* 2006 2006, 1632).

Eritrea gained its independence following a United Nations (UN) supervised referendum in 1993 (UN Jan. 2005, 3; *Political Handbook of the World 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 366). The EPLF became the ruling party of Eritrea and its leader, Isaias Afewerki became the country's president (MIPT 26 July 2006a; see also UN Jan. 2005). In 1994, the EPLF changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) (*The Europa World Year Book* 2006 2006, 1632; *Political Handbook of the World 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 366; *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 200). In 2006, the PFDJ and Isaias Afewerki remained in power (Factiva 23 May 2006; see also BBC 20 July 2006).

Human rights violations

Sources consulted by the Research Directorate identify several human rights abuses committed by the EPLF, mainly during the period between 1987 and 1992.

In 1987, the EPLF attacked a food convoy of sixteen UN trucks and seven Catholic Relief Services trucks in northern Ethiopia (MIPT 26 July 2006a; *The Washington Post* 27 Oct. 1987). The trucks and over 400 tons of food were reportedly burned in the attack (*ibid.*; see also MIPT 26 July 2006a). The EPLF claimed they set fire to the trucks after having found ammunition and bombs they believed were intended for the Ethiopian army (*The Washington Post* 27 Oct. 1987; see also MIPT 26 July 2006a). According to the Terrorism Knowledge Base (TKB), the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism's (MIPT) online database of global terrorist organizations and incidents (MIPT 14 Aug. 2006), "[t]he U.S. and other international sources condemned the attack, insisting there were no weapons present and accusing the EPLF of using hunger as a weapon in its war with the Ethiopian government" (26 July 2006a). In a 30 April 1991 article in *The Times*, Africa Watch, a London-based human rights organization, also accused the EPLF of "using hunger as a weapon" when it refused to allow the safe passage of relief services from the city of Assab.

A TKB profile of the EPLF states that international human rights groups accused the EPLF of forcefully recruiting Eritreans into their army (MIPT 26 July 2006a). However, the EPLF "vehemently denie[d]" the allegations (*ibid.*). The period over which this alleged forced recruitment had taken place was not identified in the source. According to Amnesty International (AI), however, in May 1989, an EPLF group reportedly killed as many as 200 persons of Afar ethnicity who refused to join the EPLF (1990, 92). *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1991* reported that the EPLF, among other armed groups, also recruited children as young as 14 years of age (US Feb. 1992, Sec. 1.g).

When the EPLF gained control of Eritrea in 1991, the group reportedly arrested hundreds of former government officials, soldiers, and ruling party officials (AI 1992, 115; see also US Feb. 1992, Sec. 1.d), many of whom were allegedly held without charge (*ibid.*). *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992* states that human rights organizations received reports of the disappearance of several persons arrested while in EPLF custody (US Feb. 1992, Sec. 1.b).

Several sources from 1990 to 1992 indicate that the EPLF carried out assassinations of political opponents (AI 1990, 91) and of Eritreans believed to have supported or collaborated with the Ethiopian government (HRW 1992; *The Times* 30 Apr. 1991; AI 1992, 115; see also MIPT 26 July 2006a). In 1992, AI reported that the EPLF was thought to have executed dozens of alleged criminals without trial (1992, 116).

In 1991 and 1992, there were reports of forced expulsions of over 100,000 people from Eritrea by the EPLF government (Reuters 2 Aug. 1991; US Feb. 1992, Sec. 2.d; HRW 1992; AI 1992). The majority of those repatriated were Ethiopian government soldiers and their dependents, as well as residents of non-Eritrean origin (*ibid.*; US Feb. 1992, Sec. 2.d; HRW 1992). The EPLF also reportedly expelled over 400 non-Eritrean orphans from state and church-run orphanages in the city of Asmara (*ibid.*; see also US Feb. 1992, Sec. 2.d).

AI indicated in a 1992 report that persons expelled by the EPLF were sent across the border without transportation and, as a result, "[h]undreds died of starvation or illness in transit camps or while making their way south" (1992, 114). According to a 2 August 1991 Reuters article, Ethiopian soldiers accused the EPLF of opening fire on and killing thousands of unarmed soldiers escaping across the border into Sudan. The Ethiopian soldiers also accused the EPLF of taking their personal belongings, including jackets and boots, and that "survivors [from the Ethiopian military] trekked barefoot into Sudan" (Reuters 2 Aug. 1991).

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 additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Internet sites, including: AllAfrica, European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), International Crisis Group (ICG), United Kingdom Home Office, United States Department of State.

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