

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada



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Responses to Information Requests

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4 September 2012

ERI 104179.E

Eritrea: Military service, including age of recruitment, length of service, grounds for exemption, penalties for desertion from and evasion of military service, and availability of alternative service
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. National Service

Various sources indicate that Eritrea is a highly militarized country (Bozzini 2011, 97; International Crisis Group 21 Sept. 2010, 9; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 24). According to Eritrea's 1995 Proclamation of National Service,

[...] all Eritrean citizens from the age of 18 to 40 years have the compulsory duty of performing Active National Service... [which] consists of six months of training in the National Service Training Center and 12 months of active military service and development tasks in military forces for a total of 18 months. (Eritrea 1995, Art. 8)

Sources report, however, that national service obligations are extended indefinitely (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1d; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 41-42; Bozzini 2011, 93). According to Human Rights Watch, the majority of able-bodied adult Eritreans are on "indefinite, compulsory" active national service or on reserve (16 Apr. 2009, 44). A fact-finding mission report published in 2008 by the European Parliament Committee on Development similarly indicated that military service "often extends over decades" (EU 11 Nov. 2008).

The law further states that beyond their "active" service obligations, citizens are "subject to compulsory service in the reserve army" until the age of 50 and can be recalled into service in cases of national mobilization, military training, human-made or natural disasters, and "other circumstances" (Eritrea 1995, Art. 2, 23, 28). According to correspondence sent to International Crisis Group by a diplomat formerly based in Asmara, citizens can be recalled into service for various reasons, for example as punishment for trying to flee the country or for conducting "illegal business" (International Crisis Group 21 Sept. 2010, note 74). Similarly, Human Rights Watch reports that conscripts are recalled "capriciously" and "routinely" as punishment for "perceived dissent" (22 Sept. 2011, 29).

Human Rights Watch reports that, in practice, men are required to perform national service until the ages of 55 or 57, and women until the age of 47 (16 Apr. 2009, 43). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* indicates that the criteria for demobilization are "unclear" (24 May 2012, Sec. 7b).

According to David Bozzini, an academic at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands who lived in Eritrea between 2005 and 2007 while researching the national service (2011, 95), national service is "fundamentally associated" with Eritrean citizenship and those who do not complete their service are deprived of basic citizenship rights (16 Feb. 2012, 5). Similarly, Human Rights Watch indicates that Jehovah's witnesses, who practice conscientious objection to military service, have been "in effect stripped of their citizenship" and denied access to public services, official ID, and commercial licences (16 Apr. 2009, 60).

1.1 Military and Civil Service

After the mandatory six-month military training period, conscripts are assigned to a year of military or civil work as part of their national service (Bozzini 2011, 96; AI 2 Nov. 2011; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 43). According to Human Rights Watch, conscripts to the national service can be assigned a wide variety of work but military assignments are the most common (*ibid.*, 44). Human Rights Watch reports that women in national service "frequently" experience sexual abuse and rape by military leaders, including their commanding officer (22 Sept. 2011, 30). *Country Reports 2011* indicates that reports of rape at Sawa military camp are "common" (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 6). The same report states that "widespread mistreating and hazing" occasionally led to deaths and suicides of national service conscripts (*ibid.*, Sec. 1a).

Civil service may include labour for the state or for private firms owned and operated by military or political officials (Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 25; AI 2 Nov. 2011; US June 2012). It may also include community work (Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 47), work in the fields of health and education (*ibid.*; Bozzini 2011, 96), or office work (*ibid.*). Sources indicate that conscripts must work in any position or location assigned by the government (US June 2012; Bozzini 16 Feb. 2012, 4) and cannot choose between military and civil work (UK 17 Aug. 2011, para. 9.8). Bozzini also indicates that conscripts do not have recourse to any outside authority if they are mistreated during their service (16 Feb. 2012, 5). Additionally, conscripts assigned civil work are reportedly considered soldiers and can be mobilized to serve in the army at any time (Bozzini 2011, 96). According to Human Rights Watch, civil workers who leave their position without permission are considered deserters under military law (Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 44). Eritrean refugees in Djibouti and Italy interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2008 indicated that "there was no difference between military and civilian national service - conscripts are equally at the mercy of the state" (*ibid.*). Regardless of the civil or military nature of national service work, conscripts are paid an allowance that is described as "barely sufficient for survival" (*ibid.* 2012) and "minimal" (AI 2 Nov. 2011). According to Bozzini, most civil service conscripts have to wait for seven or eight years before they are paid (2011, 97). They also reportedly have "limited" rights in areas such as marriage, property, business licences, permission to travel, and others (Bozzini 16 Feb. 2012, 5).

2. Conscription

Sources indicate that the final year of secondary school is completed at Sawa military training camp (AI 2012; US 24 May 2012, Sec. 6; Human Rights Watch 22 Sept. 2011, 31), where, according to Human Rights Watch, academic work is second to military training in the curriculum

(*ibid.*). Information obtained from Eritrean sources by the British Embassy in Asmara indicates that students who complete their final year are automatically assigned to military service, other national service work, or higher education (UK 17 Aug. 2011, para. 9.18). *Country Reports 2011* states that students who do not complete the final year cannot graduate and are not permitted to write the final examinations that are required to continue their education (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 6). Additionally, according to Human Rights Watch's interviews with Eritrean refugees, students who do not perform well academically or are not expected to graduate from secondary school can be relocated to Wi'a military camp (16 Apr. 2009, 51).

According to the University of Leiden academic, between 15,000 and 20,000 students write the grade 11 exams at the school in Sawa military camp every year, where they are conscripted into the national service (Bozzini 2011, 94). According to a news article published by the Eritrean Ministry of Information, there were 19,000 students in the 26th cohort of conscripts, who began their training at Sawa in July 2012 (Eritrea 23 July 2012).

According to the British Embassy in Asmara, local authorities may send letters to citizens who have not completed their military service to remind them of their obligation (UK 17 Aug. 2011, para. 9.34). The authorities also conduct "round-ups" in order to capture national service evaders (*ibid.*, para. 9.35; US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1d; Human Rights Watch 22 Sept. 2011, 29), which reportedly take place four or five times a year (*ibid.*; UK 17 Aug. 2011, para. 9.35). The British Embassy in Asmara indicates that such round-ups are not regulated by government policies or procedures and take place in different parts of the country (*ibid.*). The same source indicates that apprehended national service evaders are subsequently sent to military camps (*ibid.*, para. 9.35, 9.36). *Country Reports 2011* states that people have been beaten "severely" and killed during round-ups (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1a). Corroborating information for this statement could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The authorities also set up roadblocks and checkpoints to find draft evaders and deserters (*ibid.*, Sec. 1f, 2d; Bozzini 2011, 99). However, the University of Leiden researcher notes that ID, travel permits, and other documents are not provided to conscripts "on a clear and regular basis" (*ibid.*, 103).

3. Exemptions

There are no provisions for conscientious objection to military service (AI 2 Nov. 2011; Human Rights Watch 22 Sept. 2011, 36). The *Country Reports 2011* indicates that, although religious workers from government-approved religions were previously often exempt from military service, around 3,000 such workers were rounded up and sent to the Wi'a military camp in May and June 2011 (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1a). Sources report that three Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned since 1994 for conscientious objection to military service (AI 2012; Human Rights Watch 2012; War Resisters' International [2012]). According to Amnesty International, they have been detained without charge at Sawa military camp (2012). War Resisters' International's database of prisoners of peace and conscientious objectors lists the names of 12 additional Jehovah's Witnesses who were put in detention between 2001 and 2009 for conscientious objection and remain imprisoned at Sawa and Meitir camps ([2012]).

Country Reports 2011 explains that students who have family members who fought in the war of independence are sometimes allowed to serve five months or less in the military and are often placed in technical college for further education (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 2a). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the British Embassy in Asmara, married women or women with young children are usually exempt from military service (UK 17 Aug. 2011, para. 9.44). *Country Reports 2011* also states that girls who are already married are generally exempt from training at Sawa and military service (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 6). Sources indicate that pregnant women may also be exempt from national service (Bozzini 2011, 96; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 44) or reserve duty (*ibid.*). However, Bozzini indicates that pregnant women are not "promptly" issued demobilization papers to prove their exemption (16 Feb. 2012, 9). He notes, further, that some women in the national service do have children (Bozzini 16 Feb. 2012, 9).

Article 15 of the Proclamation of National Service states that citizens who are certified to "suffer from disability such as invalidity, blindness, [or] psychological derangement" can be exempted from national service (Eritrea 1995, Art. 15). According to the British Embassy in Asmara, the certification of disabled individuals and persons who are medically "unfit" for military service is done by doctors on military bases (UK 17 Aug. 2011, 9.47). Citizens declared unfit for military service are nevertheless required to fulfil their 18 months of national service obligations in "any public and government organ according to their capacity and profession" (Eritrea 1995, Art. 13). Human Rights Watch's interviews with refugees indicate that in practice, virtually all citizens undertake military service, unless they are blind or "missing their trigger fingers" (16 Apr. 2009, 47).

4. Penalties for Desertion or Draft Evasion

According to Eritrean law, violations of the Proclamation of National Service, including draft evasion through fraud, self-inflicted disability, and other methods, are punishable with two years' imprisonment and/or a fine of 3,000 Ethiopian Birr [C\$ 167 (XE 10 Aug. 2012a)] (Eritrea 1995, Art. 37). The law states, further, that if a person flees the country to avoid national service and "does not return to perform his service until the age of 40 years, he will be liable to punishment or to an imprisonment of 5 years until the age of 50, and his rights to license, visa, land tenure and the rights to work will be suspended" (*ibid.*).

Human rights reports indicate that national service evaders and deserters are subject to detention without trial (AI 2012) or without public trial (Human Rights Watch 2012), or are "informally charged with violations relating to national service, effectively allowing authorities to incarcerate them indefinitely" (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1d). According to Human Rights Watch, the number of detainees for national service evasion is unknown but is estimated to be in the tens of thousands (Human Rights Watch 2012). *Country Reports 2011* stated that hundreds of such citizens were detained in 2011 in "harsh and life-threatening" conditions, and were often held in solitary confinement (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1c). The same source notes that possessing documents proving completion of or exemption from national service did not necessarily prevent citizens from being jailed as draft evaders, although providing a proof of completion reportedly permitted to some detainees to be released (*ibid.*, Sec. 1d). Similarly, the University of Leiden researcher states that individuals who fulfill their military obligations are also at risk of being apprehended and detained during round-ups (Bozzini 2011, 102).

Country Reports 2011 also indicates that some draft evaders were sent to Wi'a military training camp, where they were subject to beatings (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1c). Sources report that citizens detained for national service evasion or desertion have been subject to "torture" (*ibid.*; Bozzini 2011, 106; AI 2012), which Amnesty International describes as "usual" treatment (*ibid.*). There are also reports of enforced disappearances of deserters or draft evaders (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1b). According to Human Rights Watch, prisoners frequently die from torture, disease, malnutrition, and other forms of mistreatment (2012).

Security forces are authorized to shoot to kill citizens who try to leave the country without permission (AI 2012; Human Rights Watch 22 Sept. 2011, 33). *Country Reports 2011* indicates that individuals were killed in 2011 while attempting to escape from military service (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1a).

4.1 Punishment of Family Members

Various sources indicate that families of national service evaders or deserters are punished by the authorities (AI 2012; Human Rights Watch 2012; US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1f). For example, families are reportedly fined 50,000 Eritrean Nakfa [C\$ 3,317 (XE 10 Aug. 2012b)] for a family member's desertion and may be imprisoned or have their property confiscated (US 24 May 2012, Sec. 1f; Human Rights Watch 2012) if they cannot pay the fine (ibid.). Human Rights Watch also indicates that a family member may be forced to perform national service in the place of the deserter, even if the family member has already completed his or her service obligations (22 Sept. 2011, 34).

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.

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Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; AllAfrica; Awate.com; Child Soldiers International; ecoinet; Forum18; Government of Eritrea; Ireland Legal Aid Board; *Journal of Modern African Studies*; Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights; United Nations – High Commissioner for Refugees, Refworld.

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