

Responses to Information Requests

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.

16 September 2013

ERI104539.E

Eritrea: Identification documents, including national identity cards and birth certificates; requirements and procedures for obtaining and renewing identity documents, both within the country and abroad (2009-August 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. National Identity Cards

The UK Border Agency's Country of Origin Information service indicates that, according to information obtained by the British Embassy in Asmara in 2010, citizens over the age of 18 must have a national identification (ID) card (17 Aug. 2012, 111). The agreed-upon minutes of a presentation given to the UK Border Agency on 16 February 2012, by David Bozzini, a political and legal anthropologist at the University of Applied Science in Geneva who specializes in Eritrea (Bozzini 7 Aug. 2013), likewise indicate that the identity card is issued to individuals over the age of 18 (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 112).

Sources indicate that the national ID card is issued by the government department responsible for immigration (ibid., 111, 112). According to the minutes of David Bozzini's presentation, the identity card is blue and is issued by the Immigration Office, which has branches in all *Zobas* [administrative regions] (ibid., 112).

Sources indicate that the ID card displays the following information:

- name (ibid., 111; Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013);
- date of birth (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 111);
- place of birth (ibid.; Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013);
- address (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 111; Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013; Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 4.2.2); and
- photograph (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 111; Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013).

Sources also indicate that the ID card does not expire (Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013; Norway 29 Apr. 2013; Keesing's Documentchecker n.d.). According to undated information in the travel section of the website of the US Bureau of Consular Affairs, ID cards are only issued in Tigrinya and Arabic (US n.d.).

1.1 Procedure for Obtaining a National ID Card

1.1.1 Obtaining a National ID Card in Eritrea

The minutes of Bozzini's presentation to the UK Border Agency indicate that to obtain an ID card in Eritrea, a citizen applies to the local administration (*Mmhdar*), which prepares a letter of recommendation for the Immigration Office branch of the Zoba (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 112).

1.1.2 Obtaining a National ID Card while Abroad

David Bozzini indicated that ID cards can be obtained through Eritrean embassies and consulates abroad, with the payment of fees and other taxes (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 113). He also indicated that there is a "special form for deserters or objectors [to military service] that clearly mentions their national felony" (ibid.).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an official in the consular section of the consulate of Eritrea in Toronto said that citizens and foreign-born children of citizens can obtain national ID cards from any Eritrean consulate or embassy and that the procedures followed are the same (Eritrea 19 Aug. 2013). The consular official also indicated that the required documentation and information is collected by the consulate or embassy and sent to the Immigration department in Eritrea to be processed, which can take approximately one month (ibid.).

The consular official indicated that for Eritreans who cannot prove their nationality because they lack the required documentation, it can be "very difficult" to obtain an ID card (ibid.). Applicants are required to have close family members attest to their identity at the consulate, and, if possible, bring copies of their parents' national ID card (ibid.). The

confirmation of an applicant's identity and nationality involves the verification of birth records in the village of the applicant's birth (ibid).

1.1.3 Replacement of National ID Card

A diplomatic source in Eritrea who corresponded with the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, in November 2010 indicated that an ID card can be replaced if lost, but that the replacement card will contain the same personal information that appeared on the original card, even if the information (for example, about occupation or address) has since changed (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 4.2.2).

The application for ID replacement on the website of the Embassy of Eritrea in Washington, DC, indicates that a copy of the original ID should be provided, if possible (Eritrea n.d.a). It also indicates that the applicant is required to pay the two percent [income] tax between 1992 and the present day, as well as "defence contributions" (ibid.).

2. Civil Registration and Documentation

The Eritrean Ministry of Information indicates that the Public Registration Office in the Central region of Eritrea was established "to record a brief profile of every individual or... family in the country" (Eritrea 5 Nov. 2010). In an interview with the Ministry of Information, the Head of the Public Registration, Cemetery and Social Rehabilitation office in the Central region stated that each administrative area in the country carries out the registration process (ibid.). Landinfo reports that, according to correspondence from a diplomatic source in April 2012, administrative offices keep a register of information on families and each family is issued a "family book" that contains their information (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 4).

According to the Head of Public Registration in the Central region, the Public Registration Office provides "'legal documents of birth, marriage, divorce, death, residential, associations and marital status as well as family certificates'" (Eritrea 5 Nov. 2010)

The UK Border Agency's Country of Origin Information service indicates that, according to information obtained by the British Embassy in Asmara in 2010,

every People's Congress has the duty and responsibility to organise Civil Status Officers who shall register births, marriages and deaths within its jurisdiction, and are duty-bound to issue certificates on request by any individual.... But in practice People's Congresses have not yet been re-established since independence in the spirit of the law. Therefore, registration of births, marriages and deaths is not available except in Asmara. (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 112)

According to the British Embassy in Asmara, there is no central register office where records are held (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.1 Birth Certificates

According to Landinfo, birth certificates can be issued in Tigrinya or in English (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 4.1). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.1.1 Obtaining Birth Certificates in Eritrea

According to undated information on the website of the US Bureau of Consular Affairs, to obtain a birth certificate, a person should apply to the municipal authorities and present the hospital birth record, baptismal certificate, and a statement from witnesses familiar with the birth, notarized by the zonal court (US n.d.). However, according to the Head of the Public Registration office in the central region, to obtain a birth certificate from the Public Registration office, applicants require a birth record or vaccination certificate, a completed registration form, the residential card of the parents, and the ID card of either parent (Eritrea 5 Nov. 2010). The same source indicates that, for a person over the age of 18, the required documents are: a copy of the birth record from their administrative area, a copy of their residential card, and their ID card or the ID card of either parent (ibid.).

According to the Head of the Public Registration office in the Central region, an Eritrean who resides abroad is also required to bring a certificate [confirming that they have paid] the two percent [income] tax, their national ID card, and their passport (ibid.).

The US Bureau of Consular Affairs website indicates that to receive a copy of a previously issued birth certificate, an applicant should submit a request to the Office of Civil Status in Asmara or the equivalent office in the municipality where the birth was registered (US n.d.).

2.1.2 Obtaining Birth Certificates While Abroad

The US reciprocity schedule also indicates that a copy of a birth certificate can be obtained from Eritrean embassies or consulates overseas, either in person or through a third party who has power of attorney (ibid.). Corroborating information for this statement could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Head of the Public Registration Office in Central region, a person who is not in Eritrea can obtain a birth certificate through a legal representative in Eritrea (Eritrea 5 Nov. 2010).

3. Passports

3.1 Obtaining Passports While Abroad

According to Landinfo, Eritrea introduced machine-readable, non-biometric passports on 1 May 2010 (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 3.2). A report published by the Swedish Migration Board indicates that the issuing of handwritten passports by the Embassy of Eritrea in Khartoum, Sudan, ceased in the summer of 2010 and that all passports issued beginning in autumn 2010 were typewritten and issued by the authorities in Asmara (Sweden 12 Apr. 2011).

Sources indicate that the validity period of passports was reduced in 2010 from five years to two years (Awate.com 18 Apr. 2010; Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 3.2). However, according to correspondence sent to Landinfo in December 2011 from a diplomatic source, machine-readable passports issued from the end of 2011 would be valid for five years (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 3.2). Undated information from the US Bureau of Consular Affairs indicates that passports are issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs for a five-year period and can be renewed multiple times by the Ministry or by an embassy or consulate abroad (US n.d.).

According to an 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" (n.d.), Eritreans residing abroad who renew their passports at an embassy are required to pay "the passport fee, any 2% income tax in arrears (tax on income generated in the host country), as well as any other fee that was imposed by the ruling party (national defense fee, adopt-a-martyr fee, fight-the-sanction-fee, etc.)" (18 Apr. 2010). The minutes of David Bozzini's presentation to the UK Border Agency indicate that, as with ID cards, passports can be obtained through embassies and consulates with the payment of fees and taxes as well as the completion of a form for military deserters or objectors, if applicable (UK 17 Aug. 2012, 113).

Passport application instructions on the websites of the Eritrean embassies in Washington and Sweden indicate that an applicant for a passport "must satisfy all national obligations, including 2% payment from 1992-present" (Eritrea n.d.b; *ibid.* n.d.c).

The Swedish Migration Board provides the following information on the issuing of passports by the Embassy of Eritrea in Khartoum, based on information obtained by the Swedish Embassy in Khartoum:

When an application for a passport is received, verification is made in the registries that exist in Asmara as to whether the individual has completed national military service. Those who leave Eritrea often do so illegally, but this does not affect the possibility of applying for a passport at the Embassy. A person who applies for a passport does not have to prove that their exit was legal. (Sweden 12 Apr. 2011)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Obstacles to Obtaining Identity Documents

In a 2010 report, the International Crisis Group writes that

[r]emittances were critical during the 1998-2000 war and have become ever more important. In order to maintain their full rights as citizens - particularly valuable if at some later date they wish to return and claim property or open a business - Eritreans abroad are expected to "voluntarily" pay 2 per cent of their monthly salaries to the government. This tax is mainly managed through local embassies and consulates. Many do pay, but increasing numbers, especially of the newly arrived, do not, whether because of their economic situations or hostility to the regime.... If they do not pay, family in Eritrea is often pressured or punished, and it will be impossible to obtain an entry visa or renew an Eritrean passport. (21 Sept. 2010, 18)

Similarly, a 2009 Human Rights Watch report indicates that the government uses the two percent tax "to consolidate its control over the diaspora population by denying politically suspect individuals essential documents such as passports" (16 Apr. 2009, 75). The report provides the example of a refugee in Rome whose passport renewal was refused on the grounds that he had not paid the income tax and had not fulfilled his "national obligations" (Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2009, 76). Human Rights Watch also indicates that citizens who failed to carry out their military service or who left the country illegally are required to "sign a 'confession' admitting to treason and failing to fulfil one's national duty" to obtain services from embassies (*ibid.*, 77).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012* indicates that citizens residing abroad generally had the right to return, but were required to provide proof that they had paid the two-percent tax in order to access embassy services, including passport renewals (19 Apr. 2013, 14).

Country Reports 2012 also indicates that Jehovah's Witnesses who do not perform military service are denied ID cards (US 19 Apr. 2013, 14). Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea reported in 2013 that followers of unrecognized religious denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, among others, "may be denied administrative services, such as the issuance of national identity cards, as this would require denouncing their religion on the application form" (UN 28 May 2013, para. 65).

5. Other Identity Documents

A report published by Landinfo provides the following information about other personal documents used for identification purposes in Eritrea:

[Translation] Various existing documents can probably be used as ID documentation.... There is uncertainty in Eritrea about which documents can be used as ID documentation in various contexts. Some sources use terms like 'relevant documents,' 'adequate documents' and 'other documentation' without specifying which documents they mean. According to a diplomatic source in Eritrea (e-mail, January, 2010), references are made to documents such as court decisions (regarding the care of children), health certificates from military service, certificates regarding real estate, testimony, conditions of employment and confirmations (for example of ownership of a car), bank statements, and evidence given by three witnesses. (Norway 29 Apr. 2013, Sec. 4 Note 11).

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.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A representative of the Eritrean-Canadian Human Rights Group was unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response. The Embassy of Eritrea in Washington, DC, was unable to provide information for this Response. Attempts to contact the Association of Eritrean Journalists in Exile were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Committee to Protect Journalists; eoi.net; Factiva; Haaretz; Smerrr.net; *The Times of Israel*; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld, High Commissioner for Refugees.

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Date modified: 2013-07-17 [Top of Page](#)

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