

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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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.

17 September 2013

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Eritrea: Treatment of Jeberti people by government authorities, including Jeberti returnees (2010-August 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources indicate that the Jeberti people (also spelled Jiberti, Djiberti, Jeberty, Djeberti, Jabarti) are Muslims (Senior Research Fellow 15 Aug. 2013; Eritrea 1 Oct. 2009; Tronvoll 2009, 111), while the *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East* indicates that they are "largely Muslim" (2009, 336). The Jeberti live in the highlands of Eritrea (Tronvoll 2009, 131; ENP 4 Sept. 2013) as a Muslim minority within the highland population (Tronvoll 2009, 111; Tesfagiorgis 2011, 138; Ostebo 2010, 51). Although the Jeberti are a Tigrigna-speaking group (Bariagaber 1 Oct. 2006) and the Jeberti mother-tongue is Tigrigna, their cultural language is Arabic (ENP 4 Sept. 2013; Tronvoll 2009, 111, 116).

The Research Directorate contacted an Eritrean professor of sociology who is both a senior research fellow at the University of Oslo, Norway, and a Senior Advisor within an Eritrean research group at the International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI), a Norway-based (ILPI n.d.a) independent institute that conducts research in the field of good governance, peace and conflict, and international law (ILPI n.d.b). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Professor indicated that the Jeberti are an "urbanized population group active as businessmen and merchants, as well as artisans (handicraft)" (Senior Research Fellow 15 Aug. 2013).

Some members of the Jeberti have been seeking official government recognition as an ethnic group (Tefagiorgis 2011, 138; Bariagaber 1 Oct. 2006, 18; ILO and ACHPR 2009, 3). Sources state that the Eritrean government does not recognize the Jeberti as an ethnic group (ENP 4 Sept. 2013; Tesfagiorgis 2011, 138; ILO and ACHPR 2009, 3) but that it does consider the Jeberti to be a part of the Tigrigna ethnic group (*ibid.*, 6; ENP 4 Sept. 2013).

Members of the Jeberti created the Eritrean Al-Nahda Party (ENP) (Bariagaber 1 Oct. 2006, 18; Tronvoll 2009, 132; ENP 4 Sept. 2013) in 2005 (*ibid.*). The ENP is part of the opposition against the Eritrean government [0] (*ibid.*; Connell and Killion 2011, 221). On 4 September 2013, the Chairman of the Central Committee of the ENP provided the following information through a telephone interview with the Research Directorate: the ENP's main office is in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, due to the difficulty of operating in Eritrea. The ENP is "seeking the removal of the Eritrean dictatorship" and "to govern Eritrea in peace and unity for all Eritreans, with all Eritreans." The Chairman added that, although the "Jeberti cause is the ENP's main cause ... the party is not only concerned with Jeberti, but rather all Eritreans." Although the ENP was founded by the Jeberti, membership is open to all Eritreans. According to the Chairman, the ENP has underground members in Eritrea that inform ENP leadership about current developments in the country (ENP 4 Sept. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Treatment of Jeberti People by Government Authorities

Sources describe the Jeberti as "marginalized" (Senior Research Fellow 15 Aug. 2013; ILO and ACHPR 2009, 6, 7). The Senior Research Fellow indicated that the Eritrean government "discriminates against and marginalizes the Muslim communities in Eritrea in general, including the Jeberti community" (15 Aug. 2013).

Sources indicate that, in the past, the Jeberti were not allowed to own land (Ostebo 22 June 2010, 51; Senior Research Fellow 15 Aug. 2013; ILO and ACHPR 2009, 3). The Senior Research Fellow stated that land is owned by the state of Eritrea, and now the Jeberti "have equal access and can lease land from the government" (*ibid.*). However, the Senior Research Fellow also indicated that "sometimes Jeberti businesses are closed and given to former EPLF [Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front] ... combatants as compensation for his/her services during the independence struggle" by the Eritrean government (*ibid.*). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior partner at the ILPI added that

between 2009 and 2010 the government declared repossession of buildings with business locations (such as bars, shops, cafeterias, etc.), as well as apartments and villas from those who had rented them for long periods of time ... These

properties were subsequently distributed to ex-fighters as a compensation and reward for their service. In this regard, the Muslims, and especially the Jeberti shops, cafeterias and houses were among the main targets by the municipality of Asmara. (Senior Partner 15 Aug. 2013)

The ENP Central Committee Chairman indicated that the Jeberti are disadvantaged in accessing work and scholarships (4 Sept. 2013). Similarly, according to the Senior Research Fellow, "Muslim groups in ... Eritrea are still largely excluded from equal participation in politics and education, except for a limited number of individuals who are loyalists ... of the ruling parties" (31 Aug. 2013). However, the Senior Research Fellow also said that the Jeberti can access the same "meagre social services" as other Eritrean citizens, such as health and education services (15 Aug. 2013).

The Senior Research Fellow indicated that the Jeberti have the "same social duties as other Eritreans, such as serving in the military and national service for unspecified periods of time" (ibid.). The ENP Central Committee Chairperson indicated that, due to their faith, most Jeberti families do not want their daughters to join the military, but they are still forced to do so (4 Sept. 2013).

According to the Senior Research Fellow, "[i]t is difficult to give a precise account of violence" that has taken place against marginalized groups in recent years because of the scarcity of information coming from Eritrea (15 Aug. 2013). However, the Senior Research Fellow indicated that

The Eritrean government is authoritarian with a tendency towards totalitarianism and has been in power for more than 22 years without holding national elections. There is no implemented constitution, and no freedom of press and speech. In such an environment, police and military treat the population with harsh methods if they show any kind of protest or critical attitudes against the President or the government at large. Both police and the military are dominated by the largest ethnic group, the Christian Tigrinya. They often discriminate against Muslims, including the Jeberti, and label them as Jihadists, fundamentalists or terrorists if they show any kind of protest against or criticism of government policies. The Jeberti community as Muslims are no exception in this regard and suffer from the same degree of discrimination as other Muslim population groups. (ibid.)

3. Treatment of Jeberti Returnees

Information on the treatment of Jeberti returnees was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Senior Research Fellow indicated that

[g]enerally, all Eritreans who fled from the mandatory and timely unlimited national service as draft evaders or deserters face incommunicado detention of undefined periods without due process, torture and other cruel forms of treatment, if they are forcibly returned to Eritrea. There is no distinction between ethnic groups in this regard and this applies to the Jeberti in the same way as to any social group of Eritrea. There are only few exceptions w[h]ere exit visas have been granted by the state for purposes such as Pilgrimage to Mekka or government-sanctioned business trips. (15 Aug. 2013)

Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, an Amnesty International (AI) representative stated that "all returnees, of whatever ethnic identity, are treated with suspicion and hostility if forcibly returned to Eritrea; most, according to reports we receive, are arbitrarily detained and tortured for information about their attempts to claim asylum abroad" (3 Sept. 2013).

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: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: African Studies Association; Associate Professor and Research Fellow in the Center for International Studies, University of Missouri, St. Louis; Association in Defense of the Human Rights of the Eritrean People; Association of Eritrean Jeberti in North America; Association of Eritrean Jeberti in the UK; Human Rights Concern – Eritrea; Jeberti.com; Royal African Society; Suwera Centre for Human Rights. A Research Associate at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland was unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Africa Intelligence; African Studies Quarterly; Al Jazeera; AllAfrica; Alenalki.com; Amnesty International; British Broadcasting Corporation; ecoi.net; Eritrea 24; Eritrea.be; Ethnologue – Languages of the World; Europa; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Jeberti.com; Minority Rights Group International; People's Front for Democracy and Justice; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Tigrai.net; United Kingdom – Border Agency; United Nations – High Commissioner for Refugees, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld; United States – CIA World Factbook, Department of State; University of Laval.

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