

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#) > [Research Program](#) > Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

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2 September 2014

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Eritrea: Military identification cards and permits, including appearance (2012-August 2014)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Military Identification Cards and Permits

In a presentation given to the Asylum and Return Division of the Swiss Federal Office for Migration, David M. Bozzini [1] indicates that

ID cards are used in all kinds of bureaucratic procedures. Not having an ID card can hinder access to civil services. However, since the border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), military conscripts need only a *laissez-passer* (and no ID card) to pass checkpoints.

Conscripts in both sectors of the National Service hold *laissez-passers* (*Mänqäsaqäsi*), which are issued by the Ministry of Defense (for the military sector) or another ministry or civil institution under which the conscript is assigned. Military *laissez-passers* are yellow, and those of civil institutions are white. Not all have the same design and information, some are even simple letters.

Demobilization cards are issued to National Service members who have successfully carried out the demobilization process. This card replaces *laissez-passers*. It generally grants more freedom of movement within the Eritrean territory. However, holders of such cards ... are still assigned to their position within the state institutions and do not have the right to change or to find a job elsewhere. Usually, Eritreans do not differ between the national service period and such demobilization in the sense that the conscript is not released. Many people doubt that they are officially demobilized by the army. (Bozzini 16 Feb. 2012, Sec. 3.2)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor at the Institute of African Affairs at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) who conducts research on Eritrean militarization and diaspora, indicated that all recruits receive military identification cards when they start military service and that these are issued by the Ministry of Defense (Associate Professor 14 Aug. 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of African studies and political science at Pennsylvania State University indicated that authorities used to give military identification cards to conscripts during military training in Sawa [2] and that the cards were the same size as the national identification card and were yellow in colour (Professor 18 Aug. 2014). The Professor also indicated that the military identification card started being issued around 1976 or 1977, but he believed that it stopped being issued in 2002 or 2003 (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Information on the characteristics of the military identification card could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

On the renewal of the *laissez-passer*, Bozzini indicates in a paper published in the peer-reviewed journal *Surveillance & Society* in 2011 that

[s]ometimes, officials in charge of issuing permits are not in their office for several days or weeks because they are attending a workshop, or because they are on leaves to attend family events and celebrations. Often in these cases, renewal processes are frozen, since delegations of authority have not been put in place. Other causes are related to technical problems such as lack of electricity or poor management of letterhead paper supply. ...

Consequently, people in the National Service are always anticipating problems when they have to renew their permits, which is frequently. Finally, internal regulations can change at any time without any advance notification. For instance, the geographical validity of permits is sometimes restricted to the town of assignation only, thus preventing conscripts from visiting their relatives. This kind of bureaucratic interference in providing permits to people carrying out National Service is pervasive. When internal regulations change within an office, this can also have an important effect on the daily functioning of the bureaucrats in charge of them. In these situations, it sometimes happens that every basic responsibility is frozen since no one yet knows the new regulations or they do not know who will be in charge of issuing permits after an internal reshuffle of posts. Bureaucratic purge also takes place unexpectedly. A new team of bureaucrats is then constituted and they usually change the rules and issue new kinds of permits of which Military Police will again be suspicious. Processes of re-assignation from one institution to another are not rare for people in the National Service. In such cases, people assigned face many problems in maintaining a valid permit. A transfer can take half a year to be processed and during that time people may have permits that are valid for only a week. Sometimes, they even remain without one, since no institution recognises their current affiliation while in "transfer." (Bozzini 2011, 103-104)

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

2. Fraudulent Military Identification Cards and Permits

According to Bozzini,

[s]trategies have been generated to secure one's everyday life in case of bureaucratic denial or obstacles to renewing permits. These strategies are related to falsification and fraudulent acquisition of permits. ... falsification has become the most common means for deceiving Military Police in Eritrea. The post-2004 *ad hoc* travel permits are even technically easier to forge and modify than the previous ID cards. Without a picture attached, permits are merely letters with a stamp and a signature from an official from the Ministry where holders are assigned. Thus, generalisation of such *laissez-passer* has not significantly enhanced the efficiency of civil National Service conscripts control.

More recently, it has also been easier to purchase real official permits from army offices. For several years, there has been a small but prosperous black market for different kind of military permits. One can buy an empty leave form stamped and signed in which it remains only to fill the blanks with the conscript's name, route, and the time validity. However, in 2007 such permits were still quite expensive. The cheaper ones went for 700 Nakfa (roughly 40 USD), that is to say, about a half of a monthly salary for a NS [National Service]-exempted civil servant for a validity period which can not last for more than a few weeks. (Bozzini 2011, 104)

The Associate Professor indicated that "fraudulent identity cards and especially National Service exemption documents are common in Eritrea. Reportedly, such documents are faked and sold by government and military officials on the black market" (Associate Professor 14 Aug. 2014). The Associate Professor said he believed that there is a high demand for documents which make it possible for people to travel inside the country without being arrested at one of the many checkpoints throughout the countries [such as]: papers stating that the individual is on leave from his/her military service, sickness certificates, exemptions from military/National Service and the like. (ibid.)

According to Bozzini, the use of fraudulent documents "contribute[s] to strengthening the level of suspicion of Military Police and therefore accentuate[s] in turn the likelihood of indiscriminate round-ups and arbitrary detention to crack down on these "irregularities" (2011, 104).

In his doctoral thesis, Bozzini indicates that police and military surveillance in Asmara and other cities is [translation] "virtually omnipresent" and that identity check controls are a possibility at "any time" (23 May 2011, 124). A report produced by Human Rights Watch on state repression and conscription in Eritrea indicates that, according to a visitor to Eritrea in 2008, buses were "frequently stopped and searched" by authorities, and passengers were asked for ID cards, with some producing "laminated cards showing that they had completed national service, others had letters authorizing travel to a specific place and for a limited period of time" (Apr. 2009, 63). In his presentation, Bozzini indicates that "[t]here are also known cases of conscripts arrested after a design change of their *laissez-passer*, as the police considered the new layout as false" (16 Feb. 2012, Sec. 3.3).

The *US Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* for Eritrea indicates that

[a]uthorities sometimes arrested persons whose papers were not in order and detained them until they were able to provide evidence of their militia status or demobilization from national service. The government contacted places of employment and used informers to attempt to identify those unwilling to participate in the militia. (27 Feb. 2014, 6)

According to Bozzini, it is "impossible" not to cross a checkpoint "several times a day," and that these checkpoints for *laissez-passer* are "the state control mechanism par excellence" (23 May 2011, 126). Additional

and 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.

Notes

[1] Dr. Bozzini is a political and legal anthropologist and is currently a Postdoc Visiting Research Fellow at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. His research focus is Eritrean military service and state surveillance, and he has written several articles in peer-reviewed journals on the subject (David Bozzini 19 Feb. 2014).

[2] Sawa is a military training camp (Associate Professor 14 Aug. 2014).

References

Associate Professor, Institute of African Affairs, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). 14 August 2014. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Bozzini, David. 19 February 2014. "About." <<http://www.davidbozzini.org/>> [Accessed 20 Aug. 2014]

_____. 16 February 2012. "National Service and State Structures in Eritrea." Agreed minutes, presentation before the Asylum and Return Division, Federal Office for Migration of Switzerland, Bern-Wabern, 28 June 2012. <<https://www.bfm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/migration/laenderinformationen/herkunftslaenderinformationen/afrika/eri/ERI-agreed-minutes-bozzini-e.pdf>> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2014]

_____. 23 May 2011. *En état de siège. Ethnographie de la mobilisation nationale et de la surveillance en Érythrée*. Doctoral thesis, University of Neuchâtel. <https://doc.rero.ch/record/25005/files/These_BozziniD.pdf> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2014]

_____. 2011. "Low-tech Surveillance and the Despotic State in Eritrea." *Surveillance & Society*. Vol. 9, No. 1/2. <<http://library.queensu.ca/ojs/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/low-tech/low-tech>> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2014]

Human Rights Watch. April 2009. *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptation in Eritrea*. <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/eritrea0409web_0.pdf> [Accessed 20 Aug. 2014]

Professor, African studies and political science, Pennsylvania State University. 18 August 2014. Telephone interview.

United States (US). 27 February 2014. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013*. "Eritrea." <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220321.pdf>> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2014]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact three local lawyers and representatives from the following organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Canada – Consulate in Eritrea, Embassy in Khartoum; City University of New York; Eritrean-Canadian Human Rights Group of Manitoba; Eritrea – Embassy in Washington D.C.; Human Rights Concern Eritrea; International Organization for Migration; London South Bank University; and the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat.

A professor at Boston University and a representative of Human Rights Watch could not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

A professor at the University of London and representatives from the Eritrean Consulate in Toronto and the National Documentation Centre of the Canada Border Services Agency could not provide information.

Internet sites, including: *Africa Review*; *All Africa*; Asmarino; Bloomberg; British Broadcasting Corporation; *Christian Science Monitor*; Droit.Afrique.com; eoi.net; Eritrea – Embassy in Washington; Factiva; Freedom House; *The Globe and Mail*; *The Guardian*; International Committee of the Red Cross; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; Interpol; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; *Jeune Afrique*; Middle East Online; Reporters sans frontières; *Telegraph*; United Nations – High Commissioner for Refugees; United States – Department of Defense, Department of Justice.

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