

Report

Eritrea: National service



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For information on all of the reports published by Landinfo, please contact:

Landinfo
Country of Origin Information Centre

Storgata 33A

P.O. Box 8108 Dep

NO-0032 Oslo

Norway

Tel: +47 23 30 94 70

E-mail: landinfo@landinfo.no

Website: www.landinfo.no

Report **Eritrea: National service**

SUMMARY

National Service has until recently consisted of both military training and community service or military service. However, according to Eritrean officials the service will with effect from October 2014 only consist of military training/service, and the length of the service will be according to the proclamation on National Service, i.e. 18 months.

Besides averting external threats, National Service is an instrument to create a cohesive national identity and rebuild the country. The *Warsay Yikaalo* campaign is an extension of this programme. The upper age limit for conscription to national service has increased since the border war with Ethiopia for both men and women. However, women are increasingly exempt from National Service because of marriage, birth or on a religious basis.

Eritreans who evade National Service are probably exposed to arbitrary punishments from local commanders, and there have been indications that Eritreans performing their National Service in military units have been more subject to punishment than Eritreans in the civilian sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND QUALITY OF SOURCES

This report is a summary of the different viewpoints and available written information regarding National Service in Eritrea and the consequences for those who evade National Service.

It is very difficult to uncover facts about the social conditions in Eritrea, including National Service. Until recently, the government had not published information on the conditions of National Service, the number of conscripts in service or how demobilisation/discharge is practiced. Therefore most of the information on National Service comes from statements from Eritreans who have left the country or consists of anecdotal information passed on to representatives of the international community in Asmara.

Landinfo has made four trips to Eritrea in the past four years, one of which also included information gathering in Khartoum and in Kassala in Sudan. The last trip to Eritrea was completed in January 2015.¹ We met with representatives of the government, representatives of the diplomatic community and local and international organisations. In Khartoum and Kassala, we also met Eritrean refugees with first-hand experience of National Service.

The majority of our sources are anonymous at their request. The disadvantage of anonymous sources is unfortunately that readers cannot verify whether or not the source and information are reliable. In some countries, such as Eritrea, few citizens will speak out if their identity is made public, due to fear of reprisals from the government or difficulties in their work.

Another problem Landinfo experienced [in obtaining information about] Eritrea is the likelihood of "round tripping" or false confirmations, i.e. two sources say the same thing which seemingly confirms certain information, when really they are referencing the same source. This can occur because there are few independent international sources in Eritrea. The international community in the country is quite small and representatives Landinfo met with over the years have been up front about the fact that much of the information they share is not fact-based, but are points of view and sometimes speculation.

The leading Eritrea expert Gaim Kibreab² has emphasised that it is almost impossible for foreigners to get permission to conduct social research projects, and even Eritrean researchers face major challenges (Kibreab 2009b). Gaim Kibreab himself has not been in Eritrea for a number of years. The lack of data and difficulties in gaining access to the available information thus limit the opportunities to access information on a variety of social issues.

¹ The immigration administration also visited the country in 1999 and 2003. In January 2015, Landinfo also visited the cities Keren and Adi Keyh.

² Gaim Kibreab is a professor at London South Bank University.

Human rights organisations do not have access to the country either, and there is no independent press³ or national, independent human rights or interest organisations who can monitor the situation of those who were deported to Eritrea, e.g. from Egypt in 2008, 2009 and 2011 respectively.⁴ A number of private international aid organisations were expelled in 2011 and there are currently very few such organisations present in Eritrea. The international representatives in the country also have limited freedom of movement.⁵

Several reputable international organisations point out that there has been serious abuse of people who evade or defect from National Service in Eritrea. Their reports are largely based on accounts from people who have come to the West and to other African countries as asylum seekers. None of the organisations in question have been in the country, as they have not been granted visas by the Eritrean government. It is therefore a paradox that criticism of the accuracy of sources has been relatively absent in the various reports published over the years. Challenges such as reliability, objectivity and accuracy are discussed only briefly. From this perspective, these sources do not necessarily have the most credible information. It is difficult to verify many of the allegations the exile sources present and because of the lack of credible reporting from Eritrea on such matters, it is often tempting to draw general conclusions about torture and brutal attacks being used against anyone who avoids or deserts from service.

Landinfo has no doubt that Eritrea has an authoritarian and militaristic government and that an unknown number of critics of the regime have been imprisoned or that human rights violations have been committed.⁶ However, we believe that it is necessary to discuss challenges and shortcomings regarding the information on this topic. Even though the government is now more transparent towards the international community than before, it is important to emphasise that Landinfo has not had the opportunity to conduct systematic investigations or interviews with people who have evaded National Service and who were later arrested or sent home.

Several international representatives in Eritrea pointed out that one can detect noticeable changes, as more people express their dissatisfaction with conditions in the country. Yet nothing suggests that there is an organised internal opposition and no one dares to publicly criticize the authorities. This is a small and transparent society, easily controlled by government security.⁷ There is no doubt that the many

³ In January 2015, six journalists were released after six years in prison. It is believed that at least 17 other journalists are still detained (CPJ 2015).

⁴ See HRW 2011.

⁵ In January 2013, the government and the UN signed a framework agreement on cooperation for the period of 2013-2016. The budget for the cooperation is estimated at 188 million U.S. dollars. The agreement has five priority areas: national capacity building, food security and sustainable living conditions, environment and gender equality. Nevertheless there were some positive trends pointing in the direction of increased willingness for reform and a certain willingness to cooperate with development actors such as the UN.

⁶ There are confirmed cases of prisoners being subjected to abuse. One such case is the Pentecostal and gospel singer Helen Berhane, who was imprisoned from 2004 to 2006. She was treated in the hospital after being released for injuries which were obviously inflicted during her imprisonment (U.S. Embassy Eritrea 2006b).

⁷ For example, buying a SIM card is a time-consuming process. Inhabitants must apply for it and the waiting time can last up to several months. As a short-term visitor, it is not possible to buy a SIM card or to use mobile phones, because there is no interconnection between Norwegian and Eritrean mobile networks.

thousands of people fleeing from the country each month impacts the society's ability to function.

Young men with education and resources, primarily Christian Tigrinya from the highlands, are fleeing in droves. The government no longer hides the fact that the country has been drained of human resources.⁸ However, on the surface, particularly in Asmara, there is little evidence of unrest in the population.

2. NATIONAL SERVICE

National Service in Eritrea differs from compulsory military service in Norway and most other countries, because the goal of the service is based on an ideology of reconstruction of the country. It also is meant to strengthen the economy and develop a common Eritrean identity across ethnic and religious lines.

After liberation from Ethiopia in 1991 and independence in 1993, Eritrea demobilised soldiers who had served in the war of liberation. In July 1994, military training was introduced into National Service again with both women and men between the ages of 18 and 40 years old being required to serve.⁹ According to the proclamation on National Service, the service period is 18 months and includes military training for six months and community service for twelve. After this initial service, all Eritreans are registered in the reserve forces until they are 50 years old and they may be called back for training and mobilisation (Eritrean National Service Act 1995, § 23 and 25). In practice however, the service, pursuant to legal provisions regarding extension in crisis situations, has been almost permanent since the border war with Ethiopia.¹⁰ The government has recognised this, but insists that the service period for new conscripts will be 18 months with effect from the 27th enlistment

⁸ Kibreab (2013) points out that Eritrean refugees are mainly young single men. In a survey he conducted amongst a large group of exiled Eritreans, 92 % of those asked said they had deserted from service. He points out that emigration from Eritrea is due to a number of interacting factors, including economic, social, political and human rights conditions. When asked why they had deserted, 51 % said that the extended length of service was a deciding factor, 19 % deserted because they wanted to help their family economically, 12 % were opposed to the very idea of military service, 5 % deserted because they had been in an argument with a superior and 5 % had escaped from prison. The main complaint of those questioned was that the service lasts several years.

⁹ The National Service Act was first adopted in 1991 and later revised in 1995 (Kibreab 2009a, 2009b). National Service is referred to as *hagerawi agelglot* in Tigrinya. According to Gaim Kibreab, the Eritrean government does not use the term military service, *wotehaderawi agelglot* in Tigrinya (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007, p. 30).

¹⁰ Eritrea is still under military mobilisation as a result of the unresolved border conflict with Ethiopia and it is referred to as a "No war – no peace" situation. This situation is always mentioned as the explanation for most of the country's problems. According to various sources, Eritrea has the largest army in sub-Saharan Africa in relation to the population (UNHCR 2011). In crisis situations, the upper age limit for military service is raised to age 50, but in practice the upper limit for going through National Service has increased in recent years to between 50 and 57 years old for men and 47 years old for women. However there is much indication that women serve for a shorter period than men.

round, which took place in autumn 2014.¹¹ It is uncertain whether or not this normalisation of the service period will actually be implemented.¹²

Conscripts serving in the civilian sector work in government agencies, schools, courts, hospitals, local governments or state enterprises, amongst other places. The reorganisation means that the service will now only consist of military training (conversation with manager of the political department in PFDJ, Yemane Gebreab, in Asmara 19 January 2015).

However, the many thousands who have been in service for many years will not be discharged in the immediate future, according to Yemane Gebreab. The economic situation in the country is difficult, energy limitations stymie development and agriculture must be improved and developed. There is also a need to expand international cooperation. Therefore, in order to avoid mass unemployment, the government has a three to five year plan on solving the challenges of transforming the service period.¹³ Gebreab stated that in general, 70 % of National Service conscripts have been demobilised since the war with Ethiopia, yet Landinfo has been unable to confirm this information via other independent sources.

Landinfo would like to make it clear that both government officials and representatives of the international community in Asmara, as early as the winter of 2013, and again in the spring of 2014, claimed that the service period had been normalised (diplomatic source (3), conversation in Asmara March/April 2014; diplomatic source (2), conversation in Asmara 31 January 2013).

2.1 WARSAY YIKEALO

The *Warsay Yikealo Development Campaign* (WYDC), the national development programme, was adopted in 2002.¹⁴ The Eritrean government has not formulated what the content of the programme is, but Eritrea experts characterise it as an unlimited extension of the National Service (Healy 2007; Kibreab 2009a; 2009b; 2013; 2014).

2.2 NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN NATIONAL SERVICE

No one knows how many Eritreans are currently serving in the National Service. The Eritrean government does not disclose how many are recruited for service, but some sources speculate on the number.¹⁵ In the summary from a 2007 Eritrea conference

¹¹ According to some sources (Shabait 2014), this was the 28th enlistment round.

¹² There has been no official public announcement about the changes. The information about the changes was given to representatives of the international community in Asmara in autumn 2014 and to Landinfo in January 2015. The government's spokespeople claim that families and conscripts were made aware of the change via local trustees.

¹³ The party secretary stated that 40,000 – 60,000 people would be eligible for discharge.

¹⁴ The term *warsay yikealo* means "bearer of the legacy". Warsay refers to the young recruits and yikealo refers to those who fought during the war for independence (Kibreab 2009, p. 260).

¹⁵ There are few materials publicly available in Eritrea. Neither has there been any census conducted in the country since independence in 1991. The official estimate of the population is 3.6 million, while the UN operates with estimates of over six million (UNDP 2014) – which is probably too high and is based on a projection of the population in 1991.

under the auspices of the think tank Chatham House, it was estimated that 350,000-420,000 Eritreans had served. Half of them were in the service pursuant to the law, while the others were in the national development programme (Healy 2007).¹⁶

2.3 RECRUITMENT: 1994-2015

From 1994 until the border war in 1998, the local authorities, the *zoba*, called about 25,000 new recruits to National Service in six month intervals, either in writing or, in smaller villages, verbally. The recruits were notified of a meeting place, such as a football stadium or a school, and were transported from there to a training camp in Sawa (for further discussion of this camp, see point 2.4).¹⁷

From the summer of 2002, an increasing number of Eritreans managed to avoid National Service and the government adopted stronger measures. Military police visited private homes, workplaces and social gathering sites in search of recruits (diplomatic source (1), e-mail 2002; Müller 2008). Women were also taken by force. In February 2005, youths were arrested in broad daylight for the first time (diplomatic source (1), e-mail 2005). In 2006, there were signs that the arrests had increased in scope; this was probably connected to the tense situation related to the border dispute with Ethiopia (diplomatic source (1), e-mail 2006).

In 2008, the dissident website Awate reported new arrests (*giffa*¹⁸) and that all Ethiopians had been taken in for training and service (Awate 2008).

The British Embassy in Asmara said in 2010 that there were no formal guidelines for conducting arrests. Most people without discharge or demobilisation documents were sent to training camps or detention centres (quoted in UK Home Office 2011, parts 9.34-9.35).

Descriptions of the situation have been complex and sometimes contradictory in recent years. A local source in Asmara said in February 2011 that arrests of youth for National Service occur far less frequently than in the past. However, in March 2013, other sources claimed that it seemed there was a lack of personnel at all levels in the army, and that, in some places, women with children were also recruited (diplomatic source (1), e-mail 02 April 2013).

However, in conversations with international representatives in Asmara in March/April 2014 and in January 2015, it was agreed that the number of *giffas* in Asmara had probably gone down considerably.

¹⁶ Crisis Group (2010) estimates the number of Eritreans in National Service to be "hundreds of thousands".

¹⁷ A member of a Christian minority group Landinfo met in Asmara in February 2011 described recruitment in the 1990s as follows:

In the beginning [1995-2000], you were called through a letter from the zoba. This letter was small, machine-printed and didn't have a stamp. If you didn't go to Sawa, you could be included in a "collection." These started in 1995/1996. However, it was not difficult to evade such collections. You noticed it around you and then you knew it was time to go to relatives to hide.

The source had done this herself. She also stated that it was easier to avoid arrest after she got an ID card.

¹⁸ *Giffa* is a term used in Tigrinya for the English expression *round up* (arrest).

2.4 SAWA – MILITARY CAMP OR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION?

In winter 2013, Landinfo's sources in Asmara claimed that while Sawa has undoubtedly had a bad reputation in the past, it had improved in recent years. According to the source, Sawa has primarily become an educational institution, rivaling the size of a city. It can reportedly house an estimated 30,000 people. The camp is located near the Sudanese border, in the Gash Barka region by the river Sawa, in the western part of the country. Sawa was built in the 1990s as a military training camp. Initially recruits lived in simple bamboo huts. Over time houses and dormitories were constructed by the camp's residents. Sawa is divided into two areas: an educational area and a military training area (U.S. Embassy Eritrea 2006a). There are also several small stores which sell groceries and other necessities. Parents can visit their children in Sawa and there is lodging provided on site (local Eritrean source, conversation in Asmara 29 January 2013; international representative (2), conversation in Asmara 30 January 2013; representative of NUEYS, conversation in Asmara 06 February 2013; diplomatic source (5), conversation in Asmara 14 January 2015). Boys and girls have separate dormitories, but interact freely the rest of the day.



Dormitory in Sawa. The picture was taken in the summer of 2014.

In order to increase control over youth old enough to serve, all high school students have to go through their twelfth and final school year in Sawa since the summer of 2003. No other schools in Eritrea offer this school year, which must be completed in order to be admitted to a university.¹⁹ However, many young Eritreans leave school before their twelfth school year and thus avoid going to Sawa.

The government has not published statistics, but according to World Bank (World Bank, unknown year), an estimated 36 % of school-age children are in school. In

¹⁹ Age at the end of the twelfth school year can vary depending on whether the person has skipped a grade.

larger cities the number is likely to be much higher, while the number drops in peripheral areas such as Gash Barka and the Afar region. World Bank estimates that in general, only 38 % of students complete their schooling. This means that many youth recruits, particularly in rural areas, are enrolled in the National Service through methods other than Sawa. They receive their military training in other camps. Wia is one of these camps, but it is unclear whether or not it is still in operation (Kibreab 2009a, 2009b; Müller 2008; representative of NUEYS, conversation in Asmara 05 February 2013).²⁰

The school system in Sawa is ostensibly separate from the military training in the camp, which is part of National Service. Schools are governed by the Ministry of Education, while National Service is governed by the Ministry of Defence. As of the winter of 2013, several of Landinfo's sources in Asmara claim that the twelfth school year in Sawa ends with six to eight weeks of military training.²¹ Rumours and stories of sexual abuse, both in Sawa and other training camps, have not been uncommon. Kibreab (2009b, p. 60) points out that it is impossible to distinguish between allegations, rumours and truth, due to the censorship in the country. Therefore a number of unconfirmed stories about suicide, fatal malaria and sexual abuse during service have also circulated.

According to a diplomatic source (2) Landinfo met in Asmara in 2011, sexual abuse occurs in Sawa "as often as you would expect in a place like this," while another international representative (3) told Landinfo in 2014 that allegations of abuse were probably exaggerated (conversation in Asmara, March 2014).

According to a representative of the Eritrean government, youths who complete the exam (and complete military training) in Sawa are divided into three categories, which follow different paths in the National Service (representative of the Eritrean government, conversation in Asmara, February 2011):

- Graduates with good grades and privileged²² Eritreans go on to one of the country's eight colleges,²³ which offer study programmes of two and four years.

²⁰ The schools inform the parents of all 11th graders about Sawa. After the information meeting, time and place of departure are arranged for after the summer holidays. On the date of departure, the students gather at the school and are then transported to the camp. The dates of departure differ according to the region.

²¹ Some sources have described the procedures in Sawa. An Eritrean woman Landinfo met in Eritrea in 2011 and who had sent several of her children to the camp explained that after their arrival, the youths completed two weeks of physical training. Teaching started afterwards, and lasted until March 16 in 2011. The day started at 6:00 a.m. with one hour of physical exercise. Saturdays were for working in the fields, while Sunday was a free day (conversation in Asmara, February 2011).

An Eritrean refugee (1) in Sudan explained that the students in Sawa had school uniforms with white shirts and blue/green trousers. A typical day in Sawa was described as follows:

You wake up at 5:00 a.m. Then you have to make breakfast and get ready for school. School starts at 8:00 a.m. and lasts until 12:00 p.m. After that, you can do your homework and go over the day's lessons. Evenings are used for relaxation. In Sawa, 120 students live in each room. You don't get a holiday during your stay there, but your family can come visit. The family stays in a room reserved for families of the same type as the students. The visits usually last two or three days. You do not have an ID card while in Sawa (conversation in Kassala, February 2011).

²² A number of sources Landinfo met in Eritrea and Sudan in February 2011 emphasised that privileged Eritreans have benefits, including access to higher education.

²³ 1) The Technological Institute in Mai Nefi, 25 km south of Asmara, which in practice is three faculties: a) Pedagogy, b) Engineering, c) Technology. 2) The college of social sciences and humanities in Adi Keyh, 110 km

After graduating, they complete their National Service mainly by performing civilian duties.

- Graduates with lower grades are offered vocational training, both inside and outside Sawa. The centre for vocational training in Sawa, which was created in 2007, consists of five schools which teach construction, management, technology and agriculture. 2,435 students graduated from there in July 2011 (Efrem 2010). After completing vocational training, the students are transferred to either civilian or military service.
- Graduates who take neither university nor vocational training generally go into service under military command.

2.4.1 Detention sites in Sawa

In the April 2009 report *Service for Life*, sources from the human rights organisation Human Rights Watch discuss various detention sites in Sawa, including underground cells and metal containers. In conversations with the human rights activist Elsa Chyrum, some exiled Eritreans state that the Sawa prison is a fenced area consisting of twelve corrugated iron houses up on a hill. The houses have names such as Wedi Shika, Bahta, Hinsa and Police (Chyrum 2006). In a report from the U.S. Embassy in Asmara to the U.S. Department of State in 2006, *Forto Sawa* is discussed. The military training camp and detention centre are reportedly located about 2 km from the educational part of the camp (U.S. Embassy Asmara 2006a). None of Landinfo's sources in Asmara in January/February 2013 could confirm this information about the detention centres in Sawa.

2.5 MILITARY TRAINING

According to the National Service law, the six-month-long military component of the National Service must be implemented at a training centre (§ 9). Sources say that in recent years, military camps/training centres have been established in all regions for those who do not go on to the twelfth school year in Sawa (conversations with international representatives in Asmara March/April 2014).

Sawa, Kiloma and Wia are the most discussed training centres and have existed for years.²⁴

2.5.1 Sawa

The length of military training in Sawa apparently varies from one round of mobilisation to the next and can be affected by both practical and political considerations. But it seems that everyone, even those in higher education, have been through a minimum of military training. This generally occurs in Sawa, but in principle the conscripts can also be called up for training later on. The information

from Asmara. Landinfo visited the college in January 2015. 3) The agricultural college in Hamelmalo, 440 km northwest of Asmara. 4) The college in Halhale, 30 km south of Asmara. 5) The maritime college in Massawa. 6) The medical faculty (Orota) in Asmara.

²⁴ Other discussed training centres include Maiter (40 km southwest of Assab), but it is no longer in use, and Adi Roso, which is only for commanders (Kibreab 2009a).

about when training occurs varies: Some said the training was conducted before the school year started, but the majority said that the military training took place after graduation. In 2013, various sources stated that the military training in Sawa was conducted after graduation in March and lasted from six to eight weeks (local Eritrean source, conversation in Asmara 29 January 2013; representative of NUEYS, conversation in Asmara 05 February 2013).

2.5.2 Kiloma

The Kiloma camp is about 35 km south of Assab and was allegedly created to reduce the number of conscientious objectors and deserters. Chyrum (2006) states that the eight months' training in Kiloma consists of long marches, up to 40 km a day in a harsh climate. The Eritrea expert Gaim Kibreab has stated that the camp only received recruits during the 17th and 19th rounds of mobilisation (conversation in Bern, November 2009).

2.5.3 Wia

Wia is about 30 km southeast of the port city Massawa. Wia was closed in 2009 after an outbreak of meningitis²⁵ (U.S. Department of State 2010; diplomatic source (1), e-mail 2010). It is unclear whether the camp has been reopened (representative of NUEYS, conversation in Asmara, 05 February 2013).

The Wia camp consists of several camps. There is a separate detention centre in the camp.²⁶ The camp is known for especially harsh conditions. According to the opposition website Awate (2007), two groups in particular were sent to this camp for training: people who had failed to meet for service and members of banned church communities. The camp has also been used for refresher training for reservists (conversations in Asmara and Kassala in 2011).

Youths who have left school before the twelfth year have also been sent to Wia (diplomatic source (2), conversation in Asmara February 2011; representative of NUEYS, meeting in Asmara, 05 February 2013).

2.6 COMMUNITY SERVICE

Eritrean authorities have stated that National Service has been reorganised as of autumn 2014, and that all new recruits will only have 18 months of military training. The community service as it has been known so far will be gradually phased out and those who are in service will be discharged over the course of an unknown number of years.

There are different perceptions on who has served in civilian and military sectors so far. There are no known official guidelines on this.

²⁵ One source (diplomatic source (1), e-mail May 2010) explained that Eritreans who served in Wia were moved to Kiloma in August/September 2009 after an outbreak of meningitis and a contagious skin infection. Kiloma has also previously been used as an alternative to Wia, but due to the harsh climate conditions in Kiloma, Wia was put back into use after the problems were dealt with, according to the source.

²⁶ Amongst the commanders in the camp before the closure in 2009 were Lieutenant Colonel Jemal, Lieutenant Colonel Weddi Haile and Captain Ramadan.

Some sources have claimed that people with higher education, special skills and other privileged people have generally served in the civilian sector - either in the public sector or in service industries such as hotels and restaurants, PFDJ-controlled companies²⁷ or in the Warsay Yikealo programme.²⁸ Others claim that this is more random (the leader of an Eritrean organisation (1), meeting in Asmara in February 2011).

Conscripts in the civilian sector interact primarily with their civilian employers. Several sources have pointed out a clear distinction between non-military and military employers. The former do not seem to enforce military regulations as strictly as the latter e.g. in regards to leave. It is possible to be transferred from the civilian part of the service to the military, but there is no information on how often this occurs.

People in civilian service are still in the military reserve of the government, according to an Eritrean lawyer Landinfo met in Asmara in February 2011. They can also be recalled for military exercises. Everyone who has completed their National Service²⁹ generally has mandatory refresher training until age 50 (National Service Act 1995, §§ 23, 27).

2.7 SERVING IN THE ARMY

Those who do not complete 12 years of schooling or continue their education after secondary school, as well as people who are collected through *giffa*, are transferred to military units in the army³⁰ (diplomatic source (2) conversation in Asmara in February 2011; Eritrean refugees (2), conversation in Kassala in February 2011; diplomatic source (4), conversation in Asmara March 2014).

The duties these recruits can be ordered to perform range from purely military duties to working in agriculture, industry, government agencies or on the property of a military superior (Kibreab 2014).

2.8 WAGES AND COMPENSATION FOR CONSCRIPTS

National Service conscripts receive ERN 145 (about NOK 112) per month the first year they are in service, and wages are gradually increased to ERN 500 (about NOK 388) per month. There are no annual adjustments in compensation. This is a very low income when compared to the price of a variety of foods.³¹ If a person is employed by a private employer instead, wages are likely to increase dramatically. The time when a person is discharged/demobilised is determined by military superiors and not

²⁷ PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) has a quasi monopoly on the export and import industry through straw companies.

²⁸ Both programmes are under the authority of the Eritrean Defence Forces, according to several of the sources Landinfo met in Eritrea and Sudan in 2011.

²⁹ Eritreans who have completed National Service are called *agelgelot*.

³⁰ The army is divided into five different zones led by five generals who report directly to the President.

³¹ In February 2011 one kilogram of oranges cost ERN 62, i.e. about NOK 24. A kilogram of apples was similarly prized in February 2013. The selection of goods in the stores in Asmara was relatively good in January 2015, but the prices for a number of goods were still very high.

by civilian leaders (conversation with an Eritrean source in the National Service in the public sector in Asmara, February 2011).

The low compensation people receive in the service is not enough to support a family and living conditions are poor for most people. The wage level in Eritrea is generally low – a teacher might earn about ERN 700-800 (corresponding to about NOK 540-620³²) per month, private employees make between ERN 1,000 and 2,000 (about NOK 770-1,500) per month and a minister makes an estimated ERN 2,000 (about NOK 1,550), while a school uniform costs about ERN 450 (about NOK 350) (international representatives, conversations in Asmara March/April 2014; January 2015).

2.9 EXEMPTION FROM NATIONAL SERVICE

According to the law, only people who performed their military service before the law took effect in October 1995 and people who can prove that they participated in the liberation war (1962-1991) are exempt from National Service.

People who are considered to be not fit for service are exempt from military training, but must perform civilian service. However the Eritrean government applies the regulations inconsistently for both women and men (Chyrum, conversation in London, May 2010; Kibreab, conversation in London, May 2010).

2.9.1 Medical reasons

The National Service Act § 15 states that physically disabled people, blind people and people with a serious mental illness can be exempt from National Service. Doctors examine and assess fitness for service, but the military authorities make decisions on exemptions.

UNHCR states that in practice physically disabled people are exempt from service (UNHCR 2011, p. 9, footnote 54). During Landinfo's trip to Eritrea and Sudan in 2011, various sources discussed multiple examples of people who were exempt due to chronic illnesses such as diabetes, poor eyesight and asthma.

The British Embassy in Asmara also refers to an Eritrean source who has stated that physically disabled (and pregnant) people are exempt from service after a medical evaluation (quoted in UK Home Office 2011, p. 46).

Human Rights Watch mentions mental illness as grounds for exemption (HRW 2009). Recruits who had left Sawa described a dramatic increase in the number of mentally unstable recruits. This was interpreted either as an expression of the wear and tear from staying in the camp or as an act in order to be exempt. If recruits are actually playing sick, this is an indication that mental illness can lead to exemption, even if Human Rights Watch refers to an Eritrean refugee who claims that one must either be blind or missing a trigger finger in order to be exempt from service (HRW 2009, p. 47, footnote 178).

³² Exchange rate 10 March 2015 ERN 1 = NOK 0.776703 (XE Currency Converter).

2.9.2 Ethnic and religious affiliation

Neither ethnic nor religious affiliations are formal grounds for exemption from National Service. In practice however, women from rural, Muslim areas where resistance to female conscription is strong are not forced to serve (Chyrum, conversation in London, May 2010; Kibreab, conversation in Bern, November 2009).

However Muslim women who grow up in the cities Asmara, Keren, Mendefera, Barentu and Assab are considered to be secularised and are recruited into the National Service, as opposed to women from Akordat, a conservative Muslim city. Men are neither exempt for religious reasons or ethnic affiliation (Kibreab, conversation in London, May 2010).

2.9.3 Women

A number of sources inside and outside Eritrea have claimed in recent years that an increasing number of women have been either exempt or demobilised from National Service if they could document marriage, pregnancy and custody of children, or if they had contacts in the government.³³ Although the law does not make a distinction in the length of service for women and men, these sources claim that the government has a more relaxed attitude towards women who serve in the military. This is not due to a change in rules, but rather to practical and pragmatic reasons. However this practice has led to an increase in early marriages. Parents take their daughters out of school at 15 years old so they can marry and thus avoid service.³⁴

At the same time, women who do not complete National Service lose many privileges. The anthropologist and Eritrea expert David Bozzini claims that many young women who avoid service live partially in hiding with their family. He also claims that these women are discharged from service – without ever having served – when they turn 27 years old (Bozzini 2012). The reason for such an "age limit" is probably that the government realises that the majority of the country's women are married and have children before they are 27 years old and are thus not appropriate for service.

Women are also released from service if they can document job offers or student placements. Women also get demobilisation papers (Kibreab, conversation in London, May 2010; Chyrum, conversation in London, May 2010; leaders of Eritrean organisation (1) and (2), conversations in Asmara, February 2011).

Mothers who have not completed National Service risk being taken in a *giffa* if they cannot document that they have children. If they can submit the necessary documentation of custody, they are usually released, but this can take weeks.

³³ The British Embassy has stated that women who are engaged can be exempt from service (quoted in UK Home Office 2011). Women who marry while they are still in service are granted leave to have their wedding and honeymoon, but according to both Kibreab and Chyrum, they must report for National Service afterwards. If women have good contacts in the government, women can, for example, perform service near their residence or near where their spouse lives.

³⁴ According to UNICEF, in 2009, 46 % of Eritrean women were married before 18 years of age (quoted in U.S. Department of State 2012).

Mothers who have been released from service have generally not been recalled to service, but there can be exceptions and the human rights activist Elsa Chyrum stated in 2010 that it was largely the military commanders who were responsible for such decisions (conversation in London, May 2010). Women with children can instead be assigned to various tasks in the local community, such as cleaning public buildings or performing assorted duties for local commanders.

According to a well-informed diplomatic source in Asmara, as of April 2013 there was an obvious lack of personnel at all levels of the army and women with children were conscripted into service in some places (diplomatic source (3), e-mail 02 April 2013). None of the sources Landinfo spoke with in Eritrea in the spring of 2014 and in January 2015 discussed this. Even if it is difficult to gain insight into what goes on in the country, extensive recruitment of women with children would probably raise attention and the information would be likely to reach the ears of the international community in Asmara.

3. PENALTIES FOR VIOLATIONS OF THE NATIONAL SERVICE LAW – THEORY AND PRACTISE

It is not uncommon for Eritreans in National Service to violate the provisions of the law in a number of areas. People are frustrated with the long service term and poor economic conditions and many thousands leave the country illegally every month.³⁵ Others fail to return to service after leave. The Eritrean government claims that about 80,000 people have not performed service, but that they must be prepared to perform service to replace those who will eventually be discharged after having served for a number of years (Yemane Gebreab, conversation in Asmara 19 January 2015).

3.1 PENALTIES UNDER THE LAW

Both the National Service Act and the Eritrean Penal Code stipulate sanctions for breach of duty. According to the National Service Act § 37, point 1, any person who breaks the provisions of the law is sentenced to two years' imprisonment and/or fines of ETB 3,000.³⁶ In § 37, point 2, it is specified that those who evade National Service through fraud or through inflicting an injury/amputation on themselves or someone else are sentenced to two years' imprisonment or ETB 3,000 in fines, in addition to compulsory military service. If the injury makes it impossible to serve, the person will be sentenced to three years in prison. According to § 37, point 3, anyone travelling out of the country who does not perform compulsory military service before turning 40 years old could be sentenced to five years' imprisonment, up until the person is 50 years old.

³⁵ UNHCR (2014) states that as of November 2014, almost 37,000 Eritreans sought asylum in Europe and just in the course of October 2014, more than 5,000 Eritreans arrived in Europe. About 2,000 Eritreans crossed the Ethiopian border monthly, while an estimated 1,000 people crossed the Sudanese border.

³⁶ In 1997, the unit of currency in Eritrea changed to ERN. ETB 3,000 currently corresponds to about ERN 2,600 or NOK 930.

According to the Eritrean Penal Code, desertion or failure to return after being absent on leave is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years.³⁷ If the crime was committed under egregious circumstances, including war, the punishment goes from five years to life and in the most serious cases, the death penalty (chapter 3, § 300, no. 1 and no. 2).

According to a local source, people who leave the country when they are of military age will be seen as deserters and will be punished (Eritrean lawyer, conversations in Asmara, February 2011). However, the source had not heard of any such criminal cases in the regular court system and none of the others Landinfo met in Eritrea had any knowledge of legal proceedings against Eritreans for violations of the National Service Act.

3.2 PENALTIES IN PRACTICE

UNHCR discusses, amongst other things, penalties for evasion and desertion in their recommendation from April 2011:

In practice punishment for military offences is carried out extrajudicially, and has been reported to include "shoot to kill" orders, detention for long periods often in inhumane conditions, torture and forced labour. Draft evaders/deserters are reportedly frequently subjected to torture, while conscientious objectors can face severe physical punishment as a means of forcing them to perform military service. Furthermore, extrajudicial executions are allegedly ordered by local commanders and carried out in front of military units for what are considered serious military offences (UNHCR 2011).

Like UNHCR, Human Rights Watch (HRW 2015) claims in its report on Eritrea that the border guards are required to shoot to kill when people cross the border illegally. The U.S. Department of State's report on human rights conditions in Eritrea in 2013 mentions that Eritreans who evade National Service are imprisoned under life-threatening conditions (U.S. Department of State 2014).

Landinfo's sources in Asmara in January 2015 and in 2014 and likewise in 2013 were aware of allegations of "shoot to kill" practices, but except for one international representative, no one was aware of specific incidents. One representative knew of a specific case where a person had supposedly been shot at the border to Sudan (international representative (2), conversation in Asmara 29 January 2013).

There is limited factual information about sanctions against those who evade or desert from service. As mentioned in the beginning of this report, most reports which describe sanctions are primarily based on accounts of asylum seekers in the West. Therefore, from a critical perspective, this information has a certain weakness, but that is not to say it has no credibility.

In recent years sources in the diplomatic community in Asmara have pointed out that many exiled Eritreans travel to Eritrea for holidays and family visits over the summer

³⁷ Eritrea's Penal Code, *Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea*, is identical to Ethiopia's Penal Code of 1957.

months.³⁸ These are people who for all intents and purposes have residence permits or citizenship in Western and other countries. They have rebuilt their relationship with the government by signing the so-called regret letter (see Landinfo 2014), paying the "two percent" tax and not participating in criticism of the government. It is Landinfo's assessment that there is no reason to believe that these people are punished when returning home: there would be rumours about this in the exile community and far fewer would risk travelling for a visit.

The general impression conveyed in recent years from international sources (based on Eritrean sources) is that service evaders who are arrested are taken into custody for a few weeks to a few months and may be returned to National Service. Several of Landinfo's sources in January 2015 said that the service evaders probably did not get long sentences and that those who evade National Service primarily risk arbitrary, extrajudicial punishments from military superiors. However there is widespread uncertainty about the extent of this, about what people are subjected to and about the profile of those who are punished. The Eritrean government points out that the service is mandatory, but they are unclear about sanctions against those who evade it.³⁹

According to some sources, Eritreans who perform service in civilian sectors are generally less vulnerable to military sanctions than those who are in military sectors (diplomatic source (1); Eritrean source in National Service in public administration, conversations in Asmara, February 2011). This information is possibly outdated, but the trend emerging at the time was:

- Defection/evasion of National Service and subsequent departure from Eritrea was considered more serious than returning late after leave.⁴⁰
- There can be a difference between those who evade the military part of the service and those who evade the civilian part. The former are considered to be deserters and are more often subjected to imprisonment and physical abuse than

³⁸ Exiled Eritreans who come home for a holiday are nicknamed "beles". This is Tigrinya for a fruit which grows/matures during the summer months of July/August.

³⁹ A 27-year old Eritrean refugee (2) was taken in a giffa in 2006. After four months of military training, he was transferred to a military unit with duties in the construction industry in Barentu (conversation in Kassala 2011).

In 2013, Landinfo also got various examples: A source at an embassy knew of a case where a local employee tried to go to Sudan illegally while he was in service. He was caught and served for eight months. He spent parts of the punishment on various collective farms. Afterwards he returned to his former job.

When asked about National Service and defection/avoidance, a spokesperson for an international organisation mentioned that one of their own employees had tried to cross the border to Sudan, but was arrested. He was imprisoned for one year, released and later fled again. When describing the prison conditions he said that prisoners were not treated badly, but that they were moved from place to place. In some places certain prisoners could work in agriculture. The spokesperson pointed out that even if the person did not tell them about beatings, etc., they would have talked about such conditions with others. After release, the person in question was sent to work in a government department, according to the spokesperson (international representative (1), 05 February 2013).

A representative from another international organisation spoke of a local employee who tried to escape from National Service. He was caught and got three weeks of "retraining". After a while, he got an exit visa and left the country. According to the source, this was a person with influential contacts in the system.

⁴⁰ Many fail to return after leave. According to a diplomatic source Landinfo met in February 2011 this is very common. The source stated that they then get bad work duties/conditions, such as several months of fruit picking, forfeiture of mobile, etc.

defectors from the civilian service. Some say that the latter can return to the service, but receive stricter working conditions and a less comfortable service.⁴¹

- People with contacts and networks can get away with lighter punishments.

3.3 VIOLENCE AGAINST FAMILY MEMBERS OF PEOPLE WHO EVADE NATIONAL SERVICE

Since 1999, there have been threats against family members of Eritreans who evade National Service. In July 2005, Amnesty reported on such arrests, primarily of the parents, but also of other family members, of young Eritreans who had deserted or failed to report for service after 1994. The reports in 2005 related to events in the Dedub region south of Asmara and near the border with Ethiopia. Allegedly they were released on bail of between ERN 10,000 and 50,000, approximately between about NOK 4,000 and 20,000, if they could guarantee that the relative in question would show up (Amnesty International 2005). In 2006, Amnesty mentioned new arrests of family members in Asmara. According to Amnesty, they were given a choice between paying fines of ERN 50,000 (about NOK 20,000) or making sure that the family member appeared (Amnesty International 2006). Those who could not do this risked having to serve for six months on behalf of those who had escaped.⁴²

The deserters HRW interviewed for the report *Service for life* also mention fear of imprisonment, fines or confiscation of family members' property (HRW 2009, p. 45-46). Landinfo does not have more recent information on retaliations against family members.

4. DEMOBILISATION

The terms *demobilisation* and *discharge* are sometimes used interchangeably and can create confusion. Mobilisation means that a state gathers both troops and supplies to prepare for war. *Demobilisation* means that the soldiers – professional soldiers, conscripts and reservists – return to normal service conditions or their civilian lives when the crisis has passed. This must not be confused with *discharge*, which means

⁴¹ One source referred to an example of an Eritrean who fled from his civilian service in Barentu to Sweden. He was unhappy and regretted it and contacted the government because he wanted to return. Upon returning, he got back his position in Barentu, because there was a shortage of teachers.

⁴² A highly trusted diplomatic source gave a statement in 2010 that sanctions against family members of people who evade their military National Service depended on a number of conditions and that there was nothing automatic about the reactions. The source said that imprisonment of family members occurred to a small extent in Asmara, but that it was more likely to happen in rural areas. Imprisonment also depended on the position of those who had left the country. The likelihood of sanctions was greater for family members of people who had a key role in the military than for ordinary conscripts in the civilian section of the National Service. The source also said that the government made a certain assessment of "the matter of guilt". If the desertion occurred while the conscript was on leave with their parents, there was a greater likelihood of retaliations against the parents than if it occurred in connection with performing service. According to this source, family members who were imprisoned served for a short period and under better conditions than both the National Service conscripts themselves and members of Christian minority groups. The source was under the impression that this second group of prisoners were held in metal containers or in underground cells or were subjected to violence. They got to receive visits from family members who sometimes had extra food and clothing (diplomatic source (1), e-mail 2010).

that soldiers are sent home after having completed their compulsory service. Many Eritreans continue to be under the control of the country's defence authorities after completing the mandatory National Service period of 18 months, i.e. they are neither discharged nor demobilised. This is due to two factors: the Warsay Yikealo programme, which in essence is an extension of the National Service; and, according to the government: the unresolved border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

4.1 DOCUMENTATION OF DEMOBILISATION AND DISCHARGE

Eritreans who perform National Service can be discharged, but this does not always occur (see chapter 3). The National Service Act has a provision that the discharge document *discharge certification* or *certificate of national service completion* must be sent to everyone who has completed national service.

Eritrean refugees interviewed by Landinfo in Sudan in 2011 (2 and 3) mentioned an office in Enda Korea in Asmara which issues demobilisation cards. The office is under the Ministry of Defence and is the only office which issues demobilisation papers in Eritrea (conversations in Kassala, February 2011).

Several sources explained that Eritreans who have been demobilised in recent years have been issued a document in the form of an A4 sheet and not a demobilisation card.

4.2 WHO HAS BEEN DEMOBILISED?

Until the border war against Ethiopia in 1998, between 48,000 and 54,000 former EPLF soldiers were demobilised. According to Eritrea expert David Pool, these were recalled to duty when the war broke out (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). The Eritrean government promised after the peace agreement in 2000 (the Algeria agreement) that 200,000 soldiers would be demobilised in three phases. According to UNDP, 104,000 Eritreans were demobilised by 2005 (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). In 2006, the number of demobilised soldiers dropped to 65,000. However neither David Pool nor Gaim Kibreab trust these numbers. Pool concludes that people may have been issued a demobilisation card, but that they were not really demobilised (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). The Eritrean government claimed that 70 % of those who were in the National Service after the end of the war with Ethiopia in 2000 have been demobilised (Yemane Gebreab, conversation in Asmara 19 January 2015).

Several of Landinfo's sources in Eritrea and Sudan in 2011 (leader of Eritrean organisation (1) and (2); representative of an international organisation (1) and other sources (see point 2.12), say that women are demobilised from further service for a variety of reasons. Yet in 2011, several sources emphasised that women were recalled to service again later and did not get an exit visa before turning 47 years old.

Some have claimed that it is easier to be released and demobilised from the civilian division of the National Service than the military division (Eritreans who performed National Service in public administration, meeting in Asmara, February 2011; diplomatic source (1), conversations in Asmara, February 2011). While both services depend on the Ministry of Defence, military commanders have significantly less influence over those who have an employment relationship with civilian employers,

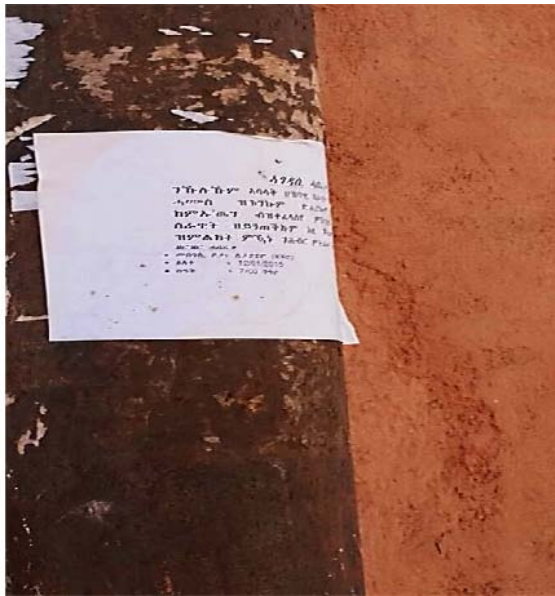
according to these sources. Gaim Kibreab emphasised in a conversation with Landinfo in November 2009 that it is possible to evade further service using contacts and/or bribery. Several of the sources Landinfo met during its trips in February 2011 and in 2013 shared this view. Eritreans with government connections and former liberation soldiers can arrange for shorter service, better service sites and get demobilised earlier (meeting with other diplomatic source (1)). Landinfo does not have more recent information on opportunities for demobilisation.

5. PEOPLE'S ARMY

The People's Army was created in March 2012 after the Ethiopian invasion in the Afar region and increased in numbers after the Ethiopian forces went into the Badme region in June 2012. It functions as an extended national guard. People were given weapons and ammunition and were expected to train every Sunday morning. Both men and women between 18 and 70 years old were required to participate in training, which took place on sports fields and similar areas. However, many of these people have either have been demobilized or discharged from National Service, or are people older than 50 who are no longer in the reserve forces.

Some have argued that the arming and training is in line with the Eritrean defence strategy, which means that they have a small but well-trained army and a population which can be mobilised on short notice. Others have stated that the launch of the People's Army is due to the weakness of the army, both due to the lack of people and the lack of confidence from the political leadership.

As an extension of the weekly training which was happening until it came to an end in the winter of 2013, there was periodic recruitment for training and people who had completed the training were used as guards outside banks and public buildings and installations (international representatives (1), (2), conversations in Asmara January/February 2013; international representative (3), conversation in Asmara March/April 2014; international representative (4), conversation in Asmara January 2015; diplomatic sources (3), (4), conversations in Asmara January 2015).



Notices on lampposts in Asmara on training in the People's Army 12 January 2015 (photo: Grethe Neufeld).

According to representatives of the international community in Asmara, the turnout for training in the People's Army was poor in autumn 2014. The relatively few people who showed up were mostly shopkeepers who were at risk of losing their license to operate their business. Therefore the authorities called for a new training session on the 12th of January 2015 and it is rumoured that the turnout there was also low. Some worry about how the government will handle this situation, but there has been no information on mass arrests or other forms of retaliation against people who did not show up.

As far as Landinfo knows, recruitment for training occurs through notices on walls and lampposts in neighbourhoods.

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