



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Eritrea: Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 19 May 2010

Information on Sawa military camp in Eritrea where students are trained and attend classes as part of their 12th year in school. Information on how easy or hard it is for students to enter or exit Sawa military camp.

A Human Rights Watch report states:

“The preferred method of the Eritrean government is to conscript students into national service straight from school, unless they are continuing higher education. To this end, the final year of secondary school was moved to Sawa military camp in 2003. This 12th grade takes place only in Sawa, under military authority, and incorporating military training. Although many 12th grade students are 18 years old, or less, some are older because they take longer to finish high school. Each round or intake of students incorporates 8,000 to 9,000 students.

Once they are in the camp, however, military service effectively starts then and there. A teacher whose national service involved teaching in Sawa told Human Rights Watch, ‘The students could not study. They were always being forced to leave the class for some kind of military service.’ A former student said he did not even enter 12th grade but was ordered straight into national service in July 2007 even though he was less than 18 years old.

National service is deeply unpopular, especially because new recruits know that there is no prospect of it ending. Students have started escaping from Sawa camp during their 12th grade year without completing school.¹⁹³ Escape is no mean feat, because, as described above, Sawa is in effect a huge prison. Those who made it described braving machine gun fire, barbed wire fences, and several days of walking through the desert without food and water.” (Human Rights Watch (16 April 2009) *Service for Life - State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea*, p. 50)

This report also states:

“Otto, meaning eight in Italian, is a punishment where the hands are tied together behind the back and victims must lie on their stomachs. This was the most common torture method noted by former conscripts and detainees, practiced in all the prisons and in Wi’a and Sawa military camps.” (Ibid, p. 30)

This report also states:

“There are myriad ways in which military superiors torture subordinates or try and scare them from escaping military service. One of the most egregious accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch concerned unsuccessful deserters from Sawa camp being tied to a corpse. A witness said: ‘One had been shot running away, the other two had their hands tied to the feet of the dead person. They were paraded round the camp in the back of a Toyota pick-up truck. The intention was for everyone to see.’” (Ibid, p.33)

This report also states in relation to prisons in Sawa camp:

“A former prisoner described the zinc cell where he was held in Sawa camp as two meters by three meters with 25 to 30 people in it...

There are multiple prisons in Camp Sawa, including several underground cells. One former inmate described ‘a big hole with trees across the top and then earth on top. They don’t allow you to come out—even for six months. People got those allergies and became sick. I was okay. But some were scratching their skin and bleeding.’” (Ibid, p. 37)

This report also states:

“Several national service conscripts interviewed by Human Rights Watch described being held in metal shipping containers in Sawa camp. One of them who was taken there after both his parents had been arbitrarily detained (they were former ELF leaders who had then joined the EPLF) recalled:

‘There were seven or eight containers, you know for bringing goods from outside. They had cut doors in them made of steel. They put me there because they called me a political prisoner because of my parents. The conditions were cruel, they beat you with a flex, a wire, they beat everyone, every night. They want to make us afraid, just enough beating not to die and not to live.’” (Ibid, p. 38)

In relation to escaping from Sawa this report states:

“Dozens of refugees who had escaped from prison or from military service described being shot at without warning while fleeing. In many of these cases the prisoners were clearly unarmed and posed little or no threat to their guards. One man interviewed by Human Rights Watch described how he and his fellow inmates in a container in Sawa camp escaped: ‘We ran in all directions. After you jump the wall there is barbed wire, more than six feet high. I pulled the wire apart and some soldiers opened fire. I saw three people shot, two on the left and one on the right. I could not help them because the situation does not allow you to help your friend.’” (Ibid, p. 39)

In relation to mental illness in Sawa camp this report states:

“‘Psychological derangement’ (article 14, 5.1) is also a ground for exemption from military service, and this appears to be a popular way to try and evade service. Recruits who have recently been in Sawa describe a dramatic increase in the number of people in the camp showing signs of severe mental illness. Recruits

describe a new disease that has sprung up among young women drafted into Sawa and Wi'a training camps, called 'lewt,' and only known in the camps. One male draftee explained: 'In every cohort at least 10 girls die. The girls cannot handle the pressure and the punishment. The symptoms are a bent back, walking backwards, and some of them shake and fall down. They become like zombies, they just stare at you.' But as one said, 'I'm not sure if they are genuinely crazy or if they are just pretending to be crazy in order to be demobilized.'" (Ibid, p. 48)

A report from Awate.com states:

"After their return from Sawa, the young boys and girls have been telling their parents harrowing stories. The Sawa regiment, which is designed to build what the army calls texawarnetn miximamn (endurance and stamina), includes long gu'ezo egri (walks), idleness and a starvation diet. The students wake up at 4:30 AM and are given their first meal at noon.

Their most bitter complaint is about the state of healthcare at Sawa. They report that no one is referred to the hospital even if his or her situation is very critical. Any one who is suffering from falciparum and plasmodium (malaria), pneumonia or a spasm is given a pain killer. Some report of avoidable deaths and delirium that occurred due to negligence and last-minute referrals to Keren hospital." (Awate.com (5 July 2007) Warsay, Arkebe & Now 'Ygermenalo')

The US Department of State Country Report states under the heading 'Children':

"The government required all students who reached the final year of secondary school to attend school at a location adjacent to the Sawa military training facility in the western section of the country. Students who did not attend this final year did not graduate and could not take examinations that determined eligibility for advanced education. The remote location of this boarding school, security concerns, and societal attitudes reportedly resulted in many female students not enrolling for their final year; however, women could earn an alternative secondary school certificate by attending night school after completing national service. Many students elected to repeat grades or dropped out of high school after the 11th grade to avoid forced conscription into the Sawa military education." (US Department of State (11 March 2010) *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Eritrea*)

This report also states under the same heading:

"All students spend their final year of high school at the military training camp in Sawa. Attendance at Sawa was compulsory and those who did not attend remain at risk of arrest. Students at Sawa were typically 18 or older, although a fair percentage were as young as 16. The initial three months of school were spent undergoing military training. Students who received poor grades in high school had in the past been sent to the Wi'a Military Camp in lieu of being allowed to complete the academic year." (Ibid)

By contrast a document from the UN Human Rights Council states:

“The delegation indicated that the idea that Eritrea recruits underage children for military service, subjects them to detention or maltreats them is inconsistent both with the ideals of the Government and its practice on the ground. National service, as a legal requirement, begins at 18 years of age and there is no such a thing as forced recruitment. Students attending the twelfth grade and preparing for the school leaving certificate exam in Sawa should not be confused with national service conscripts.” (UN Human Rights Council (4 January 2010) *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review on Eritrea, A/HRC/13/2*)

References

Awate.com (5 July 2007) *Warsay, Arkebe & Now ‘Ygermenalo’*
<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4557/3/>
(Accessed 19 May 2010)

Human Rights Watch (16 April 2009) *Service for Life - State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea*
<http://www.hrw.org/node/82284>
(Accessed 19 May 2010)

US Department of State (11 March 2010) *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Eritrea*
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135952.htm>
(Accessed 19 May 2010)

UN Human Rights Council (4 January 2010) *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review on Eritrea, A/HRC/13/2*
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4bde8f8d2.html>
(Accessed 19 May 2010)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources consulted

Amnesty International
BBC News
Child Rights Information Network
Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers
European Country of Origin Information Network
Freedom House
Google
Human Rights Watch
International Crisis Group

IRIN News
Lexis Nexis
Refugee Documentation Centre Databases
ReliefWeb
UNHCR Refworld
United Kingdom Home Office
United States Department of State
War Resisters International