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## **ETHIOPIA-ERITREA: STALEMATE TAKES TOLL ON ERITREANS AND ETHIOPIANS OF ERITREAN ORIGIN**

**Despite strong historic and ethnic ties, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have rarely been smooth. As a result, and particularly over the past decade, nationality rights of residents of both countries have been at risk.**

After Eritrea's 30-year struggle for independence, the country peacefully became a state in 1993 through a referendum in which Eritreans in Ethiopia also voted. Since the 1998-2000 border conflict during which both countries deported thousands of people – Ethiopians from Eritrea and Eritreans from Ethiopia – relations have remained bitter, with both sides stationing troops along the border. Weak enforcement of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission's decision awarding Eritrea the disputed town of Badme has left the conflict unresolved. International reluctance to persuade Ethiopia to uphold the decision has also signaled that human rights abuses in that county will not face meaningful scrutiny. Political and religious persecution has compelled citizens of both countries to become refugees around the world. Ethiopia welcomes Eritrean refugees, but Eritreans living in Ethiopian society still face marginalization.

### **Challenges to Uphold Nationality Rights in Ethiopia Remain**

During the 1998-2000 conflict, Ethiopia denationalized individuals of Eritrean origin, claiming that they were a security risk or that they had renounced their citizenship by voting in the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence. An estimated 75,000 individuals were deported to Eritrea, ripping families apart and forcing those left behind to hide their identities. Without citizenship, Eritreans in Ethiopia faced restrictions on work, travel, education, and access to social services. Compensation has not been offered for confiscated property.

Sources suggest that many, perhaps most, Eritreans living in Ethiopia reacquired citizenship under a nationality proclamation enacted in 2003. But as one person related, "People are still afraid to talk though their position has improved." Some interviewees reported problems obtaining national identification cards, including 3-year

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. Ethiopia should promote full integration and equity in employment for persons of Eritrean origin and ensure effective access to documents supporting an individual's chosen nationality.
2. Ethiopia and Eritrea should reunite families by re-establishing interstate travel and communications.
3. Consistent with the determinations of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission, both countries should devise plans to compensate victims of the 1998-2000 conflict.
4. Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya should retain open borders and take steps to increase protection as well as to ensure full freedom of movement and access to durable solutions for Eritrean refugees.
5. Ethiopia and Eritrea should become party to UN Statelessness Conventions and work with UNHCR and the domestic legal community to monitor and remedy statelessness.

delays and interrogation by immigration officials. RI observed national IDs showing “previous nationality” as Eritrean. Eritreans with Ethiopian citizenship said they still feel compelled to conceal their background, even among close friends. They rarely congregate as a community, nor are they politically engaged. Some spoke of employment discrimination. An Ethiopian in a third country said, “They made us feel nothing for that country. My kids in Eritrea are not in a good life. Those in Ethiopia are treated as foreigners. They get work permits but must not bring attention to themselves.” A woman in Addis Ababa said she is afraid to open a bank account because her family lost a lot of property during the conflict.

Although the nationality proclamation states that “no Ethiopian may be deprived of his nationality” unless he renounces his citizenship or acquires another nationality, interviewees were uncertain about their status in the event of renewed conflict. Similar ambiguity appears in the Directive to Determine the Residence Status of Eritrean Nationals Residing in Ethiopia, which states that a residence permit may be canceled “where the bearer . . . is found to be an undesirable foreigner.” In the event of renewed conflict, individuals of Eritrean origin are unsure of their fate. As one man from Asmara observed, “the gap between law and implementation is like the space between the sun and the moon, and no one knows how to close it.”

### Family Separation Continues

Nearly everyone RI interviewed told a story of ongoing separation from loved ones, exacting a considerable personal and psychological toll. Travel between Eritrea and Ethiopia is prohibited, there is no interstate phone system, and Ethiopians have reportedly been jailed for communicating with persons in Eritrea via the internet. “Family separation is the problem,” one man said. “I am a nation-less person. Eritrea does not consider me as Eritrean. Ethiopia does not consider me as Ethiopian. My brother tried to go to Sudan but was caught and jailed. My sister is in Kenya. I’ve had no news from her in 5 years.”

A woman in Addis Ababa met her father in a third country for the first time ten years after he had been deported to Eritrea. She said, “I was very close to my father, and every time I saw his name, I would cry.” An Eritrean in Kenya said, “My two brothers went to Eritrea with my mom. We’ve had no communication for 10 years. My father and sister are in the U.S.” An elderly widow lamented that at the time of her husband’s death last year they had been apart for nine years. She is unable to visit his grave in Asmara.

### Current Conditions in Eritrea Force Exodus

Refugees International was unable to secure visas to enter Eritrea, but former residents who now reside in third countries explained that the government has become more repressive

over the past decade. RI was told, “People leave by the hundreds to Sudan, South Africa, and Dubai. Everyone would like to come out if they could.” One person reported, “There is no economic growth. After 9/11 clergy were arrested and newspapers were closed down. People are traumatized, but they don’t know their rights or what to do. Some people gravitate to the churches, but Eritrea is facing a massive flight of people out of the country.” Young people also flee the country to avoid hard labor in military service, risking death and knowing their families will face a 50,000 Nakfa (US \$3,330) fine.

### Seeking Refuge in Ethiopia and Beyond

Some observers used the expression “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” to rationalize Ethiopia’s motivation to host Eritrean refugees. Whether hosting refugees for political or humanitarian reasons, Shimelba Camp, close to the Eritrean border, has nearly reached its 18,000 person capacity, and another camp is being developed to house the new arrivals numbering up to 600 a month. “Camp is not a solution to have a normal life,” one refugee stated. “Residents are not able to work and support themselves.” The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its implementing partner, the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee/Returnee Affairs (ARRA), grapple with issues residents face, such as insufficient food rations, restricted mobility, presence of Eritrean opposition groups, and limited access to education and mental health services.

About 75 percent of camp residents are young males, many university-educated, who fled conscription or political persecution, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a widespread problem. Often arriving without Eritrean identity documents, women and children may be even more vulnerable when seeking reunification with a husband or father, only to find that individual has moved on. Others expressed concern about the small size and gender composition of police patrols. Refugees with relatives or resources have recently been permitted to live outside the camp. Others find their way as self-supporting city dwellers. Some refugees attempt crossing to Sudan or Kenya. Eritreans who head to urban areas in Kenya, a country with a camp-only policy, are not recognized as refugees. Passage to Europe, depending on the route, costs \$4,000-\$5,000.

Resolving the costly stalemate between the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia will be difficult. But doing so is critical to upholding human rights and to improving security throughout the Horn of Africa.

*Senior Advocate for Stateless Initiatives Maureen Lynch and Bernstein Fellow Katherine Southwick assessed the situation of Eritreans in Ethiopia in April 2008, visiting Addis Ababa and the Tigray region in the north of the country.*