

**Eritrea: Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 25 March 2009**

**Is there any evidence that since 1998 all males in Eritrea (apart from the elderly and sick) have been permanently contracted by the army and that they have continuously worked for the ministry of defence since 1998 to this day with only a small holiday of about 10 days every year? Are those drafted to the Eritrean Army paid a salary? If so, how much do they receive per month approximately?**

According to a report from *War Resisters International* taken from the Broken Rifle it refers to national service being extended indefinitely and notes:

“Thousands of young men and women fled Eritrea and sought asylum in neighbouring countries like The Sudan, Libya, Ethiopia and other countries in Europe and the United States. This even increased after Eritrea's war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 and the open repressive acts of the present government in Eritrea.

Such massive running away of young men and women is part of an effort to avoid conscription or necessary after deserting from the army. According to a proclaimed regulation, national service, compulsory for all men and women aged between 18 and 40, has been extended indefinitely from the original 18 month term instituted in 1994. Besides excessive violations of the human right of draftees, national service consists of military service and labour on army-related construction projects.

The right to conscientious objection to military service is not recognised by the Eritrean authorities. There are frequent round-ups to catch evaders and deserters. Once in the hands of the army, the deserters face indefinite arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment or at times shooting by their commanders. Those are regularly used methods of punishments for draft evasion, desertion and other military offences in the Eritrean defence force. However, none of these measures stopped the desertion and evasion of those men and women from the military.”  
(War Resisters International (1 January 2007) *Is it ransom or fine?*)

According to a report from *ReliefWeb* it notes:

“Recruits also endure 10 months of tough military training at the newly opened Kiloma camp in the bleak volcanic Danakil desert, one of the hottest and most inhospitable places in the world.

Most are then assigned military, agricultural or construction jobs, while those with better exam results are sent to college, then to government ministries.

While technically lasting 18 months in all, such service can stretch for years, with many used as a mass labour force to harvest crops belonging to families who lost relatives in previous battles.

For the government, the program is fundamental to the security and development of Africa's youngest nation, which proclaimed independence in April 1993." (Reliefweb (1 March 2007) Conscripts prepare to boost Eritrea's defences on tense border)

The report continues

"However, analysts claim the mass militarization of society is stifling economic growth and stripping villages of the youth needed for work. Basic recruits are paid a salary of just 150 Nakfa (10 dollars, 8 euros) a month.

"It is very hard to survive on the salary, but I can survive the hardships," said one drafted youth, who declined to be named.

"The issue is that we just don't know how long it will last for."

Analysts also claim the border stalemate is used as justification for the government's iron-grip control, including the arrest of critics and closure of independent media.

Some try to dodge the draft by hiding or fleeing across the dangerous border to Ethiopia or Sudan, despite a reported shoot to kill policy by patrols.

Gangs of military police conduct regular large-scale arrests -- reportedly including inside Sudan to catch those who leave -- of those without correct papers." (ibid)

A report from BBC News says:

"They are used to doing six months' military training, followed by 18 months or so of national service - straight after finishing high school.

But during the border conflict with Ethiopia, the length of the national service became unpredictable and some people are still serving with the army five years later." (BBC News (18 July 2002) *Eritrea cracks down on draft doggers*)

The report continues under the heading 'No hiding place' and notes:

"There is also anger among university graduates who had already done the six-week military training at the height of the war with Ethiopia, but who have been told they will have to back again.

And the meagre salary of \$20 a month is not seen as a good incentive to honour the call up.

Some families say they have so many sons and daughters away in the army that to send any more children for national service is just unbearable.

Most of these families are still waiting to be informed of those who died during the recent border war.

Whatever their grievances, all of them have only two choices: To go voluntarily or keep hiding and hope the checks will pass soon." (ibid)

Under the heading 'Military Service' the *UK Home Office Report* notes in paragraph 11.02:

Article 11 covers the issuing of the military service card at the recruitment centres. [13] Article 18 sets the period of military service at a total of 18 months, though Article 21 institutes a 'special duty' on length of service, extending it indefinitely if the country is under threat. [13] (UK Home Office (16 March 2007) *Country of Origin Information Report – Eritrea*)

The same report quotes another source in paragraph 11.03 and notes:

Amnesty International reported on 7 December 2005 that:

"In late 2004 the upper age limit for female conscription was reportedly reduced to 27 years. There are also military reserve duties between the ages of 40 and 50 for former EPLF veterans and former conscripts. National service has been made more military in nature and extended indefinitely as a result of the failure of the border demarcation process and corresponding fears of renewed armed conflict with Ethiopia... Exemptions from national service include provision for the disabled, for mothers while they are breast feeding, on medical grounds, and for a family to retain a young person to remain at home when all other siblings have been conscripted." [5m] (ibid)

A response from the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* note under the heading 'Army involvement in non-military operations'

Information on whether all divisions of the Eritrean Army are involved in military operations could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate; however, several sources indicate that soldiers may engage in certain non-military activities (UN 19 May 2005; AI 21 Dec. 2006; US 15 Oct. 2007). Cited in a 19 May 2005 article by the United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), an Eritrean government spokesman stated that "[i]n a time of relative peace, 90 percent of the army works in productive sectors ... [Eritreans] have never lived in a situation where the army is simply a fighting force." The article notes that, according to the Eritrean government, the army engages in non-military activities such as farm work and construction of houses and infrastructure (UN 19 May 2005).

A 2006 public statement by Amnesty International (AI) indicates that Eritrean men and women carrying out their compulsory military service may be involved in military activities as well as in "labour on army-related construction projects" (21 Dec. 2006). A 15 October 2007 United States (US) Department of State consular information sheet on Eritrea states that Eritrea's national military service consists of "approximately six months of military training, followed by a number of years in military or other government service." (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (5 February 2008) *Eritrea: The Eritrean Army structure, including its*

*units, ranks, functions; whether all divisions of the army are involved in military operations; military activity in Asab, Gash and Tsorona)*

The *US Department of State* in their Country Report on Human Rights Practices under the heading 'Prohibition of Forced or compulsory Labor' notes:

"The government required all men between the ages of 18 and 50 and women between the ages of 18 and 47 to participate in the national service program, which included military training and civilian work programs. Increasing reports indicate citizens were enlisted in the national service for many years below minimum-wage rates with no prospective end date. The government justifies its open-ended draft on the basis of the undemarcated border with Ethiopia. Some national service members were assigned to return to their civilian jobs while nominally kept in the military because their skills were deemed critical to the functioning of the government or the economy. These individuals continued to receive only their national service salary; the government required them to forfeit to the government any money they earned above and beyond that salary. Government employees generally were unable to leave their jobs or take new employment. Draft evaders often were used as laborers on government development projects." (US Department of State (25 February 2009) *Eritrea: Country Report on Human Rights Practices – 2008*)

## References

BBC News (18 July 2002) *Eritrea cracks down on draft doggers*  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2135860.stm>  
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Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (5 February 2008) *Eritrea: The Eritrean Army structure, including its units, ranks, functions; whether all divisions of the army are involved in military operations; military activity in Asab, Gash and Tsorona*  
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<http://www.wri-irg.org/node/3167>

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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 Monitoring

BBC News

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Ethnologue

Danish Immigration Services

European Country of Origin Information Network

Google

Human Rights Watch

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

IRIN

Lexis Nexis

Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database

Relief Web

Sudan Tribune

UNHCR

UK Home Office

US Department of State