

For Immediate Release

Eritrea: Repression Creating Human Rights Crisis
Host Countries Should Cease Forced Returns of Eritrean Refugees

(London, April 16, 2009) – Eritrea’s extensive detention and torture of its citizens and its policy of prolonged military conscription are creating a human rights crisis and prompting increasing numbers of Eritreans to flee the country, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 95-page report, “Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea <<http://www.hrw.org/node/82284>>,” documents serious human rights violations by the Eritrean government, including arbitrary arrest, torture, appalling detention conditions, forced labor, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and worship. It also analyzes the difficult situation faced by Eritreans who succeed in escaping to other countries such as Libya, Sudan, Egypt, and Italy.

“Eritrea’s government is turning the country into a giant prison,” said Georgette Gagnon, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Eritrea should immediately account for hundreds of ‘disappeared’ prisoners and open its jails to independent scrutiny.”

Human Rights Watch called on the United States and European Union to coordinate with the UN and the African Union to resolve regional tensions and ensure that development aid to Eritrea is linked to progress on human rights.

The EU recently approved a €122 million assistance package to Eritrea despite concerns that development projects in Eritrea are carried out by conscript or prison labor in violation of international law.

Based on more than 50 interviews with Eritrean victims and eyewitnesses of abuses in three countries, the report describes how the Eritrean government uses a vast apparatus of official and secret detention facilities to incarcerate thousands of Eritreans without charge or trial. Many of the prisoners are detained for their political or religious beliefs, others because they tried to evade the indefinite national service or flee the country.

Torture, cruel and degrading treatment and forced labor are routine for conscripts as well as detainees. Detention conditions are appalling, with detainees typically held in overcrowded cells – sometimes underground – or in shipping containers that reach searing temperatures by day and are freezing at night.

Those who try to flee risk severe punishments and the possibility of being shot while crossing the border. The government also punishes the families of those who escape or desert from national service with exorbitant fines or imprisonment. Despite these severe measures, thousands of Eritreans are trying to escape their country.

Most refugees first flee to neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan, and then travel to Libya, Egypt, and Europe. Hundreds of Eritreans have been forcibly repatriated from Libya, Egypt and Malta in the past few years and have faced detention and torture upon their return.

Because of the risk of mistreatment faced by those who are returned, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has advised against deporting anyone to Eritrea, including rejected asylum seekers. Human Rights Watch called on all countries hosting Eritrean asylum seekers not to forcibly return them, given the

risk of torture.

"Countries receiving Eritrean refugees need to make sure that they get the protection and assistance they need," said Gagnon. "Under no circumstances should Eritreans be returned to Eritrea, where they face almost certain detention and torture simply for having fled."

Eritreans celebrated when the country gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a bloody 30-year war. But the government of President Isayas Afewerki, who led Eritrea through much of its extraordinary struggle for independence, has steadily restricted democratic freedoms, particularly since a 2001 crackdown on political opposition and media.

Eritrea claims its prolonged mass mobilization is justified by security concerns stemming from a two-year border conflict with Ethiopia that cost tens of thousands of lives from 1998 to 2000. The government often blames the United States, the United Nations, and African states for the current political impasse, contending that they have failed to pressure Ethiopia to implement the border demarcation decision of an independent UN commission, which awarded a disputed area to Eritrea.

Eritrea has had tense relations or military clashes with all of its neighbors at one point or another, and the political stalemate between Eritrea and Ethiopia has contributed to regional instability. Each government has supported armed opposition groups against the other, and Eritrea's support for militant Islamist groups in Somalia has exacerbated the conflict in that country.

"Eritrea's human rights crisis is worsening and making the Horn of Africa ever more volatile," said Gagnon. "The US, European, and other governments need to coordinate their policies on the Horn to defuse regional tensions, and make human rights progress an essential benchmark for engagement with Eritrea."

Selected accounts from Eritrean refugees:

"I sacrificed my life for the prosperity, development and freedom of my country but the reverse is true... we did not spend 65,000 martyrs for this!"

– An elderly man who fought for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in the liberation struggle

"It's okay to do national service, it's fair to serve one's country but not always. It's not fair when it's indefinite."

– A young man who recently fled national service

"If someone is suspected of escaping then they are tied up – just hands or hands and feet, or ferro [with iron handcuffs]. ... Individuals decide what kind of punishment is given, there's no law. They do not have any crimes but [people are punished because] they hate the military or hate to be a soldier. That is the main reason. Because everyone in Eritrea hates to be in the army."

– A former army officer who explained how those suspected of trying to escape from the army were tortured

"First you do your military training then they hold you forever without your rights. The military leaders can ask you for anything and if you refuse their demands then you can be punished. Almost every woman in the military experiences this kind of

problem.”

– A female recruit who served as a conscript for 10 years and suffered repeated sexual harassment

“In Dahlak there is no time limit, you are waiting for two things: either someone is coming to transfer you or to kill you. When I left Dahlak I was 44 kilograms. My haemoglobin was nothing. I needed a stick to walk. We were living underground, the temperature was 44nC; it was unbelievable. There is no word to express the inhumanity.”

– A former political prisoner detained on Dahlak Island in the Red Sea

“If one of the men escapes, you have to go to his home and find him. If you don’t find him you have to capture his family and take them to prison. Since 1998, it’s standard to collect a family member if someone flees. The administration gives the order to take family members if the national service member is not around. If you disappear inside Eritrea then the family is put in prison for some time and often then the child will return. If you cross the border, then [your family] pays 50,000 nakfa [US\$3,300]. If there’s no money then it can be a long time in prison. I know people who are in prison for six months.”

– An officer formerly responsible for rounding up national service deserters

To read the Human Rights Watch report, “Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea,” please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/node/82284>

For Tigrinya translations of this news release, as well as the summary and recommendations of the report, please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/node/82302>

For more Human Rights Watch reporting on Eritrea, please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/en/africa/eritrea>

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