



Forced Labour in Eritrea: The Role of EU Funds

Eritrean National Service is tantamount to forced labour, as it extends beyond work of a purely military character to include road construction, healthcare and government administration, all for an indefinite period. In addition, the Eritrean government regularly rounds up Eritreans, many under 18, to be conscripted. This has continued despite the peace agreement with Ethiopia, and reforms are unlikely. Due to the indefinite nature of National Service, the inability of most citizens to obtain an exit permit to leave Eritrea, and the shoot-to-kill policy at the border, Eritrean refugees often turn to smugglers (who are sometimes military officials) to leave Eritrea and are vulnerable to human trafficking. An estimated 250–300 people flee to Ethiopia per day. In 2016, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea found that Eritrean officials had likely committed the crime of enslavement through National Service. **The European Union has pledged EUR 80 million from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for road building in Eritrea**, for which National Service labour is used and, hence, is arguably contributing to this situation. **This policy brief presents the evidence on forced labour in Eritrea and the role of EU funds.**

Indefinite National Service

Eritrea is a one-party dictatorship ruled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). It is without rule of law and described by Amnesty International as the world's largest outdoor prison. The National Service Proclamation (No. 82/1995) obliges all citizens over 18 to participate in National Service for 18 months and in the Reserve Military Service after the age of 50. In 2002, the Government of Eritrea launched the Warsay Yikaalo Development Programme, which extended the 18-month limit indefinitely. It also deployed conscripts to national companies, civil service, and government administration. Foreign corporations, such as Canadian mining company Nevsun – which is currently facing trial in Canada over the use of slave labour – also make use of National Service labour through PFDJ-owned companies.

Eritreans complete their final year of school in Sawa Military Camp. Youth who try to avoid the draft are rounded up in mass conscription efforts called *giffas*, including minors as young as 14 years old. ILO observed in 2018 that around a third of conscripts were below 18 years old. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to abuse in National Service and many become pregnant early to avoid conscription, as exemptions are granted for women with children. Release from National Service is arbitrary and may come after many years, sometimes more than a decade. Without having completed National Service it is not possible to do anything formally. The majority of people fleeing Eritrea cite National Service as the main reason. Many who flee find themselves in the hands of human traffickers.

Recommendations

- The EU should immediately stop funding road building projects in Eritrea, as it has admitted that the conditions for workers and their payment cannot be guaranteed by the Eritrean government, which is in charge of monitoring.
- International businesses and INGOs working in Eritrea risk contributing to forced labour and should work on a 'do no harm' basis, which may involve withdrawing from Eritrea.
- The international community should engage with Eritrea based on conditionality and measurable benchmarks.
- Eritrean refugees continue to be in need of protection on the routes out of Eritrea as well as in transit and host countries. Returns, voluntary or not, are not safe, as returnees may face imprisonment and torture or be redrafted into National Service.

Total Control

Complete control of the economy

Enterprises in Eritrea are owned by top PFDJ-officials, or directly controlled by the government. This includes the Red Sea Trading Corporation, which oversees all imports and exports to and from Eritrea. Top officials control financial flows and no government budget is published. Farmlands, cattle and crops are often seized, and anyone protesting is sent to prison. Through the Red Sea Trading Corporation, the PFDJ controls the availability of goods. This has led to a corrupt system, which is under the complete control of individuals in power.

Control of information

Internet penetration is very low in Eritrea. Those in National Service are not allowed a mobile phone and landlines are monitored. Free journalism has been completely erased since 2001. Foreign media personnel are not allowed to travel freely and must rely on state translators.

Control of family life

Family visits to those in National Service are granted rarely and arbitrarily. Recruits are often placed far away from their families, restricting the possibility of having a family life. In any case, National Service conscripts do not earn enough to support a family.

Surveillance

The government's intelligence system collects information on everyone, causing mistrust between people. People are watched for indications that they may desert National Service or flee the country, among other things.

Punishment

There are no independent courts in Eritrea. Punishment is, therefore, arbitrary and often severe. There are many prisons, some are in the baking sun, others are underground. Torture is used systematically in these prisons. Family members are not told where or why their loved ones are imprisoned, and inquiring can lead to imprisonment.

"There are different ways of punishing in National Service. [...] they put me in Otto [tied at the wrists and ankles and hanged], put water and sugar all over me, and put me in the sun – then flies come all over your body. [...] Those who have been in Adi Abeito, near Asmara, Adesom, Mazrab, and Wia can tell you what happens." (Interview 21, face-to-face, 2 June 2019)

No change with 'peace'

After the peace agreement with Ethiopia, many Eritreans expected to be demobilised. However, statements by the Eritrean Minister of Labour and Human Welfare indicate the opposite: "Definitely a small army will remain, and the others will concentrate on the developmental work as planned..." (Manek, 2018).

Sources

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