

Report
National Service



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Report **Eritrea: National Service**

SUMMARY

According to the Proclamation on National Service, the national service consisted of both military training and community service. Eritrean officials explained to members of the international community in 2014 and 2015 that the service with effect from October 2014 would consist of military training only, and the length of the service would be according to the proclamation, i.e. 18 months. However, these statements have been modified by Eritrean officials, and it remains to be seen if the promise will be kept.

Besides averting external threats, national service is an instrument to create a cohesive national identity and rebuilding the country. The Warsay Yikealo campaign is an extension of this programme. The upper age limit for conscription to national service has increased since the border war with Ethiopia, for both men and women. However, women from their mid-twenties are probably exempt or discharged from national service because of marriage, birth or on a religious basis.

Eritreans who evade national service are probably exposed to arbitrary punishments from local commanders, and there have been indications that Eritreans performing their national service in military units have been more subject to punishment than Eritreans in the civilian sector. However, based on the lack of information it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND SOURCE CRITICISM

This report is a summary of various perspectives and of available written information about the national service in Eritrea and about the consequences for those who evade the service.

It is very difficult to retrieve facts about social conditions in Eritrea. This also applies to national service. The authorities do not disclose information about service conditions, the number of conscripts or the practice of demobilization/discharge from national service. The bulk of the information about the national service has until recently stemmed from statements made by Eritreans who have left the country, or has consisted of anecdotal information communicated to representatives of the international community in Asmara.

Landinfo has conducted five fact finding missions to Eritrea in the course of the last five years, one of which also included information gathering in Khartoum and in Kassala in Sudan. The last trip to Eritrea was conducted in January/February 2016.¹ We met representatives of the government, representatives of the diplomatic community and local and international organizations in Asmara.

Landinfo visited various cities both in 2015 and in 2016. In 2015 we travelled to Keren and Adi Khey, and in January/February 2016 we visited Keren, Agordat, Barentu, Tesseney and Mendefera.

The majority of our sources are anonymized at their own request. The disadvantage of anonymous sources is of course that readers cannot verify that the source and information is reliable. But in some countries, including Eritrea, hardly anyone will comment if their identity is disclosed because they fear reprisals from the government, or that their work will be made more difficult.

Another problem that Landinfo experiences in Eritrea is round-tripping: secondary sources citing each other rather than the original source. False confirmations – as when multiple sources say the same thing which apparently confirms a situation, while they are in fact referring to one and the same source or information – can also occur. Such challenges are largely due to the fact that international sources in Eritrea are barely independent of each other. The international community in the country is limited. None of the representatives Landinfo has met over the years have tried to conceal that the bulk of information provided is not fact-based, but rather points of view and to some extent speculations.

Leading Eritrea expert Gaim Kibreab² has previously stressed that it is virtually impossible for foreigners to get permission to carry out social-scientific research projects, and that Eritrean scholars also encounter major challenges (Kibreab 2009b).

¹ Norwegian immigration authorities also visited the country in 1999 and 2003.

² Gaim Kibreab is a professor at London South Bank University.

Gaim Kibreab himself has also not been to Eritrea for a number of years. The lack of data and the difficulties of getting access to the information which is available thus limit the possibility of insight and knowledge about a variety of social conditions. International human rights organizations do not have access to the country, but in February 2016, a delegation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) visited Sembel prison outside Asmara (representative of the Eritrean Foreign Ministry, interview in Asmara on 5 February 2016; Blair 2016c). This is the first time in many years that international representatives have been given access to an Eritrean prison.

There is no independent press³ or national, independent human rights or interest organizations that can monitor the situation for imprisoned or deported persons.⁴ A number of international private aid organizations were expelled in 2011, and as of today there are very few such organizations present in Eritrea. The international representatives in the country also have limited freedom of movement. However, there are signs that some international non-governmental organizations are given the opportunity to re-establish themselves in the country. External financial support from the West is provided primarily through the EU.⁵

Several reputable international organizations and various Eritrea experts point out that serious abuses are committed against persons who evade or desert from the national service in Eritrea. Their reports are based mainly on accounts from persons who have come to the West and to other African countries as asylum seekers. Because they have not been issued a visa by the Eritrean authorities, none of the relevant organizations has been in the country, and it is therefore a paradox that critical reflections on sources are relatively absent from the various reports published over the years. Challenges such as reliability, objectivity and accuracy are only discussed to a small extent. It is difficult to verify many of the claims that exile sources make, and because there is no credible reporting from Eritrea about such conditions it is often impossible to draw general inferences about torture and brutal assaults against all those who either evade the service or desert.

The report of the independent inquiry commission into human rights in Eritrea, hereinafter the Commission (OHCHR 2015), is one example of this. The Commission report is very critical and concludes that Eritrean authorities are responsible for systematic and gross human rights violations. The Commission considers that some of these offences may be crimes against humanity. It is beyond the scope of this report to review all aspects of the country of origin information presented in the Commission report or to consider international legal matters, but the report does have methodological weaknesses and contains information that in

³ In January 2015 six journalists were released after six years in prison. It is assumed that at least 17 other journalists are still imprisoned (CPJ 2015).

⁴ These include persons who were deported from Egypt in 2008, 2009 and 2011, see HRW (2011), and persons who were apparently deported from Israel in 2015.

⁵ In January 2016 the EU and the Eritrean authorities signed an agreement with a financial framework of 200 million euros. 80% of the funds will be used for the development of the energy sector, and the remaining 20% for capacity building.

Landinfo's assessment is uncertain. The Commission's report has received criticism, also from the international community of Asmara (diplomatic source D, H, I, J, K and M, and international organisation (E)).⁶

Landinfo does not question that Eritrea has an authoritarian and militaristic system of government under which an unknown number of critics of the regime are imprisoned or that human rights violations are committed.⁷ Although the authorities are now more accommodating and showing greater openness towards the international community than in the past and a number of foreign reporters have been granted access to the country, it is important to stress that neither they nor Landinfo have had the opportunity to conduct systematic surveys or interviews with persons who have evaded national service and later have been detained or sent home from abroad. It is furthermore important to note that journalists also cannot freely choose their interviewees.

Representatives of the British immigration authorities, however, met 46 Eritreans aged 25-35 in, amongst other locations, Asmara in February 2016. The majority of them had allegedly returned after having sought asylum in Israel and been denied a right to stay there. There is reason to be skeptical about their stories and experiences in the light of the fact that the Eritrean authorities had organized these meetings and, moreover, were represented at the meetings (meeting with a representative of the British immigration authorities in Oslo, 10 March 2016). But it is still interesting in Landinfo's opinion that the authorities started to allow such meetings. Several of the returnees showed travel documents (and ID cards) that documented their departure from Israel and entry into Eritrea, and some of them had very recently returned. The majority said that they had left Eritrea because living conditions and future prospects were poor. Although none of them specifically mentioned discontent with the national service, they were all undoubtedly of service age.

Several international representatives in Eritrea also point out that changes are noticeable because ordinary persons are giving greater voice to their dissatisfaction

⁶ The Commission bases its findings on the so-called "reasonable grounds to believe" standard, that is, that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the events have happened. This standard is used by the various UN-agencies conducting fact-finding missions in conflict and crisis areas. It does not mean that the conclusions drawn are the only ones possible, but it means that further research should be undertaken to assess whether they could lead to possible criminal prosecution in the future. To bring out facts and circumstances of the alleged violations, the Commission interviewed 550 victims and witnesses of alleged violations of human rights. They were Eritrean refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and other members of the diaspora, as well as other sources. The Commission also received 160 written accounts. A great many of the testimonials date back to the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, although there are also sources that discuss the later conditions, including in 2014 and 2015. But this standard does not mean automatically that the information that is collected is credible or accurate:

Standards of proof do not themselves ensure that findings of FFMs are of high quality, credible or accurate. Standards of proof are useful only if clear criteria and procedures are applied to each item of information collected. For example, the standard of "beyond reasonable doubt" is unlikely to be feasible in a FFM's fluid and ad hoc process because it is not an arbitrary threshold but governs the whole process. It requires individual facts to be probed by cross-examination or other processes of verification (Wilkinson undated, p. 60)

⁷ There are cases where it is confirmed that prisoners have been subjected to abuse. One of these cases is the Pentecostalist and gospel singer Helen Berhane who was imprisoned from 2004 to 2006. She was treated in hospital after her release for injuries she obviously sustained during imprisonment (US Embassy Eritrea 2006b).

with the prevailing conditions. This was also Landinfo's experience during the visit in January/February 2016. But nothing suggests that there is an organized internal opposition in the country, and no one would dare to trumpet criticism against the government in public. This is a small and transparent society, easy for the security service to control.⁸ There is also no doubt that the escape of several thousand people monthly from the country affects societal functioning. Young educated and resourceful men – in particular Christian Tigrinya from the Highlands – depart, and the authorities are no longer hiding the fact that the country is being drained of human resources.⁹ On the surface, especially in Asmara, there is still little to suggest turmoil in the population. But the country's poor economy and currency restrictions which limit cash withdrawals from banks have hit the population hard, and many ordinary Eritreans did not refrain from showing their dissatisfaction with this situation to Landinfo in various informal contexts in January/February 2016.

2. NATIONAL SERVICE

National service in Eritrea differs from conscription in Norway and most other countries, because the objective of the service is based on an ideology of the reconstruction of the country, strengthening of the economy and development of a joint Eritrean identity across ethnic and religious dividing lines. The service is also intended to provide basic military training to all.

After the liberation from Ethiopia in 1991 and its independence in 1993, Eritrea demobilised the soldiers who had served in the war of independence. From July 1994, military training has been reintroduced in the national service, and both women and men between 18 and 40 years are required to perform service.¹⁰ The regular army is a professional army, consisting of enlisted men and officers. In times of peace the

⁸ Getting a SIM card, for example, is a time-consuming process. Residents must apply for it, and the wait can be up to several months. For a foreigner on a short trip it is not possible to buy a SIM card, and it is also not possible to use a mobile phone because there is no interconnection between Norwegian and Eritrean mobile companies.

⁹ Kibreab (2013) points out that Eritrean refugees are mainly young single men. In a survey he performed among a relatively large group of Eritrean exiles, 92% of the respondents stated that they had deserted from the service. He furthermore points out that emigration from Eritrea is due to an interaction of a number of factors; in particular, economic, social, political and human rights conditions. When asked why they had deserted, 51% reported that the length of service was crucial, 19% deserted because they wanted to help their family financially, 12% were against the very idea of duty, 5% deserted because they had had a fight with a parent and 5% had escaped from prison. The main objection of the respondents was that the service lasts for a number of years.

¹⁰ The National Service Act was first adopted in 1991 and later amended in 1995 (Kibreab 2009a; 2009b). National Service is referred to in Tigrinya as *hagerawi agelglot*. The Eritrean authorities, according to Gaim Kibreab, do not use the term military service, in Tigrinya *wotehaderawi agelglot* (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007, p. 30).

recruits are not part of the army, but in time of war the entire population between 18 and 50 years of age can be mobilised.¹¹

2.1 SUMMONS TO SERVICE: 1994-2016

From 1994 to the border war in 1998, the local authorities, zoba, summoned approximately 25,000 new recruits to the national service at semi-annual intervals either in writing, or by word of mouth in villages and smaller centres. The recruits were informed about the place of attendance, for example a football stadium or a school, and were transported from there to the training camp at Sawa (see also further mention of this camp in points 2.6.1 and 2.6.1.1).

From the summer 2002 more and more Eritreans began to evade national service, and the authorities began using stronger measures. Military police visited private homes, job locations and social gathering places in search of recruits (diplomatic source (1), email 2002; Müller 2008). Even women were taken by force. In February 2005, for the first time young people were arrested in full daylight (diplomatic source (1), email 2005). In 2006, there were signs that the arrests were increasing in scale, and this was probably associated with the tense situation in connection with the border dispute with Ethiopia (diplomatic source (1), email 2006).

In 2008 the opposition website Awate reported new arrests (*giffa*), and also that all Ethiopians were taken into training and service (Awate 2008).¹²

The descriptions of the situation have in recent years become complex and to some extent contradictory. A local source in Asmara stated in February 2011 that arrests of young people for the national service occurred far less often than in the past. In March 2013, however, other sources claimed that there were signs of a shortage of personnel at all levels in the army, and in some places even mothers were being ordered into service (diplomatic source (1), email of 2 April 2013).

In interviews with international representatives in Asmara most recently in January/February 2016, however, it was agreed that the scope of the *giffas* in Asmara has probably been significantly reduced.¹³ What happens in the countryside is largely unknown. For logistical reasons, it is nevertheless hard to imagine that comprehensive actions to recruit young persons for the service can be executed in the sparsely populated areas outside the cities.¹⁴

¹¹ Demobilization is not happening on a larger scale and the upper age limit for the national service is being applied, both with reference to the law and to the unresolved relationship with Ethiopia.demobilization.

¹² The British Embassy in Asmara considered in 2010 that there were no formal guidelines for the implementation of the arrests. The majority of those without discharge or demobilization documents were sent to a training camp or a detention centre (quoted in UK Home Office 2011, part 9.34 9.35).

¹³ The Commission however considers that *giffas* are widespread (p. 406): "[...] considers that the widespread practice of *giffas*, which are conducted randomly, in an indiscriminate manner and often with excessive force, constitutes a violation of the right to liberty and security of the person".

¹⁴ An example is the distance from Barentu to Tesseney, located near the border with Sudan. There are long distances and very scattered buildings. The villages are small, and most lack electricity. The villages that are not near the main road have barely navigable roads, at least for cars. The majority of the population make their living

2.2 DURATION

The service time is 18 months according to the proclamation of national service, comprising military training for six months and civilian service for twelve. After the first service all Eritreans are registered in the reservist army until the age of 50, and they can be recalled for training and mobilisation (National Service Act 1995, § 23 and 25). In practice, however, the service, on the basis of the statutory provision for expansion in crisis situations, has been effectively permanent for many since the border war with Ethiopia.¹⁵ The government has acknowledged this, but stated to the representatives of the international community in Asmara in the autumn of 2014 that the service time for the new recruits would be 18 months with effect from the 27th recruitment round that took place in the autumn of 2014.¹⁶ Whether this normalisation of service time is actually implemented remains to be seen.¹⁷

The majority of the sources Landinfo met in Asmara in January/February 2016 said that the national service seems to be changing, but most people believe that the change is not likely to mean 18 months service time for all. Statements from various representatives of the authorities are somewhat contradictory, and information minister Yemane Gebremeskel stated in an interview in February 2016 that there were no plans for cuts in service time (Blair 2016a; b).

Landinfo would also like to emphasise that both representatives of the authorities and representatives of the international community in Asmara claimed already in winter 2013 – and again in the spring of 2014 – that the service time had been normalised (diplomatic source (3), interview in Asmara March/April 2014; diplomatic source (3), interview in Asmara on 31 January 2013).

In Asmara in January 2016, Yemane Gebreab, Head of the Political Department of the PFDJ and the President's political adviser, told Landinfo that the national service before the alteration consisted of three months of military training and then of civilian service for close to 85% of the recruits. Today the military training period is sometimes even shorter according to Gebreab, who also said that the transformation of the service means that persons who have received higher education now have one-year civilian service. The scheme is in his view reasonable in the light of the fact that

from animal husbandry and agriculture, and many young persons have the main task of herding animals and therefore spend the bulk of the time outside the home.

¹⁵ Eritrea is still under military mobilization as a result of the unresolved border conflict with Ethiopia, and the situation is referred to as a "No war-no peace" situation. This situation is always given as the explanation of most of the country's problems. Eritrea, according to various sources, has the largest army in sub-Saharan Africa in proportion to population (UNHCR 2011). In crisis situations, the upper age limit for military service can be raised up to 50, but in practice the upper limit for carrying out national service seems to have increased in recent years to between 50 and 57 for men and 47 for women. However, evidence suggests that women do shorter service than men, see chapter 2.10.3.

¹⁶ According to some sources (Shabait 2014), this was the 28th recruitment round.

¹⁷ There has been no official announcement about the changes to the population. Information about the changes was given to representatives of the international community in Asmara during the autumn of 2014, and to Landinfo in January 2015. Government spokesmen point out that families and persons required to perform service have been made aware of the change via local trusted persons.

their education is free. It is unclear how this one-year duty should be accommodated in the national service system.

Many have questioned what will happen to the many thousands who have been in service for a number of years, but according to Yemane Gebreab, they will not be covered by the change, because extensive discharges is not realistic in the foreseeable future (interview in Asmara, on 29 January 2016). This is due to the country's difficult economic situation: Energy limitations are a bottleneck for development, and agriculture has to be developed and made more efficient. There is also a need to expand international cooperation. The authorities have, therefore, in order to avoid mass unemployment, adopted a three to five year perspective to solve the challenges of the transformation of the service time. Yemane Gebreab also said in January 2015 that 70% of national service recruits have been demobilised since the war with Ethiopia. Landinfo has not been able to verify this information from other independent sources.

2.3 WARSAY YIKEALO

The Warsay Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), the national development program, was adopted in 2002. Eritrean authorities have not explained what the content of the program is, but Eritrea experts characterise it as an unlimited extension of national service (Healy 2007; Kibreab 2009a; 2009b; 2013; 2014).

2.4 NUMBER IN NATIONAL SERVICE

No one knows how many Eritreans as of today are performing national service. Eritrean authorities do not disclose how many persons are summoned to the service, but some sources speculate on the number. This information is relatively out of date, but in the summary from an Eritrea meeting under the auspices of the think tank Chatham House in 2007, it was estimated that 350,000-420,000 Eritreans have served. Half of them were in the statutory service, while the rest were in the national development program (Healy 2007).

2.5 MILITARY TRAINING DURING SERVICE

The six months-long military part of the national service, according to the national service law, must be carried out at a training centre (§ 9). According to various sources, in the course of recent years military camps/training centres have been set up in all regions for those not attending the twelfth school year in Sawa (interviews with international representatives in Asmara March/April 2014). Yemane Gebreab claimed for his part in January 2016 to Landinfo that the military training only lasted three months. He claimed further that for some it was even shorter. A representative of the Eritrean Youth Organisation NUEYS in February 2016 reported that young people who do not come to Sawa have three-month military training in other camps and then serving either in the civilian sector or in the army (interview in Asmara, 11 February 2016).

2.6 TRAINING CAMPS

Sawa, Kiloma and Wia are the most referred to training centres and have existed for a number of years.

2.6.1 Sawa – military camp or educational institution?

To increase the control over young persons of service age, all school students in high school since the summer of 2003 must spend the twelfth and last school year in Sawa camp, which is located in the Gash Barka region by the River Sawa in the western part of the country, not far from the border with Sudan. The camp is currently the size of a city that can accommodate up to 30,000 persons, and was built in the 1990s as a military training camp. In the beginning all the recruits lived in bamboo huts. Eventually, groups who have served there built houses and dormitories.

No other schools in Eritrea offer the twelfth school year, which must be completed for admission to University. Many young Eritreans, however, leave school before the twelfth school year and therefore do not come to Sawa. The authorities have not disclosed statistics, but according to the World Bank (World Bank n.d.) an estimated 36% of children of primary school age attend compulsory school. By all indications, the proportion is far higher in the big cities, while the proportion declines in peripheral areas such as Gash Barka and the Afar region. Estimates from the World Bank shows that only 38% of elementary school students complete their schooling. That means that older young people, especially in fringe areas, are enrolled in the national service in other ways than through Sawa. They receive military training in other camps. Wia has been one of these camps, but it is unclear whether it is still in operation (Kibreab 2009a; 2009b; Müller 2008; representative of NUEYS, interview in Asmara 5 February 2013).

Seemingly, the duration of military training in Sawa varies from one mobilisation round to another - some put it at between six and eight weeks, others say three months – and can be determined by both practical and political considerations. But everyone, including those who take higher education, has probably been through a minimum of military training. Information about when the training takes place during the school year also varies: Some believe the training is carried out at the beginning of the school year, others believe that the military training takes place after graduation (local Eritrean source, interview in Asmara on 29 January 2013; representative of NUEYS, interview in Asmara 5 February 2013; diplomatic source (D) 28 January 2016).

Sawa is divided into two areas: one educational site, and one for military training (US Embassy Eritrea 2006a). There are also several small shops that sell groceries and other personal requisites. Parents can visit their children in Sawa and there is accommodation for them at the site (local Eritrean source, interview in Asmara on 29 January 2013; international representative (2), interview in Asmara 30 January 2013; representative of NUEYS, interview in Asmara on 6 February 2013).

School programs in Sawa are in principle separated from the military training in the camp, which is a part of the national service. The school is subordinate to the

Ministry of Education, while national service falls under the responsibilities of the Ministry of Defence. Sawa can therefore best be likened to a combination of recruit school and a boarding school.

Rumours and stories of sexual abuse, in both Sawa and other training camps, were previously not uncommon. Kibreab (2009b, p. 60) points out that it is impossible to distinguish between allegations, rumours and truth because of censorship in the country. Thus, a number of unconfirmed stories about suicide, fatal malaria and sexual assaults during service have circulated. Boys and girls live in separate dormitories, but associate freely during the rest of the day. According to a diplomatic source (2) Landinfo met in Asmara in 2011, sexual abuse in Sawa occurred "as much as you can expect in a place like this." Another international representative (3) stated to Landinfo in 2014 that the claims of abuse were probably exaggerated (interview in Asmara, March 2014). None of the sources Landinfo interviewed in Asmara in January/February 2016 mentioned sexual assaults in Sawa as a relevant subject. The Commission, however, argues in its report that there is widespread sexual abuse of women in the training camps.¹⁸

Young people taking exams (and performing military training) in Sawa can probably be divided into three categories, which follow different subsequent tracks in the national service (representative of the Eritrean authorities, interview in Asmara, February 2011).

- Graduates with good grades and privileged Eritreans continue to one of the country's eight colleges, which offer study programs for two and four years. After finishing education, their national service consists mainly of civilian work tasks.
- Graduates with poorer grades are offered vocational training, both in and outside Sawa. The centre for vocational training in Sawa, which was established in 2007, is made up of five schools which offer training in construction, administration, technology and agriculture. The centre educates 3,000 students annually (Efrem 2010). After completing vocational training students will be transferred to either the civilian or military service.
- Graduates who attend neither university nor vocational training mostly go into service under military command.

¹⁸ [...] sexual violence against women and girls to be widespread and notorious in the military training camps. Further, as the sexual violence by officers in the training camps and army occurs within an environment of control, intimidation, coercion and punishment, where the women are powerless, it amounts to torture. Additionally the enforced domestic service of women and girls in these camps who are also sexually abused amounts to sexual slavery (OHCHR 2015, p. 407).



Dormitory in Sawa. The photo was taken in the summer of 2014.

2.6.1.1 Detention centres in Sawa

Several of the sources Human Rights Watch interviewed in the report Service for Life from April 2009 mentioned various detention centres in Sawa, including underground cells and metal containers. In interviews with the human rights activist Elsa Chyrum some Eritrean exiles stated that the Sawa prison is a fenced area consisting of twelve corrugated iron houses on a hill. The houses have names such as Wedi Shika, Bahta, Hinsu and Police (Chyrum 2006). A report from the US Embassy in Asmara to the US State Department in 2006 mentions Forto Sawa, the military training camp – and the detention centre – located approximately 2 km from the camp where schooling takes place (US Embassy Asmara 2006a). None of Landinfo's interviewees in Asmara in recent years has been able to confirm the information about the detention centres in Sawa.

2.6.2 Kiloma

Kiloma camp is located about 35 km south of Assab and was apparently created to reduce the number of conscientious objectors and deserters. The eight-month long training in Kiloma consists of long marches, up to 40 km a day in a harsh climate, according to Chyrum (2006). Eritrea expert Gaim Kibreab has said that the camp only received recruits in the 17th and 19th mobilization round (interview in Berne, November 2009).

2.6.3 Wia

Wia is located about 30 km southeast of the port city of Massawa. Wia was closed in 2009 after outbreaks of contagious meningitis (US Department of State 2011;

diplomatic source (1), email 2010). It is unclear whether the camp has been reopened (representative of NUEYS, interview in Asmara on 5 February 2013).¹⁹

The Wia camp consists of several camps. There is a separate detention centre in the camp. The camp is known for especially harsh conditions. According to the opposition website Awate (2007) two groups in particular were sent to training in this camp: persons who had failed to attend for service and members of banned church communities. The camp has also been used for refresher training for reservists (interviews in Asmara and Kassala in 2011).

Young people who have left school before the 12th grade level have also been sent to Wia (diplomatic source (2), interview in Asmara February 2011; representative of NUEYS, meeting in Asmara on 5 February 2013).

2.7 SOCIAL SERVICE

The Eritrean authorities reported in the autumn of 2014 that the national service was to be reformed and that all new recruits should have 18 months of military training. This would mean that the civilian service as previously known would gradually end, and that those in service would be discharged in the course of an unknown number of years. Spokespersons for the youth organization NUEYS told Landinfo in February 2016 that the reform has not taken place.

There are different perceptions about who so far have served in, respectively, the civilian and military sector. Official guidelines in this area are not known. Conscripts serving in the civilian sector work in places such as the ministries, schools, courts, hospitals, local authorities or state-owned companies.

Several sources have claimed that persons with higher education, special skills and other privileged persons usually have served in the civilian sector, whether in the public sector or in service industries such as hotels and restaurants, or PFDJ-controlled companies.²⁰ Others claim that the pattern is more random (Head of an Eritrean organization (1), meeting in Asmara in February 2011).

Recruits in the civilian sector report mainly to their civilian employer. Several sources have pointed to a clear distinction between non-military and military employers. The former do not seem to enforce a military policy on, for example, leave of absence as strictly as the latter. It is possible to be transferred from the civilian section of the service to the military, but there is no information on how often this happens.

Persons in the civilian service are kept standby for the military reserve of the Eritrean authorities, according to a lawyer met by Landinfo in Asmara in February 2011. They can also be recalled for military exercises. Anyone who has performed national service has in addition a mandatory attendance obligation for refresher training until

¹⁹ The Commission considers that there is reason to believe that Wia has been reopened, basing this on satellite images (OHCHR 2015, p. 278).

²⁰ The PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) has through straw companies effectively a monopoly on the export and import industry.

the age of 50 (National Service law of 1995, §§ 23, 27).²¹ All people aged from 18 to 70, moreover, are obliged to attend the so-called People's Army, see Chapter 5.

2.8 SERVICE IN THE ARMY

Most people who do not complete the 12th grade, those who do not get further education offers after high school or those who have been brought in by giffas are transferred to military units in the army²² (diplomatic source (2) interview in Asmara in February 2011; Eritrean refugee, interview in Kassala in February 2011; diplomatic source (4), interview in Asmara March 2014, representatives of NUEYS, in Asmara on 11 February 2016).

The tasks these recruits can be allocated to range from pure military tasks to work in agriculture, industry, state business or on the property of a military superior (Kibreab 2014; local sources, meetings in Asmara January/February 2016).

2.9 SALARY AND COMPENSATION FOR PERSONS REQUIRED TO PERFORM SERVICE

With effect from July 2015, the pay level for public employees – and recruits – was significantly raised, according to the Eritrean authorities. President Issayas Afewerki mentioned the increase in a New Year's interview with Eri-TV and Radio, and parts of the interview have been reproduced by the government mouthpiece, Eritrea Profile (No. 94-96).

Before the increase national service recruits received 145 nakfa (about 112 Norwegian kroner) monthly in the first service year, after which the salary gradually increased to 500 nakfa (about 388 Norwegian kroner) a month. This is a very low income, compared with the prices of a variety of foods. The President's Adviser and Party Secretary Yemane Gebreab told Landinfo in Asmara in January 2016 that the salary before the changes were introduced was 500 nakfa a month. He claimed that the monthly salary for new recruits after the change is 2,000 nakfa.

Persons with higher education, according to the same source, receive 3500-4000 nakfa a month, compared to a former pay of 1,500 nakfa. The increase was introduced in September/October 2015. In any case, all those in the public sector should receive the increase in pay retroactively from July 2015 (Yemane Gebreab, meeting in Asmara, on 29 January 2016; representatives of NUEW and NUEYS, meeting in Asmara on 11 February 2016). Landinfo has not had the opportunity to examine whether the pay increase has been implemented for all in line with the authorities' statements.

For those with a regular employment relationship with an employer, the pay raises are likely to be significant. Various sources have in the past claimed that it was first

²¹ Eritreans who have performed National Service are called *agelgelot*.

²² This is controlled by the military superior, and not civilian leaders (interview with an Eritrean source in National Service in the public sector in Asmara, February 2011).

necessary to be discharged/demobilised to have an extra job,²³ but several of Landinfo's interviewees in Asmara in January/February 2016 said that many people who are in national service have an extra job without it creating problems. This information was confirmed in interviews with local Eritreans.

The low compensation so far received for the service is in itself not sufficient to be able to support a family, and living conditions for most people are poor. Furthermore, the wage level in Eritrea is generally low – a teacher can earn about 700-800 nakfa (equivalent to approx. 540-620 Norwegian kroner)²⁴ a month, private doctors between 1,000 and 2,000 nakfa (about 770-1,500 Norwegian kroner) a month and a Minister an estimated 2,000 nakfa (about 1,550 Norwegian kroner), while a school uniform costs about 450 nakfa (about 350 Norwegian kroner) (international representatives, interviews in Asmara March/April 2014, January 2015).

2.10 EXEMPTION FROM NATIONAL SERVICE

According to the law, only persons who had served military service before the law came into effect in October 1995, and persons who can prove that they have participated in the war of independence (1962-1991), are entitled to exemption from the national service.

Persons who are considered unfit for service, are exempted from military training, but must perform civilian service. However, there is no consistency in how the Eritrean authorities apply the regulations, for either women or men (Chyrum, interview in London, May 2010; Kibreab, interview in London, May 2010).

2.10.1 Medical reasons

The National Service Act, § 15 states that the physically disabled, the blind and persons with serious mental illness can be exempted from national service. Doctors perform medical examinations and assess service capability, but the military authorities take the decision on exemption.

The UNHCR considers that the physically disabled in practice are exempted from service (UNHCR 2011, p. 9, footnote 54). During Landinfo's mission to Eritrea and Sudan in 2011 various sources mentioned further examples of persons who were exempt because of chronic disorders such as diabetes, poor vision and asthma.

The British Embassy in Asmara also refers to an Eritrean source that has stated that disabled (and pregnant) persons are exempted from service after a medical review (cited in UK Home Office 2011, p. 46).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) refers to mental illness as a basis for exemption. Recruits who had left Sawa described a dramatic increase in the number of mentally unstable recruits. This was interpreted as a sign of either the stress of living in the

²³ This is controlled by the military superior, and not civilian leaders (interview with an Eritrean source in National Service in the public sector in Asmara, February 2011)

²⁴ Exchange rate 1 April 2016 1 nakfa = 0. 79 (XE Currency Converter).

camp, or as attempts to gain exemption from duty. If the recruits are in fact playing sick, this is an indication that mental disorders can gain exemption, even if Human Rights Watch refers to an Eritrean refugee who claims that it is necessary either to be blind or to have no trigger finger to be exempted from service (HRW 2009, p. 47, footnote 178).

2.10.2 Ethnic and religious attribution

Neither ethnic nor religious affiliations are formal grounds for exemption from the national service. In practice, however, women from rural, Muslim areas where resistance to female military service is strong, are not forced to serve (Chyrum, interview in London, May 2010; Kibreab, interview in Berne, November 2009).

Muslim women who grow up in the cities of Asmara, Keren and Mendefera, Barentu and Assab, however, are regarded as secularized and are recruited to the national service, in contrast to women from Akordat, which is a conservative Muslim city. Men are not exempted for religious reasons or on the basis of ethnic affiliation (Kibreab, interview in London, May 2010).

2.10.3 Women

Several sources within and outside Eritrea have in recent years claimed that more and more women are being either exempted or demobilized from national service if they can document marriage, pregnancy or care for children, or if they have contacts in the government apparatus.²⁵ Although the law does not distinguish between service time for women and men, the sources claim that the authorities have a more relaxed attitude to women's service, and it is thought that there is an "age limit" of between 25 and 27 years for women. Representatives of the Eritrean authorities went far in confirming to Landinfo in January/February 2016 that married women and mothers to a large extent are exempted from service (interviews in Asmara on 29 January 2016; 5 February 2016). Exemption is not a consequence of formal changes to regulations, but rather of practical and pragmatic considerations. The reason for the "age limit" is that the authorities realize that the majority of the country's women get married and have children when they are in their mid-twenties and are thus not eligible for the service. This practice may have led to temporary increases in early marriage. Parents take their daughters out of school at 15 so that they can get married and thus avoid the service.²⁶

²⁵ The British Embassy has stated that women who are engaged can be exempted from service (quoted in the UK Home Office 2011). Women who get married while in service are granted leave to conduct the wedding and honeymoon, but must according to both Kibreab and Chyrum subsequently sign up for National Service. Women with contacts within the authority structures can for example be allowed to carry out the service in the vicinity of their home or in the vicinity of where their husband lives.

²⁶ According to UNICEF, 46% of Eritrean women were married before the age of 18 in 2009 (quoted in the US Department of State 2012). There were also several international representatives who mentioned this already in March 2003 when the country advisor was in Asmara.

At the same time women, like others who do not perform national service, lose many privileges, such as the ability to get land assigned or get ration cards, exit visas or passports.

It has also been argued that women are released from service if they can document a job offer or study position. Women are also given demobilization papers (Kibreab, interview in London, May 2010; Chyrum, interview in London, May 2010; leaders of Eritrean organization (1) and (2), interviews in Asmara, February 2011).

In regards the so-called *giffas* or arrests of persons for enlistment in the service, which occurred relatively frequently in the early 2000's, mothers who had not completed national service risked being taken if they could not demonstrate that they had children. If they could submit the required documentation on care responsibilities, they were usually released in a matter of weeks.

Mothers who are exempt from service have generally not been recalled to service, but there may be exceptions, and Elsa Chyrum reported in 2010 that it was largely the military commanders who were responsible for such decisions (interview in London, May 2010). Women with children could instead be allocated to different tasks in the local community, such as cleaning public buildings or performing various services for local commanders.

According to a well-informed diplomatic source in Asmara, as of April 2013 there were clear signs of personnel shortages at all levels in the army, and women with children were in some places ordered to serve (diplomatic source (1), email 2 April 2013). But none of the sources Landinfo has interviewed in Eritrea annually since the spring of 2014 discussed this. Although it is difficult to get an insight into what happens in the country, a large scale summoning of women with children for national service would probably have drawn attention, and the information would probably have reached the international community of Asmara.

3. PUNISHMENT FOR VIOLATIONS OF THE NATIONAL SERVICE ACT: THEORY AND PRACTICE

It is not unusual that Eritreans in national service violate the provisions of the law in a number of areas. People are frustrated at the length of service and poor economic conditions, and thousands leave the country illegally each month.²⁷ Others fail to return to service after a leave of absence. Eritrean authorities claim that about 80,000 persons have not performed service, and that they must expect to serve to replace those who eventually are discharged after serving for a number of years (Yemane Gebreab, interview in Asmara 19 January 2015).

²⁷ UNHCR (2015a; b) reports that in December 2015 there were a total of 131,660 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. The number of Eritrean refugees in Sudan was at the same time 125,530.

3.1 PENALTIES ACCORDING TO THE LAW

Both the National Service Act and the Eritrean Criminal Code stipulate penalties for violation of the service obligation. According to the National Service Act, § 37, paragraph 1, those who violate the provisions of the law can be given a two-year prison sentence and/or fine of 3000 birr.²⁸ In § 37, paragraph 2, it is stipulated that persons who evade National Service by fraud or by inflicting on themselves or another an injury/amputation are liable to two years in jail or a fine of 3000 birr, in addition to completing conscription. If the injury precludes effective service the sentence will be three years in prison. According to § 37, paragraph 3, anyone who leaves the country and fail to perform service before the age of 40 can be punished with five years in prison, until the person is 50.

According to the Eritrean Criminal Code desertion or non-attendance after a leave of absence is punishable with imprisonment of up to five years.²⁹ If the offence is committed during especially aggravating circumstances, including war, the punishment can be a prison sentence of from five years to life, and in the most serious cases the death penalty (Chapter 3, § 300, no. 1 and no. 2).

The new Eritrean Criminal Code of 2015 which, according to the country's Justice Minister is expected to be implemented in the course of 2016 (Justice Minister Fawzia Hashim, interview in Asmara 27 January 2016), reduces the maximum sentence in peacetime to three years in prison (art. 119) and in time of war to a maximum of ten years in prison (art. 120).

Persons who leave the country while in the compulsory service age will, according to some local sources, be seen as deserters and be punished (Eritrean lawyer, interview in Asmara February 2011, see also Landinfo 2016). None of these sources can, however, point to criminal cases in the regular court system, and none of the sources Landinfo has met during stays in Eritrea are aware of legal proceedings against Eritreans for violation of the National Service law.

3.2 PENALTIES IN PRACTICE

The UNHCR mentions, amongst others, penalties against conscientious objectors and deserters in its recommendation of April 2011:

In practice, punishment for military offences is carried out extrajudicially, and has been reported to include "shoot to kill" orders, detention for long periods often in inhumane conditions, torture and forced labour. Draft evaders/deserters are reported to be frequently subjected to torture, while conscientious objectors can face severe physical punishment as a means of forcing them to perform military service. Furthermore, extrajudicial performances are allegedly ordered by local commanders and carried out in

²⁸ In 1997, the currency unit in Eritrea changed to the nakfa. 3000 birr correspond at today's rate of exchange to approximately 2600 nakfa or 930 Norwegian kroner.

²⁹ The Eritrean criminal law, Transitional Criminal Code of Eritrea, is identical to Ethiopia's criminal law of 1957. This law will, in the course of 2016, be replaced by the country's new criminal law.

front of military units for what are considered serious military offences (UNHCR 2011).

UNHCR has not updated its recommendation since. Human Rights Watch argued in its annual report on Eritrea for 2014, like the UNHCR, that the border guards were ordered to shoot to kill persons who crossed the border illegally. In the 2016 report (covering 2015) this is not mentioned (HRW 2015; 2016). All of Landinfo's interviewees in Asmara in January/February 2016, in January 2015, spring 2014 and also in January 2013, were familiar with the allegations of the "shoot to kill" practice, but apart from one international representative, none of the sources had knowledge of any specific cases. The international representative was aware of one specific case where a person alleged was shot on the border with Sudan (international representative (2), interview in Asmara on 29 January 2013).

Landinfo raised this question with a variety of sources in Addis Ababa in September/October 2015. Some said at the time that refugees had come to Ethiopia with gunshot wounds, but the sources could not confirm whether they had been shot by the Eritrean border guards or say anything about how common such events are. The sources believed that after 2012 it had been uncommon that refugees were shot because the border guards were becoming fewer and fewer, and they could also bribe their way out. See also Landinfo's subject report: Ethiopia/Eritrea: Border crossings, registration and conditions for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia (Landinfo 2016, p. 8-9).

Factual information about in particular penalties against evaders or deserters is limited. As initially mentioned in the report most of the accounts which describe the penalties are largely based on accounts from asylum seekers in the West. Thus, in terms of source criticism, the information has certain weaknesses, which is not to say that in general it is not credible.

The general impression that is conveyed in recent years by international sources (which is based on Eritrean sources) is that evaders who are arrested, are taken into custody for a few weeks to a few months and, potentially, are reassigned to national service. Several of Landinfo's interviewees in January 2015 and in January/February 2016, believed that evaders were not likely to be given lengthy penalties and that those who evade national service, first and foremost, risk arbitrary, extrajudicial reactions from military superiors.³⁰ However, there is widespread uncertainty about

³⁰ Some of the accounts are repeated here: A diplomatic source (D) knew a deserter who was arrested when he crossed the border. He was imprisoned in Adi-Abeito prison outside Asmara. The man's brother paid bail and the deserter was transferred to a "day prison" where the conditions were significantly better (interview in Asmara 28 January 2016). A local Eritrean source (B) spoke of his nephew who deserted from national service. After seven years, he was arrested and imprisoned for one year; after his release, he was stationed in Assab and now he works as a teacher (interview in Asmara 30 January 2016).

In 2013 Landinfo was also given various examples: An embassy knew of a case where a local employee tried to cross illegally to Sudan while he was in the service. He was captured and imprisoned for eight months. Parts of the sentence he served in various forms of community service. Then he returned to his previous job.

On the matter of national service and defection/evasion a spokesperson for another international organization spoke about one of their own employees who tried to escape across the border into Sudan, but was arrested. He was imprisoned for one year, released and later fled again. His description of the prison conditions was that he and his fellow prisoners were not mistreated, but that they were moved from place to place. For a number of prisoners, it is sometimes apparently possible to work in agriculture. The spokesperson pointed out that even if

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the extent of what they are exposed to and the profile of those who are punished. Eritrean authorities point out that the service is an obligation, but they are unclear about the penalties against those who evade. Eritreans who perform the service in the civilian sector, according to some sources, have been less exposed to military punishments than those who are in the military sector (diplomatic source (1); Eritrean source in national service in the public sector, interviews in Asmara, February 2011). This information may be out of date, but the tendency that emerged at the time, was, according to these sources:

- Defection/evasion from national service and subsequent departure from Eritrea are considered as more serious than late return after leave of absence.³¹
- There may be a distinction between those who evade the military part of the service and those who evade the civilian part. The former are regarded as deserters and are more frequently subjected to detention and physical abuse than defectors from the civilian service. Some believe that the latter can return to service, but then are likely to receive stricter working conditions and a less comfortable service.
- Persons with contacts and networks can get milder penalties.

3.2.1 Visiting the home country

Sources in the international community in Asmara have in recent years pointed out that many Eritrean exiles travel to Eritrea on vacation and for family visits during the summer months. These are persons who by all accounts have residence permits or citizenships in Western or other countries. They have restored their relationship with the authorities by signing the so-called repentance letter (see Landinfo 2014), they pay the "two percent" tax, and they probably do not participate in anti-government activities. Some sources claim that one does not necessarily have to pay this tax, but this probably applies to persons who left Eritrea before independence. There is no reason in Landinfo's opinion to believe that these persons will be punished by return, because word would get around in the exile community, and far fewer would thus venture to travel home for a visit.

the person did not report blows or similar, he may of course have told others about such things. After his release he was also deployed to work in a department, according to spokesperson (international representative (1) 5 February 2013).

A representative of another international organization reported on a local employee who tried to escape from national service. He was caught and given three weeks "retraining". After a while he was given an exit visa and left the country. This was according to the source a person with contacts high up in the system. Another source referred to an example of an Eritrean who escaped from his civilian service in Barentu to Sweden. He hated it and regretted it, and he contacted authorities because he wanted to go back. On return, he was returned to his position in Barentu, because there was a shortage of teachers. A 27-year-old Eritrean refugee was captured in a 2006 giffa. After four months of military training, he was transferred to a military unit with tasks in the construction industry in Barentu (interview in Kassala 2011).

³¹ Many people fail to return after leave, and this happens all the time, according to a diplomatic source Landinfo met in February 2011. The source reported that they then get bad working duties/terms, for example, a few months of fruit picking, collection of mobiles, etc.

Nor do the authorities conceal the fact that Eritrean exiles visit the country. In the meeting with representatives of the Eritrean immigration authorities and the Foreign Ministry in Asmara in January 2016, Landinfo was told that Eritreans who have stayed abroad for three years no longer had national commitments in Eritrea, irrespective of whether their journey out was illegal. Having no national commitments means that they do not need to perform national service or be punished for evasion. Landinfo's interviewees also said that it is possible to return home before the three years are up without consequences. This scheme is an extension of the practice applied to Eritreans that have stayed in Sudan and elsewhere in the region. They were given "diaspora-status" after one year.

3.3 ABUSE OF FAMILY MEMBERS OF PERSONS WHO EVADE NATIONAL MILITARY SERVICE

Since 1999 threats have been reported against family members of Eritreans who evade national service. In July 2005, Amnesty reported on the arrests of mainly parents, but also other family members, of young Eritreans who had deserted or failed to return to service after 1994. The reports in 2005 concerned events in the Dedub region south of Asmara, and on the border with Ethiopia. The involved were allegedly released on bail of between 10,000 and 50,000 nakfa, i.e. between approximately 4000 and 20 000 Norwegian kroner, if they could guarantee that the relative in question appeared (Amnesty International, 2005). In 2006 Amnesty mentioned new arrests of family members in Asmara. They were allegedly, according to Amnesty, given the choice of paying fines of 50,000 nakfa (about 20 000 Norwegian kroner) or alternatively making sure that the family member appeared (Amnesty International 2006). Those who failed to do this risked having to serve for six months on behalf of the person who had evaded.³²

The deserters HRW interviewed for the report *Service for life* also mention fear of imprisonment, expropriation or forfeiture of family members' property (HRW 2009, p. 45-46). Landinfo does not have more recent information about abuse of family members.³³

³² A diplomatic source to which Landinfo contributes great importance on this question stated in 2010 that penalties against family members of persons who evade national military service depend on a variety of conditions, and that reactions are not automatic. The source considers that incarcerations of family members occur in Asmara only to a small extent, but that they can happen in rural areas. The detention also depends on the position of the person that has left the country. There is a greater probability for reactions against the family members of persons who have a central role in the military, than with regular recruits in the civilian sector in national service. The source believed, moreover, that the government makes a specific assessment of the "guilt issue". If the defection occurs while the recruit is on leave with his parents, it is more likely that there will be reactions against the parents than if it happens in connection with the performance of the service. Family members who are imprisoned experience relatively better short-term conditions than both the recruits themselves and members of the Christian minority groups, according to this source, who did not have the impression that these prisoners are kept in metal containers or in underground cells, or that they are subjected to abuse. They receive a visit from family members who may bring extra food and a change of clothes (diplomatic source (1), email 2010).

³³ Landinfo has met some local Eritreans (in 2013, 2015 and 2016) in Asmara, whose children have evaded service and who are living in Sudan and Ethiopia. None of them have been fined. However, these are only a few persons, and it is therefore not possible to draw any clear conclusions.

4. DEMOBILIZATION

4.1 DOCUMENTATION ON DEMOBILIZATION AND DISCHARGE

Eritreans performing national service can be discharged, but it is difficult to estimate the extent of the discharges (see chapter 4.2 for a closer review). The National Service Act has a provision which states that the discharge document (*discharge certification* or *certificate of national service completion*) must be issued to all those who have completed national service. It is issued either in A4 format, in written form or on a yellowish bank-type card (interview in Kassala, February 2011; meeting with a representative of the British immigration authorities in Oslo, 10 March 2016).

Eritrean refugees Landinfo interviewed in Sudan in 2011 (2 and 3) referred to an office in Enda Kora in Asmara that issues demobilization papers. The office reports to the Defence Ministry and is the only office that issues this documentation in Eritrea.

4.2 WHO HAS BEEN DEMOBILIZED?

Between 48,000 and 54,000 former EPLF soldiers were demobilized until the start of the border war against Ethiopia in 1998. According to Eritrea expert David Pool they were recalled by the outbreak of war (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). Eritrean authorities promised after the peace agreement in 2000 (Algae Agreement) that 200,000 soldiers were to be demobilized in three separate phases. According to UNDP 104,000 Eritreans were demobilized up until 2005 (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). In 2006, the number of demobilized dropped to 65,000. Neither David Pool nor Gaim Kibreab, however, attribute particular importance to these numbers. Pool concludes that they have been given a demobilization card, but that they in reality have not been demobilized (Asylum and Immigration Tribunal 2007). Eritrean authorities claim that 70% of those who were in national service after the end of the war with Ethiopia in 2000, have been demobilized (Yemane Gebreab, interview in Asmara 19 January 2015).

Already in 2011 Landinfo received information that indicated that women were discharged from service for various reasons. This information has been confirmed by various sources at meetings with Landinfo in Asmara, most recently in January 2016. Although women are probably discharged in their mid-twenties, they can, in principle, be recalled to the service in line with the legislation on National Service. During crises and mobilization situations anyone can in principle be summoned to the service. At the same time several of sources emphasize that women do not get exit visas before the age of 47.

One of Landinfo's interviewees in Asmara in January 2016 believed that demobilization is possible for the resourceful segments of the population, and that the system often favors an individual who has a good relationship with his superiors. The system is structured so that the application for demobilization goes to the immediate superior, who forwards the application to the HR managers in the

department. A refusal can also be appealed according to this source (diplomatic source (D), meeting in Asmara 28 January 2016).

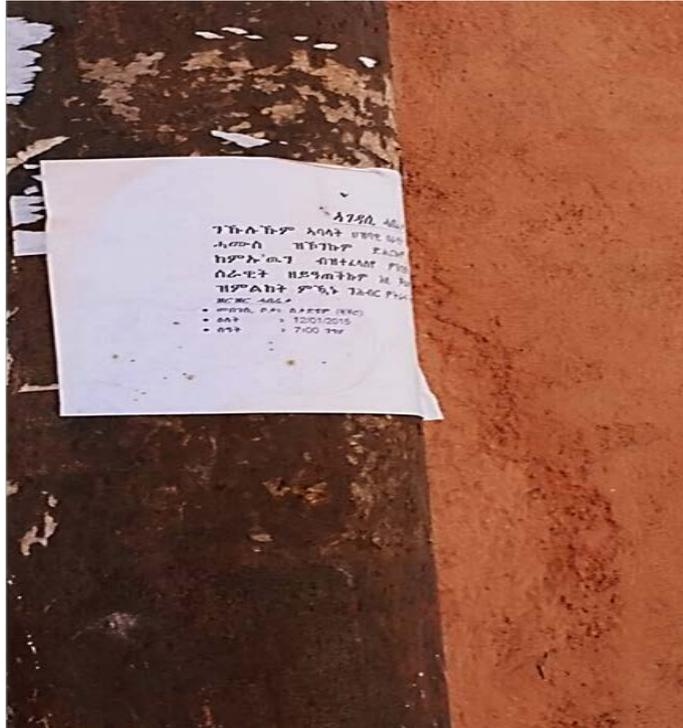
Some have claimed that it is easier to be demobilized from the civilian part of national service than from the military (Eritrean who performed national service in public administration, meeting in Asmara, February 2011; diplomatic source (1), interview in Asmara, February 2011). In principle, both services are subject to the Defence Ministry, but in practice, military commanders, according to these sources, have significantly less influence over those who serve in the civil occupations. Gaim Kibreab underlined in an interview with Landinfo in November 2009 that it is possible to evade further service by using contacts and/or bribery. Several of the sources during Landinfo's mission in February 2011 and 2013 shared this point of view: Eritreans with connections with the authorities and former liberation soldiers can arrange for shorter service, have better service places and be demobilized earlier (meeting with, amongst others, diplomatic source (1)).

5. PEOPLE'S ARMY

The People's Army, which is comparable to an extended national guard, was introduced in March 2012 after the Ethiopian incursion in the Afar region, and increased in scope after the Ethiopian forces entered the Badme areas in June 2012. People were given weapons and ammunition and had to meet for exercise each Sunday morning. Both men and women between 18 and 70 are required to participate in training that takes place on sports pitches and similar sites, but in practice, those who take part are persons who are demobilized and discharged from national service, and persons over 50 who no longer form part of the reserve force.

Some have claimed that the armament and training is in line with the Eritrean defence strategy, which focuses on a small but well trained army, and a population that can be mobilized at short notice. Others have said that the launch of the People's Army is due to the weakening of the army, both because of the lack of personnel and because of the political leadership's lack of confidence in the army.

In the extension of the weekly training conducted until the winter of 2013 when it was brought to an end, there have at irregular intervals been summons for training, and persons who have completed the training have been used as guards outside banks and government buildings and facilities (international representatives (1), (2), interviews in Asmara January/February 2013; international representative (3), interview in Asmara March/April 2014; international representative (4), interview in Asmara 14 January 2015; diplomatic sources (3), (4), interviews in Asmara 14 and 15 January 2015).



Message on a lamppost in Asmara on training in the People's Army 12 January 2015 (photo: Grethe Neufeld).

In the autumn of 2014, the attendance rate for training in the People's Army was poor, according to representatives of the international community in Asmara. The relatively few who showed up were mainly businessmen who could not risk losing their operating licenses. The authorities thus issued a summons to a new training session on 12 January 2015, and it is rumored that the turnout continued to be low. There were question therefore as to how the authorities would deal with this situation, but no information has been forthcoming about mass arrests or other reprisals against persons who did not appear (international representative (C) and (G), interview in Asmara 27 January 2016 and 28 January 2016).

The training call up notice is issued, as far as Landinfo is aware, on building walls and lampposts in neighborhoods.

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