



Eritrea

Eritrea has been called a pariah state by some observers for its poor human rights record, political repression, and history of aid to rebel groups in the region. International support for the country, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, declined after a border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), amidst a severe crackdown on dissent. Recent political reforms in Ethiopia, however, have precipitated a rapprochement between those two countries, which ended a military stalemate along the border in July 2018. Ethiopia has since facilitated renewed ties between Eritrea and its rivals Djibouti and Somalia. In late 2018, in recognition of “historic rapprochements in the Horn of Africa,” the U.N. Security Council lifted sanctions that were imposed on Eritrea in 2009 in response to its border conflict with Djibouti and support for armed groups in the region.

Such progress notwithstanding, Eritrea remains a closed society in which the government controls the economy and sharply limits civil liberties. Thousands of political prisoners reportedly remain in detention. Despite reports that it would curtail the country’s widely criticized system of indefinite national service, the government of President Isaias Afwerki has yet to do so. Authoritarianism has prompted massive refugee outflows: Eritrea was the ninth-largest source of refugees as of 2017, and in 2018 was the second-largest source of arrivals across the Mediterranean to Italy. Many cite forced conscription as a key reason for flight. Outflows have reportedly risen since the détente with Ethiopia, as many Eritreans have taken advantage of the reopened border to seek reunion with relatives abroad.

U.S. policymakers have expressed concern over Chinese and Russian activities in Eritrea, which is sits on the strategic waterway between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Russia has announced plans to build a logistics center in the country; China is active in Eritrea’s mining sector, as is a Canadian mining company that faces a lawsuit linked to Eritrea’s forced conscription. Eritrea has built alliances with Arab Gulf states, and Gulf actors helped mend ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) supports Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, to which Eritrea contributes troops, from a base on the Eritrean coast.

Background

In 1991, after 30 years of war with successive Ethiopian governments, the secessionist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) defeated Ethiopian forces, took control of the coastal province of Eritrea, and established a provisional government. Eritreans voted for independence in a U.N.-sponsored plebiscite, and Eritrea officially became a country in May 1993. The EPLF announced a four-year transition period and established institutions, including a legislature and a judiciary. The legislature’s first act was to elect longtime EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki as head of state. In 1994, the EPLF became a political party, renaming itself the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Figure 1. Eritrea Facts



Source: CRS map. Facts from CIA and IMF reference databases.

Despite early optimism about Eritrea’s prospects, conditions deteriorated soon after independence. Opposition parties were excluded from working on a new constitution, which a transitional parliament unanimously endorsed in 1997 but never implemented. Legislative elections, scheduled for 1998, were indefinitely postponed as conflict resumed with Ethiopia. In 2001, Isaias ordered the arrest, for treason, of 15 senior officials who had called for democratic reforms. Some fled, but 11 were arrested, along with 10 journalists. None were formally charged or convicted; at least one has reportedly died in detention.

Politics

President Isaias has long justified repressive policies and mandatory military service as necessary to defend against Ethiopian aggression. Some hoped that rapprochement with Ethiopia would give rise to a broader political opening, but there have been few signs of reform. Isaias continues to dominate the government and punish dissent. In late 2018, authorities arrested a former minister who criticized Isaias; like thousands of others he received no trial, and he reportedly remains in indefinite incommunicado detention.

Political opposition is effectively nonexistent—the PFDJ controls politics and the media, and is the sole recognized party. Elections have not been held since independence. Officials have cited “the prevailing wish of the people” and the border dispute with Ethiopia as justifications for the continued delay of elections and implementation of the constitution. The most recent apparent challenge to Isaias came in 2013, when a failed mutiny signaled fissures in the regime. Eritrea ranked 179 of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ 2018 *World Press Freedom Index*.

Human Rights Record

The State Department’s most recent Human Rights report on Eritrea describes abuses such as “disappearances; torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment by security forces; [...] arbitrary arrest; denial of fair public trial; unlawful interference with privacy, family, or home; restrictions on freedom of speech and press.” In 2016, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in Eritrea released a report finding reasonable grounds to

believe that crimes against humanity had been committed in a “persistent, widespread, and systematic” manner in Eritrea. According to the Commission, the indefinite nature of obligatory military service and its “terrible” conditions “make national service an institution where slavery-like practices are routine.” The government has disclosed that service conscripts are used in a wide range of economic activities. In early 2018, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea stated that human rights violations identified in the 2016 COI report “continued unabated.”

The Economy

Eritrea’s economy is centrally managed and features limited private sector activity. Economic performance depends primarily on the growing mining sector and on fluctuating global commodity prices. Growth peaked near 9% in 2011 owing to high gold prices, fell below 2% in 2016, then rebounded to 4% in 2018 as mining production increased. Economic ties with China, Eritrea’s top trade partner, recently expanded with the sale of a major stake in the country’s largest copper-zinc mine to a Chinese firm. Impediments to growth include political uncertainty, low foreign investment (prohibited in most sectors), a large budget deficit due to military spending, and a notoriously poor business climate. Eritrea ranks second to last in the World Bank’s 2019 *Doing Business* index.

Sporadic growth has done little to address substantial development challenges. GDP per capita is low and food insecurity is a persistent problem. Most of the population depends on subsistence agriculture, which suffers from recurrent drought. Humanitarian concerns are heightened because of the government’s routine denial of food shortages and ban on most humanitarian agencies. Eritrea ranked 179 out of 189 countries on the 2018 U.N. *Human Development Index*. Eritrea has reportedly made progress on health and education indicators, but data is limited.

International Relations

Spurred by a leadership transition and ensuing reforms in Ethiopia, which has taken on a mediation role in the Horn, Eritrea has renewed ties with its erstwhile rivals in the sub-region. Detente with Ethiopia could be transformative for Eritrea’s politics and economy. After their border war in the late 1990s, in which an estimated 80,000 died, the two countries clashed periodically in disputed border areas and supported proxy forces in nearby Somalia. They also accused each other of backing rebels in their respective countries. Eritrean officials routinely cited Ethiopia’s failure to implement a boundary commission’s 2002 ruling and its military occupation of territory awarded to Eritrea as justification for support to Ethiopian armed groups. In June 2018, Ethiopia announced that it would fully implement the 2000 peace agreement and withdraw from the disputed territories. The countries have restored diplomatic ties, reopened phone lines, and resumed flights. Reconnecting Ethiopia to Eritrea’s ports will likely boost trade and jobs.

Eritrea-Djibouti relations also have improved. Djibouti, like Ethiopia, has long accused Eritrea of sabotaging regional stability. Tensions between Eritrea and Djibouti stem from a 2008 border conflict. Eritrea withdrew its troops from Djibouti in 2010 after mediation by Qatar, which deployed troops to keep peace along the border. Both countries have

since released detainees, but Djibouti claims that Eritrea still holds prisoners of war. Qatar pulled its troops in 2017 after a diplomatic dispute, after which Djibouti accused Eritrea of reoccupying disputed border territory. In late 2018, however, Eritrea and Djibouti agreed to normalize relations following Ethiopia-led mediation efforts. The two countries have initiated a dialogue over contested territory and other matters. Saudi Arabia has supported those talks.

Eritrea’s relations also have improved with Somalia, where Eritrean support for armed groups—including Al Shabaab, a Somali-based Al Qaeda affiliate—prompted the U.N. Security Council to place an arms embargo and targeted sanctions on Eritrea in 2009. Eritrea and Somalia agreed to restore relations in mid-2018; alongside Ethiopia, they have since embarked on trilateral meetings to discuss security and development cooperation, among other issues.

Eritrea’s status as a major source of refugees and migrants bound for Europe has raised its profile among European donors and spurred greater diplomatic engagement since 2015. A European Union multi-year development fund for Eritrea worth over \$200 million has attracted scrutiny—critics contend it ignores ongoing human rights abuses.

U.S. Policy and Sanctions

Relations between the United States and Eritrea have been poor, though in late 2018 the State Department suggested that “through a concerted, mutual effort that began in late 2017...there are steady improvements.” Eritrea’s warming ties with Ethiopia, a key U.S. development and security partner, may enable further progress. Notably, the United States ultimately supported lifting U.N. sanctions on Eritrea in late 2018, after initial reports suggested U.S. opposition.

Successive U.S. Administrations have described Eritrea as authoritarian and raised human rights concerns. Once its largest bilateral donor, the United States now provides no bilateral aid. Two local embassy staff who were arrested without charge in 2001 reportedly remain in detention; other local staff have since reportedly been imprisoned. The Eritrean government requested that USAID leave in 2005, and there has been no U.S. ambassador to Eritrea since 2010. A 2018 visit by the State Department’s top Africa official was the highest level travel to Eritrea in over a decade. The State Department has welcomed peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea and offered support.

Eritrea is subject to various U.S. restrictions, including on the transfer of U.S. defense articles and services. Three Eritrean officials are subject to targeted financial sanctions under Executive Order 13536, pertaining to Somalia. In 2017, the United States imposed sanctions on Eritrea’s navy under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act in response to its import of military communications equipment from North Korea. Eritrea is subject to sanctions based the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and its designation since 2004 as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

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