



## Eritrea

Eritrea has been called a pariah state by some observers for its poor human rights record, political repression, and aid to rebel groups in the Horn of Africa. International support for the country, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, declined in the aftermath of a border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), amidst a severe crackdown on dissent. The United Nations has had an arms embargo in place since 2009 in response to Eritrea's border conflict with Djibouti and its reported support for armed groups in the region. Eritrean officials contend that the country is misunderstood and that allegations against it have been politicized by Ethiopia and its international allies. A recent leadership transition in Ethiopia led to its government moving in June 2018 to end the long military stalemate with Eritrea, raising hopes for change in both countries.

Eritrea is among the world's top sources of refugees. As much as 10% of the population has fled since 2000, many seeking asylum in Europe. Eritrea is the second largest source of migrants crossing the Mediterranean in 2018; almost 70,000 have arrived in Italy since 2015. Many face abuse and life-threatening situations during their journeys. Eritrea's indefinite forced conscription for national service is a widely cited reason for flight. Along with being a human rights concern, it restricts working-age Eritreans from supporting their families, undermining the economy.

While Eritrea has had poor relations with much of East Africa, it has built alliances with Arab Gulf countries. The United Arab Emirates supports Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, to which Eritrea contributes troops, from a base on the Eritrean coast; U.N. sanctions monitors consider that to be an arms embargo violation. Eritrea's ties with Egypt have fueled tensions in Sudan and Ethiopia.

### 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 Afewerki as head of state. In 1994, the EPLF became a political party, renaming itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Despite initial optimism about Eritrea's prospects as a state, conditions deteriorated soon after independence. Opposition parties were excluded from working on a new constitution, which an EPLF-dominated transitional parliament unanimously endorsed in 1997 but never implemented. Legislative elections, scheduled for 1998, were indefinitely postponed due to a resumption of conflict with Ethiopia.

Figure 1. Eritrea Facts



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

### Politics

President Isaias dominates the government, which the State Department describes as authoritarian. His now 25-year rule was consolidated in 2001 when he ordered the arrest, for treason, of 15 senior PFDJ officials who had called for democratic reforms. Some fled, but 11 were arrested, along with 10 journalists; none were formally charged or convicted and at least one has reportedly died in 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 border disputes 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 ranks 179 of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2018 *World Press Freedom Index*.

### The Economy

Eritrea's economy is centrally managed and features very 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 5% in 2017 as mining production increased. 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 ranked second to last in the World Bank's 2018 *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. Roughly 80% of the population depends on subsistence agriculture, and the country is plagued with recurrent drought. Eritrea ranked 179 out of 188 countries on the 2016 U.N. *Human Development Index*. Eritrea has reportedly made progress on health and education indicators, but data is limited.

Eritrea bars many humanitarian agencies from the country, resulting in limited information on conditions there. Humanitarian concerns around regional drought conditions are heightened for Eritrea because of the government's denial of food shortages, such as during the severe drought East Africa suffered in 2011-2012. UNICEF reports that half of Eritrea's children are stunted from malnutrition.

### 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 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 Eritrean detention facilities, military camps, and other locations since 1991. 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." There are also reports that service conscripts are used as forced labor in a wide range of economic activities, including private enterprises.

### International Relations

In 2017, Eritrea's foreign minister described his country as a "haven of stability in a turbulent neighborhood." Tensions with neighboring countries, however, have perpetuated a "no war, no peace" situation, under which the government justifies its compulsory military service. The tensions have contributed to Eritrea's regional isolation, although the recent rapprochement with Ethiopia has facilitated a thaw in relations with some other countries, including Somalia.

Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a major border war in the late 1990s that left an estimated 80,000 dead. They signed a peace deal in 2000, but subsequently clashed periodically in disputed border areas and supported proxy forces in nearby Somalia. Both governments 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, including its military occupation of territory awarded to Eritrea, as justification for support to Ethiopian armed groups. In June 2018, after a leadership transition, Ethiopia announced that it would fully implement the 2002 peace agreement and withdraw its forces from the disputed territories. The timeline for that withdrawal remains unclear, but the two countries have restored diplomatic ties, reopened phone lines, and resumed flights. Prospective trade ties could be transformative.

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 contends that Eritrea still holds some prisoners of war. Qatar pulled its troops from the border in 2017 after both countries aligned with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Gulf states' diplomatic dispute. Djibouti has accused Eritrea

of reoccupying disputed border territory in the aftermath of the Qatari pullout and contends that Eritrea has stoked anti-government sentiment among the Djiboutian opposition and supported Djiboutian rebel groups.

Djibouti opposes the lifting of U.N. sanctions on Eritrea. The sanctions include a ban on the sale and supply of arms and related material to the country and a travel ban and assets freeze against individuals designated based on certain criteria, such as support for armed opposition groups in the region. The arms embargo was originally proposed in 2009 by Uganda, a key troop contributor to the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia, at the request of the AU, in response to evidence of Eritrean support for armed groups in Somalia. U.N. sanctions monitors have not confirmed evidence of Eritrean support to Al Shabaab, a Somali-based Al Qaeda affiliate, since 2013, but have reported on Eritrean support to Ethiopian rebel groups. Ethiopia has expressed its readiness to help improve relations between Eritrea and Djibouti, and may seek to play a mediating role.

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

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Eritrea are poor. Successive U.S. Administrations have described Eritrea as authoritarian and raised concerns on human rights issues. Once the country's largest bilateral donor, the United States now provides no bilateral aid to Eritrea. 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 May 2018 visit by a senior official from the State Department's Africa Bureau, Ambassador Donald Yamamoto, was the highest level U.S. travel to Eritrea in over a decade. The State Department has welcomed the efforts by Ethiopia and Eritrea to make peace and has expressed a willingness to support the process; what that support may entail is still being determined.

Eritrea is subject to various economic restrictions in its relations with the United States, including restrictions on the transfer of U.S. defense articles and services that predate the U.N. arms embargo. Three Eritrean officials are subject to targeted U.S. financial sanctions under Executive Order 13536, pertaining to the security situation in Somalia. In 2017 the United States imposed sanctions under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA) on the Eritrean Navy, in response to its import of military communications equipment from North Korea. Eritrea is also 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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