



United Nations
Commission of Inquiry on
Human Rights in Eritrea

TESTIMONY: EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- Describing forced manual labour a witness said: “Air Force planes are outdated and there is no proper maintenance. So, the Air Force has shifted to plantation activities. For example, there was a piece of land near the airport, the Chief of the Air Force took that land for plantations. He would bring almost three quarters of Air Force conscripts to work on the plantations, and the equipment used on the plantation comes from the Air Force and Ministry of Agriculture. It was very hot on the plantations. Conscripts were not paid any money for this work. They were told it is part of our duties. If they refused to work there, they would be sent to the nearby detention facility.”
- Of Eritrea’s parastatal companies, a witness well-placed to understand Government finance explained that: “Managers are all ‘ex-fighters’ – all of them. In other key positions, you also have ex-fighters. The staff are conscripts. Most of them are paid 500 Nakfa (c. US\$10) by the company, although they are under the Ministry of Defence. There are no labourers except for conscripts. If a company employs someone who is not a conscript, it is penalised.”
- One witness, who left Eritrea in 2015, spoke of a number of arbitrary detentions and disappearances of family members over the years. In 1999, the witness’s father was arrested and disappeared. He has never been heard from again. Of his father’s disappearance he said: “There is no law, we could not do anything. You cannot ask about someone who has disappeared, you risk being arrested yourself. I don’t think anyone ever asked about his whereabouts.”
- A statement illustrative of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance was provided by a witness who left the country in September 2015. Her husband was arrested outside their home in 2009 but the witness said she only left Eritrea after giving up hope that she would ever obtain information about his condition or whereabouts. She said: “Nobody knows why he was arrested. I thought maybe his military leave permission paper had expired so I went to the local prison. I heard informally from prison guards that he was imprisoned. For four years, I was going once a week. I took food and some clothes. They never told me how he was doing. After four years, when they refused to receive items like food and clothes, we knew that he was no longer there. I haven’t seen my husband in seven years and don’t know if he is alive or not. I searched for him, but the authorities finally told me just don’t bother coming back, there’s no point.”
- A witness who escaped from prison in 2015 told the Commission that he had been detained because he had asked his commanding officer to release him from national service. He said: “Since there was no war. I also complained that we were only working

for the benefit of the big bosses. I asked this question during a meeting in March 2014 and all my colleagues clapped their hands but it annoyed the General. Immediately after the meeting, I was arrested and sent to prison. In the prison, I was placed in shackles and detained in a cell alone for 8 months. I was repeatedly beaten and tortured. Each time two people held me down and two others beat me with stakes and rubbers. They submerged my head in a deep container with dirty water. They beat me on my testicles many times. I fainted each time they did this. I have no testicles now, they disappeared. I am impotent and am not able to bear children. Before these incidents I had one daughter and that is all I will ever have.”

- Another witness explained that when he was in detention in 2014, he and others detained would “put Vaseline and lemon on the wounds of those tortured” but added that “if prison officials see you helping others, you’ll suffer the same fate. We had to hide to help fellow prisoners. I was not normal when I left the detention centre.”
- One witness who tried to flee in April 2015 said: “What was really sad – we were men, women and children – they obliged everyone to take off all their clothes so they could search them. All the guards were men. They searched the women and were touching them. The women couldn’t say no. They felt bad and we felt bad but we could do nothing. They searched everywhere, even the genitals, with their hands. They even laughed about it. Even put their fingers inside the women’s genitals and the little girls’ genitals – 5-year-old girl, a 9-year-old girl. The girls cried.”
- A witness conscripted in 1998 until 2014 when he escaped said: “After the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, I was not released although I asked for it many times. They said the war could start again at any time, you have to be on stand-by. I was sent to do agricultural work in Tsorona. The fields belong to my unit leader.”
- Describing conditions in the military training camp at Sawa, a former military trainer and administrator explained: “The trainers are very harsh. We were told if you don’t apply pressure, they won’t do what you say. We were not trained on how to treat people. They just instruct you to punish using ‘military punishments.’ In one incident a trainer tied up two people and left them in a tent. He tied them so tightly that we heard them screaming. Later, one was dead and the other’s hands were crippled. If the trainer does not apply pressure to the trainees, he could end up in prison.”
- A male soldier in Sawa stated: “We watched sexual abuses. Systematically, they forced girls to obey their instructions; to have a relationship with them. If she doesn’t obey, they find any kind of military punishment. It is commonly the division leaders, the highest ranks who would do that. The leaders select girls personally. After six months, he would change her, take a newly arrived. The 11th grade students have to pass their last year’s exam in Sawa. They take them. Once a woman is assigned to a General, they stay there to do office work, chores, etc. There is no rule, no law. Sometimes when the girls see the car of the General approaching they hide. What if they become pregnant? When it happens, they traditionally have an abortion. The girl doesn’t even want to let the Colonel know. One of my best friends was a ‘personnel’ of the Colonel. He told me that the

nickname used to get a girl is 'goat'. Sometimes when newcomers arrive they ask assistants to bring them new ones.”

- A former interrogator stated: “Torture includes beating with whips, plastic tubes and electric sticks, standing outside on a very hot sunny day at noon, tying the hands and feet like the figure of eight, tying the hands and feet backwards, tying to trees, forcing the head down into a container with very cold water, beating the soles of the feet and the palms. In addition, the interrogator is allowed to use whatever fantasy comes to his mind.”
- A witness detained in 2011 stated that: “The military rules do not allow torture. However, there is no way to complain. To whom should you complain? You cannot oppose the authorities. The prison is isolated. There is no one there, so they can do whatever they want to do. There is a saying in prison: If you scream, only the sea will hear you.”
- Describing military training that took place on the Red Sea in 2013, one witness explained: “They threw us in the sea. Most of the trainees didn’t know how to swim. We told the soldiers that most couldn’t swim and that they must teach us first and then send us out to sea. The trainers said no. When someone was drowning, the soldiers said just let them be, they are pretending so they can get out of doing this exercise. The first time we went out five people drowned. Ten conscripts died in all over one month. We wanted to gather to commemorate the people who died, but our trainers said this is nothing. If one man dies per day, then it’s a real tough course. No action was taken to bring to justice or punish those who did this.”
- An Eritrean man who was detained and tortured for trying to flee the country said: “For six months, I was tortured every other day, while the other day I was left in a cell with 40 other detainees. A lot of them were also tortured. During the torture, all of them said that they do not want someone like me to have children, as children of people like me are not welcome. They said that they will make sure that I cannot reproduce. My left testicle is seriously harmed from the torture and I cannot produce sperm. They used the device applying electricity against my genitals as well as against the palms of my hands and under my feet. I have liquid in my testicles. I cannot reproduce. In Eritrea, they do not want educated men to reproduce; they want to break the heredity. This is why they torture men like they did with me. This is what they said to me when they tortured me.”
- One woman detained by the police said: “The chief of a particular police station frequently called me out of my cell and raped me. I stayed there for nearly six months and nearly every day he raped me. He penetrated my vagina with his penis. There were two other men who did similar things to me. They ejaculated inside me. It was very painful. Even after I was released I was not sure I would survive. They would take turns. While one was raping me, the other would wait outside and come one after the other. The chief of that particular police station raped me every day. The two other came every few days, it depends. When he came to rape me, if I would refuse, he would slap me and ask why I would refuse. I responded that I want to protect myself and do not want to have this kind of intercourse with anyone. He beat me and raped me. After he finished, he threatened me not to say anything. He told me that if I would report the rapes he

would find me wherever I go and kill me. I asked him about my fault/wrongdoings. He told me to stay here and that I would learn about my problems. None of them used condoms.”

- One witness describes the death of a friend during a military training exercise in 2007: “The day after we arrived at Wi’a, we were made to trek about 15 kilometres to collect and bring firewood. On the way back, a young man was tired and sick and could not carry his load. Guards beat him to force him to continue trekking until he finally fell on the ground. The guard threatened that he would suffer for his tricks when he reached the camp. Four people carried my friend to the camp. On arrival at the camp, the guard tied him up using the ‘helicopter’ technique, and beat him severely saying that he tried to cheat. He left my friend tied up on the burning ground. Soon after my friend vomited blood through his mouth and nostrils and died on the spot.”