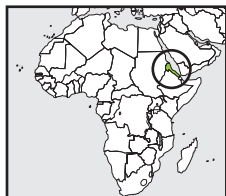


Engineering a failed State



Once praised as one of the most promising countries in Africa, the country has become the victim of an authoritarian and militarized regime. The country has rapidly descended into intolerable levels of political repression, leading to abject poverty and “social anomie,” an environment that precludes fulfilment of its international commitment to sustainable development, economic growth and progress. The fundamental obstacle of political repression can only be removed with the help of outside pressure on the Eritrean Government.

Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR)

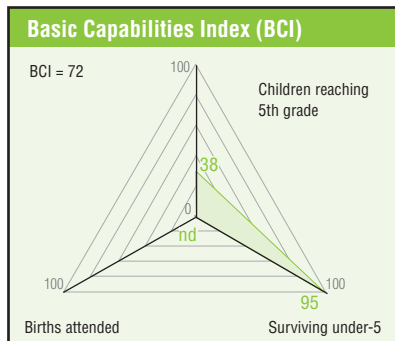
Daniel R Mekonnen

Speaking at an academic conference in November 2010, French scholar Gerard Prunier, a specialist in the Horn of Africa and East Africa, described Eritrea as one of “the hardest and worst dictatorships anywhere” and “a hell on Earth.”¹ This was not hyperbole. The Government has declared war against its own people. The worst manifestation of this war situation is the pervasive practice of forced labour under the guise of the national military service programme (NMSP), which has kept hundreds of thousands of Eritreans under an unbearable yoke of dictatorship.

Despite the looming economic, social and political crises, which have been amply detailed, the Government obstinately refuses to acknowledge the reality on the ground. On the contrary, President Isaias Afwerki, has proclaimed the country the best in Africa. Asked by Al Jazeera TV about his aspirations for Eritrea, he declared: “We are focused on doing the right things in this country ... At least we will not be like Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan; we are better off. We are number one in this continent.”² But the 2010 *Global Hunger Index* has a different view. It ranks Eritrea, together with Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo as one of the three African countries with alarming levels of hunger.³ In the context of this and other credible reports, the Afwerki comment must be viewed as an affront to the suffering Eritrean people.

A laboratory for botched experiments

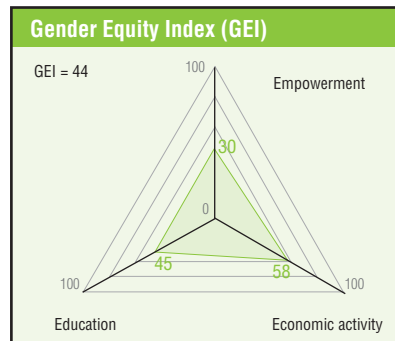
As noted above, the abusive Government policy of forced military service is the major cause of vulnerability in Eritrea. Although the country has never conducted a census, the proportion of the population forced into military service appears to be exceedingly high. One recent study estimated the country's



population at 3.6 million.⁴ In 2010 the Eritrean army had an estimated 600,000 troops,⁵ which would be an extraordinary 16.6% of the total population. This forced military service makes it extremely difficult for ordinary citizens to realize their personal aspirations in life, even if they are not personally affected by the Government's abhorrent human rights violations, such as torture and imprisonment.

Since the outbreak of a border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998, the Government has arbitrarily extended its statutory NMSP of 18 months to an indefinite period. Under this abusive policy, all adults, male and female, up to the age of 45 are subject to what amounts to slavery or forced labour, either in military camps and trenches bordering Ethiopia or working under strict military rule for corporations owned by the State and army generals.

The actual situation may be even worse. More than 1 million Eritreans are believed to be living outside of the country— one of largest diaspora communities in the world. Thus, the domestic population may be less than 2.6 million. This would make the proportion of the population in the military closer to 23%. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), a leading think tank on human security issues, the maximum limit of military mobilization is normally considered to be 10% of the total population. Beyond that, society ceases to function normally.⁶



Scholar Nicole Hirt defines “social anomie” as a state of large scale disturbed order and societal disintegration resulting from the inability of a large proportion of the society to realize personal aspirations.⁷ Along the same lines, Tricia Redeker Hepner and David O’Kane have investigated the bizarre state of affairs in Eritrea using the concept of biopolitics, which they define as “a state-led deployment of disciplinary technologies on individuals and population groups.”⁸ As their study indicates, Eritrea has become the latest laboratory for experimentation in economic, social and political policies which have previously proven disastrous in a number of archaic repressive regimes.

Given the high level of military mobilization it comes as no surprise that the Eritrean Government is accused of supporting armed groups ranging from Al Shabab in Somalia to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. The former allegation is supported by UN experts,⁹ and resulted in a severe sanction adopted by the UN Security Council in December 2009 (Resolution 1907). The latter has been validated in a report by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It is also important to note that Eritrea is currently ruled by

1 Prunier, G., *Eritrea and its Discontents*, speech delivered at the Conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA), (5 November 2010), <video.com/18716003 >.

2 Dutton, Jane, “Interview with Isaias Afwerki”, *Al Jazeera TV*, (19 February 2010), <www.youtube.com/watch?v=00uQwODNkTA>.

3 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), *2010 Global Hunger Index*, (2010), <www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ghi10.pdf >.

4 Russell, George, “Eritrea to UN: Take This Aid and Shove It”, *Fox News*, (30 March 2011), <www.foxnews.com/world/2011/03/30/eritrea-aid-shove/?test=latestnews>.

5 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010: Eritrea Country Report*, 2 and 13.

6 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Eritrea: The Siege State*, (Africa Report No. 163, 21 September 2010), 13.

7 Hirt, Nicole, “‘Dreams Don’t Come True in Eritrea’: Anomie and Family Disintegration due to the Structural Militarization of Society”, *GIGA Working Papers*, 119/2010, (January 2010), 7-9. Merton, Robert K., *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 131–132, 163.

8 Redeker, Tricia, and O’Kane, David, “Introduction” in O’Kane, David, and Redeker, Tricia (eds) *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

9 See the periodic reports of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, <www.un.org/sc/committees/751/mongroup.shtml>.

a government which does not hesitate to establish links with individuals or groups which are globally condemned for their involvement in a number of illicit activities. One such individual is the notorious Russian arms dealer, Viktor Bout, known as “The Merchant of Death.” In short, Eritrea is ruled by a small cohort of ex-freedom fighters who do not constitute a “government” in the conventional sense.

The recipe for a failed State

The country is on the brink of becoming another failed state in the Horn of Africa, a region described as the most-conflicted corner of the world since the end of WWII.¹⁰ For the past six decades, war, displacement, abject poverty and repression have been the hallmarks of this region. It has already produced one failed state, Somalia, in the last 20 years; the likelihood of Eritrea becoming another is not far-fetched. ICG raised this possibility in a September 2010 report, which called this a real danger in the absence of effective and timely international intervention. Two of the major factors it cited are “the widespread lack of support for the Government within the country and the deteriorating state of the army, whose ability to either sustain Isaias Afwerki’s regime or to successfully manage regime transition is increasingly questionable.”¹¹

By refusing to accept humanitarian assistance, under the guise of self-reliance, the Government has condemned the population to prolonged suffering. Most recently it rejected an offer of humanitarian assistance under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). The decision was formally announced in a letter from the Minister of Finance on 25 January 2011.¹² Eritrea ranks third in the world in aid dependency;¹³ the Government’s decision to discontinue or at least to curtail the activities of the UNDAF comes at a time when such assistance is urgently needed by the Eritrean people.

Mass exodus

Throughout its brief history, Eritrea has been one of the leading refugee-producing countries in the world. During the armed struggle for liberation, the main cause of mass exodus was the brutality of the occupying Ethiopian army. After the country achieved its independence in 1991, emigration declined precipitously. However, this trend dramatically shifted in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. Since September 2001 the main cause of mass exodus remains the brutality of the Eritrean go-

vernment. Nathaniel Meyers, who travelled to Eritrea in mid-2010, crystalized the situation with his observation that *Prison Break*¹⁴ has become one of the most popular television series in Eritrea.¹⁵ This metaphor depicts the tragedy of Eritrea becoming a giant open-air prison where every Eritrean considers himself or herself an inmate while relatives outside of the country are regarded as potential rescuers.

Similarly, Gaim Kibreab describes Eritrea as a society severely affected by a “powerful obsession to migrate”.¹⁶ The mass exodus typically begins with flight across the border to Sudan or Ethiopia, and continuing to Libya and then the Italian coast, the initial European destination of many asylum seekers. This journey is extremely hazardous. The suffering that Eritreans endure in crossing the Sahara Desert (including the Sinai Desert) and the Mediterranean Sea is comparable only to the extreme hardships depicted in bestseller novels or Hollywood adventure movies. The resulting trauma and psychological harm is difficult to imagine. Perhaps the most heart-breaking recent incident occurred in March 2011, when a boat carrying 335 refugees fleeing the conflict in Libya, including 325 Eritreans, capsized due to unknown reasons. Everyone on board, including pregnant women and children, perished.¹⁷ For Eritreans, this was one of the most horrendous disasters of recent times.

No room for popular uprisings

From the end of 2010 and through the beginning of 2011 an unprecedented wave of popular uprisings has removed repressive regimes in a number of North Africa and Middle East countries. Some observers have predicted that this upsurge may expand to other countries still governed by repressive regimes. In the case of Eritrea, Will Cobbett notes, this is very unlikely to happen in the near future for several reasons:¹⁸

First, Eritrea’s entire able-bodied population is strictly regimented by absolute military discipline as a result of the never-ending NMSP programme.

Second, Eritrea has no official opposition in any form that could possibly generate the kind of popular uprising seen in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries. In September 2001 the Government mercilessly crushed the first post-independence reform movement; ever since, no internal opposition or dissent has emerged.

Third, one of the major catalysts of change in other countries, the Internet, is tightly controlled by the Government and Eritrea has one of the lowest Internet penetrations in the world, far below that of countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Just 4% of Eritreans have access to the Internet, and the Government could quickly cut this off: “there’s no need for Isaias [Afwerki] to close down Twitter or Facebook – but he could if he wanted to, because he controls the monopoly telecoms provider.”¹⁹

Fourth, with the control of the only TV channel, radio station and newspaper (broadcasting and printing in each national language) the Government holds a complete monopoly of information. According to Reporters Without Borders and The Committee to Protect Journalists, Eritrea ranks last country in the world in press freedom and has imprisoned more journalists than any other country in Africa.²⁰ It is also the only country in Africa without a single private newspaper or any other form of media outlet. Nonetheless, the possibility of popular rebellion cannot be completely ruled out.

The way forward

Along with the compression of political space, eliminating any possibility of an official opposition or any form of dissent, Eritrea is also suffering increasing levels of international isolation. In this environment, which the ICG has described as “the siege state,” the country can hardly fulfill its international commitment to sustainable development. Sustainable economic growth and advancement can only occur if the fundamental problem of political repression is resolved immediately. This would require sufficient pressure to compel the Government to open up political space. As the country’s leading development partner, the European Union (EU) possesses ample diplomatic and political leverage. One way in which it could use this is by making future development assistance contingent upon the abolition of the indefinite NMSP, the holding of long-promised national elections, the implementation of the long-delayed constitution and the release of political and other prisoners. These are among the most important measures that must precede long-term planning on sustainable development. ■

19 Ibid.

20 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Iran, China Drive Prison Tally to 14-Year High*, (2010), <cpj.org/reports/2010/12/cpj-journalist-prison-census-iran-china-highest-14-years.php>; Reporters Without Borders, *2010 Press Freedom Index*, (Paris: 2010), <en.rsrf.org/press-freedom-index-2010, 1034.html>.

10 Shinn, D.H., *Challenges to Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa*, (California: World Affairs Council of Northern California, 12 March 2011).

11 ICG, op cit., note 6 above, ii.

12 Fox News, *Eritrea to UN: Take This Aid and Shove It*, (30 March 2011), <www.foxnews.com/world/2011/03/30/eritrea-aid-shove>

13 NationMaster, *Aid as per cent of GDP*, <www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_aid_as_of_gdp-economy-aid-as-of-gdp>.

14 *Prison Break* is a prominent American TV serial drama telling the story of a man wrongly convicted of murder and sentenced to death, and the efforts of his brother to help the prisoner escape.

15 Meyers, Nathaniel, “Africa’s North Korea: Inside Eritrea’s Open-Air Prison,” *Foreign Policy*, (New York: August 2010), <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/africas_north_korea?page=0,0>.

16 Kibreab, G., “The Eritrean Diaspora, the War of Independence, Post-Conflict (Re)-construction and Democratisation” in Johansson Dahre, Ulf, (ed) *The Role of Diasporas in Peace, Democracy and Development in the Horn of Africa* (Lund: Lund University, 2007), p. 99.

17 Assena.com, *335 Refugees Perished in the Mediterranean Sea*, April 11 2007, <news.assena.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3671:breaking-news-330-&catid=1&Itemid=44>.

18 Cobbett, W., *Tunisia, Egypt, Libya ... Why Eritrea Won't be Next*, (2011), <www.bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/home/2011/02/tunisia-egypt-libya-why-eritrea-wont-be-next.html>.