

Eritrea - Annual Report 2008

Area : 117,600 sq. km.

Population : 4,400,000.

Language : Tigrinya.

Head of state : Issaias Afeworki.

For the first time, this small country in the Horn of Africa led since independence by Issaias Afeworki, figures in last place in Reporters Without Borders' worldwide press freedom index, for the simple reason that the situation has gone from bad to worse. The country has been cut off from the rest of the world since major police round-ups in September 2001 and at least four journalists have died in prison.

The high hopes that Eritreans had for their country at independence, won on 25 May 1993 after a valiant 30-year guerrilla war, have completely collapsed. President Issaias Afeworki and his close allies sent the political police in against the reformist wing of the ruling party on 18 September 2001. The war with Ethiopia had just ended and growing numbers were calling for their freedom. The capital became a hunting ground to track down opponents or those accused of opposition. Former companions in arms, ministers and their advisers as well as influential generals were thrown in prison. The handful of independent newspapers appearing in the capital, Asmara, were banned and their publishers and editors arrested. All criticism of the regime was henceforth condemned as "harming national security". Along with hundreds of political and military figures, 13 journalists were caught up in the crackdown or gave themselves up to the authorities. They were all imprisoned in Asmara's number one prison before being transferred to secret detention centres, in April 2002, after having had the temerity to ask to be put on trial. Since then they have disappeared.

Deaths in prison

News that does filter out of Eritrea is as rare as it is terrifying. Prison guards, who fled abroad in 2006, revealed that at least three of the journalists who were arrested in 2001, died in prison between 2005 and 2006. And on 11 January, Fessehaye Yohannes, known as "Joshua" one of the most important figures in the country's intellectual life, died from the effects of appalling prison conditions in Eiraeiro in the north-east of the country where the highest profile prisoners are held. The family were not informed about the death of the co-founder of the weekly Setit, poet, playwright, and theatre troupe director and his body was not returned to them. This horrifying state of affairs led to Eritrea being ranked last on Reporters Without Borders' world press freedom index for the first time, just after North Korea.

The very few foreign correspondents based in Asmara are directly accountable to the information minister, Ali Abdu, who has no hesitation in suspending their work permits at the slightest deviation. Those they interview are at risk of immediate imprisonment. Journalists wishing to travel to Eritrea have to wait for months, during which time they have to convince the Eritrean ambassadors in their home countries that the reporting they plan will be favourable to the government. Any who refer in their articles to the lamentable state of civil and political liberties in the country are expelled.

An open-air prison

Eritreans are forced to live isolated lives in an open-air prison in which the state-run media have become Soviet-style instruments of propaganda. Under the close surveillance of Ali Abdu, staff on public Eri-TV, the radio Dimtsi Hafash (Voice of the Broad Masses) and the government dailies

have been turned into the government's foot soldiers. The president, his chief advisers and the military all use the media to cultivate a permanent fear of Ethiopian aggression to maintain themselves in power. This fear of imminent war is thus fuelled on a daily basis and transmitted to the diaspora, which provides the government's main financial support.

It is no surprise therefore that in the face of this catastrophe, the country is gradually emptying of its people. Every week, around 120 Eritrean asylum-seekers are added to the 130,000 refugees already living in UNHCR tents in Sudan. Deserting soldiers, youths fleeing constant conscription, ex-prisoners, academics, artists, peasants, sports stars, every social category is piling up in the refugee camps of neighbouring states, while waiting to be accepted by a third country. Many journalists working for the public media who can no longer stand being gagged by the government have also gone into exile. Some leave on foot following a route opened up by people smugglers to Sudan or Ethiopia at the risk of being shot dead by border guards who have orders to shoot on sight. Some have been arrested while trying to flee, like Eyob Kessete, a journalist with the Amharic service of Dimtsi Hafash, and Johnny Hisabu, an editor on Eri-TV, both imprisoned somewhere in the country since their capture during the year. This secret escape route cost the life of one journalist in June, Paulos Kidane, who worked for Eri-TV's Amharic service. After walking for six days, exhausted and suffering from epilepsy, he parted company with his group a few kilometres short of the border and waited near a village, hoping to recover sufficiently to continue his journey. No information filtered out about his fate for several weeks, until the Eritrean information ministry informed his family and staff on public media at the end of June that he had "died accidentally".

Paulos Kidane was one of the most popular journalists in Asmara but he chose to leave the country after he was arrested along with eight other state media staff from 12 November 2006 onwards after public defections by several other renowned journalists. The authorities arrested them because they were suspected of still being in touch with the fugitives or of planning to leave themselves. After his release he told Reporters Without Borders that he and his colleagues had been "beaten and tortured in prison after refusing to give the passwords for our emails". "We finally cracked because the pain was too much," he added. After their release on bail the "November prisoners" were followed and their phones tapped. They were forced to go back to work and were banned from leaving Asmara. Out of the nine journalists arrested, only seven were later freed. A young woman presenter on the Arabic service of Eri-TV, Fethia Khaled, was reportedly conscripted into the army, while Daniel Mussie, of the Oromo service of Dimtsi Hafash never left prison.

European failure

This tragedy is revealing of the blatant failure of the "stealth diplomacy" adopted by the European Union. Development programmes worth 122 million Euros over five years, were agreed in May by European Commissioner Louis Michel. In exchange the EU called on the Eritrean government to "adopt a constructive approach to the resolution of regional crises as well as to progress in human rights and press freedom". But on the day of the signing of the agreement on 4 May, the Eritrean president scornfully brushed aside critical questions from European journalists about human rights in Eritrea at a joint press conference with Louis Michel in Brussels. The EU official nevertheless said he was "very, very honoured" to welcome Issaias Afewerki to the Commission. As a result, Reporters Without Borders is campaigning for the Eritrean president and his ministers to be declared persona non grata in Europe.