

Eritrea: Sexual Violence against Female Army Conscripts

Eritrea allocates around 25% of its budget for military use, the highest proportion in the world. In addition, 300,000 members of Eritrea's about four million strong population are currently in military service; again, the highest proportion per capita in the world.

Military or national service is obligatory in Eritrea. Article 6 of the country's Constitution states that "any Eritrean citizen from 18 to 50 years of age has the obligation of carrying out some form of "National Service", either "Active National Service" and / or "Reserve Military Service". Article 8 states that "all Eritrean citizens from the age of 18 to 40 years have the compulsory duty of performing Active National Service". Active National Service is supposed by law to last for 18 months. In reality, it can in fact be indefinite.

1. Sexual Abuse by Superior Officers

Army commanders are reported to regularly forcibly use women in their units for their own sexual gratification. Some women are given the title of communication operator or similar positions, and are obliged to act as 'wives in the frontline', cooking food and making themselves available when requested. The higher the rank of the Commander, the more in number and beauty the women they have access to. New female recruits are scanned and selected by commanders, then forced to submit to their sexual advances. Requests for recruits to perform a "coffee ceremony", a traditional social activity in the Horn of Africa region, have become euphemistic for sexual encounters. Those who resist are threatened with heavy military duties, or with being sent to the battle-front or to a remote and harsh posting, or with being denied home leave. So pervasive is this activity that many young women are dropping out of education in order to marry or have children, since nursing mothers, women with children and married women are exempt from performing national service. Initially women over 27 were also exempt; however the age limit has now been raised to 47. In addition the Muslim community won exemption for their women after protesting at their treatment at the hands of commanders.

The stories of such abuse are legion, as are those of the often terrible consequences to female recruits of resisting the sexual advances of superior officers. One female recruit attempted over a long period of time to resist sexual abuse and assault by her commander. As punishment she was eventually abandoned in the wilderness at night, only to be raped by another man, which caused her to fall pregnant. Another was sent in a truck to undertake hard labour in a harsh desert prison in the company of men who attempted to rape her¹. Yet another recruit provided the following graphic testimony that serves to illustrate the lamentable fate of female recruits who inadvertently catch the eye of a commander, many of whom are young girls, freshly out of high school:

"In 1996 I was recruited for National Service as part of the fifth recruitment round and brought to Sawa for basic training. Many girls were raped. There were girls who adapted themselves to the situation and made advances to officers out of their own initiative, to avoid being raped. There were only male officers. Those who didn't comply, who rejected the men were given the worst work or sent into the war. The girls who had been raped but didn't want to comply were sent to the front too. The girls who were compliant and pretty were treated well. Often they got pregnant involuntarily.

¹ CSW Interviews with Eritrean refugees, 2005-2008

After six month of basic training I came to the 381st division. First I was supposed to work in the administration, but then I was sent to the front line. This surprised me. I assumed that I would serve a total of 18 month of military service. After deducting holidays, this would have meant 8 month after the end of basic training, which the soldiers usually serve in agriculture. I also had applied for holidays. But my superior wanted to prevent me from doing this. He wanted me to cook for him and to be his puppet. I refused that. So I didn't get any holidays, and was sent to the front line instead.

Those girls who refused to play the housewife had to stand on guard service for 3-4 hours at night as a form of punishment. Those young men who wanted to help them were punished too - they were ordered to stand at attention in the sun for an entire day. The other girls, who played along with the game, were treated well. They got a good room, a nice bed, and got holidays every month to visit their families. But there were only very few who played along. Most refused.

I too was once punished with the number eight and was forced to lie in the sun for a whole day, because I had refused to do the housework for my commander.

In May 1999 the unit commander tried to rape me. I screamed and others came to help me and prevented it from happening. I demanded that he be punished, but it was his responsibility to pass on my complaint to his superiors. He did not get punished. "²

2. Consequences of Unwanted Pregnancy and Venereal Diseases

Women who fall pregnant after being subjected to sexual violence in the armed forces are sent home to their families – the commanders take no responsibility for the pregnancies. As in the majority of African countries, Eritrea is a fundamentally conservative society. Rape and its consequences are not discussed openly, and often victims who do not become pregnant remain silent so as to protect their families' reputation and avoid stigma. Those who do become pregnant can experience extreme societal disapproval, despite being victims. Worse still, an unknown number of rape victims may contract HIV/AIDS and other venereal diseases.

3. No Recourse to Justice

The victims have no access to justice and there no mechanism for registering a complaint against their abusers. Even when objections are vocalised, no action is taken against perpetrators, thereby further weakening the position of victims and strengthening a culture of impunity. For example, when questioned about this appalling practice, the Eritrean president, Isaias Afwerki, is reported to have dismissively stated that such things could not be avoided as they were "part of the process." If accurate, then such a response effectively granted official licence for military commanders to treat female conscripts in any way they choose, and also ensured that the abuse of women and young girls would continue unabated in the Eritrean military for the foreseeable future.

² *Interview with Bisrat Habte Micael from 28 May 2004, Translation from Tigrinya into German by Yonas Bahta and Abraham Gebreyesus. Translation from German to English by Andreas Speck Source: Connection e.V./Eritreische Antimilitaristische Initiative: Dokumentation: Eritrea: Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Desertion*