

The Broken Rifle

Newsletter of War Resisters' International



Conscientious Objection in Eritrea 1 December: Prisoners for Peace Day

Background to the country

Eritrea, located in the horn of Africa, won its de-facto independence on 24 May 1991 after 30 years of a bitter, bloody and costly armed struggle against rule by its neighbour, Ethiopia. Eritrea formally declared independence on 24 May 1993 after an overwhelming yes vote in a referendum overseen by the United Nations.

The two major ethnic groups are the Tigigna (50%) and Tigre (40%). The Afar constitute 4% and the remaining 6% include Kunama, Nara, Bielen, Rashaida, Hidarb and Saho. The two dominating religions are Christianity, including Coptics, Catholics and other Protestant demoninations, and Islam. The official languages are Tigigna, English and Arabic, but diverse ethnic languages persist as well.

The Italians colonised and named Eritrea in 1890. After the Italian defeat in World War II, its African colonies of Eritrea, Somalia and Libya were placed under the protectorate of Britain for 10 years. The future of these three nations was a hot issue in the United Nations from 1945 to 1950, ending in an ill-advised confederation of Eritrea and Ethiopia for a projected 10 years from 1952 to 1962. In 1961, Ethiopia violated the terms of the confederation and declared Eritrea to be its 14th province. In the same year, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began armed resistance under the leadership of Hamid Idris Awate.

In 1970 a faction of the ELF, known as the Peoples Forces of Eritrea (PFE), broke away. It was a revolutionary movement led by the younger generation. After its first congress in 1977, the PFE reorganised as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and eclipsed the ELF. The EPLF succeeded in achieving independence from Ethiopia after a long war.

The EPLF immediately established a transitional government under Issayas Afewerki, leader of the successful fight for independence. EPLF members took all administrative posts and other key positions. In 1994 the third congress of the EPLF renamed itself the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Unlike its name, the regime was undemocratic and unjust. Moreover, it was unconstitutional. Its own Eritrean Constitutional

Commission, set up in 1994, had produced the constitution of 1997 after ratification by the Eritrean people. The regime ignored this and, after September 2001, imprisoned 11 prominent members of the opposition party which had demanded democratic change and enforcement of the ratified constitution.

Today, the PFDJ is the sole lawmaker in a harsh dictatorship. Eritreans are denied their basic civil and human rights, any protests always ending in arbitrary arrest, detention and torture. For all Eritreans whose vision of their new nation included peace, stability and prosperity, the scale of wars, corruption and abuse of power that followed independence was unbelievable. Eleven years after independence and 13 after freedom, Eritrea is a country where poverty and oppression are the rule.

In the last three years, the military training camp Sawa was established as headquarters for universal national service. All high school students, female and male, are forced to finish their 12th year of study in a school within Sawa. None of them have returned for further education at university once they completed national service. The University of Asmara, Eritrea's only university, has only third and fourth year students who had entered before the draft came into effect.

The government has militarised the country completely. Forced recruitment of young people, underage children and adults under 50 is a daily event. Recruits are treated brutally and there is evidence of sexual abuse of women. Nobody has a right to question the military authorities. Nobody has a right to conscientious objection.

Over the past three and a half years, Eritreans have been denied their constitutional right of free expression. There are no independent newspapers, TV channels or radio stations. The only active media are government owned. Only the Internet gives those who have access to it a source of information not coloured by government propaganda.

Foreign policy has isolated the country from human rights organisations, aid agencies and the international community at large. The dictator has used the concept of National Unity to intimidate and discredit opponents of the regime.

Religious minorities are being persecuted by means of prison and torture. According to the Compass Direct news agency, 187 Eritrean Christians have been arrested so far this year, including groups at prayer, whole wedding parties, and home Bible study groups, intellectuals and professionals. Often children and the elderly are among those arrested.

According to The Christian Post of 24 February 2005 the Eritrean government since May 2002 has closed down the country's Protestant churches, declaring their places of worship illegal and forbidding home gatherings. Only four religions are officially acceptable: Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Lutheranism and Islam.

Conscientious objection is taboo. COs are branded by the regime as cowardly and unpatriotic. There is no recourse to the law nor substitute civilian service for COs. The consequences of conscientious objection and desertion are severe torture, long-term imprisonment and even death.

After the horrors of the border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, the number of COs within the military increased. Today there are thousands who objected to military service and the military. They are forced to go into exile. Considerable numbers of them are in Europe, Libya, Ethiopia and Sudan seeking political asylum. In Germany, Eritrean refugees founded the Eritrean Antimilitarism Initiative (EAI), which supports refugees who had to flee from the Eritrean military and fights for peace and antimilitarism in Eritrea.

Consequences of war

The adverse impact of the long war for independence and later conflicts on Eritrean society and economy have been incalculable. They have exacerbated the cycle of draught, which has afflicted the entire region and caused millions of people to become dependent on external assistance for their survival. The results of these disputes are horrendous: loss of life, impoverishment, displacement of people, land mine hazards, looting, confiscation of property, exile, trauma.

At the moment, more than one-third of the Eritrean population is living in exile. The war has resulted in the disintegration of families and the loss of culture and norms of society both at home and in exile.

International and national NGOs

There is little activity by national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). What does exist is under the supervision of the regime. There are no international NGOs that advocate human rights or witness the forced military recruitment with its brutality of recruits and its persecution of COs. Nor does the government tolerate independent national NGOs, human rights groups, international observers or foreign reporters. Investigations demanded by Amnesty International and others

are ignored. All international journalists have been officially banned.

Conscientious Objection as one way to peace

The people of Eritrea are in political, social and economic crisis. There is an urgent need to establish a healthy democratic atmosphere with a constitutionally elected leadership and a multiparty political system. There is an urgent need to release all political prisoners and COs. Hence the AEI is advocating the refusal of military service in the above context.

We believe that refusing military service, militarism and war is vital for these reasons:

1. The ideas and teachings of conscientious objection are based on peace, humanity and morality. We believe they are the answer to withstanding the propaganda of national unity and national sovereignty, which are misleading and provocative.
2. The more people say No to war in Eritrea and the more people say No to war in our neighbouring countries, the region and the world, the more governments may begin to think about peaceful solutions, start to develop respect for human life and plan to build a just and secure society for coming generations.
3. Conscientious objection is the check and balance against war and militarism. A CO is at the other extreme of a warlord. We believe COs can confront and divert military objectives.

Steps for lasting peace

The AEI believes that the following steps can help to achieve a lasting peace on the basis of human, civil and political rights.

1. Introduce and cultivate respect for the right of conscientious objection and offer COs alternative civilian service.
2. Establish a culture of pluralism, civility, respect and tolerance.
3. Develop the political leadership on principles of democracy.
4. Adopt nonviolent ways of struggle.
5. Solution of conflicts peacefully through dialogue, mediation and negotiation.
6. Respect for international law.

Yohannes Kidane is a refugee from Eritrea and lives in Germany, where he is active with the Eritrean Antimilitarism Initiative

Sources:

Eritrean Democratic Parties (EDP) manifesto, Asmarion and Awate home pages on the Internet.

Eritrean Antimilitarism Initiative, c/o Yohannes Kidane, Bahnstrasse 51, D-61449 Steinbach, email yohannesk2000@yahoo.com

Editorial

Many of us might remember the hopes connected with Eritrean independence back in the early 1990s. I myself remember reading about self-reliant development, the formation of co-operatives, and in general about Eritrea taking a path which would not rely on international institutions such as the World Bank, which drove many other countries into huge external debts. However, 14 years later the situation looks entirely differently, and this issue of *The Broken Rifle* can only give a glimpse of what is actually happening in the country. When War Resisters' International first received information from the Eritrean Antimilitarism Initiative, we were shocked. Forced recruitment and imprisonment/execution of young people – men and women – who avoid military service seems to be a daily feature for Eritrea's youth, with exile the only "alternative".

War Resisters' International's contacts in Africa are still poor. Four years ago, in 2001, we highlighted the situation in Angola on 15 May (International Conscientious Objectors' Day). Prisoners for Peace Day 2005 with a focus on Eritrea is therefore a good opportunity to reach out to African antimilitarist groups, where they exist. The articles in this issue – the interviews with objectors – show very clearly how urgently Eritrean war resisters need our support. More information on the situation in Eritrea is available in a documentation published on WRI's website at <http://wri-irg.org/news/2005/eritrea-en.htm>. Feel free to download and distribute.

Andreas Speck

The Broken Rifle

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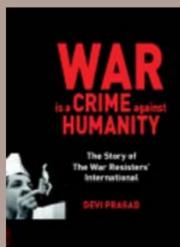
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War is a Crime against Humanity: The Story of The War Resisters' International New book by Devi Prasad

"War Resisters' International, born out of the horrors and stupidity of World War I, has kept the banners of conscientious objection and abolition of war flying through the most atrocious century of European history. War resisters, organised or not, will bring about the end of war."

Johan Galtung, dr hc mult, Prof of Peace Studies

Devi Prasad studied at Shantiniketan, Tagore's University, worked as a teacher and artist in Sevagram, Gandhi's ashram, from the 1940s until 1962. From 1962-1972 he was General Secretary of the WRI.



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Prisoners for Peace Honour Roll 2005

How the list works

First are **prisoners' names** (in bold), followed by their sentence, then their place of imprisonment with  and, finally the reason for their detention.

Information about countries where prisoners have had their sentences suspended, or where sentences have been served or completed during the year, are in *italics*.

Armenia

Although Armenia passed a law on conscientious objection in 2004, the country continues to imprison conscientious objectors. Many conscientious objectors also refuse to serve substitute service, as it is controlled by the Ministry of Defence. 22 Jehovah's Witnesses abandoned their substitute service in 2005, now facing charges of desertion.

Mher Manukyan (16/12/04–15/12/06)
Arman Marinosyan (23/02/05–22/02/07)
Roma Karapetyan (24/02/05–23/02/07)
Sergey Ovanisyan (28/02/05–27/08/06)
Gevork Manukyan (03/03/05–02/03/07)
Ashot Torgomyan (14/03/05–13/03/07)
Sarkis Karapetyan (06/04/05–05/10/06)
Tatul Gogzhyan (15/04/05–14/12/06)
Armen Grigoryan (09/06/05–08/06/07)
Grisha Gevorkyan (01/07/05–30/06/07)
 Kosh Penal Institution, Kosh, Armenia

Suren Barsegyan (09/06/05–08/06/07)
Ashot Virabyan (01/07/05–30/06/07)
Yenok Ivanyan (01/07/05–30/06/07)
Grachya Sargsyan (16/08/05–15/02/07)
Akop Muradyan (02/08/05, awaiting trial)
Vagarshak Markaryan (17/08/05, awaiting trial)
Boris Melkumyan (17/08/05, awaiting trial)
Artur Chilingarov (18/08/05, awaiting trial)
Gagik Davtyan (18/08/05, awaiting trial)
Garik Begdzanyan (19/08/05, awaiting trial)
Artur Akopyan (23/08/05, awaiting trial)
Shaliko Sargsyan (26/08/05, awaiting trial)
 Nubarashen Penal Institution, Nubarashen, Armenia

Tigran Abraamyan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Garazat Azatyan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Vaye Grigoryan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Garik Melkonyan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Karlen Simonyan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Genrik Safaryan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
Gayk Khachatryan (22/08/05, awaiting trial)
 Vardenis Detention Center, Vardenis, Armenia

Areg Avanesyan (16/02/05–15/02/09)
 Shishi Penal Institution, Shushi, Nagorno-Karabakh

Armenian citizen who was transferred to serve in Nagorno-Karabakh and imprisoned there for refusal to serve. Nagorno-Karabakh is an Armenian enclave, de-facto independent but de-jure part of Azerbaijan. Armenian forces support Nagorno-Karabakh forces, and the Criminal Code of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh is almost identical with the Criminal Code of Armenia.

Eritrea

Paulos Eyassu (24/09/1994—)
Negede Teklemariam (24/09/1994—)
Isaac Mogos (24/09/1994—)
Aron Abraha (09/05/2001—)
Mussie Fessehaye (June 2003—)
Ambakom Tsegezab (February 2004—)
Bemnet Fessehaye (February 2005—)
Henok Ghebru (February 2005—)
 Sawa Prison, Eritrea

Amanuel Tesfaendrias (March 2005—)
 Wia Prison, Eritrea

All together nine Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service. Three Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned since 24 September 1994, for refusing to perform military service. All three have never been charged for their

"crime". The maximum penalty for conscientious objection is three years.

Finland

Although under pressure from the UN and other international institutions, Finland continues to imprison total objectors, and refuses to bring its law on substitute service in line with international standards. The Ministry of Labour is now starting the process to change the law – for the first time the Finnish Union of COs will be sitting on the committee which drafts the law – but reducing the length of substitute service has been excluded from the mandate of the committee. No major changes can therefore be expected. On 1 October, 12 total objectors were in prison, but only two who will still be in prison on 1 December gave permission to publish their names.

Sauli Korpiluoma (02/08/05–27/01/06)
Aleksei Riikonen (12/09/05–29/03/06)
 Helsingin työsiirtola, PL 36, 01531 Vantaa, Finland

Greece

In 2005, the situation in Greece got worse, in spite of broad international attention. Already in December 2004, Lazaros Petromelidis was sentenced in absentia to 2 1/2 years imprisonment. He is still free, but could be arrested.

Other conscientious objectors have been briefly imprisoned in May 2005, and sentenced to suspended sentences. Several COs are awaiting the outcome of their appeal trials, and could face imprisonment.

Israel

Several Israeli draft resisters went to prison on repeated prison terms, accumulating more than 100 days in prison. Among them were Alex Kohn, one of the initiators of the High School seniors' (Shministim) letter, and Druze objector Wissam Qablan. However, the Israeli practice of imposing disciplinary sentences of up to 5 weeks repeatedly makes it impossible to predict now who will be in prison on 1 December. Please check WRI's website for updates and new alerts at <http://wri-irg.org/news/alerts>.

Netherlands

Turi Vaccaro (awaiting trial)
 HvB de Boschpoot, Nassausingel 26, 4811 DG Breda, The Netherlands
Plowshares disarmament action of F-16 nuclear bombers at Woensdrecht AFB on August 10, 2005; trial resumes on 13/10/05

Puerto Rico

José Vélez Acosta (23883-069)
 (five years – out on 27/01/06)
 USP, POB 1033, Coleman, Florida 33521-1033, USA

José Pérez González (21519-069)
 (five years – out 15/07/08)
 Edgefield FCI, PO Box 725, Edgefield, SC 29824, USA

Both have been sentenced for conspiracy, damage to federal property, and/or probation violation on 01/05/03 for resisting the US military bombardment of Vieques, Puerto Rico. Please send economic support for prisoners and families, and any returned letters to: May 1 Arrestees Support Committee, P.O. Box 191792, San Juan, PR 00919-1792

Russia

Igor Sutyagin (15 years)
 427965, Respublika Udmurtiya, g. Sarapul; ul. Raskolnikova, 53-A, YaCh-91/5, 14 otryad; Russia

Imprisoned since 27/10/1999, now convicted of espionage for researching public nuclear weapons information – sentenced 07/04/04.

South Korea

In 2004, the country's Supreme Court and Constitutional Court ruled against the right to conscientious objection. Presently, there are about 1,000 conscientious objectors in prison, the great majority of them Jehovah's Witnesses. Presently, two cases are pending before the United Nations' Human Rights Comitee.

Turkey

The persecution of conscientious objectors resumed in April, with the arrest of Mehmet Tarhan. There are more than 50 declared objectors in Turkey, most of them can get arrested at any time. However, in general Turkish authorities avoid arresting conscientious objectors – with exceptions, as the case of Mehmet Tarhan shows.

Mehmet Tarhan (08/04/05—)

 Sivas Military Prison, 5. Piyade Egitim Tugayi, Askeri Cezaevi, Temeltepe – Sivas, Turkey
 Sentenced on 10 August 2005 to four years imprisonment for two separate accounts of "insubordination in front of his unit". New charges are possible.

USA

Ardeth Platte (10857-039) (41 months—out 22/12/05)
 FPC Danbury, Pembroke Station Rt. 37, Danbury, CT 06811-0379
Sacred Earth and Space Plowshares disarmament of Colorado nuclear missile silo, 06/10/02; convicted of sabotage

Helen Woodson (03231-045) (106 months—in 11/03/04)
 FMC Carswell, Max Unit, POB 27137, Ft. Worth, TX 76127
Anti-war protest at the federal courthouse, Kansas City, Missouri, on 11/03/04 in violation of parole following release from prison on 03/09/04. Pled guilty to violation and four new charges on 18/06/04.

Inge Donato (40885-050) (six months—out 06/02/06)
 FDC Philadelphia, POB 561, Philadelphia, PA 19106

Action

- On 1 December, put aside at least one hour and write at least four cards to prisoners;
- Get your peace group or class or meeting place to organise a card-writing session;
- Set up a stall in your town centre, perform a bit of street theatre, or do whatever else it takes to attract attention and interest.

Sending cards and letters

- Always send your card in an envelope;
- Include a return name and address on the envelope;
- Be chatty and creative: send photos from your life, drawings;
- Tell prisoners what you are doing to stop war and war preparations;
- Don't write anything that might get the prisoner into trouble;
- Think about the sort of thing you'd like to receive if you were in prison;
- Don't begin, "You are so brave, I could never do what you have done";
- Don't expect the prisoner to reply;
- Remember—next year it could be you ...

Support our future work

For 47 years, War Resisters' International has publicised the names and stories of prisoners of conscience. Help us keep up the tradition. Send in a special PfP donation to WRI to help fund next year's research. Send contributions to: War Resisters' International, 5 Caledonian Rd, London N1 9DX, Britain (tel +44-20-7278 4040; fax 7278 0444; email pfp@wri-irg.org). Your outreach to prisoners does make a difference. **Show your solidarity!**

Donate online, and/or visit WRI's webshop, where you can order WRI publications and Broken Rifle badges using your credit or debit card, at <http://wri-irg.org/shop/shop-uk.htm>

Online version: <http://wri-irg.org> for all four language versions of the PfP 2005 pack.

I've had enough of the war

I was born on 10 January 1981 in Asmara. I was just 15 years old, and we were told that we would get the results of the school leaving examinations only after basic training in the National Service. That's why I joined the military, hoping that my exam results were good and I could leave after basic training to study. In 1996 I was brought to Sawa for basic training.

Some of the girls there had run away from home and joined the National Service, although they were still minors. Sometimes the parents came to take their daughters back home. But the authorities always refused that.

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.

We were in Baka, in the area of Girmaik. 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.

Those who could stand it no longer, who wanted to see their family, fled in the end. Some returned on their own, others were caught by the military police and punished with the helicopter or the number eight [1]. In some cases they were doused with milk, before they were ordered to stand in the sun for hours. They were called kobelt, outlaws, deserters.

After serving 18 months, we had to stay on for two additional months. Then the war began. It is difficult for me to describe this. It was horrible. For example, there was a rule that when soldiers were wounded, the jikaalo (old fighters) had to be brought to the field hospital first. They were taken out of the front line first, not the common soldiers. Once five or six young soldiers died because of this. They just had been left there. When the unit withdrew from the front for a break, some went to their families without authorisation. When they returned and the unit had been sent back to the front, these soldiers were sent directly to the front as a form of punishment. Others were even executed.

I have had enough of the war. I reported ill, although that meant I had to stay there and couldn't go home. After several requests and complaints I finally got five days of holidays, but I stayed away for 10 days. Then I got very scared. I returned. As punishment I had to carry a big water container up and down a hill for a full week.

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.

After the 2nd invasion our unit received training and did a course on financial auditing. I served in the administration of the unit and checked its income and expenses. My superior put me under pressure and told lies about me, because I did not comply to his demands. For example he accused me to have stolen money. He passed on this kind of accusations to his superiors, so that I would be punished. It was unbearable. Therefore I went to my family in Asmara. After one month I was arrested, and was brought to the police station in Gegjeret. After that I was sent to Adiabeto. I demanded repeatedly: "I want to be brought to my unit. If I am to get punished, then I want to get punished there." However, after some weeks I was able to escape from the prison in Adiabeto and went to Adisegado.

I managed to stay there for more than a year. I had to hide all the time, guests were not allowed to see me, and I could not leave the house. The neighbours were not supposed to see me, so that they could not report me to the police. During this time I got in contact with friends of my father, who gave me



opposition papers, for example from the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front). Because I had been gone for a long time, the authorities put pressure on my father, and finally arrested him. With the help of his friends, I was finally able to flee to Sudan.

Interview with Bisrat Habte Micael from 28 May 2004.

Notes

[1] "The helicopter": the victim is tied with a rope by hands and feet behind the back, lying on the ground face down, outside in the hot sun, rain or freezing cold nights, stripped of upper garments.

My torture in the sun



I was born in Asmara on 12 December 1978. In 1996 I was drafted into the national service in Sawa.

During basic training the food was bad and so was the training. Our instructors did not stick to the training program but, for example, they had us wash their clothes or fetch water, forcing us to submit to their will. There wasn't enough to eat. Spoilt flour was used for baking.

After six months of military training, we went on a military march of more than 120 kilometers from Ketan to Sahel. Then we were taken to Nakfa to dig trenches for 15 days. It wasn't clear what we did that for; the trenches were completely useless. Moreover, it was cold out there but we didn't get any blankets, so sometimes we were forced to use earth to cover ourselves with. After that I came back to Division 2001, 2nd Brigade, 1st Battalion, 3rd Unit, 2nd section. We were deployed at Ambori in the Dembelas area, because the Jihad (Eritrean Islamic Jihad, EIJ), a small, Sudan-based insurgent group that has mounted attacks in the north and west since 1993, were there and conflicts were very likely.

In November 1997 I was relocated to Mensura to attend a military course, where we were taught the American system of fighting in small units. That was two months before my service was

supposed to end. Later I grasped that this was in preparation for war. In early April veterans, who had been called up for national service during the first until the fourth draft wave, were drafted. As a pretext it was stated that they were to be involved in development measures. Actually, they were called up for war and sent to us.

On 12 May we attacked Badime. We marched until we got to Dembegeadamu, 18 to 20 kilometers on Ethiopian soil, occupied the area and moved into positions there. After one week Division 381 relieved us. We were relocated to Zorona. Initially, there wasn't much to be done. We dug trenches. The unit's leaders had us do private jobs, such as helping to grow vegetables. After harvest we had to pay for these vegetables with our own money.

The proceeds went into their pockets. An engineer who was serving military service was assigned to build a house for them.

I had accepted to do national service. I was an Eritrean and ready to be a soldier and fight a war for a good cause, that is if Eritrea was really in danger. But now I was to die while others forced people to work for them, which made them richer and richer. I didn't see why I should sacrifice my life.

A leader of just a section has the authority to enforce his will on women. The men also have to do jobs for him. With the leader of the unit it is even worse, all the more when it comes to a battalion leader. The situation was getting more and more insufferable.

I started to oppose. I said, "I'm doing military service. Although I don't agree with what is going on, I'm a soldier. Why do you have me work for your private interests? I don't see the sense of it."

I was arrested, released, rearrested. Once I was detained for three months and had to work in the fields from 6 am to noon and from 2 to 4 pm together with 22 other soldiers. It was meant to be a sort of brainwash. We harvested tomatoes and onions.

Later on, they offered to promote me to section leader. This was not because

they thought I was cut out for the job but because they wanted to catch me out at some time. I had to take on this job and lead a section of four soldiers.

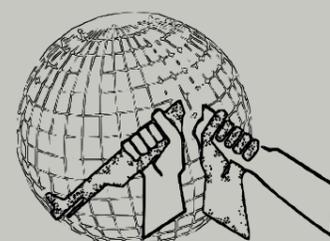
At that time, it was February 1999, the second invasion began. We were in Onoshahok when there was uninterrupted fire for 1½ days. Fortunately, I made it out of there unhurt. In my section a man and a woman were injured. She was sent to the front because she had refused to submit to her leaders. We were stationed there until May. Then I was supposed to attend a course for unit leaders. I refused. I didn't want to be involved in private business and I didn't want to oppress my friends.

Because of this I was arrested. They poured a mixture of milk and sugar over me, tied me up and exposed me to the sun continuously for two and half days. The days were very hot and the nights extremely cold. My skin got burned, blisters developed on my face. I also had a terrible headache. Because of the pain I almost fainted. A doctor appeared and called for medical treatment. Initially, the battalion leader rejected this demand. The doctor said: "I cannot take the

responsibility. In case something happens you will be responsible." Then the battalion leader agreed to medical treatment. They took me to a military hospital, peeled my skin, cleaned my flesh with disinfectant, and gave me tetracycline and antibiotic tablets. This was it. I stayed in hospital for two weeks. In spite of the tablets I got an infection. It got very ugly. For punishment they didn't treat me properly. Eventually, they took me to a military hospital in Alla. There I wasn't able to see anything with my left eye for about four months. I tried to have the battalion leader prosecuted but never received a response.

Sometimes my wounds healed, sometimes they got infected again and blisters reappeared. It was a continuous up and down. Eventually, I was granted sick leave lasting months so that I was able to travel to my family. I applied for a discharge, which was rejected on the grounds that as soon as I recovered I would be sent back to the front.

Interview with Saed Ibrahim, Translation: Thomas Stiefel



globalising nonviolence

Globalising Nonviolence War Resisters' International Conference

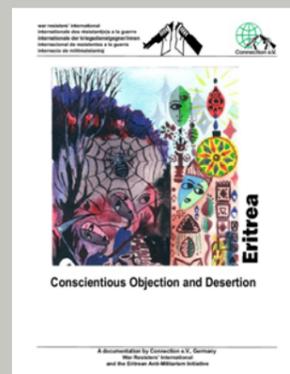
Schloss Eringerfeld Paderborn, Germany 23-27 July 2006

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For more information go to www.globalisingnonviolence.org



Documentation: CO and Desertion in Eritrea

If you want to know more about Eritrea, download our documentation on conscientious objection and desertion in Eritrea from <http://wri-irg.org/news/2005/eritrea-en.htm>.

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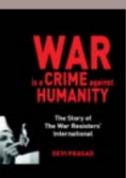
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For the right to conscientious objection

Presentation for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights 61st session, Geneva, 14 March–22 April 2005

Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab addressed the 61st session of the Commission on Human Rights on behalf of War Resisters' International. We document his statement below.

Mr Chairman

I'm representing War Resisters' International. We conduct research on conscientious objection to military service in many countries. Last year, we undertook a preliminary survey on the issue of Eritrean conscientious objectors. We learned that there are thousands of Eritrean conscientious objectors and deserters.

In Eritrea the right of conscientious objection is not recognized by law with the present government. Some members of religious groups such as the Jehovah Witnesses are in custody since more than 10 years because of their convictions to refuse to serve in the military. They never had a hearing in court.

Arbitrary detention, torture, deployment at the front line, forced labour – all without any hearing – have been common ways to punish deserters and objectors. A very often used way of military punishment is to tie victims and to lay them in the sun for days or sometimes weeks.

Furthermore relatives of deserters are threatened to push their children to send them to their units.

Although it is difficult to know the exact number, thousands from the army are evading the military service. They declare their objection through various means. They conscientiously object, desert or flee the military dictatorship. A lot of the deserters are asking for political asylum in foreign countries.

We request the UN Commission on Human Rights to take



Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab (third from left) at a NGO meeting in Geneva.

note of the continuous violations against conscientious objectors and that it take further measures to ensure that conscientious objectors and deserters get asylum protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees..

We also request the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to investigate the situation of conscientious objectors and other members of the army, particularly in Eritrea.

And we request the Eritrean government that it comply with Commission Resolution 1998/77: and in particular that it

1. releases immediately all conscientious objectors;
2. recognizes the right to refuse the military service

on reasons of conscience, including profound convictions, arising from religious, ethical, humanitarian or similar motives; introduces an alternative service compatible with reasons for conscientious objection.

Thank you very much.

Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab

Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab is an activist with the Eritrean Anti-Militarism Initiative, based in Germany, and represented War Resisters' International at the Commission on Human Rights

Thousands of people held at Adi Abeto army prison

Thousands of people arrested on suspicion of evading military conscription and held at Adi Abeto army prison are thought to be at serious risk of torture and ill-treatment. At least a dozen prisoners have reportedly been shot dead and many more were wounded

following a disturbance at the prison. On 4 November Eritrean security forces in the capital, Asmara, indiscriminately arrested thousands of youths and others suspected of evading military conscription. The arrests took place in the streets, shops and offices, at roadblocks and in homes. Those arrested were taken to Adi Abeto army prison just outside Asmara. Conditions in this military holding centre are harsh, with severe overcrowding, little food or sanitation. Many detainees have reportedly been forced to sleep outside in the very cold weather without blankets or shoes. Prisoners have no access either to their families or to lawyers.

Towards midnight on 4 November, a prison wall was apparently pushed over by some prisoners, possibly in an escape attempt. Soldiers opened fire and shot dead a number of the prisoners, wounding many more. On 8 November, the Minister of Information said that two prisoners had been killed. Other sources claim at least a dozen people were killed, and that bodies were buried without being returned to their families. Those wounded were taken to hospital and held incommunicado under military guard.

Amnesty International, 9 November 2004, AFR 64/008/2004

Relatives of COs arrested

Amnesty International reported on 28 July 2005 about the arrest of several hundred relatives of people who have evaded or deserted from the military. The arrests took place in the Debug region of southern Eritrea since 15 July.

Amnesty reported: "Those arrested were the fathers, mothers or other relatives of men or women over the age of 18 who have either failed to report for national service since 1994, failed to attend the compulsory final school year at Sawa military training camp, abandoned their army unit, or left the country illegally. The relatives have been accused of facilitating their evasion of conscription or flight abroad. Officials reportedly offered them release on bail of between 10,000 and 50,000 nakfa (US\$660 to US\$3,300), if they guaranteed that they would produce their missing relative."

Those arrested are held incommunicado in different prisons. "Many held in Adi Keih town prison reportedly began a hunger strike in protest at their detention and have been moved to Mai Serwa military camp near the capital Asmara", Amnesty reported.

Amnesty International, 28 July 2005, AFR 64/011/2005

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