

Eritrean tyranny fuels mass exit

29 JUN 2012 08:13 - DAN CONNELL

Draconian military conscription rules in Eritrea mean children as young as 12 can be forced into duty.

Dan Connell reports.

Binyam Zaid (22) was an unwilling conscript in the Eritrean army when he was caught trying to flee the country and jailed for 18 months at the Halhal military prison. On May 24 he was released in an amnesty that marked Eritrea's 21st birthday and sent back to his unit. Three days later he walked into the bush to relieve himself and never turned back.

Tigiste Beyene (35) was pregnant with her second child when she was sent to a desert prison in northern Eritrea for attending a banned Pentecostal prayer meeting. Upon release she was given 10 months to renounce her faith and pressed to do so by the local Eritrean Orthodox priest who had turned her in and by her family, who had to guarantee the state 50 000 nakfa (R28 000) to get her out. Four months later, she paid a smuggler 30 000 nakfa [R17 000] to take her to Ethiopia.

"The dark side of my life was not the year in prison, but the time I spent at home with my family," she said as she sat on the dirt floor of her cramped 3m-by-5m mud-brick house. "It was a torment."

Said Ibrahim (21), orphaned and blind, made a living as a singer in Adi Quala bars when a member of the security police claimed one of his songs had "political" content and detained him at the Adi Abieto prison. After a month he was released but stripped of his monthly disability payments for two years when he declined to identify the lyricist.

"I went back to my village and reflected on it," he said over tea at an open-air café in the Adi Harush camp, set up in 2010 when the Eritrean refugee camp Mai Aini reached capacity. It is already nearing its limit of 20 000, according to United Nations officials. "If the system could do this to a blind orphan, something was very wrong."

After appealing to his neighbours for help, two boys, aged 10 and 11, helped him to sneak over the border to Ethiopia and asked for asylum with him.

Tense border

The newcomers join more than 65000 Eritreans in five camps along the tense border, whose disputed location was the spark that set off a fierce fight between the two countries from 1998 to 2000 and remains a source of heightened tension. Most refugees tell similar stories of run-ins with the authorities in this once promising new nation, which has turned into one of the most efficient tyrannies on the continent over the past decade.

What distinguishes the influx here, as in Sudan on Eritrea's western flank, is that most are young men who, like Binyam, are trying to break free of Eritrea's national service, which they describe as a system of state-run indentured servitude that ties them up for 10 years or more, often as low-skilled workers in government departments or state- and party-owned businesses for which they are paid a pittance.

Launched in 1995, the programme initially demanded 18 months of military training and work on national reconstruction. Some grumbled at the time, but most saw this as a legitimate obligation of citizenship after a 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia that had left the territory devastated.

Even now, many escapees say they support the concept, just not the length of service, which has been extended further by requiring secondary school students to take their final year of school at a military base to prevent them from escaping. Students who drop out before that, or who fail to achieve passing grades, can be conscripted as young as 12.

Crisis seizing the country

The huge outflow of draft-age men it has triggered has become a major factor in the crisis seizing the country today. Its intensely secretive leadership shows signs of unravelling for the first time since a brutal crackdown on dissent in 2001 that followed Eritrea's defeat in the last round of the border war.

Former soldiers say that most Eritrean Defence Force units are now operating at 25% of capacity or lower and the overall strength of the army, often estimated by outsiders at 250 000 to 300 000, may actually be less than 80 000.

Perhaps to compensate, Eritrea's unelected president – former liberation front commander Isaias Afwerki – has ordered all able-bodied men not in the uniformed military to join village and neighbourhood militias and is issuing AK-47 assault rifles to them. He also ordered a shake-up in the defence force command structure, diminishing the authority of General Filipos Weldeyohannes, his favourite for the past five years, and elevating General Tekali “Manjus” Kiflai. It is something he does periodically with top generals and political appointees to prevent anyone from accumulating a base of support.

Taken against the backdrop of recent Ethiopian incursions along the disputed border – none answered by the Eritreans – these moves could signal the possibility of renewed head-to-head conflict, a threat Afwerki frequently invokes to justify his continuing crackdown on public debate. However, they may also indicate that the embattled leader, who has steadfastly refused to implement a Constitution ratified more than a decade ago and has never permitted national elections, is circling the wagons to protect himself from internal challenges.

His abrupt disappearance from public view for most of April – an unprecedented absence for a man whose daily comings and goings are the centrepiece of coverage in the state-run media – set off a wave of speculation among exiles that he was either incapacitated or dead. Although he reappeared in May, reports that a cabal of second-tier officials is meeting to plot a transition continue to circulate.

Irritant

But, although Eritrea appears obsessed with Ethiopia, the reverse no longer seems to be the case.

“Eritrea is an irritant, not a strategic enemy,” said Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. “Our strategic enemies are poverty and backwardness,” he said in a two-hour interview on the subject of Ethiopia's economic and social transformation. “We have seen poverty at its worst,” he said. “Nothing is more dehumanising.”

A former guerrilla commander himself, who came to power at the same time as Afwerki when the rebel armies they commanded routed the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, Zenawi insisted that he would step down at the end of his term in 2015. But he wants to wind down the conflict with Eritrea first, stabilising relations and reaching a service agreement to access Eritrea's Red Sea ports similar to the pacts Ethiopia has with Djibouti, Somaliland, Kenya and Sudan.

“I would like Eritrea to be at peace with itself so it can be at peace with us and we can all benefit from common prosperity,” he said. “But I am not choosy how it happens.”

The decade-long standoff between the two countries, which played out in a web of proxy wars across the region, none of which reached the point of a direct confrontation, took

a turn for the worse in 2010 when Ethiopia charged Eritrea with a bomb plot intended to disrupt an African Union summit in Addis Ababa.

“They wanted to transform Addis into Baghdad,” said Zenawi. “This made it impossible for us to ignore what they were doing.”

Pressure

Since then, Ethiopia has sought to increase the pressure on the Afwerki regime, first lobbying for sanctions at the United Nations and then launching a series of attacks on “hard targets” close to the border inside Eritrea, while simultaneously waging a hearts-and-minds campaign aimed at the Eritrean public.

Ethiopian media have toned down their once vitriolic coverage of Eritrea – or simply ignored it – and Eritreans deported from Ethiopia during the border war have been urged to return to reclaim seized assets. But the most dramatic shift was the announcement of an “open camps” policy permitting refugees to live anywhere in Ethiopia so long as they prove that they have the means to support themselves. More than 1000 Eritreans now attend Ethiopian universities, refugee officials say.

Ethiopia also hosts about 34 Eritrean opposition parties, a number that has refugees here scratching their heads in frustration and leads many to dismiss them as little more than a talk shop. During a week of interviews in three camps, the Addis Ababa-based parties were rarely mentioned.

“The only time we see them is when they want to recruit us,” said one refugee, who denounced the government in Asmara, but saw the squabbling opposition parties as cut from the same cloth.

Many here think that change, when it comes, will arise from within the country and that it may take time to sort itself out. One scenario is for a junta to take over that would include key figures from the three main power centres: the military, the national security forces and the ruling party, the ironically named People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, over which the defence minister, General Sebhat Ephrem, presides.

Inherently unstable

Such a coalition would be inherently unstable because it would comprise bitter rivals all of whom aspire to step into Afwerki’s shoes, even though none has his charisma or commands a similar following among the rank and file.

What makes Ephrem attractive as a front man is that Afwerki has long treated him as a largely ceremonial figure and given him little actual power, so he is not seen as a threat by his more ambitious colleagues.

Ephrem is also popular with Western governments and carries a degree of credibility with the public for his prominent role in the liberation of the country, first as the head of civilian mobilisation and then as the military chief of staff in the final years of the war.

How long such an arrangement would last, though, is an open question.

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