

# Eritrea

## Factsheet



### Population

As of 2020, Eritrea has an estimated population of 3,546,421. Eritrea is a multi-ethnic country, with nine recognised ethnic groups most of whom speak languages from the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. According to recent data from SIL Ethnologue, Tigrinya people make up to 75% of the population, while the Tigre people make up to 20% of the population. The rest of the Eritrean population belong mostly to the Cushitic community. There are also a number of Nilo-Saharan ethnic minorities, which include the Kunama and Nara communities. A few monolingual Italian Eritreans, who are Eritrean-born descendants of Italian settlers from the Italian colonisation period also form a small community, predominantly in the capital Asmara.

People in Eritrea practice various religions - 55% of the population is Christian, mostly Oriental Orthodox, while the second largest denomination of 43% is Muslim, and 2% practice other religions.

**It is estimated that 65% of the Eritrean population live in the countryside, and over 55% are under the age of 18.**

Eritrea is a multilingual country. The nation has no official language, as the Constitution establishes the "equality of all nine Eritrean languages".

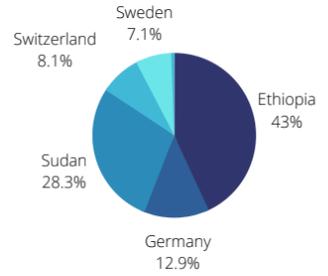
**The nine recognised Eritrean languages are Tigrinya, Tigre, Afar, Beja, Blin, Bilen, Kunama, Nara & Saho**

<https://www.unicef.org/eritrea/overview.html>;;  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13349078>;  
<https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ER>

### Refugees

Eritrea has seen tens of thousands of people forcibly displaced around the world. In Eritrea, people's lives have been severely affected by the war (1961–1991) with neighbouring Ethiopia. Following its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Eritrean politics followed the framework of a single-party presidential totalitarian regime, which had caused more people to flee. In recent years, Eritrea has suffered severe drought exacerbated by climate change, which had further contributed to people's displacement. The majority of people flee to neighbouring countries and a smaller percentage also make it to the European Union.

In November 2020, a conflict broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region followed by a communication blackout. The fighting has resulted in nearly 100 000 Eritrean refugees being caught in the crossfire and their access to humanitarian aid cut off. The conflict, a long-running power struggle between Addis Ababa and Tigray's leaders, has spread beyond, with the Tigray forces firing rockets into both the neighbouring Amhara region and across the border to Eritrea.



<https://helprefugees.org/news/why-are-so-many-people-fleeing-eritrea/>  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-34774133>;  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/concern-grows-for-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-as-tigray-war-rages>

The countries hosting the most Eritrean refugees

### Unaccompanied Refugee Children and Young People

Since the end of the war with Ethiopia in 1991, the rise to power of Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki and the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), have led to the implementation of mandatory national military. Unlike elsewhere, thousands of Eritrean secondary school students - male and female, some still under 18, are conscripted into the country's national military service programme. This military service is supposed to last 18 months but reportedly the government often extends it to last beyond a decade. Conscripts are subject to inhuman and degrading punishment, including torture, without recourse.



**It is almost impossible for young Eritreans, particularly boys and men, to avoid conscription.**

The system of conscription has driven thousands of young Eritreans into leaving their country. According to UNHCR and Human Rights Watch, currently an estimated 507,300 Eritreans live in exile. Most of those fleeing are aged between 18 to 24.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/08/they-are-making-us-slaves-not-educating-us/how-indefinite-conscription-restricts>

### Economy

Eritrea has an extensive amount of natural resources such as copper, gold, granite and marble.



In 2011, Eritrea's GDP grew by 8.7 percent making it one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The growth was due to increased rain-fed agricultural output and the expansion of the mining industry along with increasing gold prices.

**Agriculture employs about 80 % of the population in Eritrea.**



However, Eritrea does not publish a budget, making its fiscal condition difficult to assess. Short-term growth prospects remain challenging given fiscal constraints and limited opportunities under existing restrictions. Foreign investment is hindered by the Eritrean government's regulations that seek to protect domestic industries from foreign competition. This sets the tone for generally unfavourable investment climate. The foreign investors in Eritrea are Australia, China, South Korea, Italy, South Africa, and Germany, as well as the World Bank.

**Poverty appears to have remained widespread in Eritrea, but the lack of data limits available quantitative evidence. The most recent available survey data from 1996/97 indicate a 70% poverty rate.**

Tourism makes up 1% of Eritrea's GDP. The government has started a twenty-year plan to develop the country's tourist industry. However, the development of tourism is hampered by the political regime which also restricts information about the country, as well as the tensions and conflict between Eritrea and neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, Eritrea has a rich natural heritage and archeological features.

**In July 2017, the capital Asmara was listed as UNESCO World Heritage, becoming the first modernist city anywhere to be listed in its entirety.**

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview>  
<https://www.euromonitor.com/travel-and-tourism-in-eritrea/report>  
<https://en.unesco.org/countries/eritrea>

Eritrea is following a single-party presidential framework. The president officially serves as both Head of State and Head of Government. The current president, Isaias Afewerki, has been the first and current president of Eritrea, a position he has held since the end of the Eritrean War of Independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice is the only political party legally permitted to exist in Eritrea. In June 2015 a United Nations' panel accused Isaias Afewerki of leading a totalitarian government in Eritrea, which is responsible for systematic human rights violations that may amount to crimes against humanity.

For decades, Eritrea has had strained relations with most of its neighbours. Along the continuous conflicts with Ethiopia, both small-scale and large-scale battles were conducted against Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen. In recent years, Eritrea has made efforts to solve relations with Sudan and Djibouti. In July 2018, the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a five-point declaration to usher in "a new era of peace and friendship," formally ending a border war that began 20 years earlier. A month later, Eritrea and Somalia resumed their diplomatic relations after the absence of such for 15 years.



<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/eritrea>  
<http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-government.htm>

## The Human Rights Situation

Human rights in Eritrea are viewed as some of the worst in the world by several NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Freedom House. For two decades, President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea has used the absence of peace with Ethiopia to justify authoritarianism, with absence of elections and the right to vote. United Nations' experts also report that Eritrea's human rights record has not changed for the better since its government signed a peace agreement with Ethiopia in 2018, formally ending a two decades-long border conflict.

### There have been no elections since the country's independence from Ethiopia in 1993.



Freedom of speech and the press are severely constrained. According to Freedom House, Eritrea is considered as "non-free". Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, places Eritrea 178th out of 180 countries in media freedom. Journalists are also reportedly the target of the regime. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports: "Eritrea is the worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, with at least 16 journalists behind bars as of December 1, 2018; most have been imprisoned since the 2001 crackdown, and none received a trial."

The continued indefinite conscriptions of Eritreans into the military or civil service for low or no pay, with no say in their profession or work location, and often under abusive conditions remain a serious human rights issue. Secondary school students, some aged 16 or 17, are forced to undergo their final school-year in a military camp, Sawa, where they undergo mandatory military training, are under military command, and take their final school examinations before being assigned to civilian or military duties. This continues to drive thousands of Eritreans to seek refuge and into exile, many of whom are children. It is important to note that leaving the country without permission is deemed as illegal and individuals trying to flee risk being shot, killed, or arrested.



### The government further restricts the activities of the four religions it recognised.



According to reports by Human Rights Watch, the Eritrean government continues to recognise only four religious denominations as legitimate: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical. Eritreans affiliated with other faiths risk raids on their homes, imprisonment, and torture; release requires written renunciation of religious affiliation.

Multiple organisations report that arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances continue to take place, for which security forces are not held accountable. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience and other detainees, including journalists, former politicians and practitioners of the "unrecognised" religions, remain imprisoned without charge or access to lawyers and family members.

Many are held for decades in vastly overcrowded cells or in shipping containers. The whereabouts and fate of 11 politicians and 17 journalists, arrested and detained in 2001, for criticising the president's rule, remained unknown.



In 2015, a 500-page UNHRC report detailed allegations of extrajudicial executions, torture, indefinitely prolonged military service and forced labour. The report also indicated that sexual harassment, rape and prolonged sexual servitude perpetrated by state officials are also widespread especially for women in military service. The report concluded that these violations may amount to crimes against humanity. Eritrean officials have dismissed the allegations by describing them as "wild allegations", which were "totally unfounded and devoid of all merit". Consequently, UNHCR appointed a Special Rapporteur to report on the human rights situation within the country but this has been met with restrictions, challenges and a lot of opposition from the Eritrean government.

In 2020, as in previous years, the Special Rapporteur was not granted access to Eritrea to conduct in-country visits. The government of Eritrea remains opposed to engage in cooperation under the UNHCR Special Rapporteur's mandate. The Special Rapporteur has continued to monitor the human rights situation in the country by conducting field missions to third-party countries and engaging with a broad range of stakeholders. The conclusions drawn from the latest report show no evidence of a substantial improvement in the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

It is important to mention that human trafficking is another serious violation affecting Eritreans who try to escape the regime. A report by OHCHR states the following: "*It is assessed by some researchers that between 2009 and 2013, 25,000 to 30,000 individuals were victims of the Sinai trafficking; approximately 90 per cent of them are believed to be Eritreans. This high percentage is explained not only by the preponderance of Eritreans using the Sinai route but also by the fact that Eritreans are seen as the most lucrative of victims. The Eritrea diaspora network has become known for paying higher ransoms than any other national groups - (...); sometimes victims are sold a number of times and released only through the payment of progressively higher ransoms.*"