

Eritrea

Country Overview

Politics

Eritrea is a presidential republic which is characterized by an authoritarian executive branch led by president Isaias Afwerki. While citizens technically have universal suffrage at age 18, there has only been one election in the country (1993), directly after the small East African nation gained independence from Ethiopia. All future elections have been postponed indefinitely.¹ The country's legal system is mixed, with civil, customary, and Islamic law all being recognized. There is only one political party in Eritrea, The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which is led by the president. The legislative branch is unicameral and its only body, the National Assembly (Hagerawi Baito), has not had elections since they were postponed in 2001. Military conscription is mandatory for all Eritrean citizens, sometimes for indefinite lengths of time.² Conscripts do not earn enough money to adequately feed a family.³ Female conscripts have reportedly faced sexual harassment and abuse at the hands of their superiors.⁴

Human Rights Watch has characterized Eritrea as "one of the most closed and repressive countries in the world," specifically citing high rates of political prisoners, lack of independent civil society and media as well as imprisonment of citizens who attempt to flee.⁵

Economy

The World Bank classifies Eritrea as a "low income" country.⁶ The national economy is controlled by The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which is the only political party in the country and is led by the president, placing major constraints on economic growth. Nearly 80 percent of Eritreans work in agriculture, mostly in subsistence farming. The highly centralized and controlled nature of the Eritrean economy has a variety of effects, chief among which is the competition between military spending and national development programs in a country with an annual GDP of less than USD 10 billion a year. There are also few large-scale public enterprises in Eritrea, and those which do exist usually work closely with the central government. Recent developments in gold mining, which came online in 2013, and the extractives sector in a larger sense, have the prospect for driving growth in the near future.⁷



Social/Human Development

Eritrea has a population of 5.8 million, and the primary ethnic groups in the country are: Tigrinya (55 percent), Tigre (30 percent), Saho (4 percent), Kunama (2 percent), Rashaida (2 percent), Bilen (2 percent), other (5 percent). Poverty in Eritrea is pervasive, with the country ranked 179th out of 188 countries on the UN Human Development Index.⁸

The government requires compulsory mandatory service of citizens, causing high rates of emigration.

U.S. Department of State TIP Report Summary (2017)

U.S. Department of State TIP Ranking: Tier 3

The Trafficking in Persons Report highlights the fact that “The government continues to subject its citizens to forced labor through the national policies and mandatory programs, which cause many citizens to flee the country and subsequently increases their vulnerability to trafficking abroad.” Compulsory service is particularly noted in public works projects, so, although trafficking is not noted in specific export supply chains, any sectors associated with public works or infrastructure development may have adjacent trafficking risk.

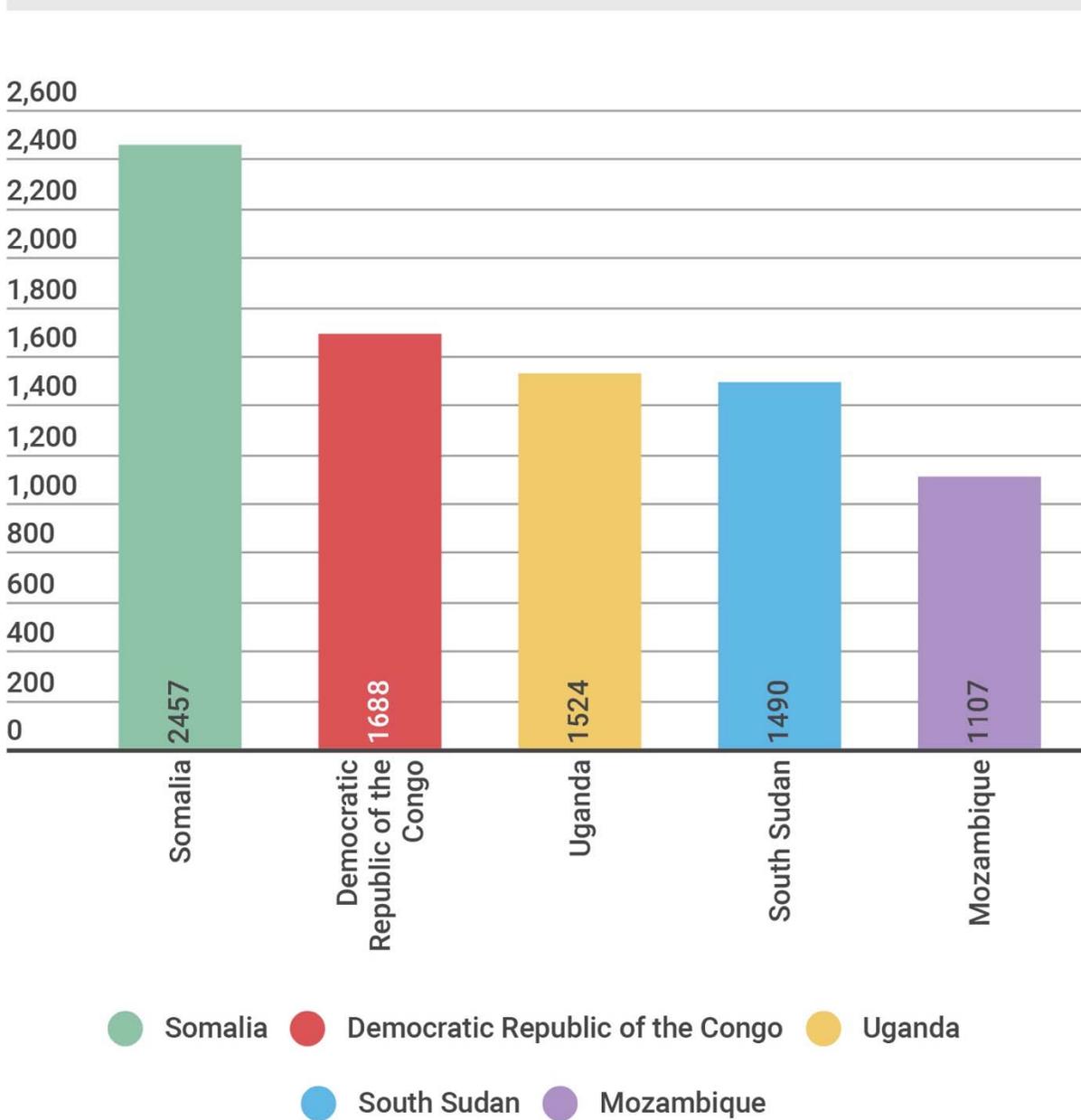
Read the full TIP report at: <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2017/271184.htm>

Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

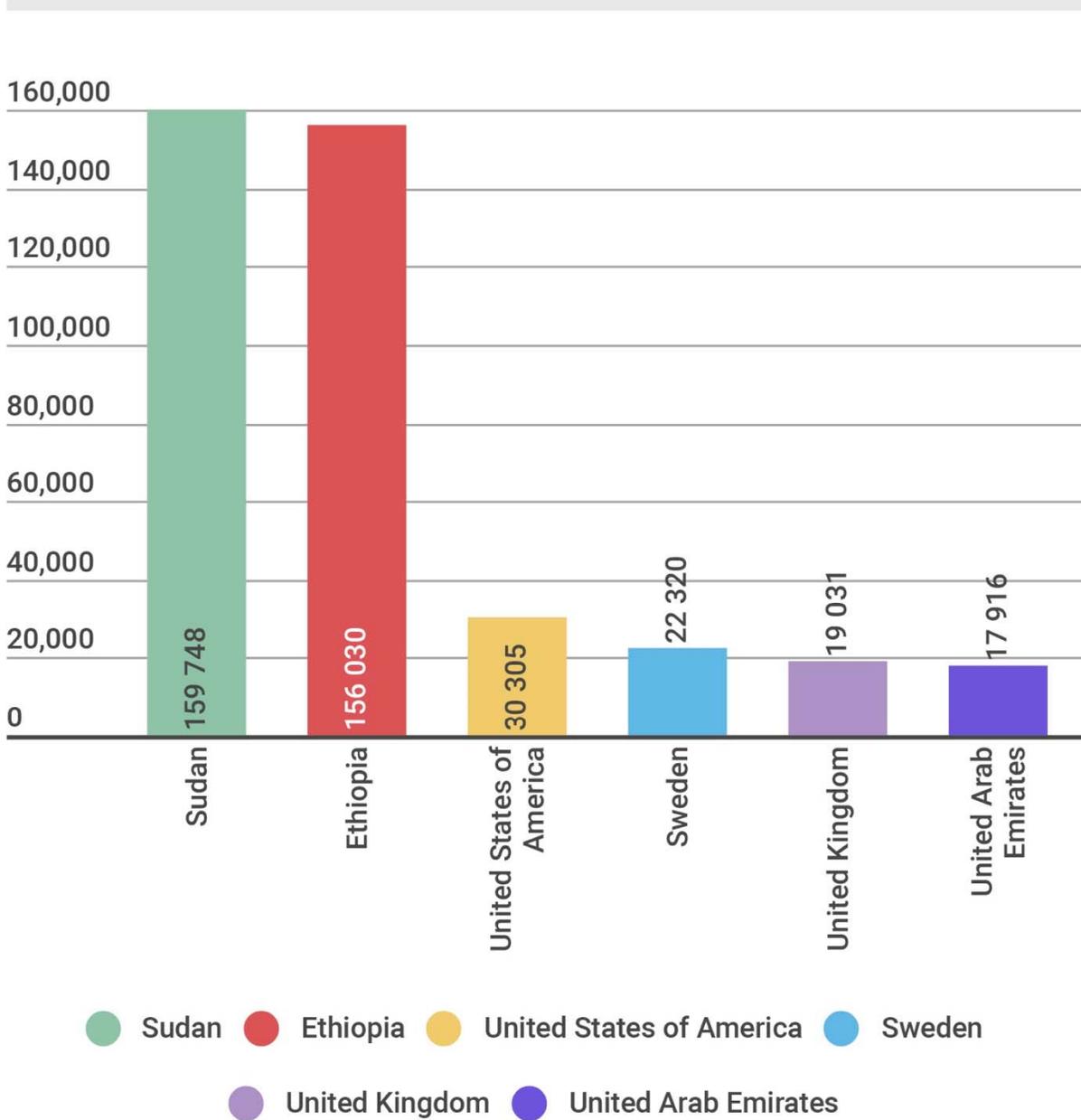
Eritrea has a net negative migration rate with 2016 estimates placing the migration rate at -14.7 migrant(s)/1,000 population.⁹ The diaspora population is now so large that remittance payments account for 30 percent of the country’s annual GDP.¹⁰



Migrants to Eritrea



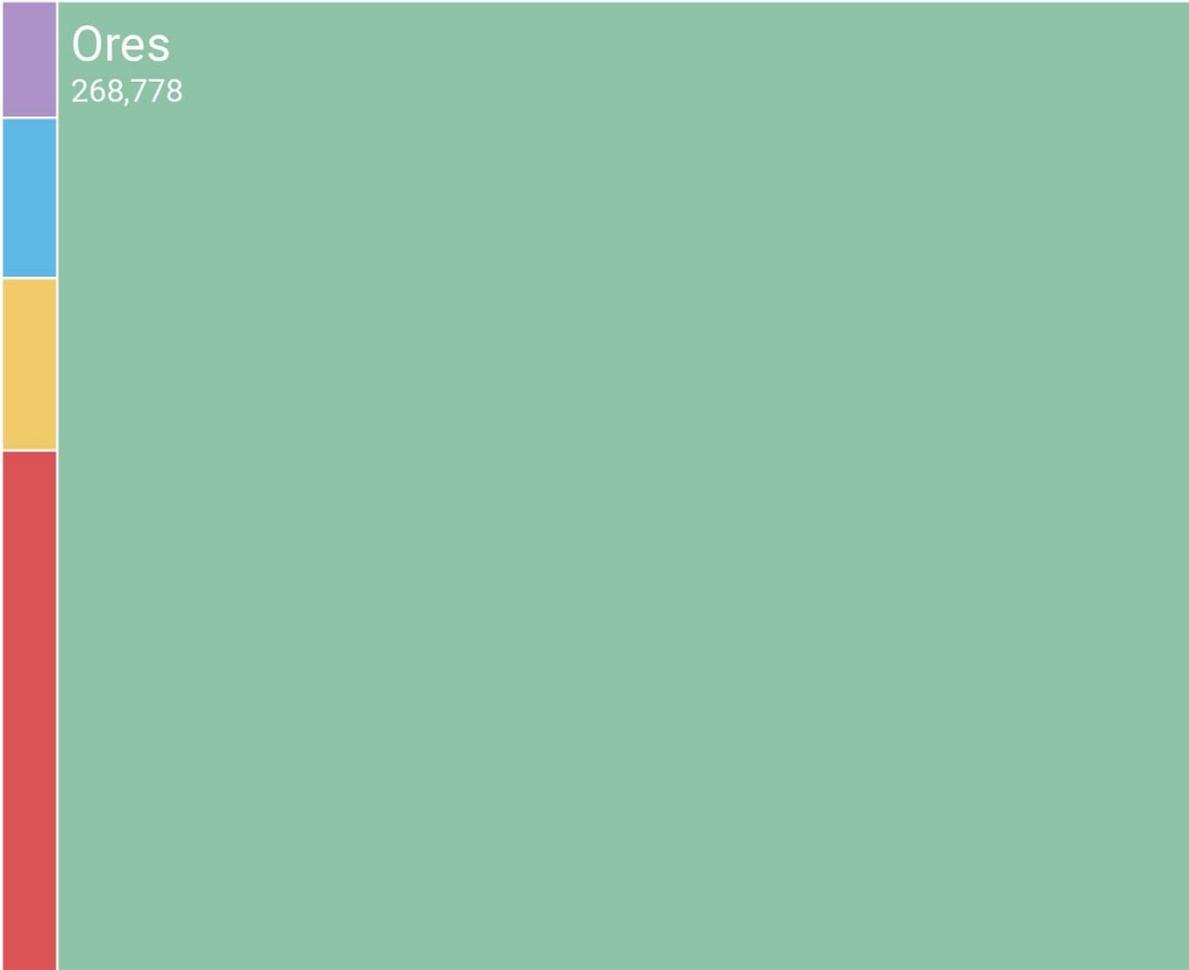
Migrants from Eritrea



Exports and Trade

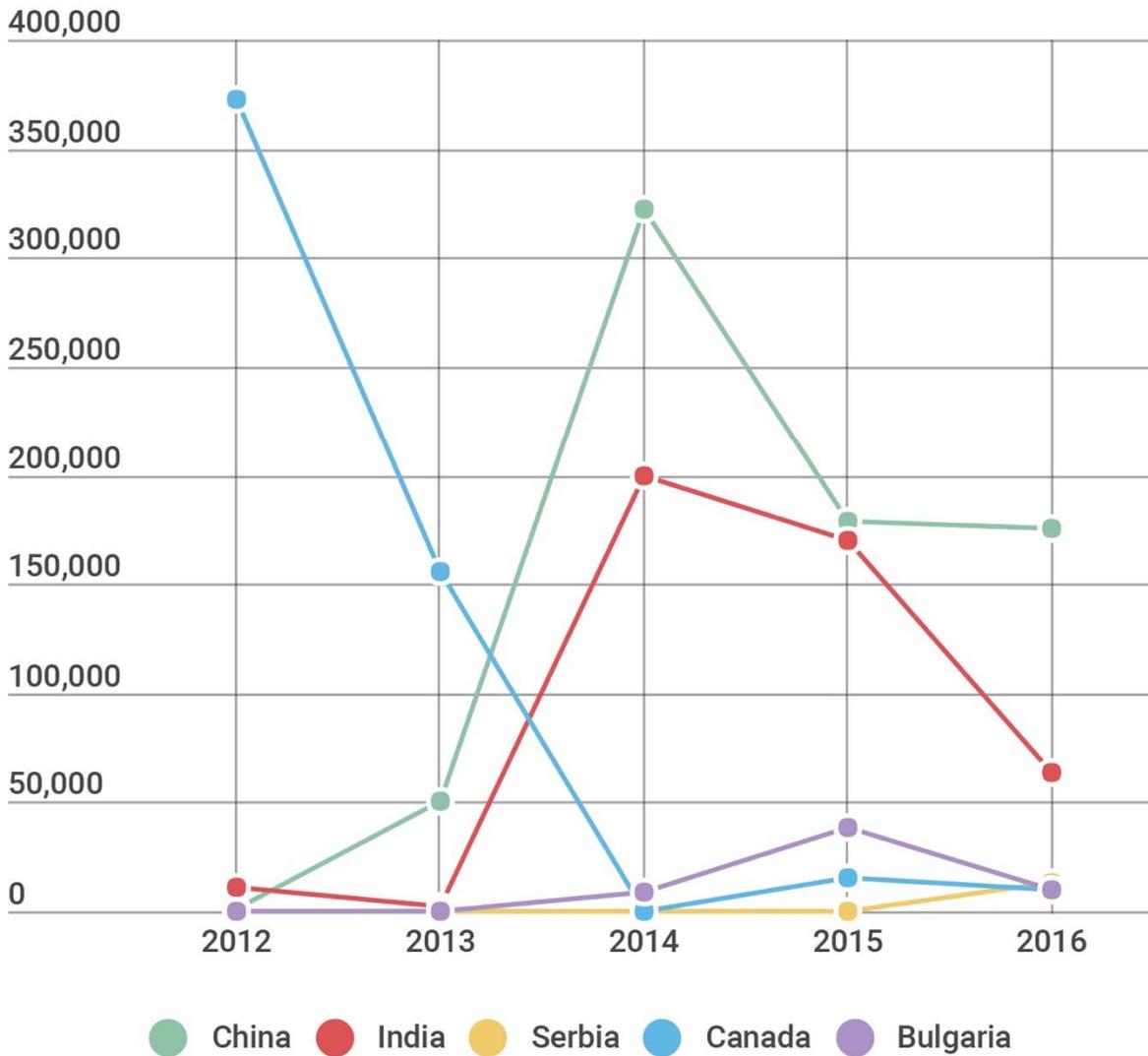
The top exports from Eritrea in 2016 were copper, gold, and pepper.¹¹

Top Commodity Exports (USD/Thousands)



The top importers of goods from Eritrea were China, India, Serbia, Canada and Bulgaria.¹²

Eritrea Export Partners (USD/Thousands)



Eritrea was the 222nd largest supplier of goods to the United States in 2014. U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Eritrea was USD 7 million in 2014.¹³



Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors Analysis

Legal/Policy Risk Factors

Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers' Rights

Freedom of Association

Eritrean law provides for workers to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike without legal repercussions or retaliation from employers. However, the law is not adequately enforced in practice, and over the last year there were no reports of strikes or successful collective bargaining efforts being undertaken by unions. Meetings of more than seven people for non-governmental reasons are prohibited by law, and no NGOs were active in attempting to protect the rights of Eritrean workers.¹⁴

Working Conditions

The only minimum wage law in the country applies solely to the public sector and party-owned businesses, and guarantees ERN 360 a month (USD 24). Minimum wage laws do not apply to the private or informal sectors of the economy, and there are no nationwide health and safety standards or places of work. There is no legal regime to guarantee the safety of workers, and there were no inspections of factory worksites carried out by the government in the past year. 80 percent of the country's workforce is employed in the subsistence farming or small-scale retail sectors, meaning that they are not protected by any federal law which would guarantee a minimum wage, or articulate acceptable workplace standards of health and safety.¹⁵

Discrimination

Eritrean labor law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex, disability, social origin, nationality, political orientation, or religion. Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, HIV-positive status, language, or age is not addressed by Eritrean law. These laws are not effectively enforced by Eritrean authorities, and discrimination against women in the workplace continues to be widespread.¹⁶

Forced Labor

Eritrean law prohibits forced labor, but mandatory prison labor and conscription into public service is legal and pervasive. All citizens between the ages of 18 and 50 are required to perform public service with almost no exemptions. This includes six months of military training followed by 12 months of active duty service. Many are required to stay longer, under the threat of detention or family reprisals. During



this extra time, conscripts are rarely promoted or receive a pay raise. It is also very hard for those in active duty to leave the country or obtain a passport. Those deemed unfit for military service are put to work in the public sector in relevant areas of expertise and are still mandated to participate in community-based militia groups (as are most ex-military members).¹⁷ The construction sector specifically is a government-owned monopoly that relies on conscripted labor.¹⁸

Child Labor

Eritrean law stipulates that the minimum working age for children is 14, and that any person under the age of 18 shall not participate in hazardous work including transportation, work involving toxic chemicals or dangerous machinery, or work in underground sewers. These restrictions do not apply to apprentices working under the supervision of a professional.

Laws involving child labor were not adequately enforced by the government, and child labor remains widespread in the country. Children in rural areas were commonly employed on family farms, and urban children commonly worked as street vendors, mechanics, or couriers. Child domestic service and begging also occurred.¹⁹

Civil Society Organizations

The Eritrean government closed all international NGOs working in the country in 2001, and has since controlled all local civil society groups and banned most international organizations from visiting the country. UN groups were also denied access. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was allowed to operate in a limited capacity, restricted to almost exclusively interacting with the repatriation efforts associated with the Ethiopian diaspora living in Eritrea.²⁰

Immigration Policies Limiting the Employment Options or Movement of Migrants

The U.S. Department of State's 2016 Investment Climate Statement for Eritrea does not specifically address immigration policies or policies relating to the movement of migrants within the country.²¹



Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants

Conventions	Status
ILO 29 Forced Labor	In force
ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize	In force
ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining	In force
ILO 100 Equal Remuneration	In force
ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor	In force
ILO 111 Discrimination	In force
ILO 138 Minimum Age	In force
ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies	In force
ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor	Not ratified
ILO 97 Migration for Employment	In force

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Use of Export Processing Zones (EPZs)

A free trade zone in the port city of Massawa was built in 2001 and issued its first licenses in 2006. Benefits of operating within the zone include no taxes on income, profits, or dividends; no customs duties on imports; no currency convertibility restrictions; no minimum investment; 100 percent foreign ownership; and 100 percent repatriation of profits and capital.²³

Promotion of Emigration/Remittance Economy

The Eritrean government discourages emigration, but the large diaspora does provide family members within the country with remittances which are unimpeded by the government.²⁴ Remittances equaled a third of the total GDP in 2005, but that number was reportedly trending downward, not because emigration was decreasing, but emigres began to focus more heavily on building lives in host countries rather than sending money home.²⁵



Political Risk Factors

Level of Corruption

The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index score Eritrea as an 18 out of 100, where a 0 signals “highly corrupt” and 100 signals “very clean.” Eritrea ranked 164 out of 176 on that index.²⁶ The U.S. Department of State reported corruption was prevalent in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government, and that police and other state security forces had also participated in accepting bribes.²⁷

Level of Crime and Violence

The U.S. Department of State reports that the crime level in Eritrea is “high.”²⁸ The homicide rate in Eritrea was 7.1 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012.²⁹

State Persecution

State security forces often acted with impunity, and extrajudicial killings and disappearances were a common occurrence. Individuals were targeted for their ethnic identity, their political views, their nationality, and their resistance to participating in mandatory national conscription. Individuals attempting to flee the compulsory service program could be jailed and tortured. Consensual homosexuality is illegal in the country, and is punishable by up to three years in prison.³⁰

Political Instability or Conflict

Eritrea scored a 98.1 in the 2016 Fragile States Index (FSI), placing it in the “alert” category and ranking the country 19th out of 178. The FSI scale goes from 0 (indicating a “sustainable” political system), to 120 (indicating a political system on “high alert”).³¹

Socio-Economic Risk Factors

Level of National Economic Development

Eritrea is scored in the low human development category, according to the UN Human Development Index, with a rank of 179 out of 188 countries and a score of 0.420. Eritrea’s human development score is lower than its neighbors, Ethiopia (0.448), Djibouti (0.437), and Sudan (0.490).³²



Level and Extent of Poverty

The United Nations does not provide statistics for multidimensional poverty or inequality adjusted HDI in Eritrea.³³ Per capita GDP (PPP) in Eritrea is USD 1,300.³⁴

Degree of Gender Inequality

Men and women are afforded the same legal rights in Eritrea, and national law calls for equal pay for equal work. In practice however, discrimination against women in Eritrea remained a key issue. Pervasive sexual violence was reported for women during compulsory national service.³⁵ Domestic violence was also commonplace, but rarely reported or prosecuted. There are no laws against sexual harassment.³⁶

Landlessness and Dispossession

There were no stateless persons or IDPs in Eritrea as of 2015.³⁷

Environmental Factors

Eritrea is vulnerable to droughts and floods which coincide with variable rainfall, and are compounded by farming-related erosion and deforestation. Like many other countries in northern sub-Saharan Africa, desertification is increasingly becoming a major issue.³⁸

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Key Commodity Supply Chains

Copper and Gold Mining

Copper and Gold Mining Overview

Eritrea has reserves of gold, copper, silver and potash. The government has actively sought to develop the commercial mining sector, although artisanal gold mining is also present. Gold mining accounted for nearly 90 percent of all exports in 2012. Production decreased 70 percent in 2013, as reserves started to exhaust at existing mines and has remained low, although reserves still exist in other locations. Copper mining began in 2013 and was ramping up through 2016.³⁹ Under national law, the government holds ten percent interest in privately held mining companies.⁴⁰



Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Copper and Gold Mining

Forced labor associated with compulsory national service has been noted in association with commercial mining interests in Eritrea, particularly in infrastructure development around mines.⁴¹ All construction companies in Eritrea are owned by the government and therefore are subject to the use of conscripted labor.⁴² Previously conscripted workers have reported being required to work on development of commercial mining sites in highly hazardous conditions.⁴³



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Endnotes

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