



## **Migration Profile**

### **ERITREA**

#### **A. Executive Summary**

Eritrea is an east African country with a population that is growing annually and may reach 6.7 million by 2030. Migrants constitute 12% of the total population (607,900 people), while refugees represent 9.6% (486,200). The long-lasting tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia has led to the militarisation of the nation.

There is little internal migration, but migration abroad is significant, due particularly to compulsory military service, which affects traditional livelihoods; land expropriation; and the dependence of Eritrean families on international remittances due to economic decline. Other core drivers of international migration include the lack of educational opportunities, poor infrastructure, and insufficient access to goods.

While the majority of Eritrean migrants are aged 18-40, regular migration from Eritrea is easier for men above the age of 54 and women above 47. But emigration is hazardous for most because regular pathways for migration are lacking, especially for the Eritrean youth who face conscription.

Those who flee the country along dangerous routes are vulnerable to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Most migrants resort to smuggling to exit the country, and often do so at night due to the risks of death or imprisonment. The usual route enters Sudan and goes onwards through Egypt to Israel or to Libya and eventually to Europe through the Mediterranean route. Along such pathways, Eritreans are highly vulnerable to kidnapping since the large Eritrean diaspora in Europe and America is a source for ransom payments.

Whereas skilled emigration is crucial to the steady inflow of remittances, it also depletes skilled labour within the country, especially in the fields of education, medicine, and policy development.

The government and a host of international organizations are active in Eritrea in response to the needs of migrants.

#### **B. Country Profile**

##### **I. Basic Information**

Eritrea is located in northeastern Africa along the coast of the Red Sea, bordered by Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. In 2017, it had a population of 5.1 million, which is projected

to increase to 6.7 million by 2030. Life expectancy is projected to progressively grow from 65.7 in 2015 to 70.9 in 2030. According to 2010 estimates, the country's ethnic demographics are approximately 55% Tigrinya, 30% Tigre, 4% Saho, 2% Kunama, 2% Rashaida, 2% Bilen, and 5% other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera). The country's religious demographics are 62.9% Christian (Coptic, Roman Catholic, and Protestant), 36.6% Muslim (Sunni), 0.4% folk religion, and 0.1% other or not affiliated. The two-and-a-half-year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was followed by approximately eight years of tension and hostility between the two countries. In July 2018, a peace agreement was finally reached. Eritrea's primary economic challenges include a lack of financial resources and chronic drought which negatively affect the near-80 percent of the population that survives on subsistence agriculture.

## **II. International and Internal Migrants**

Eritrea is not a major country of destination for migrants. In 2019, 16,000 immigrants from neighbouring countries were reported to be living there. A limited number of refugees also seek protection and assistance in Eritrea. They are discussed below, in section IV.

Internal displacement is complex due to the considerable restrictions placed on the movement of citizens by the government. Movement within Eritrea is controlled by an elaborate system of identity cards and travel permits that are used to verify a person's status, authorization to travel, and participation in compulsory national service. Checkpoints are located across the country to allow for the identification of subjects and verification of their permission to travel internally. Such mechanisms have also been adopted to prevent Eritreans from reaching border areas, where opportunities for emigration are available.

National service and land expropriation have a significant impact on traditional livelihoods and affect minorities' abilities to survive in an environment increasingly challenged by climate change. Combined with state-sanctioned conscription, inadequate education, and low wages, this contributes to the outflow of people from Eritrea. Crucially, conscription leads to the emigration of young Eritreans aged 15 to 40, making households dependent on international remittances and thereby contributing to the perpetuation of a vicious circle of economic struggle, the need for remittances and emigration. That is, international migration is a solution to economic struggle because remittances from abroad allow families to maintain themselves.

Nevertheless, the migration policy makes it extremely difficult for labour migrants to move across borders regularly. According to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), regular migration is easier for women above 47 and men above 54. All those exiting Eritrea through regular pathways are required to have formal permission to do so.

## **III. Emigration and Skilled Migration**

Eritrea is a poor country, with a Human Development Index of 0.420, which puts it amongst the ten least developed countries in the world. Eritrea is for that reason mainly a country of origin, with people leaving the country for economic, social, political, and educational reasons. In 2019, emigrants accounted for 12% of the Eritrean population (607,900 emigrants), the majority leaving for Ethiopia (217,472), Sudan (188,411), Europe (83,600), the US (35,745), and Sweden (28,947). Eritreans residing in Europe, mainly in Sweden, Germany,

and the Netherlands, obtain first residence on the basis of family reunification (21.8%) and for other reasons (77.9%). Skilled emigrant women are disproportionately vulnerable to 'deskilling' as they face a series of structural barriers that range from the lack of social networks and language proficiency to the lack of recognition of credentials.

Economic stagnation and significantly low salaries are important drivers of skilled emigration from Eritrea and are highly reflected in the fact that 96% of the ministerial staff sent abroad for long-term training between 1993 and 2002 never returned. In total, 20% of Eritrean emigrants are reported to be driven by economic factors. Lack of social services is another reason for emigration, with Eritreans complaining about insufficient educational opportunities (79%), corruption (66%), poor infrastructure (48%), and insufficient access to goods (43%).

In a study carried out between 2003 and 2009 for the European Commission's Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace, 33% of Eritrean participants felt that brain drain was negatively affecting the country's economy by producing skill gaps in tertiary education, medicine, and civil service, and further contributing to low morale amongst the remaining skilled citizens. On the other hand, 58% felt that it had a positive impact on the economy by means of remittances into the country, seed capital, diaspora tax, and transfers of skills and technologies.

#### **IV. Forced Migration (IDPs, asylum seekers, refugees, climate-displaced people)**

The number of refugees who enter Eritrea is limited, as is the protection and assistance that they receive. In 2015, 2,898 refugees were reported to be living in Eritrea, most of them coming from Somalia (97.5%), and the remainder from Sudan, Ethiopia and South Sudan. In 2019, Eritrea counted approximately 2,400 refugees, arriving mainly from the same places. However, because of rumours that the Umkulu Refugee Camp (Eritrea's only refugee camp) would be closing, over 2,000 Somali refugees fled Eritrea at the end of 2019, bringing the number of refugees hosted down to 200.

There are no recent figures on the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Eritrea. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) recorded 100 displacements due to natural disasters in 2013. While the number of IDPs is relatively small, outgoing Eritrean refugees are many.

The majority of Eritreans are called to perform military service, which can last for indefinite periods of time and thus represents one of the major drivers of forced outward migration. The border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998-2000, which left tens of thousands dead, can be understood as broadly 'unfinished' because it has left the two countries on a war footing, notwithstanding the peace deal signed in December 2000. Even though Eritrea's president signed peace accords with Ethiopia in 2018, the situation has not changed significantly, with the Eritrean youth being the most affected social group.

As of 2019, 123,413 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers lived in Sudan, 172,750 in Ethiopia, and 18,976 in Egypt. In April 2020, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ethiopia announced the closure of the border, the end of the blanket protection of Eritreans, and the

closing of the Hitsats refugee camp, which hosted more than 10,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers.

In 2015, Eritreans represented the majority of the refugees entering Italy by sea. Numbers decreased drastically in 2020, during which only 56 Eritreans reportedly arrived in Europe. The majority of Eritreans still move northwards, where they are vulnerable to human trafficking and forced detention in Libya. In fact, at the end of 2019 IOM reported 8,663 Eritreans among migrants in Libya, and at the end of March 2020 the UNHCR had registered 5,702 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Libya.

The Mixed Migration Centre, funded by the World Bank, UNHCR and the European Union among others, conducted 122 interviews with Eritrean emigrants traveling along the mixed migration routes between 2017 and 2019. Results showed that 66% of them were men and 34% were women, that their average age was 27, and that almost half of the respondents were between 18 and 25. Of those interviewed, 26% were married, versus 62% who were single, 8% who were separated, and 3% who were widowed. Most of the respondents (47%) started their journey from outside of Eritrea, mainly in Ethiopia (27%), Sudan (11%), and Kenya (5%). Most of the respondents had attained secondary school education (64%), while 40% of the men and 24% of the women had terminated their high-school studies. Only male respondents had achieved higher levels of education: 2% had a Masters' degree, and 6% had a Bachelors' degree. Students accounted for 26% of respondents, while 34% of men reported working with the police and the military. Finally, 89% of the respondents indicated the current situation in Eritrea as the core driver of their forced migration. The current situation is also central to the increasing number of Eritrean unaccompanied minors and children forced to migrate. Between 2014 and 2015, children from Eritrea accounted for approximately 25% of all the unaccompanied minors arriving in Italy.

## **V. Victims of Human Trafficking**

Trafficking of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt has been reported since the 1990's and reached unprecedented levels between 2009 and 2013. From 2012 to 2017, there were widespread reports of migrants being kidnapped by gangs specializing in human trafficking and extortion in eastern Sudan.

The state-sanctioned closure of borders forces migrants to resort to irregular pathways, which results in Eritrean migrants facing huge risks during their journeys. These risks range from the abuse and dangers associated with smugglers' services to human trafficking and torture for ransom. Individuals mainly cross into Sudan and Ethiopia and do so by moving at night. The trafficking of Eritreans is sometimes incorporated within the business models of smugglers, who in some instances use extortion and abuse while still providing smuggling services and facilitating the overall journey, thereby blurring the lines between migrant smuggling and human trafficking. The prices Eritreans pay smugglers range from 960 to USD 9,600 USD, depending on the point of departure and arrival. People find smugglers by word of mouth and by contacts from acquaintances and friends who previously left the country. Thus, widespread human trafficking of migrants and asylum seekers from Eritrea takes place parallel to and within the context of migrant smuggling.

Human trafficking gangs kidnap Eritreans traveling along well-worn migration routes, from key migrant hubs, as well as from within or near refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia. Between 2009 and 2013, there were an estimated 25,000-30,000 victims of human trafficking through routes in North Africa. In 2012, 95% of the people being trafficked through Sinai were Eritrean. The Sahar Foundation reported that Eritreans crossing into Sudan en route to Libya prefer going directly to Khartoum to avoid being kidnapped by trafficking gangs that abduct people from refugee camps in eastern Sudan, especially Shagarab camp. Abductions from camps have arguably decreased in recent years through UNHCR and government intervention.

Others are reportedly kidnapped in Eritrea with the express purpose of procuring a ransom. Sometimes the extortion process commences when migrants seek the services of a smuggler who then “sells” his clients to traffickers who are in the “business” of kidnapping for ransom, either while migrants are in Sudan or once they reach Egypt or Libya. Smugglers might also “sell” clients to a trafficker for failing to pay agreed fees. The restriction of the Israeli immigration policy contributed to reducing the viability of the trafficking route through Egypt. Kidnapping-for-ransom likely moved to Sudan, where abductions are still being reported.

## **VI. National Legal Framework**

Eritrea is part to the Khartoum Process, initiated in 2014, which seeks to actively prevent and tackle human trafficking between the Horn of Africa and Europe. The AU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (Khartoum Process) seeks to develop a cooperative network between countries of destination, transit, and origin, and to establish effective mechanisms for information sharing, capacity building, law enforcement, the prosecution of criminal networks, and the support and protection of the rights of migrants.

Beyond this, Eritrea has a series of key policy responses to immigration. Firstly, the Proclamation Issued to Amend Proclamation No. 24/1992 Enacted to Regulate the Provision of Travel Documents, the Entry Into and Exit from Eritrea and Residence of Foreigners in Eritrea (2011-04-01) defines the imposition of fines on immigrants who stay in Eritrea beyond the expiration date of their visa and who do not possess a valid residence permit. Secondly, the Eritrean Nationality Proclamation No. 21/1992 defines the conditions necessary for naturalization as an Eritrean citizen. Thirdly, the Eritrean Transitional Criminal Code Art. 65 prohibits the trafficking of youth and women for sexual exploitation. Finally, the Eritrean Transitional Criminal Code Art. 565 prohibits slavery, and the Labour Proclamation 118/2001 prohibits forced labour.

Eritrea is not a party to the Refugee Conventions, nor the Kampala Convention, and it has no domestic legislation for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees.

## **VII. Main Actors**

### *The State*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Development are key government ministries in relation to migration matters. Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs oversees international relations and is the government's UNHCR focal point for all operations in relation to refugees and asylum seekers.

With respect to general conditions in the country, the Eritrean government has made efforts to improve education, literacy levels, and vocational training to fill employment gaps. Eritrea has been identified as one of the “pre-decision-point countries”<sup>1</sup> by the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative. This means that Eritrea has made meaningful progress towards qualifying for debt relief, and it is therefore eligible for the HIPC Initiative Multilateral Debt Relief (MDR). It is yet to receive it, although an Article IV mission took place in May 2019, and the Eritrean authorities have now resumed discussions with the IMF and the World Bank, including on debt and arrears.

### *International Organizations*

International organizations in Eritrea include the UNHCR, the IOM, and the African Development Bank. Until early 2019, the UNHCR had a pivotal role in assisting refugees and asylum seekers. The UNHCR has an office in Asmara, assisting the urban refugee population. Previously, it also had field operations in Umkulu Refugee Camp. The camp was closed in mid-2019, causing over two thirds of the camp population to flee to northern Ethiopia. The UNHCR assisted with the relocation of refugees to southern Ethiopia. In 2019, the Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) between UNHCR, the Office of Refugee Affairs, and the Ministry of National Development was suspended. At the same time, UNHCR assistance in the voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees, registration of new asylum-seekers, access to the Umkulu refugee camp, and interaction with refugees in urban areas stopped. UNHCR national staff are still authorized to deliver corn-soya blend to refugees in the camp on a monthly basis.

UNHCR continues to advocate for the development of a national legal framework for asylum-seekers and refugees in Eritrea, as well as the latter’s accession to the relevant international instruments relating to refugees and statelessness. There is an EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in Eritrea. Eritrea became an IOM member state in 2015, and the IOM Regional Office in Nairobi addresses all planned programming issues in Eritrea as negotiations to establish an IOM office there are ongoing. Crucially, the African Development Bank (AfDB) cooperated with Eritrea between 2013 and 2017 by supporting Eritrea’s Education Sector Development Plan and by promoting the development of skills in pursuit of active job creation. Between 2014 and 2020, the 11<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund for Eritrea deployed \$229 million for the development of economic governance, energy efficiency, and renewable energy. This shortly followed the EU’s previous programme (2009-2013), which focused on rural development, infrastructural rehabilitation, and food security.

### *The Catholic Church*

Between 2002 and 2017, Caritas Eritrea has run supplementary feeding programmes for 35,000 at-risk people, including refugees and other migrants, coordinating its activities

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<sup>1</sup> IMF Policy Paper (2019), Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) – Statistical Update, <https://www.imf.org/~/media/Files/Publications/PP/2019/PPEA2019028.ashx>

across Asmara, Keren, and Barentu. In 2004, Caritas Eritrea appealed for \$2.5 million for drought relief and distributed aid in villages through church clinics, thereby giving assistance to drought-related IDPs. In 2017, Caritas, in collaboration with the Italian government, sought to open a humanitarian corridor to Italy for refugees from Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan. Together with the Sant'Egidio charity, Caritas developed the "Protetto: Rifugiato a casa mia" (Protected: a refugee in my home), which aimed at granting refugees a safe and legal pathway to Italy and social and professional integration into Italian society.

The Catholic Church manages about 40 health centres across the country, mainly in rural areas, which have been providing the population (including migrants) with free services since the 1990s.

### *Other Organizations*

Two other organizations active in Eritrea are the America Team for Displaced Eritreans and Radio Erena/Radio Erythrée International Blog. The former is an all-volunteer US-based NGO providing information about, and assistance to, Eritrean refugees around the world. The NGO's website provides information and background about Eritrea, the refugees, and the work undertaken with other organizations to ensure that assistance reaches Eritrean refugees around the world. Radio Erena/Radio Erythrée International Blog is an apolitical and non-governmental organization that offers cultural programmes, news, music, and entertainment. The blog provides reports on the situation in Eritrea and Ethiopia which may be useful in the gathering of national information. In addition to the blog, there are broadcasts via Arabsat's Badr-6 satellite and Radio Erena in Eritrea.

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