

Eritrea in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



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Country Profile

Introduction

The tiny nation of Eritrea on the Horn of Africa, between the Sudan and Djibouti, was known to the ancient Egyptians as the Land of Punt. Its name, Eritrea, comes from the Greek *erythros* meaning “red,” and it was given by Greek sailors in the 5th century BCE to describe the red algae in the shallow waters of its Red Sea coast. In more than 5,000 years, it has witnessed the rise and fall of ancient and modern empires. With its own ancient temples and archaeological sites, it was present at the birth of both Christianity and Islam. In recent times, it has seen foreign armies come and go, and has been a colony of Italy, Britain, and the Ethiopia of Haile Selassie. As one of the poorest African nations, Eritrea has shown, since its independence in 1993, that it is determined to defend its freedom and to achieve financial prosperity and political stability.¹



© Eric Lafforgue
Women of the Afar tribe

¹ Saudi Aramco World Magazine. Werner, Louis. Forging Plowshares in Eritrea. November 1996.
<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199606/forging.plowshares.in.eritrea>

Eritrea in Facts and Figures²

Population: 4,786,994

Age structure

0-14 years: 44% (male 1,059,458/female 1,046,955)

15-64 years: 52.5% (male 1,244,153/female 1,268,189)

65 years and over: 3.5% (male 82,112/female 86,127)

Population growth rate: 2.47% per year

Birth rate: 34.33 births/1,000 population

Death rate: 9.6 deaths/1,000 population

Sex ratio: *at birth:* 1.03 male(s)/female

under 15 years: 1.01 male(s)/female

15-64 years: 0.98 male(s)/female

65 years and over: 0.95 male(s)/female

total population: 0.99 male(s)/female

Infant mortality rate:

total: 46.3 deaths/1,000 live births

male: 52.22 deaths/1,000 live births

female: 40.2 deaths/1,000 live births

Life expectancy at birth:

total population: 59.03 years

male: 57.44 years

female: 60.66 years

Total fertility rate: 5.08 children born/woman



© Rockoctopus/flickr.com
Young Tigrinyan boy

² CIA World Factbook. Eritrea. 2006. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/er.html>. All figures are 2006 estimates unless otherwise noted.

Nationality: *noun:* Eritrean(s); *adjective:* Eritrean

Ethnic groups:

Tigrinya 50%, Tigre and Kunama 40%, Afar 4%, Saho (Red Sea coast dwellers) 3%, other 3%

Religions: Muslim, Coptic Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant



© Charles Roffery
Agordat street scene

Languages: Afar, Arabic, Tigre and Kunama, Tigrinya, other Cushitic languages

Literacy (2003 est.): (*definition:* age 15 and over can read and write)

total population: 58.6%

male: 69.9%

female: 47.6%

Country name:

conventional long form: State of Eritrea

conventional short form: Eritrea

local long form: Hagere Ertra

local short form: Ertra

former: Eritrea Autonomous Region in Ethiopia



© Saudi Aramco Services Company
Street in Massawa

Government type: Eritrea is a one-party state. It has a transition government based on a successful referendum on independence for the Autonomous Region of Eritrea on 23-25 April 1993. A National Assembly, composed entirely of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ, was established as a transitional legislature. A Constitutional Commission was also established to draft a constitution. Isaias Afworki was elected president by the transitional legislature. The constitution, ratified in May 1997, has not gone into effect, pending parliamentary and presidential elections, which never seem to happen. Parliamentary elections had been scheduled in December 2001, but were postponed indefinitely. Currently the sole legal political party is the PFDJ.

Capital: Asmara (Asmera)

Regions: There are six regions: Anseba, Debub (Southern), Debubawi Keyih Bahri (Southern Red Sea), Gash Barka, Ma'akel (Central), and, Semenawi Keyih Bahri (Northern Red Sea).

National holiday: Independence Day, 24 May (1993)

Constitution: The transitional constitution of 19 May 1993 was replaced by a new constitution adopted on 23 May 1997, but has not yet been implemented.

Legal system: The primary basis of the legal system is the Ethiopian Legal Code of 1957, with revisions. New civil, commercial, and penal codes have not yet been promulgated. For civil cases involving Muslims, *sharia* law is applied.

Suffrage: All persons 18 or older are eligible to vote.

Executive branch: The chief of state and head of government is President Isaias Afworki (since 8 June 1993). He is also head of the State Council and National Assembly. The State Council is the collective executive authority and its members are appointed by the president. It currently appears that Isaias Afworki is headed towards a lifetime term as head of the Eritrean state.



Legislative branch: The pre-independence National Assembly, which is currently the only functioning legislative body, is composed of 150 members whose term limits are not fixed. In May 1997, members of the both the old assembly and the new Central Committee met to discuss the implementation of a new 527-member Constituent Assembly. The transition to the new system (members were to be chosen by ballot in 2001) has yet to take place.

Judicial branch: Technically, the judicial system is in flux, as well. Currently there is a High Court, as well as regional, sub-regional, and village courts. Eritrea also has military and special courts

Political Parties and Popular Movements: The People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ, is the only party currently recognized by the government. Note: A National Assembly committee drafted a law permitting multiple political parties in January 2001, but the full National Assembly has not yet debated or voted on it. There are several popular movements that aspire to party status. These include: the Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ); the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM); the Eritrean Islamic Salvation (EIS); the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF); the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA); and the Eritrean Public Forum (EPF).

International Organizational Membership: Eritrea is a member of the following international organizations: ACP (African, Caribbean, Pacific States), ADB (African Development Bank), AU (African Union), COMESA (Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa), FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization), G-77 (United Nations group of 77), IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization), ICC (International Code Council), ICFTU, IDA (World Bank International Development Agency), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), IFC, IFRCS (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent), ILO (International Labor Organization), IMF (International Monetary Fund), Interpol, IOC (international Olympic Committee), ISO (correspondent), NAM (Non Aligned Movement), All Organizations of the United Nations, WTO (World Trade Organization).

Geography

Introduction

Eritrea is a lamb chop-shaped country, situated on the geopolitically strategic Horn of Africa, between 12° and 18° N latitude. With its back to the world's busiest sea route, the Red Sea, it is surrounded by three countries: Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. The desert coastal plain, 1,160 km (720 miles) in length, is a barren, hot, and dry moonscape. Off the central coast, the Dahlak Islands (an archipelago) are recognized as Eritrean territory. Inland, there is a range of mountainous highlands running north to south that shelters fertile valleys and a central plateau averaging 1,830 m (6,000 ft) in height. The total area of Eritrea is about 125,000 sq km (485,263 sq miles) or approximately the size of the state of Pennsylvania.³



© Charles Roffery
Village in Gash-Barka

The Neighborhood

Eritrea's climatic conditions are not the only challenges its location poses. The Horn of Africa has been a hotbed of political discontent: Since its independence in 1993, Eritrea has had problematic relations with its politically unstable neighbors. Sudan, to the north, which shelters more than 100,000 Eritrean refugees, accuses Eritrea of supporting insurgency against the Sudan. Ethiopia, to the south, has refused to withdraw to the borders set down by the Ethiopian Eritrean Boundary Commission (EEBC). Since 2005, Eritrea has been disputing the role of the UN Peacekeeping Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which patrols the 25-km (15.5-mile) security zone with Ethiopia. Djibouti, its neighbor to the south, has been generally stable and poses little threat. It is, however, a transit point for terrorists crossing the Red Sea from Yemen. Eritrea strives for internal balance in a region characterized by political instability⁴

Geographic Subdivisions

In 1996, the National Assembly consolidated the existing eight major regions into six national subdivisions. In order of size they are: Garsh-Barka (located in the southwest), Semenawi Keyih Bahri (Northern Red Sea Region, includes offshore Dahlak Islands), Debubawi Keyih Bahri (Southern Red Sea Region), Anseba (situated in the northwest), Debub (south central area), and Maakel (the smallest, located in the center of the country)

³ Home Planet: Eritrean Geography. Mebrat Tzehaie. <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-geography.htm>

⁴ CIA World Factbook: Eritrea: Geography. 2006. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/er.html>

Climate

The climate of Eritrea is largely a function of altitude. In the mountains and highlands, the temperature is moderate year round. The capital, Asmara, at 2,347 m (7,700 ft), has an annual average temperature of 15.5°C (60°F) and an annual average rainfall of 508 mm (20 inches). Barren eastern coastal regions like Massawa, however, average 30.5°C (87° F) and have less than two inches of rain per year in some places. Eritreans refer to the mid-year rains in the highlands as *kiremti*, or big rains (June through September) and the unpredictable rain in other areas as *belg*, or little rains. It is the inland plateau with its moderate temperatures and rainfall that is the breadbasket of Eritrea. Its climate supports the limited growth of vegetables and fruit trees, as well as sheep, goat, and camel herding. Nonetheless, USAID reports that 80% of Eritrea does not get enough rainfall to support agriculture.⁵



© Charles Roffery
Village in Gash-Barka

Rivers

Eritrea has four rivers, all of which flow into the Sudan. Three are seasonal or temporary and one, the Setit, is permanent, although it is not navigable. The Anseba and the Barka rivers arise during the rainy season and flow north into the Sudan. The Gash (also known as the Mareb) flows west along the Ethiopian border into the Sudan. The Setit (called Tezeke in Ethiopia) flows along the western border from Ethiopia and on into the Sudan.⁶

Major Cities

Asmara, the capital, situated in the northeastern part of the highland plateau in the Maakel province, is the largest of the 6 major Eritrean cities and has a population of 500,600. At an altitude of 2,347 m (7,700 ft), it is a picturesque, clean, safe city with palm-lined streets. Its name is taken from the Tigrinya language, *arbaete asmara*, and means “four villages united.”

Eritrea’s main seaport, **Massawa**, with a population of 23,100 and located in the North Red Sea province, is its largest deep water port. It has three districts: mainland Massawa, peninsular Tualud, and the historic Island of Batse. The island, with its ancient squares, Ottoman houses, and religious buildings, was an important trade city in antiquity and will someday be a major tourist destination for Eritrean travelers.

Nakfa (Nacfa) is almost a cult city for members of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), because it was here that the struggle for independence from Ethiopia began. At an altitude of 1,676 m (5,000 ft) and with a population of 25,000, Nakfa is a major town in the North Red Sea Region. Eritreans even named their currency, the Nakfa, after this center of nationalistic fervor.

⁵ Home Planet: Eritrea: Climate. Mebrat Tzehaie. <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-climate.htm>

⁶ Mongabay: Eritrea. 2005. http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_profiles/2004-2005/Eritrea.html

The highland city of **Keren** (Cheren) at 1,372 m (4,500 ft) in the Anseba region is the roof garden of Eritrea. With a population of 75,000, it is a major agricultural and dairy center. In addition to a wide variety of fruits and vegetables from its numerous small farms, it is known for its potent chili peppers. Keren's dairy herds produce milk, butter, and low-fat provolone cheese.⁷



Agordat (Akordat), elevation 640 m(2,100 ft), is located in the sunny south between the Barka and Gash rivers. The main city in the Gash region, Agordat is famed for its fruit and nut production. Many of the 25,000 inhabitants of this area own or work on the banana plantations which can be seen on the hills overlooking the river. The Doum Palms, also known as Akat trees, grow on the banks of the Barka River. They bear an oval orange fruit that is sometimes called gingerbread fruit. It was here in 1963, that Emperor Haile Selassie built the second largest mosque in Eritrea.⁸

The second port city of Eritrea, **Assab**, in the South Red Sea Region, was once the first port city of Ethiopia. It was purchased on behalf of the Italian government from local sultans by the Rubattino Shipping Company in 1869 for 8,100 gold Austrian Maria Teresa dollars. Assab was chosen by the Italians for its strategic location near Djibouti and the Straits of Bab el Mendeb⁹, and for its potential to become an important trading station between Ethiopia and Arabia.¹⁰

Now a modern port city with an oil refinery built by the former Soviet Union, Assab used to be Ethiopia's main port and therefore has a pronounced Ethiopian character to it. The town is divided into three districts: Assab Seghir (small Assab) on the shoreline, Assab Kebir (big Assab) in the center of town, containing the port and the city center, and Campo Sudan, an older Ethiopian residential area to the west of the city center. There are extensive inland salt flats surrounding Assab and 30 islands in the Bay of Assab, all of which can be visited.¹¹

⁷ Home Planet: Eritrean Cities. Mebrat Tzehaie. <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-geography.htm>

⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Doum palm. <http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9321748>

⁹ Bab el-Mendeb, "gate of tears," is the Arabic name of the narrow mouth of the Red Sea, so called because of the high ambient temperatures and humidity.

¹⁰ Eritrean Info Office Mebrat Tzehaie <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-assab.htm>

¹¹ Home Planet: Eritrean Towns <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-climate.htm>

Environmental Issues

Eritreans are very proactive in the promotion of positive environmental policy. In 1995, two years after independence, the National Assembly approved the first of several National Environmental Management Plans (NEMP). This plan has created several agencies that report to the Assembly on environmental issues: (1) environmental law study group, (2) environmental monitoring, (3) water management, (4) industrial impact assessment, (5) human settlement, (6) climate and environment, and (7) coastal and marine issues.¹²



© Charles Roffery
Family fetching water

The NEMP agencies have reported on several recent projects as having either a positive impact on the environment of Eritrea, or a negative one. By far, the positive programs outweigh the negative.

Among the first group is the National Green Week program that promotes the reforestation of lands devastated over the past 100 years and combats desertification. There are also several Rain Water Basin Projects such as the Gash Barka Project, which will conserve rainwater run-off. Another successful program is the US-based Anadarko Red Sea oil offshore drilling project that has carefully protected ocean fish and coral reefs. Perhaps the most visible of all is Charles Grove's Sea Water Farm Project (Seaphire) near Massawa. This cooperative US-Eritrean program uses agro-genomics and biogenetic engineering to grow crops and raise fish in saline coastal areas. This massive USD30-million, 21st-century bio-farm and fish hatchery complex uses water from the Red Sea. Moreover, it uses no fertilizers or chemicals. The project is expected to augment the national food supply with fish, shrimp, and vegetables, thereby helping to reduce poverty.¹³

The NEMP has also defined areas of failed environmental policy as well as environmental hazards. One project with devastating environmental effects was the Canadian-based Hydro Drilling and Irrigation Development Operation (HIDCO).¹⁴ This venture resulted in the large-scale deforestation of valuable woodland in order to drill irrigation wells, which later failed to produce enough water. Unfortunately, it has contributed to desertification as well. Principal among environmental hazards is the periodic locust hatch which usually follows a season of strong rains. The dark clouds of plant-eating insects devour crops and trees as they migrate eastward with the westerly winds. Their path takes them across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Massive land-based and airborne spraying has failed to curb the regional infestations.

¹² The Center for Integrated Study of the Human Dimensions of Global Change. Gilau, Asmeron M. Environmental Issues in Eritrea: Opportunities and Challenges. 10 February 2003.
<http://hdgc.epp.cmu.edu/maillinglists/hdgcctml/mail/msg00040.html>

¹³ Eritrean Info Office. Massawa. Mebrat Tzehaie.
<http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-massawa7.htm>

¹⁴ Foreign Affairs and International Trade Office Canada. Disclosure of Contract Reports.
http://w01.fac-aec.gc.ca/dc/main_fa.aspx?l=e&p=4&r=1&c

History

Introduction

Eritrea as a region is firmly rooted in ancient history. With more than 8,000 registered archaeological excavation sites, it ranks with other African nations, like Egypt, that can prove their historical importance to the ancient and modern world.¹⁵ From third-millennium-BCE Egypt, down through local dynasties and Ethiopian kingdoms, Eritreans have come a long way. European colonies of the 19th century and Rastafarian governments of the 20th century, paved the way for Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. Yet until 1993, the history of Eritrea was largely the history of Ethiopia.



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Egyptian wall relief

The Land of Punt

The first mention of Punt occurs during the fifth dynasty of ancient Egypt (c. 2400 BCE). It was the name given to present-day Eritrea by the Pharaohs. Relief paintings show ostriches, antelopes, and copper-skinned slaves bearing ivory, ebony, and coffers of gold and frankincense from *Ta Jeter* (Punt) or “god’s land.” Nobles from Punt visited the pharaoh’s courts. Later Egyptian pharaohs like Mentuhotep of the 11th dynasty (c.1980 BCE) and Ramses III of the 20th dynasty (1,260 BCE) visited Punt. They traveled by two well-known routes: The first was overland along the Nile to the Sudan and southwards to Punt. The second was by sea, in reed-covered boats down the Red Sea to present-day Massawa. At the end of the final Egyptian kingdom, in the 31st dynasty, sailors and traders of the Greek-Egyptian empire of the Ptolemys¹⁶ (330 BCE to 50 CE), continued to trade with Punt.¹⁷

Aksumite Civilization

Sometime during the 1st century CE, the Kingdom of Aksum (Axum) emerged in the south of present day Eritrea. Over the next three centuries, its holdings would expand to cover southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, large parts of northern Somalia, and coastal areas of southern Arabia and Yemen. Its language was Gi’iz (Ge’ez), a Semitic tongue. Greek, however, was a strong second language as well as the language of commerce in the eastern Mediterranean. Aksum was an important link in the trade networks of the day, exporting gold, ivory, frankincense, and obsidian to the north and as far as India in the east. Its kings, who built impressive stone palaces and temples, carried the title *negusa nagest* or “king of kings.”

Close ties with the Greek world brought Christianity to the inhabitants of Aksum in the early second century CE. They gave the people the name *aithiopai*, or “burnt faces.” By 325 CE, the Aksum king, Exana, had converted to Christianity and made it the state religion. This act laid the foundations of the Ethiopian Coptic or Orthodox Church.¹⁸

¹⁵ Lonely Planet. “Ethiopia & Eritrea.” Lonely Planet Publications, Oakland, CA. 2004.

¹⁶ The Ptolemys were a series of Macedonian Greek rulers of Egypt.

¹⁷ Shaw, Ian. “History of Ancient Egypt.” Oxford University Press. 2000.

¹⁸ Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Country Studies. “Ethiopia: The Aksumite State.” 1991. <http://countrystudies.us/ethiopia/5.htm>

In the late fifth century CE, Persia's expanding Sassanid Empire forced the Aksumites out of Arabia and put many of the Red Sea ports under siege. It was a turning point for Aksum's growth. There would be no new territories. Yet Aksum's close ties to the leaders of the Arabia peninsula opened the doors to a sizeable immigration of early Arab Islamic refugees in what has been called the "first hegira."¹⁹ The first wave of Muhammad's followers to flee Mecca did not go to Medina. In 622 CE, they were welcomed instead by the *negusa* (king or emperor) and settled mostly in the coastal areas of eastern Ethiopia. Over the next few generations, they grew in numbers and strength, eventually becoming a threat to the Christian kings who had originally welcomed them.²⁰

Christian Dynasties

By the mid-10th century CE, the Christian communities had weakened, while the expanding Islamic community in the east had strengthened. The Kingdom of Aksum had become a small inland Christian enclave. The Christians withdrew from the coast and over the next several centuries established several ruling dynasties. The first of these was founded by the kings of Zagwe. The Coptic Christians of Egypt began to supply the Zagwe kings with an emissary bishop patriarch for religious guidance. The rulers of the late Zagwe dynasty (916-1270 CE) were responsible for building the famous highland churches carved into mountain stone.²¹



In 1270, an Amhara nobleman from the south, Yekuna Amlak, seized the Zagwe throne and proclaimed himself the first of the new Solomonic kings; the next ruling dynasty. In claiming to be a descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Yekuna ruled until 1285 CE, when his son, Yagba Sion, came to power. To limit access to the throne by lesser claimants, Yagba instituted a practice that lasted until the Ottoman Turks arrived in the 16th century. He and his sons and grandsons had all male descendants, except for their firstborn sons (heirs to the throne), imprisoned for life in a mountaintop fortress.²²

¹⁹ *Hegira* is an Arabic term meaning 'flight to avoid capture or persecution.'

²⁰ [Selamta.net](http://www.selamta.net). Ethiopian Muslims History. Mohammad, Najib, Dr. "The Haven of the First Hijra (Migration): An African nation is the Muslims' first refuge." http://www.selamta.net/ethiopian_muslims_history.htm

²¹ Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Country Studies. "Ethiopia: The Zagwe Dynasty." 1991. <http://countrystudies.us/ethiopia/7.htm>

²² Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Country Studies. "Ethiopia: The "Restoration of the "Solomonic" Line." 1991. <http://countrystudies.us/ethiopia/8.htm>

⁹ [Altapedia Online](http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/eritrea.htm). "Eritrea." .. <http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/eritrea.htm>

Abyssinian Kings

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks arrived in port of Massawa. In 1557, they seized the offshore islands and coastal areas near Massawa. For the next 300 years, the coastal lowlands remained a protectorate and trading outpost of the Ottoman Empire.²³ At the same time, in the Ethiopian highlands, the Christian Amharic-speaking kings, Menas (1560-64) and Sarsa Dengel (1564-97), resisted the inland expansion of Islamic communities. Instead, they consolidated their influence among the tribes of the north and south. They made Gondar, near Aksum, their permanent capital and, as all emperors up to the present have done, continued the practice of claiming descent from King Solomon. The use of the name Abyssinia(n) also dates from this period and is derived from the Egyptian Arabic word *Habashina* meaning the copper-skinned descendents of Aksum.

Colonialism and the 19th Century

In 1805, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, Muhammed Ali Pasha, became governor of Egypt. After coming to power, and eager to extend Egyptian influence, Muhammed Ali sent his Egyptian army to the Hejaz and Yemen. Later he added Crete, Palestine, and Nubia, as well as the border regions with Ethiopia. For more than 100 years, he and his descendents (the Pashas and Khedives²⁴) wielded great power. Before his death in 1849, he envisioned creating a canal in the Sinai linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas. In 1854, the project was inaugurated by his grandson, Khedive Isma'el. It was financed by the Franco-British-Egyptian Suez Canal Company. Fifteen years later, in 1869, the future hero of Panama, Count Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894), witnessed the opening of the waterway he engineered. The Red Sea ports of Massawa and Assab acquired new importance for European powers, who were poised to assert ambitions.²⁵



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Colonial Massawa

The Italians opened a consulate in Massawa in 1840, the French in 1848, and the British in 1849. Following the Egyptian occupation of Keren in 1853, European powers reacted by strengthening their presence in the area. The British were afraid that Egypt, their ally and trading partner, had now become too strong. Soon thereafter, the Italians asserted claims to Eritrea and Somaliland. There was a European land grab in East Africa. The French based their claims on treaty interests in the Sudan following the Napoleonic victories in Egypt. They established a French colony in East Africa: French Somaliland. The British had territorial interests in the Sudan which later lead to the famous battles between the Mahdi and General “Chinese” Gordon in Khartoum. Gordon was killed in 1885 and the Mahdi died of typhus in the same year. In short, East Africa had become a theater for European rivalry.²⁶

²⁴ *Pasha* is a Turkish honorific title meaning “governor or general.” *Khedive* is Turkish for “viceroy.”

²⁵ TourEgypt.net. Dunn, Jimmy. “Suez Canal.” 2006. <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/suezcanal.htm>

²⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The Story of Africa: Africa and Europe (1800-1914)—Egypt and the Sudan.” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/11chapter5.shtml>

The Italian Era

Under the ambiguous Treaty of Ucciale (1889), Italy, who had the strongest footing in eastern and north-central Ethiopia, gained Eritrea as a protectorate.²⁷ Eager to connect Eritrea and Ethiopia with Italian Somaliland in the south, the Italians launched a military bid to capture all of Ethiopia. At the Battle of Adwa, 1 March 1896, Emperor Menelik II forced the Italian expeditionary army out of central and southern Ethiopia. The Italians, however, did manage to keep a foothold in the northern province of Eritrea.²⁸



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Emperor Yohannis IV of Ethiopia

Ethiopia had been a small satellite of the Ottoman Empire since the early 17th century. This aligned it with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, and Ottoman Empire) during the First World War. Italy joined the War on 23 May 1915, on the side of the Alliance (Britain, France and Russia). At the end of the war, in 1918, possessions of the former Central Powers were divided principally between Britain and France. The postwar Italian government believed its support of the Allies justified a claim to Ethiopia.²⁹ Over the next 20 years, the Italians went on to develop the infrastructure of Eritrea with an eye towards further southward expansion. During this period they engineered the famous railway lines up the escarpment from Massawa to Asmara (1911) and from Asmara to Akordat (1922). This railway, which boasts over 30 tunnels and 65 bridges, has been called a feat of engineering.³⁰

Set against the events unfolding in Italian Eritrea was the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie (1894 – 1975) and Empress Menen on 2 November 1930. Twelve representatives of foreign powers were in attendance, including German-born US Ambassador, and friend of President Herbert Hoover, Herman Jacoby. The ambassador and Mrs. Jacoby disembarked at the Port of Djibouti in late October and made the 1,255-km (780-mile) journey to Addis Ababa³¹ by train. They brought with them gifts from the American president which included an electric refrigerator, a red typewriter embossed with an eagle, 500 rosebushes, and an autographed picture of President Hoover.³²

²⁷ Journal of African History. "Treaty of Ucciali May 1889." Vol. 6 No. 2 (1965) pp. 221 - 231

²⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. "Eritrea: Battle of Adwa."

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-900377/Battle-of-Adwa>

²⁹ Answers Encyclopedia. "Triple Entente." <http://www.answers.com/topic/triple-entente>

³⁰ International Working Steam Locomotives. "Eritrean Railway Revival."

<http://www.internationalsteam.co.uk/trains/eritrea07.htm>

³¹ Addis Ababa is Amharic and means "new flower."

³² Waugh, Evelyn. "The Coronation of Haile Selassie." Penguin Books. London. 1937.

In late 1935, Rome again attempted to seize more land and finally captured the capital, Addis Ababa.³³ On 9 May 1936, Fascist Italy reported to the League of Nations in Geneva, that military action and Italian forces in Abyssinia had restored peace to a “troubled” province. In the six-month campaign, Il-Duce’s (Mussolini’s) son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, commanded an air squadron. Poison gas was used against non-combatant Ethiopians. Addis Ababa was captured and unrest temporarily subsided. The Rastafarian³⁴ Emperor, Haile Selassie, successor to Menelik II, fled the country. Soon, Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy, declared himself Emperor of Abyssinia, and Mussolini sent his African prefect, General Graziani, to Addis Ababa to supervise the continued pacification of Abyssinia, as Italy called Ethiopia.



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Victor Emmanuel III

Fascist Italy had three main goals: (1) the exploitation of natural resources in the Horn of Africa; (2) securing a strategic presence on the Red Sea coast; and, (3) the resettlement of Italians in the colony. The colony was to be “de-Ethiopized” and symbols of the historic past were to be removed.³⁵ The Great Obelisk of Aksum, as well as the stone Lion of Judah and the statue of Emperor Menelik II were shipped to Italy. Jewels, crowns, precious metals, and portable cultural monuments made their way to Rome.

Yet Italian Abyssinia had a limited future. When Italy became an Axis power in 1940, British forces in the Sudan began to move against the Italians in Ethiopia, driving them back into Eritrea. On 18 March 1941, General Lorenzini, the Italian “Desert Fox,” was killed by the British in the Battle of Keren. On 1 April, Asmara fell to the British. This was the end of the Italian occupation. Not long after this, in April 1942, the United States opened a consulate in Asmara.

British Ethiopia

During the war years, 1941-1945, Eritrea was a province of British Ethiopia, and the ports of Massawa and Assab became imperial staging areas for the British Asian fleet. Under the US “Lend Lease” program, Britain was able to provide the US with bases in Kagnew (Army) and Massawa (Navy) in exchange for war materials. After the war, however, Eritrea lost its importance to Britain. British forces withdrew, leaving a skeleton civil affairs administration. What remained in Eritrea was widespread unemployment and a defunct economy. The fate of Ethiopia and Eritrea was left to a four powers commission in 1946. When the US, UK, France, and the Soviet Union could not agree on the future of Eritrea, the matter was referred to the United Nations General Assembly. Four years later, in September 1951, UN Resolution 390 was

³³ Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota. Shively, Kevin. “Italian occupation of Addis Ababa: 1936-1941.” <http://www.macalester.edu/courses/GEOG61/kshively/ital>

³⁴ The term *rastafarian* derives from *ras* (chief or head) + *Tafaria Makkonen* (birth name of Haile Selassie). The Rastafarian religion asserts that Haile Selassie was God incarnate. As a religion it has spread to the Caribbean islands, where it has become popular through the music of reggae artists like Bob Marley.

³⁵ American Historical Review. Tannenbaum, E. “The Goals of Fascist Italy.” Vol 74 No. 4. 1969. pp. 1183-1204 [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762\(196904\)](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762(196904))

passed, which made Eritrea the autonomous 14th province of Ethiopia, with a separate constitution. With that, Eritrea temporarily disappeared from the map of Africa.³⁶

Late 20th Century

The history of Eritrea, from annexation through to independence (1948-1993), can be organized into several periods. The first, post-war period was characterized by political and economic stagnation. Throughout the 1950s, the Eritreans were repressed by the Ethiopians, who resented their wartime collaboration with the Italians and the British. Ethiopia replaced the local Eritrean language, Tigrinya, with Amharic as the official language. Resentment among Eritreans of all classes and religious backgrounds quickly grew to dissatisfaction and then to dissent. In 1956, there were several demonstrations among dock workers at the port of Massawa. On 10 March 1958, as a result of continuing discontent, a general workers strike began in Asmara and other Eritrean towns³⁷



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Members of the Eritrean Liberation Front

The next phase leading up to the revolution began with the transition to armed resistance. In July 1962 a farmer, Hamid Idris Awate (1911-1962), with 13 followers, attacked a series of Ethiopian police stations in the western lowlands (Mt. Adal, Halhal, and Gognie). They seized arms and ammunition. Enthusiasm for Awate's resistance to Ethiopian rule spread quickly among several groups of Eritreans. A number of liberation movements developed. By 1965, there were three principal groups: (1) the mixed ELM (Eritrean Liberation Movement); (2) the Christian PLF (People's Liberation Front); and (3) the Muslim ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front). Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, these factions battled each other, delaying the struggle for independence by 15 years. Finally, in 1981, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged as the umbrella movement that reconciled the other groups and united the resistance forces.³⁸

Throughout the turmoil of the Second World War and five decades of political instability, the US was a silent witness to the events unfolding in Eritrea. The US presence in Asmara began in 1943, when a small signals unit of the US Army took over Radio Marina on the 2,347 m (7,700 ft) plateau outside of Asmara. The new name was Kagnew Station. It had been an Italian radio link between Rome, Libya, and Italian forces in Africa and the Red Sea area. Under the US-UK "Lend Lease" program, the US acquired this important signals post in the crisp, clear highland air of East Africa. It was destined to become part of the Army Security Agency's inventory, and later part of the NSA's global communications monitoring network, Echelon. Off and on, throughout the revolution and "official closures" under the Mengistu government, it has operated for more than 60 years with reduced and augmented staffs under different organizational umbrellas.³⁹

³⁶ History World. Plain Text Histories. "Ethiopia."

<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=2114&HistoryID=ab92>

³⁷ Middle East Research and Information Reports (MESIR). Paul, J. "Development of a Revolution." No. 62. pp 19-23. November 1977.

³⁸ Connell, Dan. "Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution." 1998. Red Sea Press. Princeton, NJ.

³⁹ Kagnew Station Homepage. "History of Kagnew Station". <http://www.kagnewstation.com/history/index.html>

During the economic stagnation of the early 1970s, a Soviet-backed Ethiopian movement, the Worker's Party of Ethiopia, produced a leader: Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam. Miriam claimed a connection to Haile Selassie through an ancestor who had been a tribal midwife at Selassie's birth. In a palace coup, on 22 August 1974, the aging Haile Selassie was seized from his bed and taken to a secret location. A hastily assembled Revolutionary Council ordered the execution of 59 members of the royal family. In early 1975, Selassie was suffocated in his sleep and buried under a palace latrine.⁴⁰



© Hans van der Splinter
Monument in Asmara

Mengistu and his party created the era of the “Derg,” or the Marxist revolutionary committee. Parliament was dissolved and the “Derg” became the central authority. A reign of “Red Terror” ensued. On 9 March 1975, “Black Sunday,” forces of Mengistu gunned down 200 innocent civilians in the Eritrean town of Akordat. Other massacres against Eritreans followed.⁴¹ During the Red Terror of 1977-78, several thousand opponents of Mengistu were hunted down and summarily executed; their bodies left on the streets as a warning to others.⁴²

Over the next ten years there were several Ethiopian offensives to capture Eritrea. Border areas were seized but the Ethiopians were unable to completely subdue Eritrea province. Indeed, following the consolidation of Eritrean forces under the EPLF in 1988, the Eritreans began to win battles. They took Afabet in 1988 and the important town of Keren in 1989. There followed the fierce battle for the Port of Massawa in 1990.⁴³ As the Eritreans grew stronger, resistance within Ethiopia to Miriam and the socialist government began to grow as well. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) emerged as a united opposition front to defeat Mengistu.

The EPRDF's March to Addis Ababa in 1989 was the beginning of the end for the Marxist government. The Ethiopian economy was in ruin as support from defunct Eastern European socialist regimes ceased. The Soviet Union, which had supported Mengistu and supplied arms to Ethiopia, was also about to fall. Mengistu Miriam, who saw the end of his military rule approaching, fled the country on 21 May 1991. The dictator who is was responsible for massive human rights violations, murders and massacres, and the starvation of more than one million Ethiopians, found refuge in Zimbabwe, where he lives to this day, a wealthy and guarded man.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Iyob, Ruth. “The Eritrean Struggle for Independence.” 1997. Cambridge University Press. London.

⁴¹ History World. Plain Text Histories. “Ethiopia.”

<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=2114&HistoryID=ab92>

⁴² Somaliand Times. “Ethiopia: Ruling in Col. Mengistu Case Postponed.” 27 May 2006.

<http://somalilandtimes.net/sl/2005/227/6.shtml>

⁴³ Eritrean Community Center in Minnesota. “Eritrean History.” <http://www.nitesoft.com/eccm/history.htm>

⁴⁴ DictatorforHire.com. “Mengistu Haile Mariam.”

<http://www.dictatorforhire.com/mengistu-haile-mariam.shtml>

Recent Events

With the collapse of Mengistu's government in 1991, the final push for independence in Eritrea began. Eritreans were mobilized and educated by the EPLF to form a provisional government. In April 1993, this government held a referendum on independence and 99% of the voters opted for independence under the banner of the EPLF. On 24 May 1993, the newly elected President Isaias Afwerki, leader of the EPLF, took power. The EPLF was immediately dissolved and replaced with a new party, the People's Front for Justice and Democracy (PFDJ). It has remained the only legal party since the revolution.⁴⁵



In the months following, President Afwerki and the National Assembly worked together to improve the welfare of Eritreans and the standing of the nation in two basic areas. Their first concern was internal policy. The Assembly worked diligently to improve the infrastructure, creating roads and electricity grids, extending the phone system and establishing schools and hospitals. They also drew up a provisional constitution creating laws and policies to protect human rights and to repair the economy. A more complete version of the constitution was approved in 1997. Yet within a few years, those rights were quickly eclipsed as the government of EPLP Eritrea became a repressive state.

Initially, the country's leaders were determined to create good foreign policy – the second area of concern. They took pains to create good relations with major regional and world powers: the US and the European Union, the Gulf Arab States, and Asian powers (e.g. China). They rightly believed that the wealthier nations of the world would provide development aid. World powers were indeed quick to respond, creating economic aid and development packages that have continued over the past twelve years. The United States alone provided more than USD65 million in foreign aid to Eritrea in 2004 and 2005. Continued foreign aid, however, is in jeopardy since major contributors are making their foreign aid contingent upon the improvement of human rights in Eritrea.⁴⁶

The growth and development of Eritrea have not been without setbacks. Relations with Ethiopia have been tense and armed conflict has simmered for 12 years. Efforts to normalize relations with Ethiopia have centered on the establishment of mutually recognized borders. More than 40,000 soldiers have been killed on both sides and over 300,000 troops remain stationed along the 800-km (480-mile) border. In May through November 1998, Eritrean forces bombed and shelled several Ethiopian towns, killing several hundred. Ethiopians responded in 1999 by attacking the Eritrean border town of Badame. Neither side prevailed, and on 12 December 2000, a peace treaty was signed in the presence of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and UN mediators.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. "Eritrea, 1994." <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9111701/eritrea>

⁴⁶ US Department of State Background Notes. "Eritrea." <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2854.htm>

⁴⁷ GlobalSecurity.org. Military. "Ethiopia/ Eritrea War." 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/eritrea.htm>

Following the treaty, the United Nations took several major steps toward resolving the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two most prominent actions were the establishment of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC). As a result of the recommendations of military observers in UNMEE, a peacekeeping force of 4,300 was dispatched on 15 March 2001 to patrol the frontier between the two countries. As an additional measure, the UN established taskforces to study the food needs of Eritreans, as well as the sale and supply of weapons to states in the Horn of Africa.⁴⁸



© Dawit Rezené
UN soldiers monitoring
Ethiopia-Eritrea boundary

The work of the boundary commission has been rather more complicated. The proposed settlement of final boundary issues was rejected by Eritrea in 2003, and has remained disputed until the present. Likewise, the United Nations Ethiopian Eritrean Claims Commission (UNEECC), acting under the authority of the High Court in The Hague, awarded a claim settlement to Eritrea for aerial bombings on the western front. This proposed settlement of claims was rejected as insufficient by Eritrea on 19 December 2005 and the border dispute rages on. With threats of insurgency from neighboring states and the continued proliferation of weapons in the Horn of Africa, the viability of the Eritrean state is in jeopardy.

There is, however, a far greater threat to democracy within Eritrea. The government of President Afwerki has become increasingly intolerant of internal criticism and dissent. On 25 September 2001, all private media ownership was suspended. Since that time, dissidents and journalists have disappeared. There are more than 400,000 Eritrean refugees living in exile in neighboring countries. Government detention centers and prisons, like Adi Abeto, Embatka, Eriairo, and Dogola, are infamous. In September 2002, Haile Woldetensae, the government minister in charge of border negotiations, disappeared from his home and has not been heard from since. In July 2003, the Voice of America (VOA) journalist, Aklilu Solomon, vanished, and on 24 January 2004, thirty-eight Jehovah's Witnesses were captured. Only 18 have since been released.⁴⁹

Human rights organizations worldwide have become aware of these repressive measures and human rights violations. In late 2005, Human Rights Overview documented Eritrean interference with UN humanitarian activities as well as the arrest, imprisonment, and torture of political dissenters. In October 2006, the French organization *Reporters Sans Frontieres* (Reporters without Borders) asked the Eritrean Embassy to confirm the death of three of the many journalists held in the infamous desert prison, Eriairo. As with all such queries, the government's response has been "you have no right to ask this question."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea. General Overview. <http://www.unmeeeonline.org/index.php?option>

⁴⁹ Amnesty International. Eritrea. "You have no right to ask - Government resists scrutiny on human rights." 19 May 2004. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engaf640032004>

⁵⁰ Human Rights Overview Eritrea .. <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/eritre12307>

Timeline of Eritrean History

7000 BCE Archaeological evidence of early human habitation in Buya region

2400 BCE Commerce between ancient Egypt and the Land of Punt (Eritrea) as evidenced by modern archeological findings in Egyptian monuments and pyramids

1980 BCE Mentuhotep, Pharaoh of 11th-Dynasty Egypt, visits Punt

1260 BCE Ramses III, Pharaoh of 20th -Dynasty Egypt, visits rulers of Punt

750-656 BCE The Kingdom of Kush in coastal Ethiopia flourishes under the protection of the pharaoh.

330 BCE Egyptian pharaonic dynasties come to an end. Era of the Greek-Macedonian Ptolemys begins in Egypt.

100 CE Beginning of Kingdom of Aksum (Axum) in the south of present-day Eritrea

200 CE Greek traders arrive in Aithiopiai, land of the “burnt faces.”

325 CE King Exana of Aksum converts to Christianity and makes it the official religion.

400 CE The largest of the stela (obelisks) at Aksum is erected.

500 CE Persian Sassanid forces drive Aksumites from Yemen and western Arabia.

571 CE Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, is born in Mecca, Arabia.

622 CE Muhammed’s followers leave Mecca on the Hegira, fleeing to Medina. Some migrate to Ethiopian coast and are received by the Negusa (King) Yekuna Amlak.

710 CE Feuding Muslim communities on the coast destroy the Aksum port city of Adulis, weakening the Aksum trade empire.

916 CE King Mara Tekle of Ethiopian highlands founds the Zagwe dynasty (916 – 1270).

1270 The Zagwe Dynasty comes to an end and Yekuna Amlak becomes the first Solomonic king of Ethiopia.

1320 The Solomonic kings oppose the founding of an autonomous Jewish state, Beta Israel, in land of Kush (Ethiopia). Rabbi David Zimra in Cairo (a.k.a. Radbaz) declares these Jews to be members of the tribe of Dan.

1450 The highpoint of Christian Orthodox art under the abbots. Influenced by Orthodox religious artists in Europe, Ethiopian Christians produce icons, triptychs (altar panels), and decorated manuscripts.

1557 Ottoman Turks seize and occupy the offshore islands and some coastal communities, beginning a 300-year occupation of the coastal regions.

1590 Phillip II, King of Spain, sends Jesuit missionaries to Ethiopia.

1633 Abyssinian King Fasilades rejects Roman Catholicism and expels and kills the Spanish and Portuguese Jesuit missionaries.

1650 – 1750 The era of the Egyptian Death or century of Black Plague in Ethiopia. Doctors estimate that 50% of the indigenous population was decimated by several waves of the plague.

1805 Mohammed Ali Pasha becomes Turkish Viceroy in Egypt and reasserts historical claims to Ottoman settlements in Ethiopia.

1840 Italians open a consulate in Massawa.

1849 British consulate opens in Massawa. Muhammed Ali Pasha dies.

1853 Egyptians occupy Eritrea after Battle of Keren.

1869 The Egyptian Khedive Isma'el opens the Suez Canal and massive Red Sea traffic begins.

1888 Italians declare port of Assab a protectorate.

1889 Treaty of Uccialli between King Menelik II and Italians makes Italy a protector of Eritrea colony.

1890 1 January, Italy creates the Colony of Eritrea.

1896 1 March, Battle of Adwa. Emperor Menilek II drives Italian forces from Ethiopia

1911 Italian engineers complete first rail link between Massawa and Asmara.

1914 As a client of former Ottoman Empire under Egyptian rule, Abyssinia aligns itself with Italy against the Hapsburg German alliance.

1915 23 May, Italy enters World War I on the side of Allied Powers.

1919 28 June, Treaty of Versailles is signed, ending World War I.

1923 Ethiopia is accepted into the League of Nations with support of France and Italy.

1928 Mussolini signs a Treaty of Friendship with Ethiopia, but sends troops to Eritrea and Somalia.

1929 Ethiopia takes delivery of six Potez Biplanes for its fledgling air force and army.

1930 Ras Tafari Makkonen (Haile Selassie), Lion of Judah, is crowned Emperor of Ethiopia.

1933 Ras Destu Demtu, son-in-law of Haile Selassie, becomes first Ethiopian Ambassador in Washington.

1935 September, Using Eritrea as his main base, Mussolini invades Ethiopia with 80,000 troops. Italians and French sign Treaty of Somaliland, giving Italy a strip of land between Eritrea and French Somaliland, and rights to the Djibouti-Addis Ababa Railway.

1936 Italian forces capture Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie flees the country.

1941 General Lorenzini, Italian Desert Fox, killed on 18 March. Eritrea falls to the British on 1 April.

1942 8 May, United States Navy opens Naval Repairs Depot at Massawa.

1943 17 May, 3176th Signals Service Detachment of US Army opens intercept station outside Asmara, Eritrea.

1946 Eritrea is administered by Four Powers Commission of the UN.

1951 September, UN Resolution 390 makes Eritrea the 14th province of Ethiopia.

1958 10 March, General workers strike in Asmara.

1962 Eritrean Armed Resistance against Ethiopia begins in western lowlands.

1974 Haile Mengistu Miriam emerges as head of Marxist Workers' Party in Ethiopia. In August, Miriam seizes power. Selassie is captured.

1975 Haile Selassie "dies" in custody and is buried under palace latrine. 9 March, Black Sunday, 200 innocent civilians gunned down by Mengistu's forces.

1977-78 The Red Terror: open massacre of critics of Mengistu's regime.

1988 Eritrean liberation forces consolidate under the EPLF with headquarters in Nakfa.

1989 Ethiopian workers and students of the EPRDF march on Addis Ababa, protesting the excesses of the Mengistu government.

1991 Mengistu Haile Miriam flees the country and finds refuge in Zimbabwe.

1993 23 May, Eritrea is declared a free and independent country.

1997 Eritrean Constitution is adopted. Its currency, the Nakfa, is traded as a floating currency on the world market.

1998-2001 Border conflict with Ethiopia over common boundary rages for more than two years. An estimated 40,000 combatants are killed.

2000 A treaty between Ethiopia and Eritrea is brokered by the UN and OAU on 12 December. UN Border Commission and UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea are established.

2001 On 15 March, a UN peacekeeping force of 4,300 is sent to border regions. Private ownership of news media is suspended. Dissidents and critics of the Afwerki government are imprisoned.

2002 Government minister for border affairs, Woldetensae, is arrested and imprisoned.

2003 Eritrea Airlines begins international service to Europe. British geologist, Terry Nutt, is killed by Eritrean Islamic Jihad terrorists with links to Sudan and Somali Al-Qa'eda factions.

2004 Ethiopian Parliament votes to accept the 2002 decision of the UN Boundary Commission. Thirty-eight Jehovah's Witnesses are arrested by state security office.

2005 Eritrea expels UN border observers. UN fears war as Eritrea moves troops to border regions. US State Department report, VISTA 2005, declares Eritrea a zone of humanitarian disaster based on drought, famine, and refugees of conflict.

2006 In November, the State Department lists Eritrea with Iran, North Korean, and Saudi Arabia as nations that violate religious freedoms. Eritrea goes on record as supporting the Islamic Courts movement of Somalia.

2006 12 December, the BBC reports that Haile Mengistu Miriam is found guilty of genocide and war crimes by the UN courts after an 11-year trial.

Economy

Introduction

More than a century of colonial exploitation and 30 years of civil war have debilitated Eritrea's economy. With 80% of the population working on farms, Eritrea's economy can be called agricultural. Its annual per capita income of USD220 ranks it fifth from the bottom of all world nations. It is just ahead of countries like Burundi (USD100), Liberia (USD130), and Guinea Bissau (USD180).⁵¹ Yet Eritreans are an industrious people determined to defend their independence, wage war on poverty, and build a stable national economy. Their motto has been "progress through self-reliance." They pride themselves on never having accepted development aid, which has had conditions attached. The government asserts that it is committed to maintaining its market economy and privatization. All indices of the World Trade Organization (WTO) show the Eritrean economy in steady but slow growth.⁵²



© Eric Lafforgue
Two men plowing a field

⁵¹ The World Bank. Annual Report 2006. "Country Eligibility for Borrowing from the World Bank."
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/EXTANNREP/EXTANNREP2K6/0,,contentMDK:21046862~menuPK:2915976~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:2838572,00.html>

⁵² World Trade Organization. Eritrea: Basic Indicators. September 2006.
<http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBCountryPFView.aspx?Language=E&Country=ER>

Industry

During the civil war that was also a war of liberation, Ethiopia dismantled more than 40% of Eritrea's factories. Many of the factories dated from the period of Italian colonization. By the time of independence in 1993, all production had stopped.

Those factories left standing were badly in need of repair and investment.⁵³ The prewar industrial base rested largely on agricultural exports such as tobacco, textiles, leather goods, and

minerals such as granite, marble, and salt. Following independence, and with the aid of foreign investment, Eritrea has been able to expand and diversify this base. In 2005, there were 2500 small-to-medium-sized factories producing goods such as beverages, processed foods, chemicals, metal products and construction materials.⁵⁴



© Hans van der Splinter
Massawa docks

Future industrial growth centers on two areas: the exploitation of petroleum resources in the Red Sea area, and the continued growth of the construction industry. Geological surveys have determined that there are significant oil and gas deposits in the northeast of Eritrea and in offshore areas near the Dahlak Islands.⁵⁵ Since 2001, a few energy development concessions have been granted to international explorations firms such as the US-based CSM Energy. Smaller grants were also issued to Pakistani and Chinese companies. To date, none of the test sites have produced oil or gas in amounts that can be commercially exploited. The Chinese continue to invest heavily in Eritrea's energy development sector. A Soviet-era oil refinery at Assab that was mothballed in 1997 is to be redesigned and outfitted in anticipation of resumed activity.⁵⁶

The construction industry, however, is the only industry that has demonstrated robust growth in infrastructure projects such as building power plants, roads, hospitals, and schools, and upgrading seaport and airport facilities. This growth is being fueled in part by continued funding from the World Bank. In July 2006, the World Bank designated 33% of its funds for the fiscal year (USD85 million) to infrastructure construction projects.⁵⁷

⁵³ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. "Eritrea: Industry." <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-37658/Eritrea>

⁵⁴ Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Eritrea: Industry." 2006.
<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Eritrea-INDUSTRY.html>

⁵⁵ University of South Carolina Geology Department. USC Sequence Strategy Web. "Plate Tectonics on Evaporite Accumulation: Preamble and Summary." 2005.
<http://strata.geol.sc.edu/thinsections/caco3-evaporites.html>

⁶ Eritrea Technical Exchange Project. Dr. Van Buskirk, Robert. "Eritrea Climate, Energy, Environment and Technology Site." 2003. <http://www.punchdown.org/rvb/>

⁵⁷ The World Bank. "Eritrea: Country Brief. Lending by Sectors." 2007.
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/ERITREAEXT/0,,menuPK:351396~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:351386,00.html>

Banking

Eritrea inherited a defunct banking system from socialist Ethiopia. The Ethiopian military junta had nationalized all financial institutions in 1984. At independence, the National Bank of Eritrea was designated to become the Central Bank, responsible for regulating the currency and all domestic and foreign payments. The Commerce Bank of Eritrea (CBE) would service the fledgling private financial sector. Growth was

sluggish until the Financial Institution Proclamation of 1997, which established the Nakfa as the official currency. It also supported the policy of privatization by liberalizing the banking and insurance sectors and by making the Nakfa a currency tradable on the foreign currency exchanges. Eritrea remains a member and client of all UN financial and banking agencies including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁵⁸



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Nakfa, the Eritrean currency

From the late 1990s, the banking industry began to grow, albeit slowly. In addition to the Central Bank and the Commerce Bank, both of which are state-regulated, two more banks appeared: the Housing and Commerce Bank (HCB) and the Eritrean Development and Investment Bank (EDIB). Since 2000, these banks have been issuing dollar-denominated certificates of deposit in the amount of USD1000. Current planning in the banking sector calls for the establishment of offshore Eritrean banking facilities in the hopes of attracting investors from the Middle East. Yet, in spite of 4.8% economic growth in 2005, there are currently no foreign banks operating in Eritrea.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Encyclopedia of the Nations. Eritrea: Banking and Securities." 2006.

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Eritrea-BANKING-AND-SECURITIES.html>

⁵⁹ Library of Congress Federal Research Division. Country Profile: Eritrea. September 2006.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Eritrea.pdf>

Trade

It is better for a nation to export more than it imports. Without a viable manufacturing base and with only a weak agricultural base, Eritrea has traditionally imported much more than it could sell abroad. However, since 2003, this trend has been reversing and, thanks to a growing Middle Eastern market, Eritrean exports are increasing slowly (USD33.6 million in 2005). Exports include foodstuffs (e.g. canned goods, cooking oils, pasta, and cheese), and beverages such as beer, liquor, soft drinks, and mineral water. Other exports include tobacco and textiles, e.g., fabrics, yarn, knitwear, sacks, twine, blankets, and cotton bedding. These products are in addition to traditional export items: leather, granite, marble and salts.⁶⁰

One very promising development is the recent Gateway to Africa Project (GAP) sponsored by the United Arab Emirates state of Dubai. Under GAP, Eritrean ports have become the East Africa trade distribution portal for Dubai's manufactured goods. Current plans call for some of Dubai's free port manufacturing base to be relocated to Eritrean ports. With domestic expenditures on defense, humanitarian issues, and fighting drought decreasing, Eritrea has more capital to inject into its developing industrial base. Of the approximately 2,500 existing factories in mid 2006, only 45 were under national control. The rest are privately held. The popular slogan "more sweat, less debt" can be observed operating at the national level.⁶¹

⁶⁰ World Trade Organization. "Eritrea: Basic Indicators." September 2006.
<http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBCountryPFView.aspx?Language=E&Country=ER>

⁶¹ Africa Business Pages. "Eritrea – Gateway to Africa."
<http://www.africa-business.com/features/eritrea.html>

Energy

Eritrea has a long way to go toward being energy self-sufficient. This can only happen if oil and gas exploration prove productive. In 2005, it was consuming nearly 8,000 bbl/day of oil and selective petrol rationing was introduced in an effort to reduce imports. Non-commercial gasoline consumers were mostly affected by this measure. During the same period, 270.9 million kw/h of electrical power were generated and 251.9 were consumed. Of this amount, 54% of all energy was allocated to the industrial sector. Most domestic consumption of electricity is in the cities – remote rural areas are largely without electricity. At present, only 26% of Eritrean homes, rural and urban, are connected to the national electricity grid.⁶²



© Eric Lafforgue
Street vendor

Several initiatives are expected to augment local energy production. These are bio-mass generation, and solar and wind energy. The first two sources can be of potential value to individual consumers. Wind power, however, can be fed into the national power grid. An extensive wind power generation program is being carried out by Lawrence Livermore Labs of California in the wind-rich corridor south of Assab. Large banks of generators (which at wind speeds of 10m/hr (30ft/hr) can generate 2kw/hr each) are being constructed as part of a developmental aid program. This energy is being fed into the national power grid.⁶³

Resources

Eritrea's list of natural resources includes a good number of minerals, some of which have yet to be fully exploited. These include major deposits of gold, zinc, copper, feldspar, mica, potash, marble, granite, salt, and gas and oil deposits. Petroleum reserves have yet to move from the maps of geological surveys to actual commercial production. The area of land cultivation is limited by the climate and lack of water. The Red Sea, however, provides fish for the domestic market and even has the potential to support export of frozen or dried fish. Given better water management and conservation, there is potential for greater growth in the domestic agriculture and dairy industries.⁶⁴

⁶² Dr. Van Buskirk, Robert. "The Eritrean Energy Sector." <http://www.punchdown.org/rvb/energy/EngSector.html>

⁶³ Dr. Van Buskirk, Robert & Lebassi, Bereket. "Numerical Simulation of Wind Distributions for Resource Assessment in Southeastern Eritrea, East Africa." <http://www.punchdown.org/rvb/wind/EriSouthWind20050715.pdf>

⁶⁴ CIA World Factbook. "Eritrea." 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/er.html>

Tourism

The government has been promoting tourism heavily for the past five years in the hopes of creating an industry that will create jobs and bring foreign capital into the country. The lack of an infrastructure to support the influx of foreign visitors means that tourism in Eritrea is a matter of “roughing it” in pursuit of adventure. The national carrier, Eritrean Airlines, which began operating in 2003 with leased Boeing short- and long-haul aircraft, connects Eritrea with other Africa cities and major European airports.



© Charles Roffery
Mural in Assab

The government promotes two kinds of tourism: nature tourism and heritage tourism. Nature tourism concentrates on the abundant natural attractions of the country. There are the bird and wildlife habitats of the elephant and lion, and the splendid marine life in the coral reefs of the Red Sea. There are also unique natural features such as the Danakil Depression, which lies 100m (330 feet) below sea level. The hot springs of Makwaar and Arafayle, and the endless white sandy beaches and the Dahlak Archipelago are also part of nature tourism. Lastly, there are the highland plateaus and splendid views of the escarpment on the road from Massawa to Asmara.

Heritage tourism allows the tourist to experience Eritrean traditions and architectural and archaeological heritage. There are historic and prehistoric sites such as the ancient cave paintings of Qo Haito and Himbirti, and the British and Italian War Cemeteries. Also of great interest are the Ottoman buildings in the main cities and the Orthodox churches of the 11th through 14th centuries, carved into mountain stone. Likewise, there are traditional celebrations such as the three-hour coffee ceremony and Tigrinya folk art, displaying colorful dress, dance and music.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Shaebia National Tourism Office. Eritrea Nature Tourism.
http://www.shaebia.org/hatewil/Eritrea_Tourism/Eritrea%20Tourism%20folder/Eritrea%20Tourism/nature.html

Transportation

Much of the transportation network in Eritrea was begun under the Italians. The 306 km (190 miles) of railway, laid in two stretches (Massawa-Asmara and Asmara-Akordat), were completed in 1922. Of the 17 airports in the country, two are designated international and have runways that can accommodate larger jet aircraft: Asmara and Massawa. Travel inside the country is usually by hired taxi or rental car for tourists. The network of paved roads is somewhat limited. Of 4,010 km (2,400 miles) of roads, only 874 km (535 miles) are paved. Public bus service both inside Asmara and between the major cities is good and reliable. With a conversion rate of USD1 = 15 Nakfa, the bus fare from Asmara to Asseb 676 km (420 miles) is reasonable at 200 Nakfa USD13.50). Boat service to Dahlak Island is available, but it is run by a private charter service operating out of Massawa and fares must be negotiated.⁶⁶



© Rockoctopus/flickr.com
Massawa island causeway

Outlook

The economic outlook for Eritrea is not bleak, but it is uncertain. Many analysts forecast slow yet robust growth through 2007.⁶⁷ Long-term economic growth is dependent on sustaining the fragile political stability. It can be jeopardized by a number of factors such as protracted border disputes, excessive military spending, high fuel prices, lack of qualified manpower, and insurgencies in neighboring countries. In particular, Eritrean support for the nascent Islamic Courts movement in Somalia, siding with Somali insurgents in a border dispute against Ethiopia, could prove disastrous for Eritrea.

⁶⁶ Mebrat Tzehaie. "Transport in / to Eritrea." <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-transport.htm>

⁶⁷ The World Bank. Eritrea. "Growth Prospects are Strong, but Social, Environmental Pressures from Globalization Need More Attention."

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/ERITREAEXT/0,,contentMDK:21163898~menuPK:351392~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:351386,00.html>

Society

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Eritrea is a multicultural society. It is composed of nine principal ethnic groups: Tigrinya, Tigre, Kunama, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, Rashaida, and Saho. Each has its own language, traditions, and tribal region. Yet there are some common denominators. For example, approximately half the country is Coptic Christian. Most Coptic Christians are found among the Tigrinya (95%), the Bilen (30%), and the Kunama (10%), while 47% of the total population is Muslim and comes from the remaining tribes.⁶⁸ About 3% of the total population is either Roman Catholic or Protestant. Likewise, although there are nine basic tribal groups, they are mutually recognizable due to their distinctive dress and, in many cases, inherited features.⁶⁹



© Eric Lafforgue
Rashaida women and girls

Eritrea is also a multilingual society and many citizens have knowledge of a second, sometimes third, language. Both the Tigrinya language and Arabic are official languages of Eritrea and are understood by most of the country's citizens. The other tribal languages, however, are all legally recognized. Tigrinya is a descendent of the ancient Ge'ez language, which today is only used in the rituals of the Coptic Church. It is a cousin to other Semitic languages, such as Arabic. It has a distinctive script with over 200 different characters and word endings that vary according to the speaker. The second most common language, Tigre, is also a Semitic language. Most of the other tribal languages belong to the Cushitic language group. Finally, there are two other non-Eritrean languages that are popular and widely understood: English and Italian.⁷⁰

Religions

The two principal religions, Christianity and Islam, are equally represented in Eritrea. Membership largely follows tribal membership, with some tribes split among the two religions. Since independence, smaller Protestant Christian sects have gained members mostly through missionary conversions. These sects have been more successful in gaining converts among the Coptic Tigrinya population than among Muslims. One such group, the Jehovah's Witnesses, ran afoul of the government in 2003 and several of its leaders were imprisoned along with conscientious objectors. Some have been released, others remain in prison. Since that time, religious freedoms have been shrinking. The government has required non-traditional religious groups to register and file a statement describing the nature of their religion.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ethnomed.org. "Voices of the Eritrean Community." January 1996. <http://ethnomed.org/voices/eritrean.html>

⁶⁹ The Africa Guide. African People and Culture. 2007. <http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/index.htm>

⁷⁰ Eritrean Community Center in Minnesota. "Languages in Eritrean." <http://www.nitesoft.com/eccm/languages.htm>

⁷¹ US Dept. of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. "Eritrea. International Religious Freedom Report 2005." <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51471.htm>

Traditions

Several public holidays are celebrated by all Eritreans.

Likewise, there are celebrations which differ from one tribe or religious group to another. The first of the four public holidays is Fenkil Day, 10 February. This commemorates the resistance operation of 1990 to liberate the port city of Massawa. The next holiday is Liberation Day, or Independence Day, 24 May.

Martyr's Day, on 20 June, is usually celebrated by planting trees in public gardens, and is basically a remembrance day for those who fell in the struggle for independence. The last of the public holidays, Armed Resistance Day, is on 1 September, and it honors the day in 1961 when Eritrea began its armed struggle against Ethiopia. Public holidays are usually marked by noisy processions through the streets and by displays of folk art and music.



© Hans van der Splinter
Festival Dancers

Other major holidays are basically religious in nature and are either Christian Coptic Orthodox or Muslim in origin. Christian festivals follow a solar calendar (based on the earth's annual orbit around the sun) and the dates do not change, whereas Muslim festivals follow the lunar calendar (based on moon's 28-day orbit around the earth) and the dates vary from year to year. The Christian festivals are: Leddet (Coptic Christmas), 7 January; Timket (Epiphany), 19 January; Tensae (Easter); Miriam Dearit (Virgin Mary in Keren Province only), 29 May; Keddus Johannes (Coptic New Year), 11 September; Meskel (Discovery of the True Cross), 28 September. The center of Christian celebration is the church on most occasions.⁷²

Muslim holidays are fewer in number and are mostly celebrated in family or tribal circles. They begin with Muharrem (Muslim New Year). After that come Mawlid al-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet), Eid al-Fitry (feast following fasting month of Ramadan), and Eid al-Adha (feast of sacrifice follows the month of pilgrimages – Hajj).

⁷² Home Planet Eritrea. Mebrat Tzahaie. "Celebration of historical events in Eritrea." <http://home.planet.nl/~hans.mebrat/eritrea-history.htm> - holidays

Hospitality

In all parts of Eritrea, regardless of ethnic or religious background, guests are received with great deference. In spite of the country's extreme poverty, a host will extend the maximum of hospitality. At the very least, a visitor will be asked to stay to dinner. In Asmara or any large town, this can mean a cuisine that reflects the Italian colonial period: pasta with spicy meat and vegetable sauces. In rural areas, the kitchen is poorer and the fare much simpler. People in the highlands eat *injerra* (a flat pancake bread) together with spicy meat sauces. In the lowlands and coastal areas, *asida*, a porridge made from sorghum, is popular.⁷³



© Terry O'Sullivan
A traditional coffee ceremony

A guest might also be treated to the traditional coffee ceremony which can take up to three hours to complete. This begins with the roasting of the green coffee beans. Thereupon follows the grinding of the beans in a special mortar. There are songs sung to accompany each phase of the ritual. Next, there is the threefold boiling of the coffee in special long-handled pots. Finally, the coffee is served in three rounds, each of which has a special name: *awol* is the first round, *kale eyti* the second, and *bereke* (or blessing), the third. It would be a breach of etiquette to leave before the obligatory third round is drunk.⁷⁴

⁷³ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Eritrea." <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html>

⁷⁴ Trekearth.com. "Coffee Ceremony." <http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Africa/Eritrea/photo124243.htm>

Engagement and Marriage

Although Eritrean marriage customs were traditionally regulated by tribe and religion, the state is asserting its role in defining legal aspects of marriage. Under Article 46 of the Citizens' Rights Proclamation of 1997, the government permits marriage between two adults without consent at the age of 18. Marriage may take place with parent's consent at the age of 16. Engagements may take place at an earlier age. In practice, however, many girls are betrothed as early as 8 years of age; the actual marriage taking place when she is 14 or 15. Marriages for both Christian and Muslim families are frequently arranged and the consent of the bride and groom is given in the presence of the family. It is uncommon for girls to be forced or coerced into marriage. Likewise, marriage between Christian and Muslim families is very uncommon.⁷⁵



© Eric Lafforgue
Eritrean couple

Marriage and wedding customs differ between Christians and Muslims, but both limit the wedding celebration to one day. The Christian ceremony, whether Coptic Orthodox or Roman Catholic, is conducted by a priest; the Muslim ceremony consists of signing a marriage contract in the presence of the families and an Imam or Islamic clergyman. On the wedding day, the women of both families tattoo their hands and faces and march through the village or city streets, singing and beating drums. A tent is set up to receive guests and serve a festive meal. There are colorful costumes and traditional dances. At Christian weddings, men, often the groom himself, serve *suwa* to the guests. This is a fermented alcoholic drink made from honey and grain. Muslims do not serve alcoholic beverages but they do serve a festive meal including lamb, goat, or beef.⁷⁶

Arts – Dance and Music

Eritrea folk art is not a thing for galleries or public decoration. Folk art is the vehicle that carries and preserves the traditions and culture of the people. Coptic churches are decorated with the art works of painters going back to the 14th century. Likewise, colorful tribal costumes and designs can be seen in each of the nine major tribes. The most important forms of folk art, however, are music and dance. Every important social event in an individual's life, (e.g., birth, marriage, or religious festival) is accompanied by music or dance, sometimes both. The music and dance of the Kunama are known to be among the most colorful and exciting. Musical instruments like the *krar* and *wata* (stringed), *shambko* (flute), and the *embilta* (reedy sounding horn) all date from the time when Eritrea and Ethiopia were one. There are also popular recording stars like Bereket Mengistaeb and Tekle Kiflemariam who can be heard and seen on the Eritrean radio and television service, respectively.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Right to Education.org. "Eritrea: Minimum age for marriage."
<http://www.right-to-education.org/content/age/eritrea.html>

⁷⁶ Asmera.nl. Mebrat Tzahaie. Eritrean Wedding. <http://www.asmera.nl/eritrea2006/eritrea6535.htm>

⁷⁷ Answers.com. Music of Eritrea. <http://www.answers.com/topic/music-of-eritrea>

Urban Life

Life in a town or city in Eritrea means being connected to the national electric grid and telephone network, as well as all the services and luxuries electricity provides. For UNICEF this means 24 % of the total population. It also means greater access to schools, hospitals, and reliable transportation. In cities and towns, the influence of colonial history can be seen and felt. Since Eritrea was Italy's showcase for all of Africa, the inland towns and cities still have an Italian flavor. Asmara, in fact, was called "little Rome."



© Terry O'Sullivan
Village in Eritrea

The cities are commercial centers where the agricultural products of the rural regions are bought and sold. Moreover, the cities of Eritrea are becoming centers for an urban elite consisting of civil servants, and business and professional men and women. Moreover, it is urban life that makes gender equity a reality, for it is here that educated Eritrean women can find good jobs in urban centers like Asmara. As education, commerce, and opportunities in the urban areas increase, there will most likely be a migration from rural areas to the cities.⁷⁸

Rural Life

For better or worse, rural life is everything that urban life is not. Over 75% of the population lives in rural areas. This means reduced access to water, telephone, electricity, schools, and transportation. It can also mean a lack of sanitation and greater exposure to regional diseases, such as malaria in the coastal regions and western lowlands. There are few factories in rural areas and the only income is that received through working the land: agriculture.

In rural areas, gender matters. Men work the fields plowing and planting. Boys tend flocks and herds, and girls assist their mothers in fetching water and helping in household chores. Since most of a family's wealth in rural regions comes from the land, the issue of land ownership, promised under the laws following independence, has become critical. In the rich highlands surrounding Asmara, where land ownership is inherited and where there is a higher population density, providing equal land right use has proven difficult. With the constitution guaranteeing everyone over 18 the right to use and cultivate the land he lives on, land reform is destined to remain a hot political issue that will not go away.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Eritrea." <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html>

⁷⁹ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Eritrea." <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html>

Health

Eritrea is one of the poorest countries of the world, and outside of the central highlands, the harsh climate contributes to health hazards. The coastal lowlands are hot and arid and a home to the anopheles malarial mosquito. Malaria is very common. Occasional epidemics of meningitis and leishmaniasis⁸⁰ are also common. HIV/AIDS, too, is a persistent problem, with 2.4% of the adult population infected. Yet the health statistics for the country improve year by year. In 1996, the life expectancy was 56.5 (for males) and 60.4 (for females). By 2004, the figures had changed: 58.0 (for males) and 62.0 (for females). The WHO coordinates the work of national and international agencies in the development of health care facilities. It has provided USD160 million in health care aid for the past four years. Likewise, USAID has contributed USD60 million annually for the past three years.⁸¹



© Charles Roffery
A roadside mural advertising health care

Education

Following independence, the Ministry of Education set educational goals for the country for a period of 15 years. The first goal is universal education in the native languages for primary schools and in English for secondary schools. Reducing adult illiteracy from 80% to 40% and establishing a network of trade and industrial schools were second and third goals, respectively. Lastly, there was the goal of the creation of a college and university system to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The law mandating basic education until the age of 16 is admittedly difficult to enforce in rural areas where schools and qualified teachers are unavailable. With the assistance of the international community and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) they have begun to meet these goals. As of 2005, there were more than 225,000 pupils in elementary schools and a total of 824 schools in the country. Moreover, there were two universities: the University of Asmara and the Institute of Science and Technology. Instruction is coeducational throughout the system.

⁸⁰ Leishmaniasis is a chronic and sometimes fatal skin infection that is transmitted by sand fleas.

⁸¹ World Health Organization. Eritrea. <http://www.who.int/countries/eri/en>

Sport and Recreation

Poverty has not deprived Eritreans of the need for sport and recreation. Soccer (football) is a passion for most youths who gather around the television to watch national and international matches, as well as the World Cup, which takes place every four years. Eritrea is a member of the Africa Cup Soccer League and has more than 200 soccer clubs and 5,000 registered players. Young people gather after school and at weekends to play. If a ball isn't available, they improvise by making soccer balls out of compacted cotton. Female athletes are becoming fond of the sport as well. Cycling is also a popular past time and the annual 91-km (55-mile) race between Asmara and Keren is a qualifying race for cyclists who want to enter international competitions. Lastly, there are traditional games as well. Children can be seen on the streets playing a pitch game called *gebeta*, also known as *mandala*, for which they use 48 dried peas and 6 empty cups. There is also a traditional hop and skip singing game for girls called *fti fti*.⁸²



© Libby A. Baker
Young soccer player

⁸²Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Cultural Profiles Project. "Eritrea: Sports and Recreation."
<http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/eritrea/sports.html>

Perspective

US-Eritrea Relations

The United States has had full diplomatic relations with the State of Eritrea since April 1993, when the first US ambassador arrived in Asmara. The US Embassy is located in a popular and fashionable street in Asmara: Franklin Delano Roosevelt Street. As of 2006, the American government continues to support the government of Eritrea with USD65 million in humanitarian aid annually, including USD58.1 million in food assistance and USD3.47 million in refugee support. Yet, there have been some reservations concerning continued foreign aid in light of the human rights abuses of recent years. The objective of US foreign policy with respect to Eritrea centers on four important areas. First, the US wishes to see peace with Ethiopia concluded. Secondly, it wishes to see the development of a viable democratic political system. In addition, the US wishes to see Eritrea a valuable player in stabilizing affairs in the region, i.e., the Horn of Africa. Lastly, the US desires an improvement in the economic, developmental, and humanitarian situation in Eritrea.⁸³



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Donald Rumsfeld meets with Isaiyah Afwerki

Outlook

Eritrea had the potential to be an integral part of a collective security arrangement in the Horn of Africa. Currently there are several forces and movements in border states that can act to destabilize the security of Eritrea and to jeopardize its continued development. Support by Eritrean Muslims for the Islamic Courts Movement and the Islamic Unity Party Movement in Somalia (against Ethiopia who opposes these movements) is seen as highly antagonistic. Moreover, such activity could further polarize Muslims in Eritrea and alienate them from their central government.

The political instability of Sudan is affecting Eritrea. The Christian Sudanese People's Liberation Front (SPLF) continues to operate in the south of the country in border areas with Eritrea. The Sudan was a host to more than 100,000 Eritreans during the war with Ethiopia. To please the US government, the government in Khartoum began negotiations with the SPLF but Sudanese leaders continue to embrace extremist Islamic positions. Negotiations are stalled. The Sudanese government, likewise, is avoiding a resolution of the conflict in Darfur.

⁸³ US Department of State. Bureau of African Affairs. Background Note: Eritrea. October 2006.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2854.htm>