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ERITREA

Mobilisation after the war in Tigray

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Summary

A power struggle and unresolved territorial disputes between Eritrea and Ethiopia resulted in a deadly border war lasting from 1998 to 2000. Tensions between the two countries remained high in the period that followed. However, this changed significantly when Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia in 2018. In September 2018, representatives of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement that ended the 'no war, no peace' situation. The rapprochement developed into a military alliance against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 2020 and led to open hostilities in Tigray in November of that year, with Eritrea directly involved through the deployment of ground troops. Eritrea was not, however, a party to the ceasefire that ended the war in November 2022. Differences of opinion between the two countries intensified following the outbreak of the Fano uprising in the Ethiopian region of Amhara and Abiy Ahmed's October 2023 speech on access to the Red Sea.

There is little information about the size of the Eritrean forces involved in the war in Tigray (November 2020 – November 2022). It is estimated that thousands of Eritrean conscripts were killed or wounded in the conflict. At the time this COI Focus was finalised, the Eritrean government had not released any information on the number of Eritrean casualties or the identities of those killed or missing.

The agreement between the Ethiopian authorities and the TPLF stipulates that foreign troops and soldiers not belonging to the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) must withdraw from Tigray. Various sources report an Eritrean military presence in northern Tigray. However, Eritrea denies this, stating that Eritrean troops are only present in regions allocated to Eritrea by the border commission. According to reports, the situation has returned to the 'no war, no peace' status quo that prevailed before 2018.

National service, whereby men and women of conscription age perform military or civilian duties for an indefinite period, is standard practice in Eritrea. According to various sources, there was a surge in mobilisation during the war in Tigray, with the local administration calling up more people for national service and using *giffas* (targeted searches) to reach a broader range of profiles. After September 2022, the recruitment and mobilisation campaign further intensified throughout the country, with increasingly coercive practices being employed. In September 2022, Eritrea called up all reservists up to the age of 55. As many ignored the call-up, the authorities stepped up the *giffas* and carried out house searches. They imposed collective punishments on the families of draft dodgers in an attempt to force them to report for duty.

Following the ceasefire and peace agreement in November 2022, these practices were initially still being reported by sources. However, the United States Department of State (USDOS) states that the mobilisation campaign has been declining in scale since January 2023, although the authorities are conducting security investigations and arresting individuals suspected of evading conscription.

In general, sources are unable to provide information on cases of individuals returning to Eritrea, and consequently on the risks they face. Returnees, including regime supporters, are subject to the arbitrary and inconsistent treatment characteristic of Eritrea, as are all other Eritrean citizens. Individuals returning to Eritrea who are of conscription age must fulfil their national service upon arrival, unless they have already done so or have an exemption. However, an important distinction exists between permanent and temporary return. Those who meet the government's requirements (paying a 2% tax and completing form 4/4.2) and have the legal right to reside in a country other than Eritrea are granted diaspora status. This exempts them from national military service and allows them to leave the country without an exit visa. These individuals can only return to Eritrea temporarily (for six to twelve months, sometimes extendable to two or three years), as permanent return would invalidate their diaspora status and make them liable for national service again.

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List of abbreviations

AMIF	Asylum Migration and Integration Fund
AU-MVCM	African Union Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mission
CoHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
EASO	European Asylum Support Office (currently EUAA)
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EEBC	Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission
EEPA	Europe External Programme with Africa
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Forces
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum (formerly EASO)
FFM	fact-finding mission
HRCE	Human Rights Concern – Eritrea
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDP	internally displaced person
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
OSAR	Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PRF	Peace Research Facility
RVI	Rift Valley Institute
SEM	State Secretariat for Migration
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TPF	Tigray Peace Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USDOS	United States Department of State
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

Introduction

This COI Focus examines mobilisation in Eritrea in the context of increased tensions in the Horn of Africa. It builds on the COI Focus *Eritrea. Mobilisatie in het kader van de oorlog in het noorden van Ethiopië* [Eritrea. Mobilisation in the context of the war in northern Ethiopia] of 18 August 2023.

This COI Focus mainly covers the period that follows the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the federal government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2022, which ended the war in Tigray.

Cedoca completed this research on 4 September 2025.

The report consists of two main sections. The first part addresses the general context of tensions in the Horn of Africa, focusing on the relations between Eritrea and neighbouring Ethiopia. The second part focuses on mobilisation in Eritrea. It first provides a brief overview of national conscription in Eritrea before describing the scope of mobilisation during the war and after the end of active hostilities in Tigray. It concludes with a discussion of the risks associated with mobilisation upon return.

By national service and military mobilisation, Cedoca refers to different but interrelated matters. National service is the general framework in Eritrea (see chapter 2.1.). This COI Focus uses terms such as "call-ups," "enlistment," and "recruitment" to describe how recruits are taken into the system of national conscription through the education system, local administration, or occasional roundups. During the war in Tigray (November 2020 – November 2022), some sources reported an increase in mobilisation in Eritrea. The local administration called up more people from a wider range of backgrounds for military service, including highly educated personnel working within the civilian component of national service, reservists and individuals who had previously been exempted or discharged from national service. The authorities also introduced new practices in the mobilisation campaign, such as evicting families who could not adequately explain the whereabouts of a conscripted family member.¹

It is difficult to ascertain the facts about conditions in Eritrea. There are no independent media outlets, national human rights organisations or interest groups that can monitor the situation in the country. Access to the country for academic researchers, journalists, and human rights organizations is restricted. The authorities disclose little to no information about the conditions of national service, the number of conscripts, or how demobilisation and discharge from national service are practised. There is also a lack of transparency regarding the implementation of legislation on conscription and illegal exit. Furthermore, the authorities do not publish any guidelines or implementing regulations. Most of the available information about national service originates from statements made by Eritreans who have left the country or is anecdotal information gathered by representatives of the international community in Asmara.²

This research draws on country of origin information (COI) reports from other governments, international media outlets, academic literature and reports from human rights and international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN). It also draws on publications from the Eritrean government.

Several individuals were contacted by Cedoca for the previous COI Focus. These included Martin Plaut, a journalist and researcher specialising in the Horn of Africa; academics with expertise in Eritrea; and a European military source in Addis Ababa. Cedoca asked them the following questions:

¹ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, telephone conversation, 10/07/2024

² EASO, 07/2019, pp. 11-13, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, [url](#)

- Are you aware of mobilisation efforts, in addition to the annual call-up of conscripts and *giffas* (roundups), to track down draft evaders?
- Are you aware of demobilisation campaigns after the end of the war in Tigray?

From 29 January to 6 February 2025, Cedoca undertook a fact-finding mission (FFM) to Eritrea, co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The mission aimed to collect information on national service and mobilisation, among other things. During the mission, Cedoca met with representatives from various Western and non-Western diplomatic missions with a permanent presence in Asmara, as well as representatives from UN institutions, the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), and other Eritrean sources. These sources are listed in the bibliography. All of the sources requested anonymity for security reasons. Diplomatic sources are cautious about disclosing information that could identify them or their staff. For this reason, Cedoca has omitted certain details that could facilitate identification when citing sources. As some contacts indicated that the movements of the FFM team may have been monitored during their stay in Asmara, Cedoca has also chosen not to mention the exact dates of the interviews.

The mission took place mainly in the capital, Asmara, and most of the individuals contacted were foreign diplomats. As the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) points out in the introduction to its 2019 report, foreign diplomats in Asmara do not have access to prisons, military camps, or internal Eritrean government documents relating to justice or military conscription.³ The information collected by the SEM is largely based on observations and oral accounts from acquaintances of these diplomats.⁴ This was also the case for the contacts during Cedoca's FFM. The SEM notes that these foreign diplomats are generally more familiar with the situation in Asmara and its surroundings, which often differs from other parts of the country. Therefore, the information from SEM and Cedoca regarding national service more often concerns the civilian component of national service in the capital than the military component.⁵ With regard to Eritrean sources, Cedoca notes that these are all individuals with good connections to the government.

Cedoca continuously monitors the security situation in Eritrea. In the event of any fundamental changes or developments that significantly alter the situation on the ground, Cedoca will update this COI Focus as soon as possible.

³ EASO, 07/2019, pp. 11-13, [url](#)

⁴ "You talk to privileged people who go to the same bars as western diplomats go to, middle-class people. It is never clear if the information you get is very individual or a general rule.": Diplomatic source H, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

⁵ EASO, 07/2019, pp. 11-13, [url](#)

1. General Context

1.1. Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia

The rivalry between Eritrea and the neighboring Ethiopian region of Tigray dates back to the civil war that began in the mid-1970s and ended in 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) jointly defeated the Ethiopian Derg regime. This resulted in the independence of Eritrea and the the TPLF taking power as the primary actor within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in Ethiopia.

A growing power struggle and unresolved territorial disputes between the two parties led to a border war that lasted from 1998 to 2000.⁶ During this period, until the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia in 2018, the neighbouring countries became increasingly estranged from each other. The countries maintained a tense relationship for almost two decades, with occasional incidents occurring. Although there was no direct war, Eritrea supported Ethiopian opposition groups in exile, and Ethiopia diplomatically isolated Asmara on the international stage.⁷

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea changed after Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia in 2018. In September 2018, representatives of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed an agreement in Jeddah titled *Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation*. Initially, the rapprochement led to benefits for both countries. Flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara resumed in July 2018, and the land border reopened in September of that year. Thousands of Eritreans took the opportunity to migrate to Ethiopia. In December 2018, Eritrea closed the border again, possibly to halt emigration.⁸

The agreements between the two leaders were shrouded in secrecy. The rapprochement developed in 2020 into a military alliance against the TPLF and escalated into open hostilities in Tigray in November of that year. For Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, the conflict represented an opportunity to destroy the TPLF, which he considers a significant security threat to Eritrea, and to take revenge for the border war. During the conflict, the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) gained control over border areas they had long claimed, including Badme.⁹

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA)—also known as the Pretoria Agreement—signed on 2 November 2022, ended the war. It is an agreement between the Ethiopian federal authorities and the TPLF. Eritrea, the regional authorities of Amhara, and the Amhara militias, which had sacrificed tens of thousands of troops and incurred high financial costs, were not involved in the negotiations or the agreement.¹⁰ These parties felt betrayed by Abiy after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement.¹¹ The CoHA draws attention to the disagreements between Eritrea and Ethiopia concerning the future of the Tigray region and the TPLF. These disagreements occasionally came to the fore during the conflict, but were suppressed by the fight against a common enemy.¹² While Abiy is willing to cede control over Tigray to a weakened TPLF, particularly to limit international reputational damage, Isaias seeks the

⁶ ICG, 09/11/2022, [url](#)

⁷ RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#)

⁸ RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#); Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

⁹ In 1998, an armed conflict broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In December 2000, the governments of both countries ended the border war by signing the Algiers Agreement, which provided for the establishment of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC). The Commission was tasked with demarcating the border between the two countries. Ethiopia reluctantly accepted the Commission's ruling but did not actively implement it and continued to occupy certain areas assigned to Eritrea by the EEBC, resulting in a tension that persisted until Abiy came to power in 2018: Permanent Court of Arbitration, n.d., [url](#); Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰ RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#); USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#); ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#)

¹¹ Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

¹² RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#); Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

destruction of the TPLF, according to Firehiwot Sintayehu, lecturer at Addis Ababa University.¹³ Michael Woldemariam, associate professor at the University of Maryland and senior fellow at the Center for International & Security Studies in Maryland, pointed out that Eritrea did not publicly oppose the CoHA but considered the agreement dangerous for national security due to the continued existence of the TPLF and a sizeable Tigray militia.¹⁴

A significant deterioration in relations between the two countries occurred after a speech by Abiy Ahmed in October 2023, in which he stated that securing access to the Red Sea is crucial for Ethiopia's survival.¹⁵ Regionally, Isaias sought rapprochement with the presidents of Kenya and Somalia, and repaired difficult ties with the president of Djibouti. In the Red Sea region, Eritrea looked to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, distancing itself from Prime Minister Abiy and Ethiopia.¹⁶ However, Eritrea's response was not limited to diplomatic manoeuvres. Reports emerged of military movements in the border area between Eritrea and Ethiopia, but these are difficult to verify.¹⁷ In October 2023, Martin Plaut noted that Eritrea reinforced positions around Dankalia along the eastern border with Ethiopia, particularly in Bada and Bure.¹⁸ Plaut's analysis of the situation at the time was that Eritrea and Ethiopia were once again two countries with very different interests. According to him, this represents a return to the 'no war, no peace' scenario of the pre-2018 period. The difference this time is that the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) occupy Ethiopian territory.¹⁹

On 1 January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that would allow Ethiopia to develop a naval base along Somaliland's coast. Somaliland later claimed that the agreement also included recognition of Somaliland's independence, although Addis Ababa remained cautious. The announcement increased regional tensions. The following day, Somalia, which considers Somaliland to be part of Somali territory, described the agreement as an act of aggression. It then strengthened regional cooperation with Eritrea, among others, to put pressure on Addis Ababa.²⁰ The MoU reshapes the region's geopolitical landscape, leaving Ethiopia regionally isolated while Somalia strengthens ties with Eritrea and Egypt.²¹ Turkish mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia led to a joint statement in December 2024, reducing tensions between the two countries and removing the prospect of an Ethiopian seaport in Somaliland.²²

The ongoing Eritrean presence in parts of Tigray also places pressure on the already strained relationship between the two countries, according to Mohamed Kheir Omer. Eritrea claims that it has only occupied the border areas with Tigray that the Boundary Commission awarded to the country in 2002.²³ Political analyst Daniel Berhane notes that Addis Ababa ignored reports of occupation and abuses by Eritrean troops for a long time, hoping that this would hinder any potential rapprochement between the TPLF and Eritrea.²⁴ Nevertheless, in early 2024, following Abiy's speech on access to the

¹³ RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#)

¹⁴ USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#)

¹⁵ Ethiopia lost access to the sea after Eritrea became independent in 1993: Ethiopia Observer, 15/10/2023, [url](#); BBC (de Waal A.), 08/11/2023, [url](#); ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#); Foreign Affairs (Gebrehiwot Berhe M., de Waal A.), 05/08/2025, [url](#)

¹⁶ USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#); Plaut M., 31/10/2023, [url](#)

¹⁷ USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#)

¹⁸ Plaut M., 31/10/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹ Plaut M., 31/10/2023, [url](#)

²⁰ ICG, Crisis Watch Eritrea January 2024, n.d., [url](#); ICG, *Crisis Watch Eritrea March 2024*, n.d., [url](#)

²¹ African Arguments (Kheir Omer M.), 21/06/2024, [url](#)

²² ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 12/12/2024, [url](#)

²³ Shabait, 15/03/2024, [url](#); African Arguments (Kheir Omer M.), 21/06/2024, [url](#)

²⁴ Foreign Policy (Berhane D.), 02/09/2025, [url](#)

Red Sea, Asmara established contacts with the TPLF. These contacts had deepened by the end of the year.²⁵

Since the CoHA, the TPLF has gradually split into two camps. In March 2025, a TPLF faction and allied armed officers from the Tigray Defence Force (TDF)²⁶ expelled the interim government in Tigray. A few weeks later, in May 2025, the national electoral commission withdrew the TPLF's legal recognition for procedural reasons.²⁷ The TPLF, led by prominent figures such as the former president of Tigray (during the 2020–2022 war) and current TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremikael, appears to be seeking alignment with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in an apparent attempt to regain influence over the federal government.²⁸ Another group, loyal to former interim president of Tigray Getachew Reda, rebranded itself as the Democratic Solidarity Party (Simret) and aligned itself more closely with the federal government.²⁹

The Tigray forces also experienced a split. After several senior TDF officers sided with the TPLF in March 2025 and dismantled Getachew's regional interim administration, dissatisfied TDF members formed a new armed group, the Tigray Peace Forces (TPF). This group aims to remove the TPLF from power in Tigray. According to rumors, Getachew and the Ethiopian federal government support the TPF.³⁰ Several armed incidents involving both camps occurred in southern Tigray in the summer of 2025.³¹

Addis Ababa accuses Asmara not just of interference in Tigray.³² Although difficult to substantiate, persistent rumors since 2023 suggest that Eritrea has been providing military training to Amhara security forces and Fano groups³³, and maintains links with Fano insurgents.³⁴ At the same time, Addis Ababa allows Eritrean opposition groups to operate in Ethiopia. One of these groups is Brigade N'hamedu, also known as the Blue Revolution, a diaspora-led group aiming to overthrow the regime in Asmara.³⁵ The Abiy government also supports Afar organizations such as the Afar National Congress, which resist the Eritrean regime, by allowing them to operate offices and enjoy operational freedom in Semera, the capital of the Ethiopian Afar region.³⁶ According to academics Daniel Tesfa and Mirjam

²⁵ The Eritrean ruling party, People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), introduced Ximdo to describe its rapprochement with the TPLF. Ximdo stands for "connection" and "coordination of different actors to function as a whole." The term gained popularity through symbolic initiatives such as cross-border community meetings, particularly between communities in Senafe, Enda Ghergis, and Tsorona (Eritrea) and Zalambesa, Egela, and Rama (Tigray, Ethiopia). These communities have long been divided by conflicts and a military border but now play a role in emotionally charged reunions between members living on both sides of the border: Tesfa D., van Reisen M., 21/07/2025, [url](#)

²⁶ The fighting Tigray forces consist of a broader group of actors than TPLF members and sympathizers. Members of opposition parties, artists, journalists, civil servants, and former TPLF members are united under the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). ICG, 02/04/2021, [url](#)

²⁷ The Africa Report (Tunbridge G.), 22/07/2025, [url](#); Foreign Policy (Berhane D.), 02/09/2025, [url](#)

²⁸ Tesfa D., van Reisen M., 21/07/2025, [url](#)

²⁹ The Pan African Review (Kheir Omer M.), 14/08/2025, [url](#)

³⁰ The Africa Report (Tunbridge G.), 22/07/2025, [url](#)

³¹ The Africa Report (Tunbridge G.), 22/07/2025, [url](#); Addis Standard, 01/08/2025, [url](#)

³² ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#); Ethiopia Insight (Atsbeha E.), 10/04/2025, [url](#)

³³ Fano is a paramilitary force of Amhara consisting of locally decentralized militia units

³⁴ During the Tigray war, Amhara troops and Fano militias were allies of the Ethiopian army in the fight against the TDF. From 2022 onward, the relationship between the army and these forces increasingly came under pressure. The CoHA caused a breach of trust for many Amhara. After Abiy announced the disbanding of regional forces in April 2023, several members of the Amhara forces defected to Fano. The Fano groups began an armed uprising that escalated in August 2023. At the closure of this COI Focus in May 2025, the Amhara uprising was still ongoing: RVI, PRF (Sintayehu F.), 06/2024, [url](#)

³⁵ ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#)

³⁶ Addis Standard, 30/07/2025, [url](#); Tesfa D., van Reisen M., 21/07/2025, p. 14, [url](#); The Pan African Review (Kheir Omer M.), 14/08/2025, [url](#)

van Reisen, this may indicate efforts by the Ethiopian government to create counter-networks within border communities and thereby contain the threat of an alliance between Asmara and the TPLF.³⁷ Nevertheless, according to Mohamed Kheir Omer, recent developments suggest growing support among Ethiopian Afar organizations for closer cooperation with Eritrea.³⁸

In March 2025, various sources reported signs that both Addis Ababa and Asmara were preparing for war, notably troop movements on both sides of the border. Anonymous sources reported a significant deployment of heavy weaponry and mechanized units in the Afar region, near the Eritrean border.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE)⁴⁰ reported that Eritrea was in a state of the highest alert. Although Abiy stated to parliament on 20 March 2025 that Ethiopia had no intention of waging war against Eritrea over access to the Red Sea, he demanded negotiations to secure that right. Asmara perceived this as intimidation.⁴¹ In May 2025, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki claimed that Ethiopia was engaged in large-scale arms purchases.⁴² Ethiopia responded in June 2025 with a diplomatic letter accusing Eritrea and the TPLF of planning a joint offensive in Ethiopia.⁴³ Although both countries repeatedly openly denied planning a military conflict, an article by Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe⁴⁴ and Alex de Waal⁴⁵ in August 2025 noted that both nations had indeed acquired military equipment, including armed drones, defense systems, missiles, machine guns, and armoured vehicles. Both countries also deployed military troops to the border near Assab, according to the two academics. Meanwhile, hostile rhetoric continued to circulate.⁴⁶

Several sources believe that neither country benefits from war, but that a miscalculation could lead to incidents.⁴⁷ A military confrontation is considered unlikely by experts such as Michael Woldemariam; René Lefort, an observer of Ethiopian politics since the 1970s; and Mohamed Kheir Omer, an Eritrean researcher based in Oslo and former member of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Neither party can afford such a conflict. Abiy faces persistent uprisings in the Amhara and Oromia regions, and general insecurity across the country. The Ethiopian economy is also in severe distress, hampered by inflation and debt.⁴⁸ Given this context, René Lefort considers a return to a 'no war, no peace' scenario more plausible than an open conflict between the two countries.⁴⁹

Mohamed Kheir Omer considers a proxy war—where both countries support opposition groups and armed actors against the other party—more likely than a direct conflict between the two countries.⁵⁰

³⁷ Tesfa D., van Reisen M., 21/07/2025, p. 14, [url](#)

³⁸ The Pan African Review (Kheir Omer M.), 14/08/2025, [url](#)

³⁹ The Economist, 20/03/2025, [url](#)

⁴⁰ HRCE is an independent advocacy organization based in the United Kingdom (UK) that promotes the rights of Eritreans worldwide. HRCE [website], n.d., [url](#)

⁴¹ ICG, 27/03/2025, [url](#); Reuters, 13/03/2025, [url](#)

⁴² Ministry of Information, Eritrea (@shabait), 24/05/2025, [url](#)

⁴³ Addis Standard, 04/07/2025, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe is Senior Research Associate at the World Peace Foundation at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and founder of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University.

⁴⁵ Alex de Waal is Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and has more than four decades of experience in the Horn of Africa.

⁴⁶ Foreign Affairs (Gebrehiwot Berhe M., de Waal A.), 05/08/2025, [url](#)

⁴⁷ USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#); The Africa Report (Tunbridge G.), 22/07/2025, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 25/08/2025, [url](#)

⁴⁸ USIP (Woldemariam M.), 15/12/2023, [url](#); Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#); Addis Standard (Lefort R.), 09/08/2025, [url](#); The Africa Report (Tunbridge G.), 22/07/2025, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Addis Standard (Lefort R.), 09/08/2025, [url](#)

⁵⁰ The Pan African Review (Kheir Omer M.), 14/08/2025, [url](#)

1.2. Eritrean Participation in the War in Tigray

From the start of the conflict, the TDF and humanitarian organizations pointed to the involvement of Eritrean troops in the invasion of Tigray.⁵¹ On 23 March 2021, Prime Minister Abiy admitted that Eritrean troops had crossed the border into Tigray.⁵² On 16 April 2021, Eritrea also acknowledged that its armed forces were participating in the conflict and pledged to withdraw from Tigray.⁵³

There is little information on the size of the Eritrean military in general, or on the extent of the deployment of Eritrean troops in Tigray. Dan Connell, a research fellow at the African Studies Centre at Boston University and a retired lecturer in journalism and African politics, cited the International Institute for Strategic Studies as estimating in 2019 that Eritrea had over 200,000 active troops and around 120,000 reservists. A Foreign Policy estimate, consistent with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) data, put the figure at between 150,000 and 200,000 soldiers in 2022.⁵⁴

Mesfin Hagos, a former freedom fighter and Eritrean Minister of Defense now living in Germany, stated in an article in December 2020 that several Eritrean military units, including the notorious 525 Commando Division, were deployed from November 2022 in campaigns in Tigray. Eritrea sent the 42nd and 49th mechanized divisions and the 11th, 17th, 19th, and 27th infantry divisions through Zalambessa. Five additional Eritrean divisions reinforced these troops at Edaga-Hamus, south of Adigrat and north of Mekelle. According to Mesfin Hagos, President Isaias Afwerki also mobilised the 26th, 28th, and 53rd infantry and the 46th and 48th mechanized divisions on the Adwa front. The TPLF reported that Eritrean technical and combat units also actively participated in fighting at the Alamata front, southeast of Mekelle, in November 2020. According to Mesfin Hagos, by December 2020, the EDF had established a permanent presence in towns such as Wukro, Adigrat, Adwa, Shire and Nebelet.⁵⁵

However, none of the consulted sources provide authoritative assessments of the number of Eritrean troops involved in the war. In early September 2021, an Ethiopian journalist writing under the pseudonym Ermias Teka estimated that around 300,000 Eritrean forces were involved in hostilities in northern Ethiopia.⁵⁶ Sources close to the TPLF claimed that half of the Eritrean forces were in Tigray by October 2022.⁵⁷ In October 2022, a Western diplomat told *The Washington Post* that the number of Eritrean soldiers involved in the escalation of hostilities since August 2022 was approximately 60,000.⁵⁸

Two Eritrean sources consulted by Cedoca during the FFM in Eritrea indicated that only a portion of the Eritrean army was deployed in the war in northern Ethiopia. Eritrean source B briefly stated that “not even the whole army was deployed.”⁵⁹ Two representatives from the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that only a small part of the army was involved in the war:

“We have a standing army and a reserve army. If things go out of hand, and the standing army can’t handle things, we might be required to fight. [...] This time we were not part of the war effort.

⁵¹ Reuters, 11/12/2020, [url](#)

⁵² Eritrea Hub, 25/03/2022, [url](#)

⁵³ Eritrea Hub, 25/03/2022, [url](#); Le Monde, 31/05/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁴ Foreign Policy (Omer M.K.), 10/11/2022, [url](#); CIA, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁵ African Arguments (Hagos M.), 04/12/2020, [url](#)

⁵⁶ Plaut M., Vaughan S., 02/2023, p. 256

⁵⁷ Foreign Policy (Omer M.K.), 10/11/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁸ The Washington Post, 17/10/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁹ Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

If things go really wrong, we will have to go to war too. [...] Mobilisation was not needed, we didn't need to fully engage in that war, a small part was enough.”⁶⁰

The number of Eritrean soldiers killed or injured during the Tigray war is unclear. According to Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, thousands of Eritrean conscripts in Tigray have presumably died or been seriously wounded since the conflict began in November 2020. However, the Eritrean government has not released official information on the number of Eritrean deaths, nor on the identities of those who have died, gone missing or disappeared.⁶¹ In November 2022, USA Today provided an approximate total for combatant fatalities, including those of the TDF, ENDF, EDF and other participating forces. According to this source, between the start of the war in November 2020 and the signing of the peace agreement two years later, 250,000 to 600,000 soldiers were killed.⁶² In an article from September 2023, Tigrayan journalist Dawit Kebede estimated that between 37,000 and 40,000 Eritrean soldiers had died.⁶³ *Africa Confidential* stated in early November 2022 that the death toll among Eritrean troops could be comparable to that of Ethiopian forces,⁶⁴ with around 90,000 casualties over the two-year war. The number of wounded is likely even higher, according to *Africa Confidential*.⁶⁵ Assenna TV reported in December 2022 that an estimated 60,000 Eritrean troops had been killed since the escalation of hostilities in August 2022 of that year.⁶⁶

A diplomatic source (I), speaking to Cedoca in early February 2025, noted widespread frustration over the government's failure to disclose the number and identities of the fallen:

“There is a lot of frustration about the fact that nobody knows how many people have died. Normally, a list of martyrs is announced on martyr's day. This has not happened yet. You cannot mourn before the announcement. You're not allowed to mourn before martyrs are announced, 'don't get ahead of the government'. But of course there is word to mouth, some will be informed about deaths.”⁶⁷

An anonymous Eritrean source (L) confirmed that the number of Eritreans killed in the war in Tigray it is not known. The source reasoned that if the number were high, this would be noticeable in Asmara. When asked whether the fallen soldiers might be from elsewhere rather than Asmara, the source argued that 'all battalions are mixed'.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

⁶¹ UNHRC, 04/05/2024, p. 8, [url](#)

⁶² USA Today, 21/11/2022, [url](#)

⁶³ Tghat (Kebede D.), 30/09/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁴ Other estimates suggest higher ENDF fatalities. According to Alex de Waal, the ENDF lost 393,000 soldiers (killed or missing). A media outlet reported in July 2023 that the ENDF had already sent death notifications to families of more than 260,000 soldiers who died in Tigray, noting that reporting is an ongoing process. Foreign Affairs (de Waal A., Gebrehiwot Berhe M.), 08/04/2024, [url](#); BBC (de Waal A.), 08/11/2023, [url](#); Ethiopia Insight, 30/01/2024, [url](#); Gebrehiwot Berhe M., 08/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁵ Africa Confidential, 03/11/2022, [url](#)

⁶⁶ EEPA, 06/12/2022, [url](#)

⁶⁷ Diplomatic Source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

⁶⁸ “Nobody knows. The number must not have been very big, else it would be noticeable.” Eritrean source L, interview during the CGRS FFM to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara.

1.3. Eritrean armed forces in Ethiopia after the CoHA

1.3.1. Geographical presence in Ethiopia

On 2 November 2022, the TPLF and the federal government signed the CoHA (see chapter 1.1.). This was followed by an agreement on the implementation modalities, signed in Nairobi, Kenya, by military leaders of the federal army and the TPLF. Neither the Eritrean troops nor the Amhara militias were involved in the negotiations or agreements. Although the latter agreement provided for a withdrawal of non-ENDF soldiers and foreign troops from Tigray, Eritrean troops and Amhara militias were still present in parts of the region months later.⁶⁹

At the start of the war, Eritrea took control of areas that the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) had allocated to Eritrea but that remained occupied by Ethiopia. It also seized territory that it claimed as its own, despite the EEBC ruling that it belonged to Ethiopia. This included parts of Irob. As of January 2023, the EDF withdrew from the towns of Adwa, Axum and Shire and the areas of Felafil and Endebagerima in Tigray. However, it retained control over various areas along the border.⁷⁰ In May 2023, Eritrean troops prevented a mission led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) from entering a village in the Tahtay Adiyabo *woreda*⁷¹. That same month, the EDF also denied the African Union Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mission (AU-MVCM) access to the Irob *woreda*.⁷² Mohamed Kheir Omer wrote in November 2023 that Eritrea occupied 52 districts in Tigray.⁷³ According to a memo prepared by the Health Cluster at the end of January 2024,⁷⁴ the EDF occupied various parts of the border districts or patrolled the areas. The memo also reported that Eritrean soldiers were abducting farmers and stealing livestock. Federal forces either failed to protect the population or were entirely absent.⁷⁵

Irob Anina Civil Society, a non-profit organization that advocates for the Irob population, stated that Eritrean troops were present in the town of Zalambessa and the *woredas* of Gulemekada (sub-districts: Marta, Addis Tesfa, Addis Alem, Shewit Lemlem and Sebeya) and Irob (sub-districts: Endalgeda, Weratle, Agerelekoma and Alitena). In the northwestern zone, the EDF occupied parts of various *woredas*, including Tahtay Adiyabo (sub-districts: Rural Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Ademeyti, Adi Tsetser, Lemlem, Shembelina, Mentebteb and Adi Aser), Maekel Adebayo (sub-districts: Adi Awala, Kushet Ayay and May Abay) and Seyemti Adiyabo (sub-district Adiyabiya Digum). Finally, in the central zone they fully or partially occupied several *woredas* including Egela (sub-districts: Hoya Medeb – specific villages: Kolo Birdo, Sebeo Belesa, Adi Kutu and Ouna Shehaq –, Erdi Genanu, Kushet Egri Sebeya and Ziban Sesewe) and Rama (sub-district Mereb).⁷⁶ During a visit by the African Union Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mission (AU-MVCM) to Zalambessa in early April 2024, the mayor announced that approximately 75% of the town was under the control of the Eritrean armed forces, while the remaining 25% was under the control of the ENDF. The EDF further controlled six *kebeles*⁷⁷ of the Gulomekeda *woreda* and was strategically positioned near the gateway to the town

⁶⁹ Addis Standard (Gebrekristos M.), 31/10/2023, [url](#)

⁷⁰ The Reporter Ethiopia (Endale A.), 22/04/2023, [url](#); The Guardian, 07/08/2023, [url](#); ICG, Crisis Watch Eritrea January 2023, n.d., [url](#); ICG, *Crisis Watch Eritrea July 2023*, n.d., [url](#)

⁷¹ *Woreda* is the term used to designate districts in Ethiopia. The country's various regional states consist of zones, which in turn are divided into districts or *woredas*.

⁷² UNHRC, 14/09/2023, p. 9, [url](#); Addis Standard, 06/04/2024, [url](#)

⁷³ Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

⁷⁴ The Health Cluster consists of international and local organizations as well as UN agencies that coordinate health care in humanitarian emergencies. More information at Health Cluster/WHO, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁵ AP, 02/02/2024, [url](#); ICG, *Crisis Watch Eritrea February 2024*, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁶ Irob Anina Civil Society, 09/03/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁷ *Kebeles* are the lowest administrative units in Ethiopia, roughly comparable to neighborhoods or villages.

of Zalambessa.⁷⁸ In his May 2024 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, referred to information on the continued presence of Eritrean armed forces in areas recognised by the EEBC as Ethiopian. These areas include the towns of Zalambessa and Irob, as well as the Gemhalo, Waela Nihbi and Tahtay Adiyabo regions.⁷⁹

On 2 July 2024, a European military source in Addis Ababa stated in an email that the northern part of Tigray was inaccessible, but that the presence of Eritrean forces had been confirmed by two sources.:

"It is advised not to approach the border due to the presence of ERI troops. Even NGOs are not allowed to go, nor journalists. [...] The presence of the ERI Tp in the North of ETH (North of Tigray) is confirmed by two sources: the international commission monitoring the Pretoria agreements and by the ERI President Isaia [sic] himself. On 1 Mar 2024, the ERI President officially confirmed that the EDF occupied certain ETH zones. These zones have henceforth been considered by the ERI President as ERI territory [...] The zones where the presence of EDF has been confirmed: HUMERA, TEKEZE, BADME, RAMA, EROB (in red on the map)."⁸⁰

The image below shows in red the presence of Eritrean troops on Ethiopian territory in mid-2024:

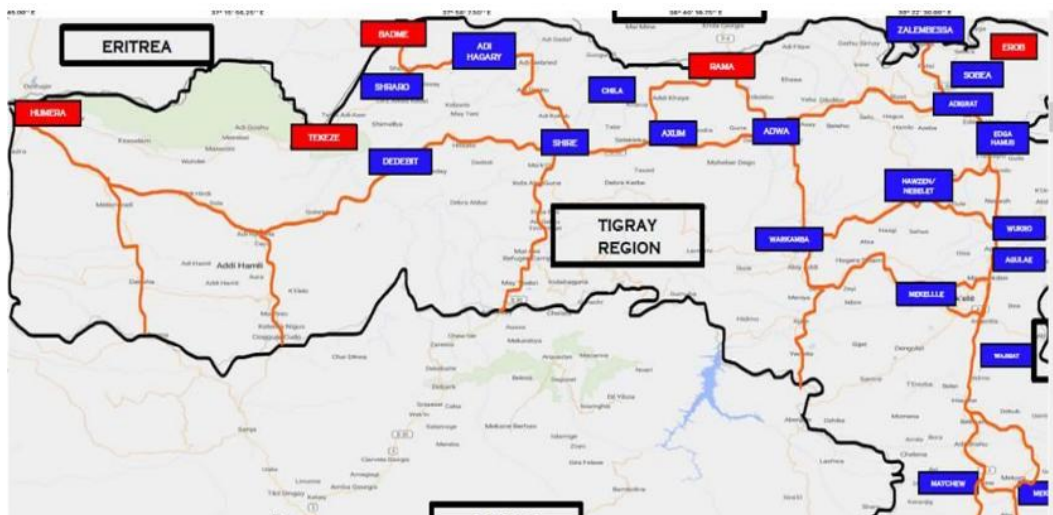


Figure 1: Map showing EDF presence in Tigray⁸¹

At the time of writing, Eritrea still denies any presence on Tigrayan territory. The country argues that its soldiers are only present in areas allocated to Eritrea by the EEBC (the Ethiopian-Eritrean Boundary Commission), such as Badme.⁸² Two representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated during a conversation with Cedoca during the FFM in Asmara:

"Eritrea and the TPLF were technically at war before. They occupied our land [...]. We got back land, like Badme. They claim we occupy parts of Tigray, but that is not true. We are within the legally defined Eritrean border. Badme was attributed to us."⁸³

⁷⁸ Addis Standard, 06/04/2024, [url](#); ICG, *Crisis Watch Eritrea April 2024*, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁹ UNHRC, 04/05/2024, p. 7, [url](#)

⁸⁰ European military source, e-mail to Cedoca, 02/07/2024, Addis Ababa

⁸¹ European military source in Addis Ababa, email, 02/07/2024

⁸² The Reporter Ethiopia (Tekle A.), 02/03/2024, [url](#)

⁸³ Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

1.3.2. Size of the Eritrean Forces in Ethiopia

In November 2023, one year after the war in Tigray ended, Eritrean researcher Mohamed Kheir Omer estimated that nine Eritrean divisions totalling around 40,000 soldiers were occupying border areas with Tigray. According to the researcher, these divisions were reinforced with mechanised forces.⁸⁴

A European military source contacted by Cedoca in July 2024 indicated that the size of the EDF in Tigray is unknown to all, including his colleagues.⁸⁵

A Horn of Africa researcher, contacted via social media by Cedoca in June 2024, wrote the following:

"What I hear is that there are 20 divisions in Tigray or on the Eritrean side of the border, but EDF divisions are only about 2,000 in each, depleted by the war. So maybe 20,000 in Tigray. Half of the troops."⁸⁶

After making enquiries with his contacts, this researcher obtained the following information about the presence of Eritrean soldiers on the Eritrean side of the border from an informed source in Ethiopia:

"It is difficult to guess the number of soldiers on the Eritrean side. The Eritrean infantry divisions found between Omohajer and Kisd Eqa⁸⁷ are 37, 22, 28, 57, 25, 12, 35, 53, 55, 13, and divisions with heavy weapons are 47, 48, 49. Division 13 and 37 are in military training. From Kisd Eqa up to Bure (Assab), the infantry divisions are 11, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 26, 27, 29, 31, 32, 33, 36, 37, 38, 39, 63, 65, 69. Divisions with heavy weapons are 46, 50, and the new division 71. Reserve divisions on this side are 51, 52, 59, and 10, 30."⁸⁸

During the research period for this COI Focus, Cedoca could not find any further information in the consulted sources or obtain information from contacts regarding troop movements. This information relates to military intelligence, which is usually shrouded in secrecy, and which would be highly sensitive for contacts to disclose.

⁸⁴ Foreign Policy (Kheir Omer M.), 07/11/2023, [url](#)

⁸⁵ European military source in Addis Ababa, email, 02/07/2024

⁸⁶ Horn of Africa researcher, messages via social media, 19/06/2024

⁸⁷ Ksadika, border crossing near Rama (Tigray, Ethiopia)

⁸⁸ Horn of Africa researcher, messages via social media, 24/06/2024

2. National Conscription and Mobilisation in Eritrea

2.1. National Conscription

This chapter briefly addresses the issue of national conscription in Eritrea. It explains how people are called up or recruited, what is known about exemptions or releases from service, and the penalties for evading the draft. Cedoca has supplemented this information with data obtained during the FFM in Eritrea. Additional information on national conscription can be found in the 2016 report by the Norwegian COI service Landinfo⁸⁹ and in two reports by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, now the European Union Agency for Asylum, EUAA): *National Service and Illegal Exit* (2016) and *Eritrea: National Service, Exit and Return* (2019).⁹⁰

Eritrea introduced national service in 1994, shortly after independence. The purpose of national service goes beyond national defense and includes post-independence reconstruction and promoting national ideology.⁹¹ All Eritreans between 18 and 40 years old⁹² are required to perform national service.⁹³

As stated in the 1995 Proclamation on National Service (hereafter: proclamation), the service period is eighteen months, consisting of six months of military training and twelve months of civilian service. After conscription, all Eritreans are registered in the reserve army until the age of 50 and may be recalled for training and mobilisation.⁹⁴

Based on the legal provision for extensions in crisis situations, the service period has effectively been permanent for many since the border war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000, in practice. Following the introduction of the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme in 2002, a post-war reconstruction and development programme, conscripts have been required to extend their service beyond the statutory eighteen months. Actual service durations vary, with periods of ten to twenty years being common.⁹⁵

The Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme merges military and civilian service, making the distinction between the two components of national service not always clear since it was introduced in 2002.⁹⁶

In 2003, the Eritrean authorities added the education system to the programme.⁹⁷ The twelfth school year, which takes place at the Sawa National Training and Education Centre, has since included several

⁸⁹ Landinfo, 2016, [url](#)

⁹⁰ EASO, 11/2016, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, [url](#)

⁹¹ Landinfo, 2016, p. 10, [url](#); Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

⁹² In practice, the upper age limit for completing national service seems to have risen to 50–57 years for men and 47 years for women: EASO, 09/2019, p. 22, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, p. 10, [url](#)

⁹³ Eritrean Gazette, 23/10/1995, [url](#)

⁹⁴ Eritrean Gazette, 23/10/1995, [url](#); Shabait, 15/08/2020, [url](#); Shabait, 19/07/2022, [url](#); Kibreab G., 15-16/10/2014, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, p. 24, [url](#)

⁹⁵ EASO, 09/2019, pp. 34, [url](#); "You go to Sawa at 12th grade, after that you are assigned to the civilian or military service. National service ranges between 18 months and 30 or more years.": Diplomatic Source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; "I do see people who are, for example, 30 years old and are not in national service anymore. Others, for example 40 years old, are still in national service. It is not clear why.": Diplomatic Source E, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

⁹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 42, [url](#)

⁹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 42, [url](#)

months of military training.⁹⁸ The results students achieve in the final exams determine their further educational opportunities. Recruits with the highest scores are eligible for higher education at one of the country's eight colleges, which offer two- and four-year programmes. After completing their education, their national service mainly consists of civilian work tasks. Those with average scores may attend vocational training. After completing vocational training, students are assigned to either civilian or military service. Those with the lowest scores usually enter military service immediately.⁹⁹

An Eritrean source (L) told Cedoca during the FFM that in the past five to six years, no one from Sawa has been sent directly to military service.¹⁰⁰ Two other sources indicated that the cohorts (often referred to as "rounds") of recruits who graduated from Sawa during the Tigray war were not deployed to that war but remained at the Sawa base.¹⁰¹ One of these sources noted that approximately half of each Sawa cohort normally joins the army.¹⁰²

The Eritrean authorities present conscription through the school system as the regular method. However, according to EASO, official statistics show that only a small proportion of each age group actually reaches the twelfth grade. Others, such as school dropouts and draft evaders, are conscripted by local authorities or captured at checkpoints or during targeted search operations and raids, known as *giffa*, and sent to training camps for military training.¹⁰³

National service can take many forms. As well as active military service, it can include office work in government institutions and companies. Positions range from lawyers and diplomats to mid-level managers, skilled technicians and mechanics, administrative staff, maintenance staff, cleaners, medical personnel, teachers and labourers (for example, in construction).¹⁰⁴

Individuals in civilian service remain on standby for the military reserve of the Eritrean authorities.¹⁰⁵ An Eritrean source (A) mentioned in a conversation with Cedoca during the FFM in Eritrea that everyone in civilian national service automatically becomes a reservist until the age of 40. Some remain reservists even after the age of 40.¹⁰⁶ They can be called up for military exercises. These refresher training courses are announced by the *kebab*.^{107, 108} Everyone who has completed military service is also required to participate in military refresher courses until the age of 50.¹⁰⁹

In addition to national service, the Eritrean authorities established a mandatory civilian militia in 2012, the People's Army, also known as Hezbawi Serawit or the (People's) Militia. Medically fit adults up to

⁹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 42, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, p. 12, [url](#)

⁹⁹ Shabait, 19/07/2022, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, pp. 27, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, p. 13, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰ Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁰¹ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁰² Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁰³ According to a country report by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, enrollment rates in 2019 were 69 % in primary education and 46 % in secondary education: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, pp. 26, 28–30, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 40, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ USDOS, 24/06/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ People who are not in service – up to 70 years old – are reservists.": Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Swedish Migration Agency, Country and Global Analysis, 29/06/2021, [url](#); SEM, 17/12/2019, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷ Eritrea has three regional administrative levels: zoba, nus-zoba (or sub-zoba), and kebabis. The zoba is comparable to a province, a kebab to a municipality.

¹⁰⁸ Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

the age of 70 who are not in the army are required to join a local militia and undergo regular military refresher training.¹¹⁰ Diplomatic source (L) stated in a conversation with Cedoca during the FFM in Eritrea that the militia includes men up to the age of 60.¹¹¹ Local militia leaders assign individuals to additional unpaid forced labour in agriculture, security duties, or national development programmes.¹¹² According to an Eritrean source (B), as of 2024, Hezbawi Serawit refers to (a part of) the reserve army. Their duties are varied: from providing security at events, to agriculture and surveillance. In peacetime, they fall under the authority of the *kebab*. These are not full-time positions but rather short assignments or work periods. Hezbawi Serawit reservists are not paid for their activities as reservists, but by their respective employers, as they usually have other jobs.¹¹³ Sources also indicate that exceptions to the obligations of the People's Army are possible. A source stated in 2017 to the Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés (OSAR) that wealthy individuals could buy their way out of service in the People's Army.¹¹⁴ According to a source interviewed by the Swedish COI Service during a mission to Eritrea in 2018, certain categories of persons with medical problems may be exempt from the Hezbawi Serawit. Another source interviewed during the same 2018 mission was of the opinion that a person's status plays a role, that connections with the government are important and that the elite enjoy benefits.¹¹⁵ An Eritrean source (L) told Cedoca that exceptions exist and gave the example of businessmen or people working for an international mining company:

"When you reach the age of 40, 41, 42: you're not regular military, you become a reservist. You work for two days a week, for example in construction, water provision. You work for your community [...] Everybody who is not in the military, is in the reserve army or the militia. [...] people with investments – who sometimes have to travel, or diplomats are not in the militia. Also, if you work in a mining company, you are not in the militia because you work for a company."¹¹⁶

According to the United States Department of State (USDOS), employees in national service, particularly those without educational or vocational qualifications, receive low wages, and the authorities often replace salaries with food or non-food rations. Conditions are often harsh for those in military service or in jobs requiring physical labour.¹¹⁷ Due to the low wages, many Eritreans in national service who live in Asmara hold a second or third job alongside their duties under conscription.¹¹⁸

Those who fought in the liberation struggle against Ethiopia (Article 12) and people with disabilities, visual impairments or mental health conditions (Article 15) are the only groups formally exempt from

¹¹⁰ Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; USDOS, 21/07/2023, [url](#); Swedish Migration Agency, Country and Global Analysis, 29/06/2021, [url](#); SEM, 17/12/2019, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

¹¹¹ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹¹² Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; USDOS, 21/07/2023, [url](#); Swedish Migration Agency, Country and Global Analysis, 29/06/2021, [url](#); SEM, 17/12/2019, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, pp. 15–16, [url](#)

¹¹³ [The] local administration is responsible for the militia. In case of war, they can be on standby, put in standby camps, and assigned to battalions if necessary." Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Eritrean source B, e-mail, 07/05/2025

¹¹⁴ OSAR, 30/06/2017, p. 19, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ Swedish Migration Agency, Country and Global Analysis, 29/06/2021, p. 16, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹¹⁷ More information on remuneration can be found in: EASO, 11/2016, pp. 42–44, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, pp. 35–36, [url](#); USDOS, 24/06/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁸ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source J, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara, 03/02/2025, Asmara; National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

national service. Those deemed unfit for military service are exempt from the military programme but must instead fulfill the civil service obligation (Article 13).¹¹⁹

In addition to the de jure exemptions, there are also de facto exemptions. While the relevant authorities usually honour these exceptions, they have no legal basis. Inconsistent application is possible. For example, women with children are usually exempt from national service, but this is not always the case and can sometimes be only temporary.¹²⁰ The NUEW stated in a conversation with Cedoca in early February 2025 that women are more likely to be exempted from service because of their reproductive role. Asked whether marriage is sufficient for demobilisation, the NUEW indicated that a woman may choose to leave the army due to marriage. She may also, if she wishes, continue working in civil service. Those with children generally do not remain in the army.¹²¹ A diplomatic source (I) indicated that women are more likely to be exempted or discharged from service due to marriage or pregnancy, and that they more easily obtain a discharge letter than men:

“When women are released – because of marriage or pregnancy or another reason – they get a release paper. When men are released, they are obligated to sign up for the militia in their neighbourhood. If there is a call to come, and you don’t come, you can get in trouble, you are subject to round-ups.”¹²²

Source L, on the other hand, stated that women with children are certainly exempt from national service. Women over the age of 30 are also exempt, according to this source.¹²³

According to diplomatic source F:

“Men above 60 can leave the country more easily; they are released from service. For women, it’s different; it depends on marital status and children. At the age of 30–40, they are out.”¹²⁴

Because Eritrea is not a rule-of-law state, exemptions are likely easier to obtain for individuals from prominent families.¹²⁵ People who are de facto exempt from conscription generally do not receive exemption letters. As such documents are required in the formal labour market, their activities are limited to the informal economy. Moreover, there is a risk of being apprehended during *giffa* raids.¹²⁶

The government may occasionally release conscripts after an unspecified number of years of national service, according to USDOS. However, authorities require individuals to submit a petition to the government based on criteria that periodically change, are non-transparent, and are often associated with corrupt practices. The policy and practice for discharge from national service are inconsistent

¹¹⁹ Eritrean Gazette, 23/10/1995, [url](#)

¹²⁰ EUAA, 11/05/2022, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, p. 31, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 42, [url](#)

¹²¹ “Women are released first, they are the mothers. They have a reproducing role. So we have to release women earlier for the reproductive aspect. [...] This depends on the choice of the woman: if she wants to stay in the army she can, if she wants to be out, for example because of marriage, she can. Those with children don’t stay in the military, those who want to get married can choose to be demobilized – they can still work in national service as a civilian if they want employment. [...] If they have children, they stay at home. Many are unemployed but we want them to work, but in that case you need daycare. In my office, national service women can marry, can get pregnant and get children but stay employed.”: NUEW, Interview during the FFM by the CGVS regarding Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹²² Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹²³ “They’re 100 % free, also women above 28/30 years of age are free – have to be ready to give birth.” Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹²⁴ Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹²⁵ “Eritrea is not financially corrupt, but there is nepotism, depending on how patriotic you and your family are.”: Diplomatic source H, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; EASO, 09/2019, p. 40, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 42, [url](#)

¹²⁶ EASO, 09/2019, p. 32, [url](#)

across different organizations and government institutions.¹²⁷ EASO noted that there are two different forms of discharge from Eritrean national service. Demobilisation (*mitiyas* in Tigrinya) refers to the transfer from the military to the civilian component of national service while retaining an obligation to serve in the military reserve, usually in the form of periodic military refresher courses. Discharge (*mifinaw*) means full exemption from national service. Since 2012, exempted individuals usually join the People's Army.¹²⁸ According to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since 2002, when indefinite conscription was introduced, very few people have been officially discharged from service. Discharge is also never final, as individuals relieved from conscription may be remobilised in case of necessity (see Chapter 2.2.).¹²⁹

Regarding demobilisation, Eritrean source (L) stated that the applicant must provide a valid reason, such as caring for their parents. Concerning discharge, this source indicated that it is important to demonstrate that the applicant can secure an income outside national service: "What the government wants to know: can you sustain yourself? If yes, you can be released."¹³⁰ However, multiple sources insist that this is not easy, especially outside the major cities, partly because the private market in Eritrea is very limited.¹³¹

Diplomatic source J indicated in a conversation with Cedoca that for certain professions, it is very difficult to obtain discharge from national service: "Doctors, engineers, gynecologists etc. have no chance to be demobilised, as they are needed."¹³² The same source also pointed out that the siege mentality prevents general demobilisation:

"Eritrea is still in a war-mindset – the fact they have a big hostile neighbour, the idea they have to be ready, and that if they are not Ethiopia will invade for sure. There is no perspective on evolution."¹³³

Diplomatic source I also stated that the current relationship with neighbouring Ethiopia means that general demobilisation is not yet feasible:

"In 2018–2019 they were looking at demobilizing, in 2020, with Tigray conflict, this stopped. There is also Abiy Ahmed who said they would take the port by force if necessary. The Eritrean government feels they have to be ready. [...] A lot of the Eritrean government's decisions are driven by the will to hold on to territory."¹³⁴

¹²⁷ USDOS, 24/06/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁸ EASO, 09/2019, p. 35, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 44, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹³¹ "There is no private sector employment. The private sector is limited, quasi nonexistent. National service is there out of necessity.": Diplomatic source K, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; "The country is not good for business. Money gets stuck. It is not possible to exchange your Nakfa for dollars, it is thus not possible to take your money out. Companies who do business have lots of problems to get money out of the country. If this would be better, there would be more companies. Money can't be transferred.": Diplomatic source E, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; "We have a weak private sector. The only employer here is the government.": Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; "Mines, construction companies are all government-owned. National service is everything government run, anything else is public. There isn't a lot of private sector.": Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹³² Diplomatic source J, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹³³ Diplomatic source J, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹³⁴ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

Article 37 of the proclamation punishes desertion and draft evasion with imprisonment of two years and/or a fine.¹³⁵ Article 297 of the 1991 Penal Code imposes imprisonment of five years for evasion of national service during wartime. Article 300 prescribes a maximum of five years for desertion. During wartime, imprisonment can range from five years to life, and in severe cases, the death penalty may apply.¹³⁶ In its 2019 report EASO indicated that in practice, military commanders determine penalties for national service violations arbitrarily, and offenders may be subjected to detention, torture, and inhumane or degrading treatment.¹³⁷ Family members of deserters or draft evaders are sometimes imprisoned or fined to pressure the wanted individuals to report to their unit.¹³⁸

The Eritrean authorities do not publish official figures on the number of citizens registered for national service. In 2019, EASO noted that the majority of sources consulted estimated the number of conscripts to be between 300,000 and 400,000. There is also uncertainty about the respective share of the military and civilian components of national service.¹³⁹

The 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia did not lead to reforms regarding the duration or content of national service. There are no indications of demobilisation or discharge campaigns. Following the peace agreement, the Eritrean authorities justified the continuation of indefinite national service by pointing to the tense situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region along the Eritrean border, as well as the country's economic and employment situation. Finnish COI sources indicated in 2019 that many sectors lacked sufficient labour, making large-scale discharges from national service impossible. An international organization questioned whether the Eritrean state could function without the national service system.¹⁴⁰ Based on information from an international organization, the Finnish COI service reported in its 2019 FFM report that individuals previously discharged from national service had been recalled. This source also questioned the value of the national service completion certificate.¹⁴¹

Conversations with contacts during the FFM in Eritrea revealed that the country considers national conscription to be a necessary security measure.¹⁴²

2.2. Mobilisation

Several sources reported an escalation of mobilisation in Eritrea during the Tigray war (November 2020 – November 2022). The local administration called up a greater number of individuals for national service via local administrations and *giffas*, and a wider range of profiles.¹⁴³

Individuals formally exempted or discharged from national service cannot, in principle, be recalled, but they are not exempt from the duty to defend the country during wartime. Both Eritreans performing civilian tasks as part of national service and those formally or informally exempted can be

¹³⁵ Eritrean Gazette, 23/10/1995, [url](#)

¹³⁶ Eritrea, 15/09/1991, [url](#)

¹³⁷ EASO, 09/2019, p. 40, [url](#); UNHRC, 04/05/2024, p. 8, [url](#); UNHRC, 09/05/2023, p. 8, [url](#)

¹³⁸ EASO, 09/2019, p. 41, [url](#); InDepthNews (Tesfa D., van Reisen M.), 22/08/2025, [url](#)

¹³⁹ EASO, 09/2019, pp. 24-25, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ Finnish Immigration Service, 20/11/2019, p. 10, [url](#); Landinfo, 2016, pp. 10-11, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ Finnish Immigration Service, 20/11/2019, pp 8-9. 10, [url](#)

¹⁴² "They say: we fought 30 years without anybody's help against the strongest army of Africa. We only have our own people, nobody will help us, it's our backbone, our only resource. They have to stay to protect. We prioritize national security.": Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source K, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁴³ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone conversation, 10/07/2024; HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#); UNHRC, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

mobilised in wartime and assigned tasks deemed necessary by the authorities.¹⁴⁴ Anyone who has received military training and is between 18 and 50 years old can be mobilised, regardless of whether they are currently in service.¹⁴⁵

During the FFM in Eritrea, Cedoca inquired about the risk of mobilisation for individuals aged 60 and older. Diplomatic source F replied that the practice is arbitrary:

"Every case is different [...]. When you are 60, you start to feel safer, but you are not necessarily safe. There's no fixed age, it varies."¹⁴⁶

Diplomatic source H stated that almost all men under 60 can be mobilised: "Anyone who qualifies, and I mean people under 60. They do not mobilize those with medical issues."¹⁴⁷ Source H clarified in an email that persons exempted for medical reasons are not mobilised into military service but are required to serve in other ways.¹⁴⁸

Eritrean source L stated that certain groups face little risk of military mobilisation because they are needed in their current capacities:

"People with skills and investments are free from mobilisation. People with normal jobs can be called – they're on standby. [...] Doctors but also plumbers, technicians – skilled people, are free from mobilisation."¹⁴⁹

2.2.1. Mobilisation during the Tigray Conflict (November 2020 – November 2022)

From the onset of the Tigray conflict, the frequency and intensity of *giffas* (round-ups) increased, alongside reports of house searches.¹⁵⁰ In January 2021, Eritrean authorities issued a general call for all citizens to report for military service.¹⁵¹ On 28 January 2021, Martin Plaut reported that, according to a source with strong connections in Eritrea, the Eritrean offensive involved the mobilisation of 200,000 new troops. This number was achieved by enrolling previously exempt categories, such as women with young children, retired soldiers, and children as young as 16, according to Plaut.¹⁵²

According to the May 2022 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, the Eritrean authorities bolstered the army by recruiting Eritrean refugees who had been forcibly displaced from Tigray and returned to Eritrea.¹⁵³ The Special Rapporteur noted that Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray war led to a dramatic increase in *giffas* and targeted house searches aimed at enforcing military conscription. Reservists formally discharged from military service were mobilised, and thousands of Eritreans performing national service in civilian roles were transferred to military functions. Security forces reportedly detained children from age 14 during *giffas*, and Eritrean children aged 16–17 were deployed in combat despite limited training ranging from one to six months.¹⁵⁴ Smaller training camps, such as Wia or Met'r, were reduced in size during the conflict as many

¹⁴⁴ Landinfo, 22/02/2023, pp. 3-4, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ Landinfo, 22/02/2023, pp. 7-8, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ "There is a lot of arbitrariness. Some can leave at a younger age [...] There's no fixed age, it varies. The knowledge we have is based on personal experiences of people around us. People tell us about their case.": Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁴⁷ Diplomatic source H, conversation during the information-gathering mission of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁴⁸ Diplomatic source H, email, 29/04/2025

¹⁴⁹ Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁵⁰ UNHRC, 06/05/2022, [url](#)

¹⁵¹ EEPA, 13/01/2021, [url](#)

¹⁵² Eritrea Hub (Plaut M.), 28/01/2021, [url](#)

¹⁵³ EEPA, 25/03/2021, [url](#); UNHRC, 06/05/2022, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ UNHRC, 06/05/2022, [url](#)

conscripts with minimal training were sent directly to the front, according to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁵⁵

According to the UN Special Rapporteur, recruitment and mobilisation campaigns intensified nationwide between mid and late 2022, with increasingly coercive methods being employed. According to The Guardian, Eritrean troops were heavily engaged in combat from August 2022 onwards, prompting the authorities to further escalate mobilisation.¹⁵⁶ In September 2022, Eritrea called up all reservists up to the age of 55.¹⁵⁷ Many ignored the call, which led to intensified raids, house searches, and checkpoints along major roads. Widespread searches were carried out in towns and villages, and women were also conscripted. According to an anonymous source from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the Tigray conflict women were more frequently assigned to physically demanding labour roles, such as road construction, while men were at the front.¹⁵⁸

Martin Plaut reported in mid-October 2022 that everyone of conscription age were being detained, and those not yet called up were expected to attend two hours of military training daily before starting their regular jobs.¹⁵⁹ The heavy fighting following August 2022 resulted in thousands of casualties and widespread disruption which prompted the authorities to mobilize new conscripts, including older men up to 70 years old, according to Martin Plaut.¹⁶⁰

According to the UN Special Rapporteur's report, the authorities forced families to hand over their relatives for conscription. Collective punishments were imposed on families to compel draft evaders to report. If the individuals in question were not found, the authorities in rural areas targeted the families' income by, for example, confiscating livestock, closing shops or preventing people from harvesting their crops. Failure by a family member to respond to a conscription call could result in the denial of food rations for the entire household.¹⁶¹ Where the government initially fined families, after mid-2022 it resorted to evicting families from their homes, confiscating their property and livestock, and detaining family members. Neighbours who offered assistance were threatened.¹⁶² Several sources reported that parents and relatives of fugitives had been held in improvised detention facilities, while their homes were sealed, and that they were only released once the fugitive surrendered.¹⁶³

In December 2022, Cedoca asked a diplomatic source who monitors Eritrea from Khartoum questions regarding mobilisation in Eritrea. The source replied by email on 22 December 2022, stating the following:

"I understood that the procedure of mobilisation is the following: The persons are asked by telephone to report to the administration of the Subzoba. They were given an exact time when they had to appear with a water canister and light clothing. If a person does not move in despite being ordered to do so, he or she is searched for. There are two ways to do this: one, the soldiers go from house to house with lists of names and search for the person. These lists of names were prepared in advance by the Subzoba offices. The second variant is based on coupons in Asmara and on the size of the farmland in rural areas. Each family member in the capital would receive a

¹⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs- Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 40, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ The Guardian, 08/10/2022, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Al Jazeera (Zelalem Z.), 18/09/2022, [url](#); HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#); UNHRC, 09/05/2023, pp. 7-8, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Netherlands 19/12/2023, p. 40, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹ Eritrea Hub (Plaut M.), 19/10/2022, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ Plaut M., journalist specializing in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa and Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, telephone conversation, 16/12/2022; UNHRC, 09/05/2023, pp. 7-8, [url](#)

¹⁶¹ UNHRC, 06/05/2022, [url](#); BBC, 12/10/2022, [url](#); HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁶² UNHRC, 09/05/2023, pp. 7-8, [url](#); Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone interview, 10/07/2024

¹⁶³ BBC, 12/10/2022, [url](#); EEPA, 05/09/2022, [url](#); EEPA, 04/10/2022, [url](#); EEPA, 12/10/2022, [url](#); Awate, 30/10/2022, [url](#); Awate, 01/11/2022, [url](#); Awate, 09/12/2022, [url](#)

coupon. All family members must be present to redeem them. If someone is missing, they are asked and checked. In this way, people who are not present can be identified. In rural areas, families would not receive coupons, but a piece of land to cultivate. The plot would correspond to the size of the family. The Eritrean authorities would check whether the plot still corresponds to the size of the family. If this is not the case, they can determine that the person has not moved in.”¹⁶⁴

Human Rights Watch (HRW) wrote in February 2023 that many of those arrested on suspicion of evading mobilisation in and around Asmara had been transferred to the military prison of Adi Abeito, northeast of the city. Satellite images showed a large crowd in the prison courtyard and surrounding areas from October 2022 to the end of January 2023. Family members reported that during this period many men were taken from the prison to the headquarters of their assigned military unit. HRW noted that it could not confirm where these persons were taken but had received reports that dozens of reservists who were in Asmara were summoned to the town of Tsorona, near the border with Ethiopia.¹⁶⁵

During a telephone conversation with Cedoca in July 2024, two academic researchers mentioned that the mobilisation campaign during the war in Tigray echoed the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia two decades earlier. The risk of mobilisation was being felt by groups that had previously faced little risk, including highly educated individuals:

“There was an escalation of mobilisation.[...] For many, it sounded like echoes of the 1998-2000 war when everyone was called up for service. The threat of being called up/mobilised became much more widespread [...]. It reached people that they would not normally reach.”¹⁶⁶

However, two Eritrean sources interviewed by Cedoca during the FFM in Eritrea contradicted the above information. They indicated that there was no need for mobilisation and that only part of the Eritrean army was deployed in the war in northern Ethiopia.¹⁶⁷ When asked whether the mobilisation reported by several sources had not taken place, two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that reservists up to the age of 50 were mobilised, but had returned to civilian life:

“The reserve army was mobilised, up to the age of 50. Now they are demobilised. They returned from the war and went back to civil life. People from government offices were not mobilised.”¹⁶⁸

These government sources also indicated that the mobilisation took place on a much smaller scale than during the border war.¹⁶⁹ This information aligns with statements made by the Eritrean Minister of Information in September 2022. Minister Yemane Gebremeskel denied that mass mobilisation had

¹⁶⁴ Diplomatic source A, e-mail, 22/12/2022

¹⁶⁵ HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#); “He talked about thousands of people arrested. There were so many, that many had to stay outside. They got sunburnt by day and very cold at night. After the prison, he was sent to a barrack where he had to do some tasks. Later these duties were limited to the weekend, and still later to once a month. This happened to many people.”: Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁶⁶ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, telephone conversation, 10/07/2024

¹⁶⁷ Eritrean source B, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara; Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁶⁸ Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁶⁹ Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

taken place in Eritrea. In an interview, he added that “[s]ome reservists were called up, but that’s a tiny number.”¹⁷⁰

Two sources interviewed by Cedoca during the FFM also pointed out that the recently graduated classes in Sawa were not mobilised.¹⁷¹ For example, diplomatic source I stated: “There were rumours that the two Sawa classes that graduated at the time were held at a base, but were never really deployed.”¹⁷² The source added: “It is not the case that more people went to the army.”¹⁷³ As noted in the previous chapter, it is possible that new recruits, for example school leavers who were summoned via the local administration of the *kebab* or apprehended in *giffas* and trained in other military camps, began military service during this period.

Asked whether the People’s Army was mobilised during the war in Tigray, Eritrean source L also replied that it had not:

“No. They were collected and put in camps, but were not sent to the front, they stayed in the camps. You never know what happens in a war, they could’ve been necessary. Collecting is not easy, so you have to be ready. You place them somewhere and train them. These were standby camps, they were released again after about a month. They were held there for a month, 40 days, maybe two months – and then the government understood the situation and they took them back home.”¹⁷⁴

Diplomatic source I indicated during Cedoca’s FFM in Eritrea that the militia, referring to the People’s Army or the reservists, was mobilized. This applied to men up to 60 years: “Mobilisation of militia, all men 60 and under. Not just the youth. There were those with medical exemptions, apart from them: all were impacted.”¹⁷⁵ Regarding the role of the People’s Militia, source I added: “Rumours say that the militia was more a back-up for the army in Tigray, rather than doing military actions in the field.”¹⁷⁶

Other diplomatic sources with whom Cedoca spoke during the FFM in Eritrea reported having seen or heard about *giffas*. However, they did not know where the apprehended persons were taken, and therefore also did not know whether they were deployed in the war in Tigray.

Diplomatic source D mentioned that there were rumours of young men being brought to mobilisation centers, including persons who had tried to evade service.¹⁷⁷ Diplomatic source G stated that from mid-September 2022 the government issued almost daily announcements for mobilisation in municipal halls:

“At that time, secret community meetings were held at the administrative district level and men under 50 and women under 40 without children were ordered to register with the military (including those who had already been discharged). Civil servants were exempted from registration.

¹⁷⁰ EEPA, 21/09/2022, [url](#); BBC, 16/09/2022, [url](#); BBC, 12/10/2022, [url](#); HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁷¹ Representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara, conversation, 03/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷² Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷³ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷⁴ Eritrean source L, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷⁵ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷⁶ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁷⁷ “There were reports of young men brought to mobilisation centers, also people who hid from national service. Hundreds of thousands were mobilized.”: Diplomatic source D, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

Meanwhile, compulsory recruitment measures (*Giffa*) were implemented for those who were eligible for mobilisation but did not register with the military for various reasons.¹⁷⁸

Source G observed that ad-hoc checkpoints appeared in the city during the same period:

"Almost every morning soldiers were deployed in the main corners of the city to check people passing by. They stopped everyone and checked if they had completed their national service duties. They stopped busses, taxi's. They checked if the people were doing or had done their national service. If not, the person was put in jail for a couple of days, then they were divided to different positions (in the army). Through this forced mobilisation, they wanted to find people evading national service. This continued for several months, at least until March 2023, though the frequency varied from time to time. Local people shared information over SMS. When something happened, the streets become almost vacant. We immediately saw and understood that something was happening in that part of the city. [...] I saw them. Secret Police and military in groups of four people were randomly putting up check-points in the city. Nobody knew beforehand where these checkpoints would appear. I often saw military trucks filled with young people, maybe they were taken to prison."¹⁷⁹

Asked whether he knew what happened to the apprehended persons, diplomatic source G replied:

"I have no information on where they were taken. Some say they were not sent to the front but were made to do supporting tasks/logistics, like supply. Some were mobilised to construction sites."¹⁸⁰

Diplomatic source F reported having observed that militia members went door-to-door during the mobilisation campaign. This source added that women were also arrested - mothers, grandmothers - to compel evaders to report.¹⁸¹

"During the mobilisation, the militia did checks on the street, they sometimes went from house to house to arrest family members of evaders. At the same time, some youngsters seemed fine, without worries for mobilisation. It is not always clear who they are. Maybe they are 2 %, or the children of generals or ministers."¹⁸²

Diplomatic source F stated they had not yet met anyone who claimed to have fought at the front. The source noted that rumors were circulating in Asmara that farmers had been mobilised to fight at the front, and that educated Asmarinos were sent to the fields to perform agricultural work.¹⁸³

Several sources referred to the tense calm in the capital in August and September 2022. One contact (source C), who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, stated that he encountered a strange atmosphere in Asmara during the war in northern Ethiopia. Local staff of international organisations were also summoned and therefore had to live in hiding in office buildings. In some cases, organizations were able to prevent the mobilisation of personnel, according to anonymous source C.¹⁸⁴ Diplomatic source F reported that Asmara was empty in September 2022 during the peak of the mobilisation. People were either mobilised or in hiding to avoid conscription. The source said

¹⁷⁸ Diplomatic source G, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source G, e-mail, 25/02/2025

¹⁷⁹ Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸⁰ Diplomatic source G, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸¹ "During the mobilisation: the militia carried out checks, some went house-to-house, women were also arrested, as well as mothers and grandmothers, until the person who they were looking for, came forward. [...] militia who were in the street. The repercussion on the family is hearsay.": Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸² Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸³ Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous source C, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

that several embassies held a meeting to determine how many local staff had been summoned and how to respond.¹⁸⁵ Diplomatic source I also noted the calm in the city:

“During the conflict Asmara was quiet, there were round-ups, ID-checks, people were put in buses and driven off. Taxi and truck drivers were pulled as militia, so there were very few taxis in the city. Some of the mobilised were sent closer to the border, some did logistics around Asmara. Many were sent out of Asmara.”¹⁸⁶

When asked who was apprehended and possibly mobilised during this campaign in the summer and autumn of 2022, most sources responded that it was mainly young people. Diplomatic source G stated the same. This source mentioned in the same conversation having heard about the mobilisation of people up to 55 years old, but that he did not witness this himself.¹⁸⁷

2.2.2. Mobilisation after the CoHA

After the ceasefire and the 2 November 2022 peace agreement between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, sources initially continued to report ongoing mobilisation. An article from 9 December 2022 on the Eritrean diaspora website *Awate* mentioned that the rounding up of youth continued even after the signing of the peace agreement.¹⁸⁸ In an email dated 21 December 2022, a diplomatic source (A) informed Cedoca that, based on information from two contacts in Asmara, there had been no changes in mobilisation as of 21 November 2022. The source added: “On December 20, 2022, a UN source told us that he has seen ‘a case of mobilisation’ on the same day.”¹⁸⁹ HRW wrote in February 2023 that it continued to receive reports that the mobilisation campaign, raids, round-ups, and reprisals were ongoing, some three months after the end of the conflict in Tigray.¹⁹⁰

Le Monde wrote in the same month that Eritrean troops were gradually withdrawing after the peace accord of November 2022, although this did not amount to a complete withdrawal (see Chapter 1.3.1.). Back in Eritrea, most members of the reserve troops were returning to civilian life, although no one could say for how long.¹⁹¹

The USDOS stated in its 2023 Human Rights Report that after Eritrea’s partial withdrawal from the Tigray region in January 2023, members of the militia returned home. The government’s mobilisation campaign subsequently decreased in scale, although the authorities continued to carry out security checks on individuals suspected of evading conscription. These individuals were apprehended and detained.¹⁹²

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, between April 2023 and April 2024 the country remained in a state of permanent mobilisation, with serious consequences for the human rights of the population, “including through the individual persecution of draft evaders

¹⁸⁵ “In September 2022, at the peak of the mobilisation in the third wave of the war, Asmara was empty. People were hiding or deployed.”: Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸⁶ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸⁷ “It were young people mainly. I did not see older people being mobilized. I heard many girls were dropping out of school, to go in hiding.”: Diplomatic source G, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

¹⁸⁸ *Awate*, 09/12/2022, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ Diplomatic source A, e-mail, 21/12/2022

¹⁹⁰ HRW, 09/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹¹ *Le Monde*, 10/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹² USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

and deserters and the collective punishment of their families and communities.” He referred to *giffas* being carried out in towns and villages across the country to track down draft evaders.¹⁹³

In June 2024, Cedoca asked a number of contacts whether Eritrea was still experiencing a situation of heightened mobilisation in mid-2024. To this question, a military source responded by email on 2 July 2024 as follows:

“There is no further information on a mobilisation in ERI at this moment. The last information about mobilisation process dates from the end of 2022. [...] In the current situation of mistrust between ERI and ETH, and given the internal conflicts in ETH where ERI would have an influence, the ERI troops remain on alert.”¹⁹⁴

In a phone call with Cedoca on 10 July 2024, two academic researchers on Eritrea pointed out the siege mentality in the country:

“ICG talked about the siege state in an article of 2013. I think that covers it very well. The country always feels under siege by something or someone, it is never at peace. That mentality drives everything. And it has been reinvigorated recently.”¹⁹⁵

The same academic researchers indicated that mobilisation did not stop after the war:

“Mobilisation in a sense has not stopped, it is the same kind of round-ups that we have seen before where you need your movement papers, you need to justify presence in a town or area. If you are not where you are supposed to be, that has consequences.”¹⁹⁶

However, they stated that the pressure their contacts experienced during the war had decreased:

“From the communications with people in Asmara that I had in the last few months, there seems to be less of a general pressure cooker, but these people with whom I am in contact, they are all in some way – through family or occupation – not being mobilised at this point of time.”¹⁹⁷

Asked which profiles were concerned, the academic researchers specified the following:

“Women with young kids, my friends with young kids in Asmara never voiced any concern about themselves being mobilised. Also people with high education, some individuals who have shops – having a shop points to a special status anyways, few professional athletes.”¹⁹⁸

Several contacts interviewed by Cedoca during the FFM in Eritrea indicated that *giffas* were still going on for a short period after the war ended in November 2022. Diplomatic source I reported that the national mobilisation stopped in December 2022.¹⁹⁹ Diplomatic source F said that several weeks after the peace accord, buses carrying people returned to the capital. The source added that months after the signing of the CoHA, militia members were still stopping people in the streets of Asmara and asking them for documents justifying their presence.²⁰⁰ A third diplomatic source (G) stated that in March

¹⁹³ UNHRC, 04/05/2024, pp. 2, 7, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ European military source in Addis Ababa, e-mail, 02/07/2024

¹⁹⁵ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone call, 10/07/2024

¹⁹⁶ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone call, 10/07/2024

¹⁹⁷ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone call, 10/07/2024

¹⁹⁸ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone call, 10/07/2024

¹⁹⁹ Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰⁰ “In the weeks following the peace agreement, there were trucks with soldiers returning. [...] After the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022, months after even, there were still militia in the street, stopping people and checking their document. If you are stopped you have to be able to show a release paper, but no one has that, or a circulation permit. If you do not have the correct document, you get jailed for months, then national service status is checked.”: Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

2023 he witnessed the last *giffa* in Asmara,²⁰¹ after which he no longer saw or heard of *giffas* in the capital. Source G added:

"All of a sudden the taxi drivers were released from the front and came back to the city. Other also gradually came back. People gradually returned to the city, in busses, in summer 2023."²⁰²

Asked whether and when the mobilisation that started in the context of the Tigray war came to an end, diplomatic source H replied: "It's very difficult, there are seasonal mobilisations that have nothing to do with war, but are meant to temporarily increase the workforce."²⁰³

Diplomatic source D noted that in the period after the CoHA, sporadic reports circulated about mobilisations, based on rumours that people had to report to mobilisation centers.²⁰⁴

Asked whether they saw a lasting impact of the mobilisation on life in Asmara, source I replied that mobilisation had no lasting impact on Asmara afterwards. This source heard that the wounded were mainly treated in a hospital in Keren.²⁰⁵ Source F also stated that he saw no impact in the capital: "Asmara was maybe not affected that much by those casualties, the ones more educated in Asmara were not the ones who were sent to the front. The ones who died are maybe rather from villages or from the border area."²⁰⁶

On 18 February 2025, about two weeks after Cedoca's FFM in Eritrea, HRCE reported under the title *Eritrea Orders Nationwide Military Mobilisation, Raising Fears of Renewed Conflict* that the Eritrean government had issued a directive to all regional administrations to register and mobilise citizens under the age of 60 for military refresher training. This measure included demobilised conscripts²⁰⁷. Married female conscripts and female conscripts with children were also ordered to return to their respective military units, according to HRCE. The report also stated that persons under the age of 50 were forbidden from leaving the country.²⁰⁸ Cedoca wrote to HRCE requesting a copy of the directive. HRCE replied by email on 4 March 2025 as follows:

"In Eritrea, Directives are given mostly verbally. If issued in writing, they are kept confidential and for internal use only. The state media do not publish such information. There is no independent

²⁰¹ Diplomatic source G, e-mail, 15/05/2025; Diplomatic source G, conversation during the mission of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰² Diplomatic source G, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰³ Diplomatic source H, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source H, e-mail, 01/05/2025, Asmara

²⁰⁴ "After the Pretoria agreement, there have been scarce reports of mobilisations, based on rumors. People would have to report to mobilisation centers.": Diplomatic source D, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰⁵ "I have not noticed an impact, not heard about an impact.": Diplomatic source I, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰⁶ Diplomatic source F, conversation during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025-06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁰⁷ In an email to Cedoca from 1 July 2025, HRCE explained what the organization means by demobilised conscripts. "In the Eritrean context, the term can be misleading, as true demobilisation rarely occurs in practice. What we mean by 'demobilised conscripts' refers primarily to individuals who may have formally been released from active military service, but remain under national service obligations, typically in civilian roles such as teaching, clerical positions, or working in government-run factories, farms, or construction sites. These individuals are not exempted from national service and are not eligible for a passport or exit visa, as they are still considered conscripts under the system of indefinite service. Some others may have been temporarily released due to age, health, or family circumstances, but even these individuals are often kept 'on standby'," meaning they can be recalled at any time. The recent directive to register all citizens under 60 includes this category: former conscripts who never received full demobilisation and remain under the regime's control. [...] all the individuals covered in the recent mobilisation order are either currently serving in some form or considered still under obligation, and therefore ineligible for exit visas under Eritrea's highly restrictive emigration system." HRCE, e-mail, 01/07/2025

²⁰⁸ HRCE, 18/02/2025, [url](#)

media, no general assembly (last convened in February 2002, 23 years ago), and no transparency. Our information comes from credible sources inside Eritrea.”²⁰⁹

A few days after the HRCE report, BBC Tigrinya also reported the call-up of reservists for military training. According to the BBC, the directive required citizens under 60 who have served in the Eritrean army to register and undergo training. It also forbade citizens under 50 to leave the country without authorisation from the competent government authority. Residents of the city of Asmara told BBC Tigrinya that this order from the Eritrean government had not been officially announced. This call-up for training, which the Eritrean government sent to regional administrations and was implemented through the *kebeles*, ordered soldiers²¹⁰ to return to their units and stipulated that other citizens of the country working in various sectors were strictly monitored when leaving the country. During meetings, Eritrean citizens received information about the current situation in the *kebeles*, which showed that women could also be called up for military training. Regarding the ban on leaving the country, BBC Tigrinya reported that government employees under the age of 70, as well as former soldiers who were discharged from the army before the age of 60, needed to present a supporting letter from the People’s Army Office²¹¹ when they wished to leave the country. According to the new directive, women under the age of 50 were prohibited from leaving the country.²¹²

Following these reports, international media and think tanks reported on a nationwide military mobilisation in Eritrea in February 2025.²¹³

While drafting this COI Focus, Cedoca requested information about these reports and events in Asmara from several contacts it had spoken with during the FFM in Eritrea. All sources contacted said that there was no mobilisation taking place in the city, only periodic training and refresher courses.²¹⁴ Source K wrote: “February mobilisation – there was no such thing [...]. There was regular refresher training for some categories.”²¹⁵ Source H likewise stated that this was routine training, and not mobilisation:

“Our assessment from February is that some units were called to undertake routine training. This information was later exaggerated from sources in Addis and the UK. We did not see, or experience, mobilisation in Asmara. That is not to say it didn’t happen elsewhere. In 2022, we saw embassy staff and guards taken. I am not aware of any embassies experiencing this in February. In 2022, they were not rumours. This time, they were. That’s the difference. Exit visas were temporarily suspended at the same time but resumed only a few weeks later.”²¹⁶

Regarding the exit ban, source F indicated that exit visas had not been issued temporarily, but that issuance had resumed by the end of February 2025.²¹⁷

²⁰⁹ HRCE, e-mail, 04/03/2025

²¹⁰ From the Google Translate version, it is unclear whether this refers to serving soldiers, other conscripts, and/or reservists.

²¹¹ Possibly this refers to the People’s Militia.

²¹² BBC Tigrinya, 21/02/2025, [url](#)

²¹³ Reuters, 14/03/2025, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 25/03/2025, [url](#); ECFR, 17/04/2025, [url](#); Clingendael, 06/03/2025, [url](#)

²¹⁴ Diplomatic source K, e-mail, 01/05/2025; Diplomatic source J, e-mail, 21/02/2025; Diplomatic source F, e-mail, 24/02/2025; Diplomatic source H, e-mail, 29/04/2025

²¹⁵ Diplomatic source K, e-mail, 01/05/2025

²¹⁶ Diplomatic source H, e-mail, 29/04/2025

²¹⁷ Diplomatic source F, e-mail, 24/02/2025

2.2.3. Demobilisation after the CoHA

Cedoca found no information on demobilisation in the aftermath of the CoHA. None of the sources consulted by Cedoca had encountered any such information.²¹⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea's report also makes no mention of demobilisation.²¹⁹ Sources from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cited in the December 2023 Country Report on Eritrea, indicated that they were not aware of any formal demobilisations in Eritrea. The government was said not to have communicated formally on this matter. An anonymous source informed the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs that, since the signing of the CoHA, there had been less media attention on the conflict in Eritrea and that demobilisations had taken place, albeit on a small scale..²²⁰

Two academic researchers told Cedoca in July 2024 that, to their knowledge, no demobilisation had taken place:

"There has not been any demobilisation. There are breaks, where people go home sometimes. There has not been any demobilisation before – why would they do it now in this context? As far as my knowledge goes, there has been no formal demobilisation and I do not consider it in future. [...] The government has not yet informed the families of the martyrs – the people who died in the war – they can only make assumptions about whereabouts. Possibly, there is the aspect that the authorities do not want to demobilize and bring people back home because these people will tell their families what has happened, who has died. The authorities want to contain that information. The fact that the authorities don't send them back home is a strategy to keep the high number of casualties out of the public eye."²²¹

Diplomatic source D stated in February 2025 that many of those who were mobilised during the campaign were still in service and may be stuck in the field, which causes problems for the families of these persons.²²² That was also the impression of diplomatic source H: "That is my assumption – tensions are high, maybe if you were at the front during the war, you are probably not in Asmara at this point in time."²²³ In an email, source H clarified that "people at the border are unlikely to have returned back to their homes at all."²²⁴

2.2.4. Mobilisation of returnees

This chapter discusses the risk of mobilisation upon return. Without going into detail about the conditions for leaving the country legally, Cedoca notes that Eritrean citizens face significant restrictions when trying to leave the country. Eritreans must obtain an exit visa, but various sources indicate that the requirements for obtaining both passports and exit visas are inconsistent and non-transparent. Many therefore leave the country through illegal channels.²²⁵

The government often refuses citizens passports and exit visas because they have not completed their military service, national service, or militia duty, have not paid income tax, or for arbitrary or unstated

²¹⁸ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, telephone conversation, 10/07/2024; Researcher on the Horn of Africa, messages via social media, 19/06/2024.

²¹⁹ UNHRC, 04/05/2024, [url](#)

²²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 16, [url](#)

²²¹ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, telephone conversation, 10/07/2024; Researcher on the Horn of Africa, messages via social media, 19/06/2024.

²²² "[...] many are still mobilized or stuck in the field, which poses a problem for the families.": Diplomatic source D, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara.

²²³ Diplomatic source H, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source H, email, 01/05/2025, Asmara.

²²⁴ Diplomatic source H, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara.

²²⁵ USDOS, 24/06/2024, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, pp. 42–52, [url](#)

reasons.²²⁶ To obtain an exit visa, Eritreans must be able to demonstrate that they have completed their national service or have been officially exempted. According to the 2016 EASO report, they must also provide a reason for their intended departure. The authorities consider travel abroad for medical treatment unavailable in Eritrea, study abroad, and attendance at sports events or conferences as valid reasons.²²⁷

The Swiss COI service and EASO wrote in 2019 that, unlike members of the national service, members of the People's Army are generally not prohibited from traveling abroad or obtaining an exit visa. However, they still need permission from their zone commander. According to both sources, this permission is sometimes difficult to obtain and can only be secured through personal contacts.²²⁸ During the FFM in Eritrea, Cedoca asked several interlocutors whether members of the People's Army could leave the country. Two sources (Eritrean source B and diplomatic source H) stated that members of the People's Army have access to passports and can travel. A third source, diplomatic source I, explained that the militia commander must confirm with a signed statement that the person is not needed:

"It is difficult for everybody over age of 5 to get a passport and an exit visa. It is more difficult for men because they are in the militia. It's gender and age specific. In case of medical problems passport and exit visa is a possibility. Usually, for men to have an exit visa: the militia commander has to sign that they are not needed."²²⁹

EASO stated in its September 2019 report that some Eritreans who return to their country have previously violated Eritrean laws, particularly Proclamation 24/1992, which regulates entry into and exit from the country, and the proclamation on national service due to desertion or draft evasion. According to the latter proclamation, registers are kept of persons eligible for national service who have fled the country. If these persons do not return to Eritrea before their 40th birthday to complete their compulsory service, they risk up to five years' imprisonment until their 50th birthday. In addition, they lose the right to work and to acquire land. The proclamation does not distinguish between legal and illegal departures on this point.²³⁰ According to the EASO report, several factors are important in determining how the authorities treat returnees:

- the manner of return: voluntary or forced²³¹;
- the manner of leaving Eritrea: legal or illegal²³²;
- the year of departure from Eritrea (before or after independence, the border war with Ethiopia);

²²⁶ USDOS, 24/06/2024, [url](#); SEM, 17/12/2019, [url](#)

²²⁷ EASO, 11/2016, p. 14, [url](#)

²²⁸ SEM, 17/12/2019, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, p. 43, [url](#)

²²⁹ Diplomatic source I, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara.

²³⁰ EASO, 09/2019, p. 55, [url](#)

²³¹ Information on the treatment of persons forcibly returned is scarce and anecdotal. For more info: EASO, 09/2019, pp. 62–64, [url](#)

²³² The country report added that in 2018, when the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was open for several months, persons crossing the border did not need a passport or exit visa. During the first weeks, there were no controls at all, and later only minimal checks and registration: Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 05/2022, pp. 54–57, [url](#). Persons who left the country at the time of the open borders, from July to December 2018, did not have an exit stamp or exit visa, or any other proof of legal departure, as stipulated in Eritrean law (Regulation 4/1992), which still applied during the border opening. Persons who returned to Eritrea after going to Ethiopia during the border opening were reportedly neither checked nor registered. Many of them, who returned to Eritrea after a few days or weeks in Ethiopia, therefore faced no problems, since their stay in Ethiopia was not explicitly known to the Eritrean authorities: Finnish Immigration Service, 20/11/2019, [url](#)

- payment of the 2% tax²³³ and signing of form 4/4.2²³⁴;
- political activities abroad: none, pro-government, or anti-government;
- completion of national service prior to departure from Eritrea;
- duration of stay in Eritrea: short-term visitor or permanent returnee;
- personal contacts with the responsible authorities;
- and finally, arbitrariness.²³⁵

2.2.4.1. Voluntary and forced return

Persons who return to Eritrea and are still subject to national service must, upon arrival, still perform their service if they have not yet done so or do not have an exemption.²³⁶ According to an anonymous source from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, persons subject to national service who are forcibly returned risk detention or disappearance. The same source said that what happens to the person would depend on the responsible commander and whether the family can buy the person's release.²³⁷

During Cedoca's FFM in Eritrea, an Eritrean source said that a returnee will not be punished for an illegal flight upon return. However, if he or she is still of conscription age and has not yet completed their national service, he or she will have to do so. Asked whether returnees are punished for their evasion or desertion, the source replied that this is not the case. Source B added: "They are rehabilitated. Also in case of desertion. After rehabilitation they are sent back to their unit. [...] The rehabilitation is to make you accept reality. It takes about one month."²³⁸ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that no measures or punishment follow after return following evasion: "Evasion of National Service – almost everyone did that. There is no action against them."²³⁹

Cedoca's contacts, who were either written to or interviewed during the FFM, have no recent information about the treatment of returnees following illegal flight, draft evasion or desertion. In general, it is difficult to determine the risks for returnees because sources are not aware of persons of conscription age who have returned. Known cases of return are limited to the organised forced return of a small number of individuals who had been convicted of a criminal offence in the country that repatriated them and who did not have the right to reside there. There are no local or international organisations or other entities that monitor returnees after their arrival.²⁴⁰

²³³ All Eritreans residing abroad—regardless of whether they left the country legally or illegally—are obliged to contribute 2% of their income as Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Tax (RRT), popularly known as the 2% tax or diaspora tax: EASO, 09/2019, pp. 55–56, [url](#)

²³⁴ Eritreans who wish to return and have not completed their national service must sign form 4/4.2, popularly known as the form of repentance or letter of regret, officially titled Immigration and Citizenship Services Request Form. In doing so, they admit to having committed an offense and accept the associated punishment. This applies to all Eritreans who left the country illegally without completing national service. Only persons who are exempt from service or have completed their service are not required to sign this form: EASO, 09/2019, p. 56, [url](#)

²³⁵ EASO, 09/2019, p. 55, [url](#)

²³⁶ EASO, 09/2019, pp. 59–61, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 59, [url](#)

²³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 59, [url](#)

²³⁸ Eritrean source B, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²³⁹ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁴⁰ Diplomatic source D, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source E, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Diplomatic source H, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; "We have no access to jail. We are not entitled or allowed to do a follow up on returnees. We are sending them back to their country so on what basis could we do a follow up?": Diplomatic source I, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

Returnees, including regime supporters, are subject to the same arbitrariness and inconsistent treatment as all other Eritrean citizens.²⁴¹

It is unclear how the authorities view asylum applications lodged abroad. Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a conversation with Cedoca: "In principle we believe they are economic migrants."²⁴² Asked what happens to them upon return, one of them replied: "Generally, internal security registers them when entering. Then they can go to their village, family."²⁴³

When asked for their assessment of the risk upon return for people who were able to leave Eritrea legally with a passport and exit visa, the academic researchers said the following:

"Having a passport and exit visa does not necessarily mean one is exempted from national service. For example, academics, they can travel with passport and exit visa. Civil servants can sometimes too – they are not exempted from national service, they are in national service. They are just not sent on the military stream. [...] If that person is on the government radar for the wrong behavior for example traveling abroad on a passport and exit visa but asking for asylum -, he would be particularly exposed to risks. A passport and exit visa is not an indicator that you are safe. People try to get a passport and exit visa to be able to travel and ask asylum service abroad, therefore they have to be on good standing with the authorities, it is a gray scale and it should not be confused with loyalty."²⁴⁴

The above information suggests that conscripts of returning age who have not completed their national service will most likely have to do so upon returning to Eritrea, possibly after undergoing punishment or rehabilitation. Eritreans who return but do not meet the conditions for obtaining preferential diaspora citizen status (see below) are considered residents of the country and risk being mobilised in times of war.

2.2.4.2. Visits and temporary return

According to figures from the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2017, on average about 95,000 Eritreans living abroad travel to Eritrea each year. This includes Eritreans who have lived abroad for decades and acquired other nationalities. Short visits by diaspora members to Eritrea under these conditions are generally unproblematic.²⁴⁵

Georgia Cole and Milena Belloni highlight the distinction between permanent and temporary return. Eritreans who meet certain conditions, such as staying outside Eritrea for two to three years, signing a formal letter of apology expressing regret for their illegal departure (Form 4/4.2) and paying 2% of their income to the Eritrean government, can temporarily return as 'diaspora citizens'.²⁴⁶ According to EASO, an Eritrean identity card and an international travel document are also required to obtain this preferential status from the Department of Immigration and Nationality.²⁴⁷

The legal status of diaspora citizens differs from that of other citizens upon return to Eritrea. For example, they are exempt from national service and can leave the country without an exit visa.

²⁴¹ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 58, [url](#)

²⁴² Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁴³ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGVS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁴⁴ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone conversation, 10/07/2024

²⁴⁵ EASO, 09/2019, p. 57, [url](#); Mekonnen D., Yohannes A., 05/2022, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ For example, Cole and Belloni point to the case of Eritreans who have lived in Saudi Arabia for many years with their Eritrean passports. The Saudi authorities require this to obtain a work permit, and it is not possible to apply for asylum in Saudi Arabia.

²⁴⁷ EASO, 09/2019, p. 57, [url](#)

Diaspora citizens can only return to Eritrea on a temporary basis (six to twelve months, sometimes extended to two or three years²⁴⁸), as permanent return would nullify their diaspora status, thereby making them again liable for national service. There are few known cases of Eritreans whose diaspora status has expired, possibly because they deliberately leave the country before the status lapses.²⁴⁹

Cole and Belloni argue that the rights of Eritreans who return temporarily depend on certain legal rights and protections acquired outside the country—for example, through obtaining refugee or other residence status—even if these remain uncertain.²⁵⁰

The two academic researchers mentioned previously stated the following during a phone conversation with Cedoca in July 2024:

“If one comes to the EU and applies for asylum, but is rejected, he cannot get a diaspora status. If he is sent back, he becomes a resident citizen of Eritrea – which is what people we were talking to are trying to avoid, becoming ‘one of those’ again.”²⁵¹

Other sources also mention that individuals must hold a valid residence permit or a foreign citizenship in order to qualify for diaspora status.²⁵² Interviews with Eritrean sources during Cedoca’s FFM in Eritrea revealed that the length of time someone spends abroad is a key factor in determining whether they are required to serve upon their return. For example, Eritrean source B stated that a person who was conscription-eligible upon departure would no longer be so if he or she has lived abroad for more than three years, has a residence permit abroad, and has also signed a letter of apology. If these conditions are met, the person can apply for a document from the Department of Immigration and Nationality that is valid for seven years, referred to by the source as a “seven-year card.” During that period, the person can come and go at will. However, they cannot settle permanently in Eritrea, as they would then once again become subject to national service.²⁵³

The two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs related these conditions to Eritrea’s migration law:

“We have a migration law. For Eritreans to be considered resident abroad, they should stay three years outside Eritrea. [...] If they did not stay three years outside, they are considered residents of Eritrea. They can join family, anything, but are not allowed to exit Eritrea. [...] After three years, there is the ability to go back and forth, they are considered residents of the host country.”²⁵⁴

These sources stated that a foreign residence permit is not required, as long as the person can prove that they have lived abroad for more than three years.²⁵⁵

It is unclear at what point the stay of a person holding a “seven-year card” is considered as having become permanent. According to Eritrean source B, this depends on the call for national service, which occurs once a year, and thus there is no fixed time limit that determines when a stay is considered permanent.²⁵⁶ According to the two representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a person with a

²⁴⁸ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#); Mekonnen D., Yohannes A., 05/2022, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#)

²⁵⁰ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Two academic researchers with expertise on Eritrea, phone conversation, 10/07/2024.

²⁵² Swiss Refugee Council, 30/09/2018, [url](#); EASO, 09/2019, p. 57, [url](#)

²⁵³ Eritrean source B, interview during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Eritrean source B, email, 07/05/2025

²⁵⁴ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara.

²⁵⁵ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁵⁶ Eritrean source B, interview during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara; Eritrean source B, email, 07/05/2025

“seven-year card” can remain in Eritrea for up to three years before once again being considered a resident and consequently losing the privileges tied to diaspora status. To prevent this, they only need to briefly cross the border, after which they can re-enter Eritrea:

“They have to leave at the latest by three years. They can’t stay longer than three years. If they do, they are reconsidered resident of Eritrea again. [...] They can cross border and come back.”²⁵⁷

However, fulfilling the above-mentioned conditions is no guarantee against prosecution.²⁵⁸ Sources point to incidents involving visitors who were detained because they did not possess an Eritrean identity card, had not signed form 4/4.2, had financial ties to a school where an uprising had taken place, or had engaged in activities abroad that are regarded as anti-government.²⁵⁹ It is unclear whether the preferential status offers a guarantee against mobilisation. In an email dated 25 May 2025, Eritrean source B wrote that diaspora citizens holding a “seven-year card” are not mobilised in the event of a national mobilisation campaign. Sources generally note that, in the Eritrean context, privileges are never guaranteed.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Two representatives of the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview during the FFM of the CGRS to Eritrea, 29/01/2025–06/02/2025, Asmara

²⁵⁸ EASO, 09/2019, p. 57, [url](#); Mekonnen D., Yohannes A., 05/2022, [url](#)

²⁵⁹ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, 19/12/2023, p. 58, [url](#); EASO 09/2019, pp. 58–59, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ Cole G., Belloni M., 2022, [url](#)

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