

## About Eritrea and Eritreans...



Eritrea is Located in N.E. Africa: North of Ethiopia, East of Sudan, On the Red Sea

**The People:** About 4 million, Mixture of Muslim and Christian; Approved religions are Sunni Muslim; Eritrean Orthodox Christian (the church is controlled by the state), Lutheran and Roman Catholic. Others, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals are highly persecuted). **Primary Languages:** Tigrinya and Arabic.

**Languages/Ethnic Groups:** Tigrinya, Tigre; Kunama; Saho; Afar; Nara; Blein; Hbdrib; Bedawi. With Ethiopia, Eritreans share the only indigenous alphabet in Africa.

**The Refugees:** Thousands flee the country every month because of the malevolent dictatorship in control and:

- Unending abusive, intolerant, essentially unpaid military impressment characterized as slave labor.
- Lack of basic human rights: freedom to worship, to congregate, etc.
- Surveillance; abuse of families of those who flee; arbitrary jailing.
- No free speech, no public media; journalists jailed.
- No rule of law; arbitrary arrests and imprisonment without charge or trial.
- Acute and extensive cruelty, torture and rapacity.
- **These abuses continue despite the political rapprochement with Ethiopia in 2018**

**Where They Have Fled:** Ethiopia (camps in the north & east, and urban), Sudan (camps in the east; urban); Israel (not welcome by govt.); Libya (often trafficked; many detained in terrible conditions); Yemen; Djibouti; Egypt; South Africa; Uganda; Kenya; Saudi Arabia; S. Sudan; most countries in Europe; USA (via Latin America); Canada. Resettled to various western countries – USA, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Australia, etc. Many unaccompanied children have fled Eritrea, particularly to Ethiopia.

**Difficulties Encountered by Eritrean Refugees:**

- Long, unproductive, frustrating lives in camps, often resulting in vulnerability to trafficking.
- Limited resettlement opportunities.
- May be kidnapped by traffickers, extortionists in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya; extortion often by torture.
- Overloading onto rickety boats on the Mediterranean that may capsize and drown refugees. May be caught and returned to Libya where they are detained, sometimes in terrible conditions.
- Unrecognized as refugees and shunned as just job-seekers in Israel, some other countries.
- Harassed, intimidated and threatened by Eritrean regime operatives and other regime supporters.

## About Eritrea and Eritreans – Page 2

**Naming Convention:** An Eritrean is given a gender-specific single name. The individual's second name is his or her father's (first) name, and the individual's third name is the paternal grandfather's (first) name, and so on. An Eritrean may know the names of 5 or even 10 paternal ancestors. Tigrinya names often have everyday meanings, such as: Tsehaie (m) = Sun; Berhane (m) = light; Timnit (f) = aspiration; Semere (m) = accomplished; Haddish (m) = new; Selassie(m) = Trinity; Bruk (m) = blessed; Hiwet (f) = life; and Yordanos (f) = River Jordan.. Some names, such as Meron, may be for man or woman. Muslim families generally use traditional names, often taken from the Quran. Spelling of names is done phonetically, and so the same name may be spelled inconsistently using the Western alphabet, person to person or between a given person's documents.

**The Calendar and Dates:** The Eritrean (or Ethiopian or Julian, "Ge'ez") calendar, rather than the Gregorian (western) calendar, is often used by Eritreans, especially for church and rural documents. The Eritrean calendar date precedes the corresponding Gregorian date by roughly 7 or 8 years, which can lead to confusion around actual dates and thus authenticity of documents. In general the Gregorian calendar is utilized in Eritrea.

**The Primary Language is Tigrinya:** spoken fluently by most of the refugees, being the primary or secondary language for most. Many speak Arabic. Some speak Amharic (Ethiopia), the official language until 1991.

**The Long Arm of the Regime:** The Eritrean regime strives to control the diaspora, including through agents operating out of the embassies, in order to punish refugees and defectors, to hinder them from supporting the opposition, to serve as an example to those who might flee or oppose the regime, and to raise hard currency. Regime activities include:

- Harassment, intimidation and threats.
- Payment of 2% income tax back to the regime, retroactive to departure from Eritrea.
- Pressure to sign an official "form of regret," pay the 2% tax, and provide personal information including about employment, travel history and about family still in Eritrea (information used as leverage against the refugee, asylee or now-citizen of another country).
- Passport will be sold to a refugee or family members only if the form of regret is processed.
- For any official documents to be provided, taxes must be paid up: marriage/birth/death certificates/transcripts.
- Family members of defectors are subject to arrest, fines, imprisonment in Eritrea.
- Regime operatives create break-ups of refugee families through deceit, in order to cripple the opposition.
- The regime has long and purposely created acute distrust among the citizenry, as a means of dividing and maintaining control of the population; this extends deep into the diaspora.
- Care must be taken in vetting Tigrinya & Arabic interpreters / translators to avoid infiltration by regime agents.

### **Miscellaneous Aspects:**

1. Because citizens have been fleeing Eritrea for so long (>20 years), recent refugees often have relatives long-established in other lands, having accumulated resources. So Eritreans have been targeted for kidnapping as being likely sources for extortion, as compared to other refugees.
2. Traditional food includes a large, spongy sour flat bread called *taita* or *injera*, which is used with the (right) hand only to eat spicy stew (*zighnee*) and vegetable (*ahmltee*) recipes.
3. Most Eritreans do not eat pork.
4. Culturally, men may be very friendly upon first meeting a child, offering treats – this may be misinterpreted and the refugee should be cautioned about local concerns.
5. FGM is very common among Eritreans, regardless of religion; now outlawed there.
6. Many Eritrean Orthodox churches outside the country are controlled by the regime.

December, 2018

