



# GENERAL INFORMATION PERTAINING TO ERITREAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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This information is provided in order to assist professionals and volunteers in working with issues, documents, petitions, adjudication, etc. involving Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers. This information may be helpful for volunteer resettlement agencies and their affiliates and case workers; individual volunteers assisting Eritreans; USCIS analysts, detention officers and interviewers; immigration judges, government attorneys and immigration attorneys; embassy consular sections that might process Eritrean refugees; and UNHCR and other professionals who interview and process Eritrean refugees.

The America Team for Displaced Eritreans is a U.S.-based nonprofit all-volunteer humanitarian organization (501(c)(3) public charity) which provides assistance to Eritrean refugees around the world. This assistance consists primarily of *ad hoc* material and advocacy support for refugees and asylum seekers in the U.S. and where else need may arise, and communication to obtain help for refugees in acute safety and need situations in various countries, presently with emphasis on Yemen, Uganda and Ethiopia.

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## A. BACKGROUND: WHY THERE ARE ERITREAN REFUGEES

Conditions which have caused hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to flee their homeland

1. The **regime that took control** of Eritrea in the early 1990s soon began efforts to protect their position against replacement by any means. This effort grew with time in order to secure the regime against interference by democratic, political, or external means. A constitution had been prepared and ratified by regional vote, which would assure some semblance of democracy and election of officials.
  - But the constitution was, and has continually been, ignored.
  - Public and free media have been systematically silenced.
  - In 2001, 15 high-level officials of the regime petitioned the president to implement fair and democratic operation; soon, as much of the world was focused on the events of 9/11, all (except a few who were out of the country) were rounded up and jailed, not to be heard from again.
  - Sources of humanitarian help, such as USAid, have been expelled from the country in order to keep out foreign observation and any influence for democracy.
  - Any whisper of political opposition can result in imprisonment and beating. Unauthorized meetings of more than a few people are not permitted.
  - An unresolved border war with Ethiopia erupted in 1998, and Eritrea had taken this as a reason to impose martial law. Rapprochement between the countries began in summer, 2018, but there have been no detectable improvements in human rights in Eritrea since then. Eritrea maintains one of the largest standing armies in Africa.

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2. In order to **maintain subjugation of the population** in the country, and to a great extent in other countries, a threat of abuse of those remaining in the country is continued. Examples are:
  - Citizens as of age 18 are to do “national service” which is in the military and/or doing other work for the state, theoretically for 1½ years including training. In reality, some are forced to start before age 18, and many face endless service, often to age 50, with reports now that to age 57 is not unusual. Military service is essentially unpaid, and is utilized as slave labor for road construction, public works, mining operations and personal work for regime authorities.
  - Any military recruit raising the slightest question about orders or expresses any dissatisfaction is subject to beating and prison.
  - The local economy has been devastated by the rapacity of the regime, with rampant inflation; many can survive only on funds sent from outside the country by friends and relatives
  - People in the country suspected of any disloyalty to the regime may be jailed and/or beaten
  - Relatives in the country of a citizen known to have fled illegally are subject to interrogation, jail and large fines.
  - Relatives in the country of known oppositionists in the Diaspora may be jailed, tortured or killed.
  - Documentation and testimony of the torture and other abuses routinely done by the Eritrean regime to dissidents and other enemies of the state are extremely extensive. Examples are the U.S. Department of State Human Rights Reports on Eritrea; Human Rights Watch Country Summaries on Eritrea; and the U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports covering Eritrea.

#### **B. FACTORS INFLUENCING SAFETY AND BEHAVIOR OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

1. In order to help control the Diaspora and blunt the opposition, Eritreans loyal to the regime **harass and intimidate refugees**, particularly in the U.S., about turning their back on the government, and push them to sign and comply with the “Form of Regret,” or “Taesa” (ጣዕሳ), thereby pleading for forgiveness for turning against the government, in effect agreeing to pay delinquent and future 2% tax on income, and providing personal information including identities of parents in Eritrea. In the U.S., subsequent demands are made for W-2 forms. The subject is required to sign the following (translated) statement, extending profound vulnerability:

**I, whose name is the above-stated citizen, hereby confirm with my signature that all the foregoing information which I have provided is true and that I regret having committed an offence by failing to fulfill my national obligation and that I am willing to accept the appropriate measures when decided.**

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Refugees of course generally refuse to sign this agreement unless intimidated or threatened under personal threat or threat to relatives still in Eritrea. The America Team warning about this practice is available in English and Tigrinya via [THIS LINK](#).

2. Refugees and asylees are often **kept in a state of fear** by the regime, by either threat to family back home or by perceived threat in the resident country, or both. This tactic is effective in keeping the refugee or asylee from being forthcoming with information about regime operatives, whether regarding a threat received or illegal acts observed.

### **C. FACTORS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN PROCESSING REQUESTS AND CLAIMS**

1. Members of the Diaspora are **not permitted to return to the country, nor to obtain any official documents** such as school transcripts, birth certificates and marriage certificates unless the individual is on the good side of the regime and has been paying, or pays up, the 2% income tax required of the Diaspora. Otherwise, the individual must sign and comply with the “Form of Regret,” as described in section B-1, above. Thus, Eritrean refugees and asylees filing petitions in the U.S. for spouse or unmarried children under 21 years old to join them (**USCIS Form I-730; instructions**) generally must rely on secondary supporting documentation. Church-issued baptismal certificates that the family member(s) may have can be helpful in this regard.
2. It is true that Eritrean embassies in some countries **may issue a passport** to a refugee for a fee, but this is done only if the Form of Regret is executed. With cases of refugee relatives seeking to join a parent in the U.S., and a travel document was needed, the requirement has been that the refugee in the U.S. travel to the Eritrean embassy in Washington and sign and comply with the Form of Regret.
3. Eritreans (and Ethiopians) use a **unique phonetic alphabet** known as Ge’ez, or “Tigrinya script.” While the spelling of words, including names of persons, are consistent across the country as one would expect, names are rendered into the western alphabet as the individual believes they should be spelled, to mimic how they sound. Thus, **names are often spelled differently** by an individual from how a relative or an official might render the same name. For example:
  - ብርሃኑ, a man’s name, is typically given as Berhane and Brahane; and
  - ኀብረሂወት, another man’s name, is given alternatively as Ghebrehiwet, Ghebrehewut, Gebrihiwet, Gebrehiwot and Gebrehiwet; and
  - ጸገራዳ, a woman’s name, may be spelled Tsegereda or Tsegarida

While names written indigenously in the western alphabet would be expected to be spelled identically when referring to the same individual, it should be taken into account that an Eritrean individual’s name may be, and often is, given with alternative spellings.

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4. The **naming convention for Eritreans** is such that the first name is gender-specific, and the second name is the father's first name, the third name is the paternal grandfather's first name, and so on. Thus, there is no family surname. Eritreans are traditionally known by their first two names. In completing documents, an individual may give his/her second name or third name as the "last name," which can lead to uncertainty.
5. In general, the **Gregorian** (western) calendar is generally used in Eritrea. However, the Ethiopian (Julian or "Ge'ez") **calendar**, rather than the Gregorian (western) calendar, is often used by Eritreans for church and rural documents. This, like the variations in the spelling of names described in section C-3 above, can raise doubts about authenticity of documents which are actually valid. The Ethiopia calendar date precedes the corresponding Gregorian calendar date by roughly 7 years.
6. **Place of Birth:** Eritrea was a part of Ethiopia from the 1950s until *de facto* independence in 1991 and official independence in 1993. Thus, if an individual were born prior to independence in what is present-day Eritrea, his/her statement or documents may indicate birth in Ethiopia, even though they were born in Eritrea. Prior to independence, Individuals and families from Eritrea often moved to Ethiopia for purposes of employment, education and to be with family members.

Also, with the breakout of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, many Eritrean families, often with children born in Ethiopia, were forcibly deported to Eritrea. In some cases these Eritrean children are not Tigrinya speaking, having been raised in non-Tigrinya speaking parts of Ethiopia. Such individuals, born in Ethiopia and deported to Eritrea (because of the war or otherwise) are sometimes fancifully known as *Amice* ("ah-MEE-chee") after the practice of Italian industry of shipping car parts to Ethiopia for assembly and shipment of the finished product to another country (*Amice* from **Automotive Manufacturing Company of Ethiopia**). They were often looked down upon by "native" Eritreans, and sometimes discriminated against.

7. **Know your interpreter! Know your translator!** The Eritrean regime uses devious means of learning about refugees and asylees. One way is to gain jobs interpreting and/or translating for resettlement agencies, immigration lawyers, courts, interpreter services, etc. This is done in various countries including the U.S. In this way, the regime can learn identities of refugees, asylum seekers and asylees, and personal information about them, including about relatives in Eritrea and other countries. Interpreters have been known to take the opportunity to threaten the refugee about not saying anything at all negative about the regime. Being intimidated and frightened, the refugee does not tend to reveal this form of harassment.

Just because someone speaks Tigrinya does not at all mean they are suitable as an interpreter or translator. Candidate interpreters should be vetted vis-à-vis possible support of the regime. Most Eritrean Orthodox churches in the U.S. are aligned with the Eritrean regime, and many Eritrean community centers are, as well.

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For printed copies of this form, the Links are:

1. Warning about Regime Harassment:

[http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ALERT-refugee\\_copy\\_-\\_English\\_Tigrinya.pdf](http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ALERT-refugee_copy_-_English_Tigrinya.pdf)

2. Form I-730: <http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-730.pdf>

3. Instructions for Form I-730:

<http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/I-730Instructions.pdf>

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