

Thu 11 Oct 2018 ([Ruth Maclean](#), *west Africa correspondent*)

'It's just slavery': Eritrean conscripts wait in vain for freedom

With their hopes dashed that peace with Ethiopia would bring an end to national service, young Eritreans must either accept a life of forced labour or flee.

Dawit was tiring, but he could not stop. An Eritrean schoolteacher on the run, he was crossing the border to Ethiopia alone at night, with only a stick to protect himself against the hyenas and the military squads who pick up runaways.

He was risking his life to get out so that he could take up a scholarship in the US. In Eritrea, one of the most isolated and repressive countries in the world, young people have no future. Their choice is to undertake compulsory national service, or try to flee.

Eritrea's national service is harsh, pays a pittance and goes on indefinitely. Usually, conscripts go into the military. But Dawit had been doing his national service as a teacher for more than 13 years. The government would not let him go.

When Eritrea signed a peace deal with Ethiopia in July after a 20-year standoff, rumours began circulating that gave Eritrean families great hope. People whispered that political and religious prisoners were about to be freed, that the country's most notorious jails would be closed, and that the indefinite conscription of anyone aged between 18 and 50 would end.

Many believed the historic reforms introduced by Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, were also bringing change to Eritrea, which has been ruled by former revolutionary fighter Isaias Afwerki since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991.

In July, the Eritrean embassy in Ethiopia reopened, and the first commercial flight in two decades took off from Addis Ababa to Asmara, with champagne and roses handed out on board. Last month, the road border was reopened in two places. Reunited relatives embraced and soldiers in fatigues danced in celebration.

At one graduation ceremony, reportedly attended by Afwerki, a new batch of conscripts were told they would serve for no more than 18 months.

"All the mothers in Eritrea think their kids are coming back from the frontlines," says Helen Kidan, from the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights.

In fact, nothing has changed, say Eritrea watchers. They point to the recent arrest of the former finance minister and author of a book calling for a youth uprising against the president.

The minister for labour and human welfare, Luul Gebreab, told Bloomberg recently that the government was studying the economic effects of demobilisation, but several officials said it would not happen yet.

Although the pretext for conscription no longer exists, the rumours that it will be phased out are probably false, says Fisseha Tekle, a human rights researcher on Eritrea and Ethiopia for Amnesty International. “For the last 15 years, they were blaming Ethiopia. That excuse is no longer there, so it is high time for them to stop this scheme.”

Eritrean activists and analysts say the indefinite national service is less about conflict with Ethiopia than a way to keep people weak and unable to mount resistance to the government. They suggest the authorities are unlikely to demobilise tens of thousands of militarily-trained men and women who bear a grudge against them, with no prospect of finding them alternative employment.

National service usually lasts between five and 10 years, but can last for up to 20. Conscripts often work 72-hour weeks in extremely harsh conditions with inadequate food and low pay. No one is legally entitled to take leave, which depends on the whim of commanding officers. Some conscripts have reported going for years without being allowed to visit home. If a conscript fails to return after taking leave, their parent may be jailed until they do.

Eritrean teenagers spend the last year of high school in a military camp before going straight into military service. If they get good enough grades, they might attend college and be given a civilian role. But the only way out is to leave the country.

Dawit’s midnight run to Ethiopia was the second time he’d tried to escape. About a year earlier, after being denied an exit visa to study in the US, he paid a trafficker to get him out. He was caught and jailed for seven months, moving between the country’s notorious, overcrowded prisons. Eventually, he was released and reassigned to a school in a remote area, with his small salary suspended for six months. “It’s just slavery,” he says. “You toil day and night and you get nothing.”

Every month, thousands of young people like Dawit sneak out of the country, ending up in Libya, Sudan, Europe, or dying along the way. Visitors to refugee camps on the Ethiopian side say more Eritreans have been crossing recently, amid warnings from traffickers that this could be their last chance to claim asylum elsewhere.

But false perceptions that things are improving in Eritrea could change other countries’ attitudes to taking them in. “In Europe, they’re using every excuse to deny entry, deny asylum applications,” says Tekle.

Eritrean officials have made empty promises about national service before. In 2015, Lord Avebury told the House of Lords the Eritrean ambassador had said conscription would be restricted to 18 months, but nothing changed.

For now, many Eritreans are surviving on rumours that their children may soon be allowed to come home, get a job, have a family life and a future.

“The mothers are expecting something. The 140,000 people doing their national service on the border are expecting something,” says Kiden. “The families of journalists and other political prisoners are expecting something. And I don’t see how these hopes will be fulfilled.”