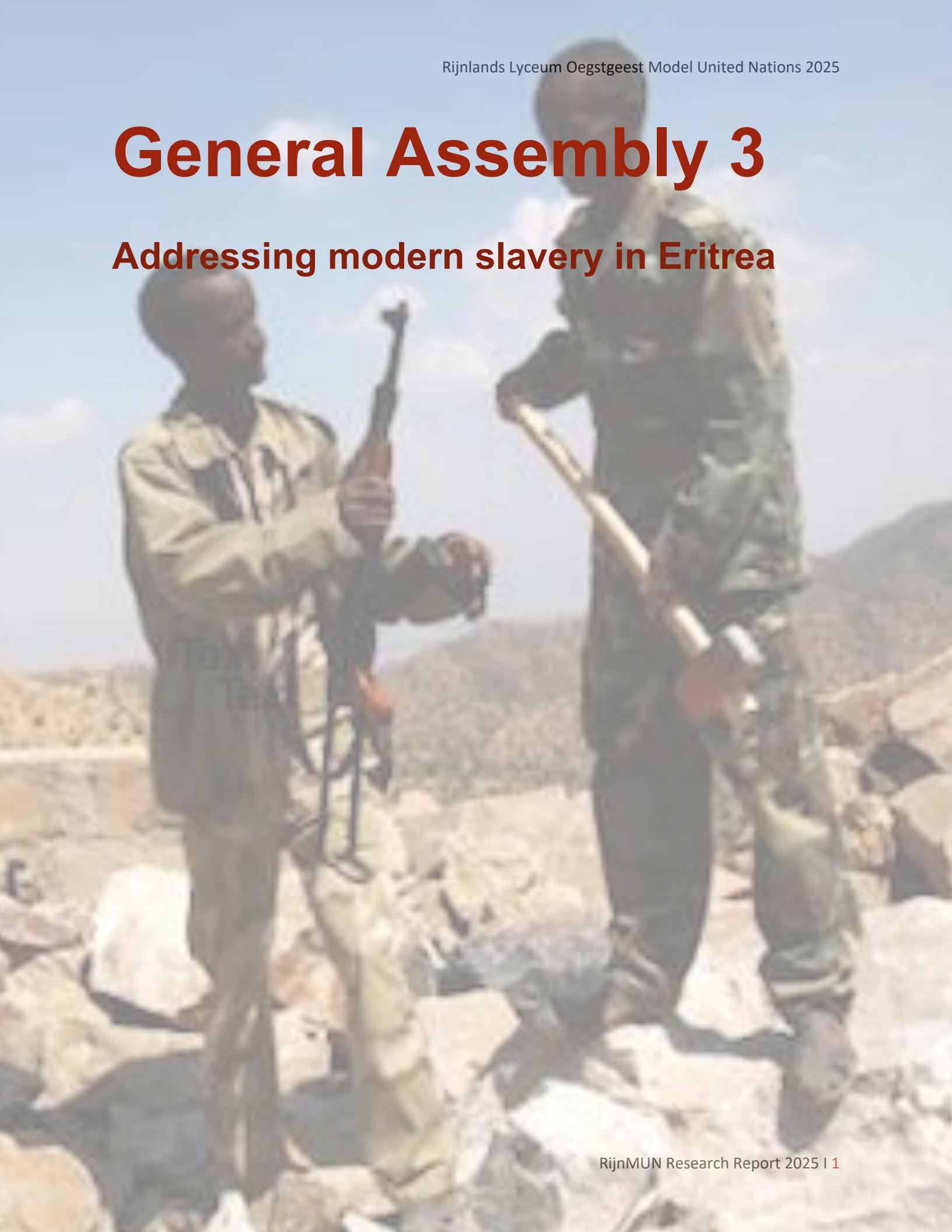


# General Assembly 3

## Addressing modern slavery in Eritrea



<b>Forum:</b>	GA3 - Social, Humanitarian and Cultural
<b>Issue:</b>	Addressing modern slavery in Eritrea
<b>Student Officer:</b>	Stein Booden
<b>Position:</b>	Chair

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## Introduction

Modern slavery persists in various forms around the world, often concealed within state institutions and legal frameworks. In Eritrea, the issue is most prominently linked to the country's system of indefinite national service—a program introduced in the 1990s to promote post-war reconstruction and national unity. Over time, however, this system has evolved into a mandatory, open-ended labor requirement involving both military and civilian work, often under harsh and uncompensated conditions. Many Eritreans spend the majority of their adult lives in service, with limited freedom of movement, little pay, and no clear path to release. These conditions have led international human rights organizations to classify Eritrea's national service as a form of modern slavery.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, asserts in Article 4 that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.” Article 23 guarantees the right to free choice of employment and to just and favorable conditions of work. Numerous reports by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have raised concerns that the Eritrean government's policies are in violation of these core principles.

While the world has made legal and moral commitments to ending all forms of slavery, the case of Eritrea remains a reminder that the struggle for human freedom is far from over.

## **Key Terms**

### **Slavery**

The status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.

### **Forced labour**

Work or service exacted from any person under threat or coercion and without voluntary consent.

### **Human Rights violations**

The breaching of fundamental human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFJD)**

Eritrea's current ruling and only political party, with Isaias Afwerki as its president

## General Overview

### *Historical and Political Context*

Following centuries of colonization by Western powers, in 1952 Eritrea was given a federation together with Ethiopia by a UN resolution. However, just 10 years later, in 1963, Ethiopia fully annexed Eritrea, officially dissolving the autonomous status it held in the federation. This caused a 30-year long conflict, which only ended in 1991 when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which would later become the PFDJ, defeated Ethiopian troops under the leadership of guerilla warfare fighter Isaias Afwerki.

In April of 1993, after a UN-supervised referendum on Eritrean independence from its annexing power at the time, Ethiopia, in which more than 99% of Eritreans voted in favour of self-governance, de jure independence was reached and Afwerki was put forward by the National Assembly as the first president of Eritrea as the head of the PFDJ.

Afwerki has been in power ever since, refusing to hold elections. He has made sure the 1997 Eritrean constitution has never been ratified, which allowed him to essentially rule by decree. On September 18th, 2001, Afwerki officially banned all press not owned by the state. Throughout the 2000's, the Eritrean regime has practiced extensive censorship over the internet through its telecommunications company, EriTel. This authoritarian rule poses several problems when discussing possible solutions to modern slavery. Firstly, the one-party system Eritrea makes for a lack of political and legal safeguards, due to the fact that the PFDJ can easily dismiss any opposition to their rule. This makes the voicing of anti-slavery thoughts not only difficult, but often dangerous for the people involved. Furthermore, because of the suppression of free press and the online censorship there is insufficient public knowledge on the human rights violations in Eritrea, thus reducing the social and political urgency on the international front.

In 2002, the PFDJ imposed a particular religious policy. From thereon, the government would only recognize 4 religious groups; the Eritrean Orthodox church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic church and the Eritrean Evangelical Lutheran church. Any other religious denomination and the worship of said denominations was declared illegal by Eritrean law. This decision started two decades of wide-spread religious persecution, which is highly relevant to the issue of slavery, because members of these 'forbidden religions' are often detained for years on end without trial and forced into slavery.

### ***The National Service Program***

One of the main causes of and contributors to modern slavery in Eritrea has been the National Service Program (NSP). Originally intended to strengthen national security and prop up patriotic feelings, the NSP has become an indefinite and compulsory system which affects most Eritrean citizens, men and women alike.

All Eritrean citizens are required by law to take part in the NSP starting from the age of 18, with severe punishments being applied to those who refuse. Participants first undergo extensive military training and afterwards they are assigned to various roles within Eritrean society, including military service, agricultural work, jobs in construction and infrastructure et cetera. While the official length of the national service program is 18 months, citizens are often forced to work for years on end, sometimes even decades, without a clear end date. In fact, according to the Human Rights Watch, the average length of the NSP is not 18 months, but 6.5 years.

The general compensation for the participants of the NSP is little to none. Due to this and the forced nature of the program, many international organisations, like the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have called the NSP a form of modern slavery.

### ***Forms and conditions of exploitation***

In Eritrea, citizens that have to partake in the NSP are often subjected to non-military jobs, as said in the previous subheading. While such roles were initially tied to reconstruction efforts after independence, their execution under conditions of indefinite duration, lack of consent, and minimal compensation has raised consistent international concern. Multiple sources document that citizens are prohibited from choosing the line of work they partake in within the NSP. Furthermore, they often work under strict surveillance and punitive discipline. According to reports from former conscripts and international rights organizations, the work environments are frequently characterized by long hours, poor living conditions, and insufficient medical care. Some assignments take place in isolated locations, and conscripts may go months or years without access to their families. Teachers and civil workers, for example, are often assigned to under-resourced areas far from their homes and are not permitted to resign or change posts voluntarily.

In addition to state-run labor, there have been allegations of conscripts being assigned to work for private companies and foreign-owned mining operations, notably the Bisha mine, under state contracts, a practice which has been criticized for enabling economic exploitation of forced laborers without

transparency.

The absence of enforceable labor protections and legal redress mechanisms within Eritrea leaves individuals without a formal avenue to report abuse, negotiate conditions, or challenge their conscription status. These structural characteristics, particularly coercion, lack of consent, and lack of exit, form the basis of why international bodies consider such labor conditions to be consistent with slavery-like practices under international law.

### ***Impact on population and migration***

Eritrea's system of indefinite national service has had a significant effect on its population dynamics, particularly with respect to emigration and displacement. Thousands of Eritreans flee the country each year, citing compulsory, open-ended conscription, lack of civil liberties, and limited economic opportunities as primary drivers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has consistently identified forced labor under the national service program as a major factor contributing to Eritrea's refugee crisis.

According to the Global Slavery Index, Eritrea has one of the highest rates of modern slavery globally, and this correlates closely with the country's high per-capita refugee outflow. Many young Eritreans choose to leave illegally rather than face indefinite conscription. In some cases, families are reported to assist their children in fleeing the country to avoid lifelong national service obligations. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea has stated that this pattern constitutes a forced population movement stemming from state policies that restrict autonomy and liberty.

These migration patterns have contributed to significant demographic shifts, especially among the youth population, which makes up a disproportionate share of refugees. Countries in the Horn of Africa, the European Union, and Israel have received tens of thousands of Eritrean asylum seekers in recent years. A 2022 report by Human Rights Watch also highlights that migrants who flee Eritrea often continue to face exploitation and abuse during their journeys or in host countries, compounding the human rights consequences of the original system of forced labor.

### *International recognition and reporting*

Multiple international organizations have formally identified aspects of Eritrea's national service program as meeting the criteria for modern slavery or slavery-like practices under international law. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, in its 2016 report, concluded that the indefinite and involuntary nature of Eritrea's national service constituted enslavement, a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. The Commission documented widespread forced labor, arbitrary detention, and coercive conditions imposed on conscripts, particularly in civilian sectors unrelated to defense.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have published repeated findings labeling Eritrea's national service system as forced labor that violates international conventions, including the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Forced Labour Convention. These organizations have emphasized the lack of consent, indefinite duration, and absence of legal recourse as factors that distinguish Eritrea's system from conventional military service.

The Walk Free Foundation's Global Slavery Index consistently ranks Eritrea among the countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery, citing state-imposed forced labor as a central driver. The Index notes that despite international attention, Eritrea has made no measurable progress in reforming its conscription system or implementing safeguards against abuse.

International legal bodies and governments have also responded through diplomatic channels, including UN Human Rights Council resolutions, sanctions, and asylum policies. For instance, the European Union and several African states have recognized the national service system as a valid basis for asylum and refugee protection, acknowledging its coercive nature and potential to violate international human rights standards.

## Major Parties Involved

### Eritrea

The nation responsible for the national service program, often accused of not doing enough to combat the issue of slavery and of directly contributing to it

### The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

The principal intergovernmental body within the United Nations responsible for promoting and protecting human rights. Its investigations have brought to light findings of slavery, perpetual detention and many other human rights violations.

### The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

A United Nations agency mandated to aid and protect refugees. It has been crucial in documenting the refugee problem in Eritrea.

### The International Labour Organisation (ILO)

A United Nations agency tasked with promoting and protecting labour rights. It has formally criticized Eritrea for violating ILO Forced Labour Conventions, emphasizing the non-voluntary, unlimited duration of conscription as a form of state-imposed forced labor.

### The Eritrean mining, agricultural and construction sectors

This includes both state-owned firms and private companies, both of which have been known to frequently make use of forced labour.



## Timeline of Key Events

<b>April 25th, 1993</b>	Eritrea formally gains independence
<b>October 23rd, 1995</b>	The National Service Program is launched
<b>September 18th, 2001</b>	Eritrea formally bans independent press
<b>April 16th, 2003</b>	Human Rights Watch releases its first report on Eritrean forced labour
<b>October 31st, 2005</b>	The UN special rapporteur on human rights violations in Eritrea expresses formal concern before the General Assembly
<b>October 2009</b>	Eritrea bans major NGO's, like Amnesty International and Save the Children, from conducting work in Eritrea
<b>June 4th, 2015</b>	The UN commission of inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea publishes its first reports
<b>June 8th, 2016</b>	The United Nations Committee on information declares conscription a form of slavery
<b>June 9th, 2018</b>	A peace agreement is signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia
<b>November 11, 2021</b>	UNHCR confirms a mass exodus of youth from Eritrea

## UN Involvement and Other Treaties

- International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, 28 June 1930
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948
- United Nations Conference on Human Rights, 14 June 1993, Vienna, Austria
- United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, 31 October 2000 (S/RES/1325)
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Forced Labour, 19 June 2014 (A/RES/68/156)
- Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, 8 June 2016 (A/HRC/32/CRP.1)
- Human Rights Council Resolution on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, 23 June 2017 (A/HRC/RES/35/25)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

### UN Commission of Inquiry and 2016 Report

In 2015, the United Nations Human Rights Council established the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea to investigate allegations of widespread human rights abuses, including the use of forced labor through the indefinite national service program. The Commission's comprehensive report, released in June 2016, presented substantial evidence that Eritrean authorities were responsible for systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations. These violations included arbitrary detention, forced labor, torture, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement and expression. The report concluded that these practices could constitute crimes against humanity and called for urgent international action to hold Eritrean leaders accountable and protect the affected population.

### Human Rights Council Resolution 35/25 (2017)

Following the Commission's findings, the Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 35/25 in June 2017. This resolution expressed serious concern over the persistent human rights violations in Eritrea and reaffirmed the need for international cooperation to address these abuses. It called on the Eritrean government to end the practice of indefinite national service, release political prisoners, and allow independent humanitarian access. The resolution also urged member states and international organizations to intensify efforts to monitor the situation and support Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers. However, Eritrea rejected the resolution and denied access to UN monitors, limiting the effectiveness of these measures.

### Role of the ILO

The International Labour Organization, as the UN agency responsible for promoting labor rights, has condemned forced labor practices globally and established conventions such as ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour and Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour. Despite these international standards, Eritrea has not ratified several key ILO conventions that would obligate the country to prohibit forced labor explicitly. The ILO has repeatedly urged Eritrea to align its national service policies with international labor laws, but due to Eritrea's isolation and limited cooperation, the organization's influence remains minimal. Consequently, forced labor continues largely unchecked under the guise of national service.

### Contributions of NGOs and refugee agencies

Efforts to enforce international norms and hold Eritrea accountable face significant obstacles. Eritrea's government has consistently rejected external scrutiny, denied access to UN investigators, and maintained strict controls on information flow. This isolationist approach limits transparency and

hampers enforcement of UN resolutions and international labor standards. The international community remains divided on how best to respond, balancing diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and humanitarian aid. While some advocate for increased sanctions and international pressure, others caution that such measures may inadvertently harm the Eritrean population. As a result, debate continues over the most effective combination of diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian tools to address modern slavery in Eritrea and promote sustainable change.

## Possible Solutions

### Strengthening targeted sanctions

One potential approach to addressing concerns related to national service practices in Eritrea is the implementation of targeted sanctions against individuals or entities associated with enforcement. Such sanctions aim to influence policy changes while attempting to limit broader economic impact on the general population. The effectiveness of sanctions depends on international cooperation and enforcement.

### Enhancing support for refugees and asylum seekers

Providing assistance to Eritreans who leave the country to avoid extended national service involves improving access to protection, resettlement programs, and basic services. Coordination with international organizations and neighboring states can help facilitate humanitarian aid and legal support for displaced persons.

### Encouraging diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation

Engagement through diplomatic channels and regional bodies may create opportunities for dialogue on national service policies and human rights concerns. Collaborative efforts with the African Union and other regional partners can encourage cooperation and potentially support reforms.

### Promoting awareness, education and civil engagement

Raising awareness about the conditions of national service and related issues within Eritrea and among diaspora communities may contribute to informed discussions. Supporting media and civil society organizations can enhance transparency and provide platforms for affected individuals to share their experiences.

### Coordinating local accountability, humanitarian aid, and development

A combined strategy involving legal measures, humanitarian assistance, and economic development programs may address the underlying factors related to extended national service. Coordinated international efforts can balance enforcement with support initiatives aimed at improving social and economic conditions.

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## Appendix

- [\*Global Slavery Index 2023, Eritrea snapshot\*](#)
- [\*Eritrea: the CIA World Factbook\*](#)
- [\*Amnesty International - Eritrea 2019 Archives\*](#)
- [\*Detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea\*](#)