

ERITREAN  
COMMUNITY PROFILE

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This booklet has been compiled by the national office of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to assist state and territory governments, service providers and other key settlement stakeholders to settle new entrants under Australia's Humanitarian Programme.

Accurate information about the pre-arrival experiences of refugees, including environmental conditions in camps, can be difficult to obtain and verify. While every effort has been made to ensure this document is factually correct, it may contain some inaccuracies.

Refugee experiences can vary considerably between individuals. Readers should note that this document is intended to provide a general background of the possible experiences of arrivals under the Humanitarian Programme. Information presented here may not always be applicable to individuals within the community in Australia or to new arrivals.

Where possible, more detailed information on specific groups of arrivals will be provided to service providers as an adjunct to this and other Community Profiles.

Policies in relation to Australia's Humanitarian Programme change over time. For current information visit the department's website at [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au).

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# Introduction

Eritrea forms a part of the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by Sudan to the north and west, the Red Sea to the east, Djibouti in the south-east and Ethiopia to the south. It is a small country of approximately 121 300 square kilometres.

The region was largely independent with periods of rule and influence by the Ottomans, Tigray Kingdom and Egyptians, until it was occupied and colonised by Italy in 1890. Italy ruled until defeat in 1941 by British forces. British mandate governed until 1952, when the United Nations (UN) formed a federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1962 Ethiopia, under Emperor Haile Selassie, declared an end to Eritrean autonomy and proclaimed Eritrea a province of Ethiopia. Eritreans have fought for independence since that time.

Although Eritrea was awarded formal independence after a referendum vote in 1993, there have been continual border disputes with Ethiopia. A United Nations peacekeeping operation currently monitors a 25 kilometre-wide temporary security zone along the entire length of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.

The border issue compounds other pressing problems including Eritrea's inability to grow enough food, frequent drought conditions, reliance on subsistence agriculture, widespread presence of land mines and only 4.7 per cent arable land. As a result, two thirds of the population receive food aid. As well, economic progress is hampered by the proportion of Eritreans who are diverted from the workforce into national service with the armed forces.

As a result of decades of war and the effects of continual drought in the early 1980s, the country of Eritrea has been devastated. Many Eritreans left the country due to the ongoing conflict and were forced to flee to refugee camps in the neighbouring countries of Sudan and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), and all the way to Kenya. In addition, economic instability, national service, the threat of another outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia, and suspected insurgent activity along the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders mean that many Eritreans are continuing to flee their country.

Eritrea's recent history is closely intertwined with that of Ethiopia, and some Eritrean entrants may have entered into marriage with Ethiopians. Readers may also wish to refer to DIMA's Ethiopian Community Profile.

# Community in Australia

There is a very small community of Eritreans in Australia. At the time of the 2001 Australian Census, there were only 1620 Eritrean-born persons living in Australia, an increase of 42 per cent from the 1996 Census.

According to the department's Settlement Database (SDB), between 2000 and 2005, there were 796 new Eritrean arrivals to Australia (Figure 1) predominantly through the Humanitarian Programme<sup>1</sup>.

It should be noted that due to the turbulent history of the country including years of civil war, changing borders and large refugee movements, there may be a significant number of refugees identifying themselves as Eritrean-born who were born in countries other than Eritrea.

Figure 1. Number of arrivals, 2000-05

Migration Stream	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
<b>Family</b>	827	30	34	33	46	63	233
<b>Humanitarian</b>	118	128	64	93	87	65	555
<b>Skilled</b>	1	3	1	-	2	-	7
<b>Unknown</b>	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
<b>Total</b>	146	161	99	126	136	128	796

Figure 2 shows that the bulk of these arrivals settled in the state of Victoria. The next largest number of arrivals settled in Western Australia. For privacy reasons, locations where fewer than twenty arrivals settled are not specified.

Figure 2. Settlement location, 2000-05

Location	NSW	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Other	Total
<b>No. of arrivals</b>	84	61	62	32	426	117	14	796

<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that data on country of birth is not always a reliable indicator of the social, cultural or ethnic background of humanitarian entrants. There is often a great deal of cross-border movement in world regions affected by instability, and conflicts between neighbouring countries can result in borders moving over time. Additionally, children born in one country may have parents who were born in a different country. These children are likely to share the cultural, ethnic or linguistic characteristics of their parent's country of birth rather than their own.

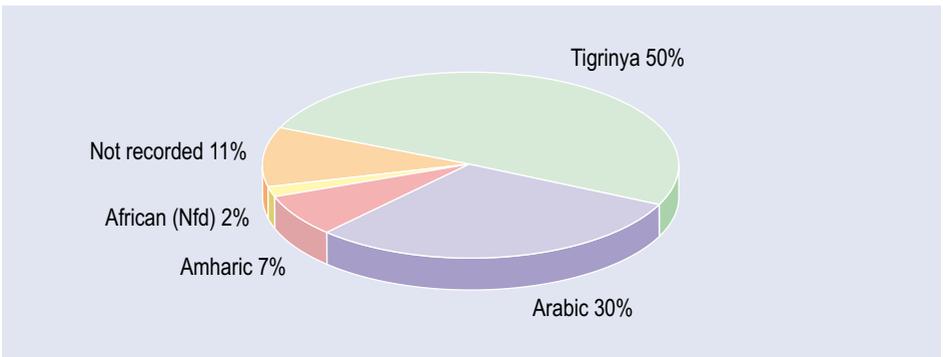
Nine main languages are spoken in Eritrea with Tigrinya and Tigre being spoken by approximately 80 per cent of the population. The main language spoken at home by Eritrean people residing in Australia in the 2001 Census was reported as Arabic. Figure 3 shows the self reported English proficiency of Eritrean arrivals over the period 2000-05. Most (72 per cent) were classed as having 'Poor' or 'Nil' English language skills.

**Figure 3.** Stated English proficiency, 2000-05

Main language	Number of entrants	Per cent of entrants
<b>Very Good</b>	42	5
<b>Good</b>	88	11
<b>Poor</b>	300	38
<b>Nil</b>	269	34
<b>Not Recorded/Not Stated</b>	97	12
<b>Total</b>	796	100

According to the SDB, the main languages spoken by Eritrean-born people who arrived in Australia from 2000-05 are Tigrinya (50 per cent), Arabic (30 per cent), and Amharic (seven per cent) (Figure 4). A further 13 per cent spoke an African language that was not further defined (Nfd) or not recorded, possibly due to a lack of available language codes.

**Figure 4.** Main languages spoken, 2000-05



Two main religions are practiced in Eritrea – Islam and Orthodox Christianity. From 2000-05 the main religions reported by new arrivals were Islam (38 per cent) and various Christian denominations (37 per cent). The remainder (25 per cent) reported a wide variety of other religions (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Main religions, 2000-05

Religion	Number of entrants	Per cent
Islam	305	38
Christian (various)	294	37
Other religion	197	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>796</b>	<b>100</b>

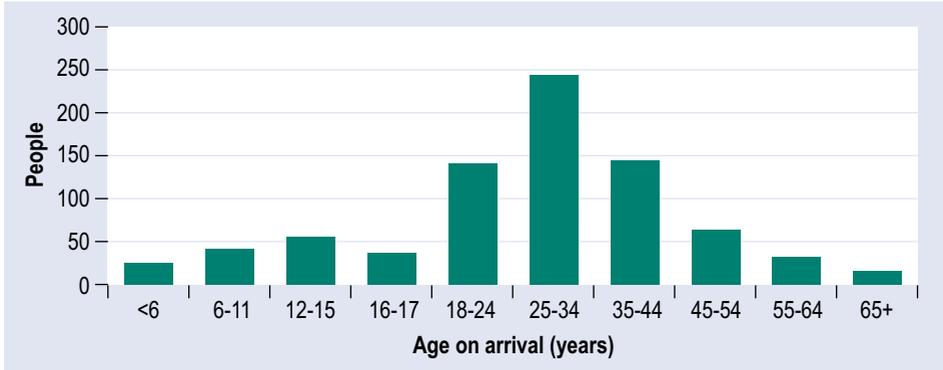
Figure 6 shows the different ethnic groups of Eritrean-born arrivals over the last five years: Tigrinya 15 per cent, Tigrean nine per cent, Eritrean six per cent, Blen (Eritrea) two per cent, and Amhara (Ethiopian) two per cent. The remaining 66 per cent of arrivals consisted predominantly of unknown ethnicities with a very small proportion of other ethnicities identified.

Figure 6. Ethnicity, 2000-05

Ethnicity	Number of entrants	Per cent
Tigrinya (Ethiopian/Eritrean)	120	15
Tigrean/Tigray/Tigre	74	9
Eritrean	48	6
Blen (Eritrea)	19	2
Amhara (Ethiopian)	14	2
Unknown or other	521	66
<b>Total</b>	<b>796</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 7 shows the ages of Eritrean-born arrivals to Australia between 2000-05. The largest age group of people who arrived in this period was 25-34 years of age (31 per cent), followed by 35-44 years (18 per cent). Overall, 32 per cent of arrivals were aged 24 and under.

Figure 7. Age on arrival, 2000-05



## Pre-arrival experiences

The Eritrean people have spent 30 years fighting for independence from Ethiopia. During these years, more than 750 000 people fled Eritrea, taking refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly in Sudan. Many started to return to Eritrea after the war drew to a close in 1991 and independence was won with a referendum vote in 1993. However, the border war with Ethiopia in 1998 - 2000 caused many to again leave their country. At the end of the dispute in 2000, approximately 356 000 Eritreans were refugees and another 310 000 people were displaced within the country.

Most Eritreans arriving in Australia through the Humanitarian Programme have been living in refugee camps in countries surrounding Eritrea, having fled Eritrea during the years of fighting for independence from Ethiopian rule. Repatriation has been possible for some refugees. However, some entered into mixed marriage while living in refugee camps in surrounding countries, and for many of these arrivals, repatriation was not a viable option. Others are refugees for other political and humanitarian reasons.

The UN has expressed concern over possible renewed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the existence of undetected land mines, and the increased food crisis. The Eritrean Government has imposed restrictions on the operations of international aid organisations, including provision of food aid, and as a result, resettlement is a necessary option for many refugees.

Camp sizes vary greatly. Some camps give shelter to tens of thousands of people and some a few thousand. Some camps provide basic accommodation and services, like schooling, while others do not have the capacity or resources.

As a result of the conflict, many Eritreans have lived in these camps for many years, sometimes for periods of more than twenty years. Entrants may also have lived in a number of different camps, either moving from camp to camp as refugees, or through successive periods of flight from their homes. Children may have been born in camps and not experienced any other ways of living. Camp lifestyle affects individuals differently and can be a source of great stress, negative experiences and lasting trauma, adding to the existing stress of circumstances that lead to flight from their country of birth.

# Settlement considerations

The majority of Eritrean refugees have spent years in refugee camps and their education levels are low. Children born in refugee camps usually have less education than those who were born in Eritrea. Eritrean entrants may also be unfamiliar with formal schooling methods. Illiteracy is common amongst women from rural areas, their role being to care for children and elderly family members.

The bulk of the Eritrean-born population coming to Australia is between 18 and 44 years of age and they are likely to require education, training and employment assistance. A large proportion of the Eritrean population is dependant on food aid, having few marketable skills and little employment experience. It is not uncommon for men to gain work in or near refugee camps—working for the UN as drivers, in the nearest townships as bakers or in restaurants. Women sometimes sell tea and food. However, most camp residents are unskilled, especially long term residents.

Lack of English language skills can make it difficult for newly arrived Eritreans to understand the Australian system and to settle easily. Entrants are likely to require translating and interpreting services, possibly in languages that are not readily available.

Some Eritrean families are larger than the Australian norm and arrivals may need assistance to find appropriate long-term housing.

While some have experience of living in an urban environment, most Eritreans have not had the opportunity to develop a range of basic life skills required for everyday life in Australia. Arrivals may be unfamiliar with using modern appliances and utilities, maintaining a Western-style home, banking or performing other day-to-day transactions typical in Australia.

Eritreans may experience a sense of separation from family and friends, many of whom have been displaced or resettled in various countries throughout the world. There is only a small community of Eritrean-born people in Australia so there is no ready-made community to settle into. This can lead to isolation and exacerbate difficulty in accessing services.

Common health issues in camps are tuberculosis, hepatitis, HIV, poor eyesight, diabetes, malnutrition and high blood pressure. Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress are also concerns due to the effects of pre-arrival experiences, culture shock and the pressures of settling in Australia.

Eritrean refugees will have a variety of documentation. The primary documents from camps will be UNHCR ration cards and mandate letters. Some may have old Eritrean or Ethiopian passports. If a child was born in a camp there will most likely be a birth or baptismal certificate. Marriage certificates are less common. If the marriage took place longer than 10 years ago, it is likely that there will be no documentation. Some people do not know their exact birth date and in these cases, birth dates are recorded as 1 January of the year of birth.

In 2005-06, some 200 visas were granted to Eritrean women at risk and their families, who had been living in Wad Sherife camp and other camps in Sudan since the 1980s. For 2006-07, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has requested Australia to resettle a small number of Eritrean refugees currently in Kenya.



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# Eritrea country background

## Location

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa, between Djibouti and Sudan.

To the south, it is bordered by Ethiopia. The country's coastline stretches over 1000 kilometres along the Red Sea. Asmara is the capital city.

Eritrea is approximately 121 300 square kilometres in area (just over half the size of Victoria).



## Climate and topography

Eritrea is a hot, dry desert strip along the Red Sea coast. It can be divided into three main regions: the central highlands, the western lowlands and the eastern escarpment and coastal plains. The capital city of Asmara is located in the central highlands, which is a narrow strip of land running through the middle of the country about 1980 metres above sea level. The climate is cooler and wetter in the central highlands, semi-arid in the western hills and lowlands. Rainfall is heaviest during June to September, except in the coastal desert.

The highlands receive the most rainfall, with an annual average of 40 to 60 centimetres; the region's fertile soil and favourable climate (averaging 18°C) make it the most populated and cultivated area in the country.

## Population

In July 2005, the population of Eritrea was approximately 4.5 million with a growth rate of 2.51 per cent. Life expectancy for the total population is 58.47 years; for males 56.96 years and for females slightly higher at 60.02 years. The mortality rate is 74.87 deaths/1000 live births.

Figure 8. Age structure, (The World Factbook 2003)

Age	0 – 14 years	15 – 64 years	Over 65 years
<b>Per cent of population</b>	44.0	52.5	3.5

Eritrea's population is diverse. There are nine different ethnic groups with the Tigrinya and Tigre ethnic groups having the largest numbers of people. Each group is concentrated in a particular region of Eritrea with its own language and customs.

Figure 9. Ethnicity (The World Factbook 2003)

Ethnic group	Tigrinya	Tigre & Kunama	Afar	Saho	Other
<b>Per cent of population</b>	50	62	4	3	3

## Language

Tigrinya, Arabic and English are all official languages in Eritrea. Tigre is also a main language. Tigrinya, which is spoken by the majority of the population, is considered the country's working language, along with Arabic. A large proportion of the country's Muslims speak Arabic. English is the language of instruction in secondary and tertiary educational institutions. Each of the nine ethnic groups speak their own unique language. Amharic, a remnant of Ethiopian rule, is also widely spoken.

## Family

Most Eritreans live in rural areas in an extended family of several generations that includes parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. The average family has approximately six children. Family is very important to Eritreans, and generally, they extend this sense of welcome to strangers.

Traditionally, families arrange marriages. In urban centres, young people more frequently choose their own partners.

There is a high regard for the elderly and their role is often to settle household conflicts. Women have more recently been accorded more respect following their role in the fight for liberation. Since independence, the government has pursued an active policy for women's equality and has allocated a quota of 30 per cent for women in the local and provincial assemblies; however, much of Eritrean society remains traditional and patriarchal, especially in rural areas.

## Religion

Eritrea is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims. The majority of Christians belong to the Orthodox (Coptic) Church; there are a small number of Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Most Muslim Eritreans belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. Islam is predominant in the coastal regions of Eritrea. For both Christians and Muslims, religious practices include fasting for days and for certain periods, following the religious calendar.

Since May 2002, the government of Eritrea has only officially recognised the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, Catholicism and the Evangelical Lutheran church. All other faiths and denominations were required to undergo a registration process that was so stringent as to effectively be prohibitive.

## Dress

In cities, Eritreans like to dress their best, with Western style suits being usual in offices. Many urban dwellers prefer somewhat formal attire; men wear suits and ties, women are modest but fashionably dressed. Western dress predominates in the capital, especially for young people.

The traditional dress for women is a dress of white cotton with colourful trim; the traditional dress for men is also white. However, it is seldom worn except for ceremonial occasions. For some Muslims, dress is influenced by religious standards. Military style clothing is also extremely common throughout the country.

Eritreans have maintained the Italian tradition of promenading in the evening. In cities, people can be seen strolling the streets. Young women are not always chaperoned.

## Food

Eritrea's culinary tastes have been strongly influenced by the Italians. Eritreans eat more bread than other African communities, and they also enjoy pasta. They will eat meat when it is available and they can afford to buy it. They have also been influenced by Ethiopian cuisine. They eat a grain called 'teff' and their bread is called 'injera/enjera'. In general, they eat with their hands.

## Ethiopian calendar

For centuries Eritrea has followed the Ethiopian calendar which is based on the Julian calendar as opposed to the Western Gregorian calendar.



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The Ethiopian year is on average 365.25 days long, causing the calendar to gain a day about every 134 years. The Ethiopian year consists of 365 days, divided into twelve months of thirty days each, plus one additional month of five days and six in leap years. The Eritrean/Ethiopian new year begins on 11 September and ends the following 10 September. The Eritrean/Ethiopian year also runs almost eight years behind the Western Gregorian year. For example, the Eritrean/Ethiopian year 1983 began on 11 September 1990, according to the Western (Gregorian) calendar, and ended on 10 September 1991. However,

Eritrea has substantially adopted the more universal Gregorian calendar for business and official use.

## Health

Eritrea's health care system is not strong, and has deteriorated due to years of war and recurring droughts. Most medical facilities, including hospitals and birthing centres are in Asmara, the capital, as well as in the other two main cities of Keren and Massawa. Hospitals are generally understaffed and under-equipped. The government has launched a programme to decentralise health care and health care facilities, yet the challenges of providing adequate staff and equipment continue. Private health care is available but very expensive.

The practice of modern medicine is not widespread. Eritreans usually do not see a doctor until a health problem is serious. Most people respect a doctor's authority although their understanding of prevention and causes of diseases is somewhat limited. As modern health care is inadequate, many Eritreans use traditional medicine. Healers use herbs and other local ingredients to treat common illnesses. Healers do not take money for payment; they prefer an exchange of goods.

Common conditions include malaria and dengue fever. HIV/AIDS is also spreading quickly. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with UNAIDS and other UN agencies, is working to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and reduce its impact in Eritrea. Since 1992, USAID/Eritrea has provided \$45 million in aid to strengthen the health system in Eritrea, to improve maternal and child health, and to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.



There is a large community of displaced persons. Over half a million Eritreans fled to Sudan during the war of independence. When they returned, they overloaded the already limited health care system. Within these communities malaria, meningitis and cholera are common and many people suffer from malnutrition.

## Education

At the time of Eritrea's independence (1993), only 20 per cent of the population was literate. This figure is lower for women. Today, literacy levels have improved (total population: 59 per cent - 2003), although they are still below those of other developing countries.

Education is free for all Eritrean citizens. However, there are not enough facilities for all people to attend school. A typical public school in Asmara has two shifts. Access to education is a serious problem, especially for children living in small towns, villages and rural areas. More boys go to school than girls.

Eritrea's school system is divided into three phases: primary school lasts for five years, middle school for two years and upper or secondary school for four years. Enrolment is estimated at 45 per cent of the total school-age population for primary schools, 22 per cent for middle schools and 14 per cent for secondary schools.

To help preserve cultural diversity, primary school instruction is given in the native language of each region. At higher grades, Arabic and English are introduced. From grade seven through to university all schooling is conducted in English.

## Economy

Since independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Eritrea has faced the economic problems of a small, desperately poor country. Thirty years of war have left the country devastated, and Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world. Like many African nations, the economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture, with 80 per cent of the population involved in farming and herding.

The Ethiopian-Eritrea war in 1998-2000 severely hurt Eritrea's economy. GDP growth fell to zero in 1999 and to -12.1 per cent in 2000. The May 2000 border dispute with Ethiopia caused some \$600 million in property damage and loss, including losses of \$225 million in livestock and 55 000 homes. The conflict prevented the planting of crops in Eritrea's most productive region, causing food production to drop by 62 per cent. Inadequate rainfall and below normal cereal production hampered economic growth in 2002-05.

Eritrea's short-term economic growth depends on outside aid and foreign investment. Since the war ended, the government has been determined to develop the economy, expanding the use of the military and party-owned businesses to complete Eritrea's development agenda.

## History

Eritrea formed part of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum until the 7th century. Ethiopian emperors kept a presence in the area until the mid-16th century, when the Ottoman Empire gained control of much of the coastal region. Beginning in the mid-19th century, Ethiopia struggled with Egypt and Italy for control of Eritrea. In the 1880s, Italy occupied the coastal areas around Assab and Massawa, and by 1890, had colonised the entire country.

After the defeat of Italy in 1941, the British governed Eritrea as a trust territory for 10 years. In 1952 the United Nations decided to make Eritrea an autonomous region of Ethiopia. However, in 1962, Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie dissolved the Eritrean parliament and made Eritrea a province of Ethiopia. Conflict developed between the two countries and a year later the Eritreans began to revolt.

Eritreans have fought for independence since that time. The war for independence ended in 1991 after fierce fighting for the coastal city of Massawa, combined with a change of leadership in Ethiopia and a negotiated cease-fire with Eritrea. Eritrea was awarded formal independence after a referendum vote, supported by the UN, held two years later (1993).

## Political

Following the successful referendum on independence in 1993, a National Assembly composed of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice was established as a transitional legislature. A Constitutional Commission was also established to draft a constitution. Isaias Afwerki was elected president by the transitional legislature in June 1993 and the constitution was ratified in May 1997.

The legislature (the National Assembly) includes 75 members of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice and 75 additional popularly elected members. The National Assembly is the highest legal power in the government, setting the internal and external policies of government, regulating implementation of those policies, approving the budget, and electing the president of the country.

With Eritrean independence, Ethiopia lost free access to the trading ports of the Red Sea, creating some tension between the two countries.



Flag of Eritrea

However, peaceful relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia lasted until 1998 when war erupted over Eritrea's abandonment of the Ethiopian common currency and establishment of an Eritrean currency. In retaliation, Ethiopia determined that the extensive trade between Ethiopia and Eritrea be carried out in US dollars. Disputes erupted along the border, centring on the town of Badme.

Having captured Badme and other disputed areas, and under considerable pressure from the international community, Ethiopia halted its advances and both sides signed a cease fire in June 2000. Six months later a final peace treaty was signed, with both countries agreeing to resolve the dispute through binding international arbitration. In 2001 the two countries agreed on a UN proposed mediator to demarcate their disputed border. An international commission was appointed to resolve the dispute with the final demarcation findings announced in 2002.

In February 2002 the National Assembly banned the creation of other political parties in the near future. Currently, the sole legal party is the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – this party dominates the government and no opposition parties are permitted.

In 2003 the boundary commission ruled that the disputed town of Badme, the original site of the flare ups in 1998, was to be awarded to Eritrea. While the Ethiopian Government eventually accepted the ruling 'in principle', in fact, they refused to abide by it. Border conflicts have continued between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The UN has monitored the border since 2000 and maintains a force of 4000 peace-keepers.



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The border issue compounds other pressing problems including Eritrea's inability to grow enough food, particularly with frequent drought conditions, subsistence agriculture, widespread presence of land mines and only 4.7 per cent arable land. Two thirds of the population receive food aid. As well, economic progress is hampered by the proportion of Eritreans who are diverted from the workforce into national service with the armed forces.

There are grave international concerns for the government's lack of respect for human rights. Problems include:

- a lack of democracy and political freedom
- curtailed freedom of speech
- poor prison conditions, including reports of prisoners being tortured and beaten
- limited activity of non-government organisations
- violence and social discrimination against women
- restrictions of workers' rights.

The current government faces the enormous challenge of building a country that is experiencing the aftermath of decades of war and prolonged drought. Eritreans have a reputation for being industrious, and their tenacity in winning their freedom is matched by determination to build the country.

# Sources of information

The information compiled in this report comes from a variety of sources as follows:

- emails from relevant staff working with this caseload
- discussions with staff in the department's national office as well as state and territory offices
- the department's Settlement Database and
- the following references:

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