

Eritrea: the North Korea of Africa





With an average income per person of only 300 dollars, Eritrea is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. Its population depends on remittances from the large diaspora (of which the Eritrean government takes 2%) to meet its basic needs. The exchange rate on the black market makes it possible to get twice the amount of nafka, the local currency, than the official government issued rate would suggest.

picture: Metal market Asmara



According to 2013 estimates, life expectancy is 61 years for men, 65.4 for women. Eritrea ranks 181 out of 187 in the UN-issued human development index which measures health, education, and living standards (2012).



Total government spending on health in 2011: 17 dollars per person....

picture: old italian pharmacy in Asmara



The head of state since independence in 1993, President Issayas Afewerki, has centralized power into a government dictatorship. The process of democratization, started in 1997 with the adoption of a new constitution, has been entirely abandoned.

The suppression of liberties and basic human rights of this regime is astounding: only a single political party exists, the justice system is directly under the executive branch, the number of political prisoners is increasing regularly, freedom of the press is nonexistent, arbitrary arrests are rampant, and habeas corpus is unheard of. The image of the president is rarely seen but his presence is constantly felt.

picture: bar in Asmara



Just like in North Korea, Eritrea boasts a self-sufficient political-economic system but fails to meet the most basic dietary needs of its population. This is best symbolized by Asmara's metal market, where all this is metallic is recycled. There is no room for waste.

picture: Metal market Asmara



In 2010, Eritrea received a total of 121 million euros in official development assistance. In November 2011, Eritrea decided to put an end to this foreign aid. The government forced the last NGOs to leave the country by December 31st, 2011, and all UN programs to cease by 2013. Fortunately, they decided to reverse these decisions in July 2012, asking the international community for continued assistance.

picture: Asmara mercado



Only four religions are permitted in Eritrea: Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Islam. The others, such as Pentecostals and Evangelists, are persecuted and thrown in prison. According to Amnesty International, they would be between 1,500 and 3,000 people. Many are kept locked up in shipping containers like export goods which become an absolute inferno in one of the hottest countries in the world.

picture: Cathedral of asmara



During the holidays, students are “invited” to work in fields to help the national effort.

Human Rights Watch also exposed forced labor for foreign mining companies who have come to exploit rich deposits of gold, silver, copper, and zinc. Under conscription, the young and able must work in atrocious conditions.



More than 8,000 asylum seekers and immigrants crossed the Mediterranean in the first half of 2013. People from countries of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Somalia and Eritrea, make up the majority of these migrants, hoping to escape their homelands.

162,000 Eritrean refugees and currently in Sudan.

picture: pool of Asmara



Many youth risk everything by trying to escape abroad, especially to Ethiopia and Sudan. The UNHCR estimates their number at 3,000 a month.

Those who succeed to cross into Sudan become pray for abusive human traffickers who hold them ransom for up to 10,000 dollars.

Some who make it to the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, will be killed for organ harvesting.

The desert-dwelling Rashaida tribe, who raise racing camels for sale throughout the Middle East, are accused of trafficking by many refugees. The Rashaida are nomadic people who fled Saudi Arabia 200 years ago and have prospered as smugglers in Africa. The Eritrean government cannot control them as they are feared by many in the region. The Rashaida are the only Eritrean citizens who are free from otherwise mandatory military service.

picture: Rashaida tribe man

Eritrean citizenship means obligatory national service for an unlimited duration. Initially men between the ages of 18 and 50 served for only 18 months. During the war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000, this term limit was removed, allowing the government to extend the duration of service indefinitely. Malnourished and underpaid, more and more Eritrean soldiers escape into neighboring countries, running the risk of being caught, charged for desertion, and imprisoned without a trial.

picture: woman soldier on national day parade.





In Eritrea, the soldier is sanctified, his shoes (sandals) have become a national icon.

picture: roundabout in Asmara



The war with Ethiopia from May 1998 to June 2000 claimed an estimated 50,000 to 140,000 victims. Afeworki's former brothers in arms were rewarded with villas on the outskirts of Asmara, with stunning views of the cemetery of Ethiopian tanks.



Young Eritreans play video games in a hall in Asmara under a picture of the glorious soldiers who fought Ethiopia.



In Massawa, construction of the luxurious Dahlak hotel took years to complete. The owners are members of the Italian mafia who hope to one day bring tourists through the rarely used international airport of this Ottoman city situated on the Red Sea.



Of all the countries in the world, Eritrea comes in last place in the 2013 Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders. They systematically repress journalists who try to do their job.

They boast the biggest prison in Africa for journalists and have no privately owned media channels. Football on satellite TV is an outlet for many Eritreans who would never dare to talk about politics in public.

picture: former fascist italian club, Asmara



EriTel, the national telecommunications operator, is run by the regime. The four internet service providers in the country obtained a licence from the Ministry of Information and rent bandwidth to EriTel. Network monitoring could not be easier.

The government deliberately maintains a low connection speed to slow the sending of emails. Simple instant messaging applications have had a huge success.

Eritreans cannot access the internet through their telephones.



There are an estimated 10,000 political prisoners, kept captive in approximately 30 detention centers throughout the small country. Paranoia is widespread. Communicating with the outside world is often an obstacle course that involves constantly changing emails and using pseudonyms. In 2000, Eritrea became the very last country to connect to web.



A hope: with its winding mountain roads that go from sea level to 2,400 meters in altitude in only 100 km from Massawa to Asmara, Eritrea presents an ideal training ground for cyclists. Many Eritreans dream of a career in this sport.

According to five-time Tour de France winner Bernard Hinault, “What gives them their strength might be hunger, their desire to escape. Professional teams should pay close attention to this pool. In any case, I would if I were in their place.”

The athletes are closely watched: two cyclists defected in 2013. Last December, the entire football team disappeared in Uganda.

picture: young asmarino in front of Tagliero FIAT garage.

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