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# Eastern Africa Series

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# The Eritrean National Service

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Servitude  
for 'the Common Good'  
and the Youth Exodus

GAIM KIBREAB

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*In memory of those who fled the indefinite national service in search of a dignified life, but perished en route.*

*And I have to also mention my brave daughter, Reema, who spent the previous year travelling the world alone and gaining invaluable life experience and the type of autonomy that could never be matched. YOU MAKE ME PROUD! ☺*



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## Foreword

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In this important and innovative book, Gaim Kibreab examines one of the most secretive states in the world, Eritrea, through the prism provided by its system of ‘national service’, which subjects a very large proportion of the population, and especially the youth, to an indefinite period under the control of the state. Drawing both on the analysis of reports in the country’s state-controlled media, and especially on interviews with a large and varied number of refugees who have – at the risk of their lives – fled from Eritrea, he is able to provide an insight into many aspects of Eritrean life that have hitherto evaded the attention of researchers. In many ways, the findings of the study confirm what might have been expected. Even though two of the key objectives of national service have been to strengthen the country’s defensive capabilities and promote its economic development – its official title is the ‘Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign’ – the actual effects have been quite the opposite. An army of disgruntled conscripts is unable to replicate the heroism and sense of purpose that drove the epic liberation struggle that culminated in Eritrea’s independence in 1991, while the impact on ‘development’ has been disastrous. Particularly important here is the impact on subsistence agriculture and the complex survival mechanisms that have enabled families to spread their risks in an extremely uncertain environment. The gender equality that characterised the liberation struggle has given way to the widespread exploitation of women within the national service system. Yet it is a tribute to the professionalism of the research – in a field often marked by a high level of partisanship on either side – that the author shows how some of the objectives of national service have been achieved. In particular, it has indeed served to promote an enhanced level of national identity and helped to bridge ethnic and religious differences within a country with nine distinct ethnic groups, divided roughly equally between Christianity and Islam. This is ground-breaking research, essential to the understanding of modern Eritrea, and with much to teach us beyond its boundaries.

Christopher Clapham  
*Centre of African Studies, University of Cambridge*

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This research project has spanned nearly two decades and benefitted from the generosity and wealth of knowledge and experiences of a large number of people. I corresponded with and interviewed many people, too many to name in the book. Given the state of fear and risk permeating present day Eritrea, a substantial proportion of the respondents and key informants interviewed for the study, including many in the diaspora, do not want to be identified by name. I thank them warmly just the same. I hope their voices are presented clearly and loudly in the book. Without their help, this book would have never seen the light of day.

Samuel Gebrehiwet was always ready and willing to provide any information I asked of him and patiently answered what must have seemed an unending stream of questions. Mihret Haile and he opened their house to me and welcomed me as kin. In no small way, this book owes its existence to them. Dr David Styan has heard a good deal about this book and has read some of the chapters and made very useful if not always gentle comments. Our daughter, Fanus, an English Literature student at Durham University, has read the whole manuscript and advised me to learn how to write short sentences. Even though I am aware of the proverb that 'old habits die hard', I have promised her to try. I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Christopher Clapham, who in spite of his tight schedule wrote the foreword to this book. Hannah/Azieb Pool/Asrat has read and edited Chapter 1. She also used her dense social network to find a suitable photo for the cover of the book. Without her help, this would have been impossible. It is comforting to have a cousin who is always ready and willing to help.

I owe a big thank you to Fessehaye Solomon, Dawit Fessehaye, Abdella Adem, Solomon Noray, Zerai Gebrehiwet, Elias Mewes Chine, Moges Berhane, Yohannes Berhe, Ellien Haile, Efreem Ariaia, Aster Gebreselasse, Isaias Tsegai, Kemal Ibrahim, Asefaw Gebrekidan, Suleiman Hussein, Salah Aboray, Selam Kidane, Laurie Lijenders, Kahsai Habtay, Woldegebriel Kidane, Merhawi Habtay, Bereket Kidane, Selam Gebrehiwet, Tesfalem Araya, Kidane Tuku, Medhanie Kifletsion, Kflehans Teweldebrhan (Gordm) and Isaac Kiflay. A debt of gratitude is due to Dr Mebrahtu Atewebrhan for drawing the map of the Sawa Military training camp. Nadia Imtiaz undertook the unenviable task of collating and checking the references

and painstakingly reading the whole manuscript. Melany Wagestroom has carefully formatted the whole manuscript and I am grateful to her.

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In spite of all the assistance and encouragement generously provided, I remain entirely responsible for all the shortcomings as well as the views expressed.

## Acronyms & Abbreviations

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<i>Agelglot</i>	National service conscripts
AI	Amnesty International
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
COI reports	Country of Origin reports
EDF	Eritrean Defence Force
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
ENS	Eritrean National Service
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
G-15	Fifteen leading members of the ruling Front who issued an open letter in May 2001 accusing the President of acting illegally. Eleven of them have been held in unknown place without being charged since 18 September 2001
<i>Gedli</i>	Liberation struggle
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NYSC	Nigerian Youth Service Corps
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
PLF	People's Liberation Forces
<i>Tegadalai</i> (sing.)	Freedom fighter
<i>Tegadelti</i> (plu.)	Freedom fighters
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
<i>Warsai</i>	Inheritor of the core values of the liberation struggle
WFP	World Food Programme
WYDC	Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign
<i>Yikealo</i>	Former combatants (to whom nothing is impossible)



## Introduction

---

People are so docile right now. It is almost as if good government means when the politicians lie to us for our own good, for the public good...

James Bovard

The Eritrean National Service (ENS) constitutes the nerve centre of post-independence Eritrean polity without which it is difficult to understand and analyse the causes of the successes and failures of the Grand National projects, such as nation building, nurturing of national unity and common Eritrean national identity, post-conflict (re)construction and the building of efficient defence capability. During the liberation struggle, also called the thirty years' war (1961–1991), the idea of 'the common good' in which individual interests were sacrificed in pursuit of the grand cause – independence – was the single most important lynchpin. Its pursuit created a politically and socially acceptable moral justification for the sacrifice of individual interests.

Although the war ended, the ENS continued and has become open-ended; though intended as a common good, it has degenerated into indefinite forced labour or a modern form of slavery. Consequently, thousands of citizens are forcibly held in endless servitude against their will, under the threat of severe punishment. It affects every aspect of the country's economic, social and political situation, as well as the lives of hundreds of thousands of households and conscripts.

There has not, to date, been any in-depth and critical scrutiny of the ENS's achievements and failures. There is also a dearth of data on its overarching impacts on the social fabric of Eritrean polity. This book is a partial attempt to fill the lacunae. The main aim of this book is to examine the extent to which the stated goals of the 'national service', as stipulated in the proclamation on the ENS, various government policy declarations and practices, have been, or are in the process of being, achieved. Unlike other wide-ranging national service programmes discussed briefly in the book, in which the main focus is on citizenship, independence, equality, responsibility and participation, in Eritrea the main emphasis has been on control, loyalty and service. Since 2004, hundreds of thousands of young men and women have fled the country, risking their lives in order to disentangle themselves from an indefinite state of entrapment.

The other core purposes of the book are to: state the goals and objectives of the ENS; discuss briefly the historical backdrop to it; provide the rationale/s underlying the programme; examine the national service's transformative effects, as well as its impact on the country's defence capability, national unity, national identity construction and nation building. It also examines the extent to which it is able to function as an effective mechanism of preserving and transmitting the core values of the liberation struggle to the *warsai* (conscripts). The impact of the national service on the social fabric and livelihood systems of the society, families and conscripts are also critically examined. Equally, the book aims to give voice to the voiceless conscripts who are forced to serve indefinitely without remuneration and against their will under the menace of punishments.

## THE GOALS OF THE ERITREAN NATIONAL SERVICE (ENS): ORIGINS AND RATIONALE/S

Proclamation No. 11/1991 on the ENS was among the first proclamations enacted by the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE). It was enacted soon after the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) seized power by throwing out the Ethiopian forces of occupation from the country on 24 May 1991. The fact that the PGE enacted the proclamation on national service before the country's future was to be determined in a referendum nearly two years later shows the extent to which the compulsory, but then not yet universal, national service was perceived as a critical instrument of national unity, nation building and post conflict national (re)construction.

All Eritreans – women and men – between the ages of eighteen and forty are required to perform national service.<sup>1</sup> However a few categories were exempt from national service, and three categories of people could gain exemption, subject to meeting the required criteria. Proclamation No 11/1991 was repealed in November 1995, 18 months after its implementation, and replaced by Pro. No 82/1995. The latter abolished all exceptions stipulated in the first proclamation on national service and turned the compulsory national service into an almost universal obligation. After 1995 only veterans of the thirty years' war (1961–1991) of independence were exempted.<sup>2</sup> Those who are declared unfit mentally and/or physically by the Board<sup>3</sup> established by the government are exempted from military training, but are required to perform national service 'in any public or government organ according to their capacity.'<sup>4</sup> Even when they complete the required eighteen months service they will continue to have the compulsory duty to serve according to their capacity

<sup>1</sup> See Article 2 of the National Service Proclamation 11/1991; Article 8 of the National Service Proclamation 82/1995.

<sup>2</sup> Art. 12 (2) Proc. 82/1995.

<sup>3</sup> Art 11 (3) Proc. 82/1995

<sup>4</sup> Art.13 (1) Proc. 82/1995.



until they reach fifty years of age.<sup>5</sup> The universality of the ENS is clear from these provisions. Even conscientious objectors such as Jehovah's Witnesses are forcibly conscripted in violation of the canons of their faith (AI 2004).

Although the first proclamation on the ENS was enacted in 1991 primarily to overcome widespread youth unemployment, military training was implemented for the first time in 1994. Prior to 1994, students at secondary and university levels took part in summer development work programmes without taking military training (Kibreab 2008, 2009b). The ENS consists of six months military training at the Sawa Military Camp and twelve months participation in development work<sup>6</sup> under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence or other ministries, regional administrations or the firms of the ruling party. During the first six months, all conscripts receive intensive military and physical training. All citizens who complete the required eighteen months of active national service also 'have the compulsory duty of service until the age of 50.'<sup>7</sup>

The objectives of the ENS according to Proclamation No 82/1995 are to:

- (1) establish a strong Defence Force...to ensure a free and sovereign Eritrea;
- (2) preserve and entrust [to] future generations the courage and resoluteness, heroic episodes shown by the people in the past thirty years;
- (3) create a new generation characterised by love of work, [and] discipline ready to participate and serve in the reconstruction of the nation;
- (4) develop and strengthen the economy of the nation by investing in development work...;
- (5) develop professional capacity and physical fitness by giving regular military training and continuing practice to participants in Training Centres; and
- (6) foster national unity among our people by eliminating sub-national feelings.<sup>8</sup>

One of the central aims of the book is to examine the extent to which some of the goals are achieved or are in the process of being fulfilled.

## OUTLINE OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Having stated the aims and objectives of the book, this introductory chapter will now present the goals and structures of the national service. It will then describe the structure of the book and the methodological procedures used for data gathering. The chapter also provides some initial

<sup>5</sup> Art. 13 (2) Proc. 82/1995.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Art. 23 (2) Proc. 82/1995

<sup>8</sup> Article 5, Pro. No. 82/1995 (Published in the *Eritrean Gazette* No.11 of 23 October 1995).

historical and contextual background to the ENS, including its rationale, as well as its magnitude. Chapter 2 then presents different theories on national service and the philosophical perspectives which, on the one hand, view compulsory national service as being the highest good or fountain of virtue and on the other, as being the antithesis of a free society and a form of forced labour or a modern form of slavery. Chapters 3 to 9 draw on original data from research interviews with former conscripts who deserted from the national service after serving on average six years rather than the eighteen months required by the law on national service in the country.

Chapter 3 examines the relationship between the government and the military and the extent to which the former's constant interference has stifled the development of an institutionalised and professionalised military which serves the interest of the state and the polity rather than the government of the day. Based on the narratives of former conscripts, Chapter 4 examines the extent to which the ENS has built the country's defence or fighting capability. If the evidence suggests otherwise an attempt is made to identify the constraints on building effective defence and fighting capability. The chapter also examines the extent to which the institution of national service (which, due to its open-ended and compulsory nature, has forced tens of thousands of conscripts to 'vote with their feet' in search of opportunities for a livelihood and international protection against forced labour) is able to contribute to the building of Eritrea's defence and fighting capability. Inasmuch as the contribution of the ENS on Eritrea's defence capability is to a large extent influenced by the degree of professionalism, technical capability and autonomy of the Eritrean military, the chapter examines the constraints on the development of an effective system of defence in the country.

Chapter 5 examines the extent to which the national service preserves and transmits the core values developed during the liberation struggle to the present generation, the *warsai*. It also discusses the impact of war fought against an external enemy on internal solidarity and on citizens' willingness to serve and sacrifice their lives in the service of the nation. In view of the fact that the former combatants, the *yikealo*, are perceived by the Eritrean government to be the repository and conduit of the core values engendered during the liberation struggle, the chapter assumes that their ability to transmit these values to the *warsai* is to a large extent dependent on the nature of their relationship with the latter. The chapter therefore devotes considerable space to examining the relationship between the *yikealo* and the *warsai* and how this affects the process of transmission of the values and norms of the liberation struggle. The chapter also identifies the virtues and vices the conscripts developed and internalised in the process of participating in the national service. Some abuses unrelated to the aims and objectives of the ENS, such as exploitation of conscripts' labour power for commanders' personal gain and how these corrupt activities and practices reduce the effectiveness of the ENS to preserve and transmit the core values produced during the liberation struggle, are also discussed.

Based on the former conscripts' perceptions, Chapter 6 discusses the extent to which the ENS functions as a vehicle for national unity and social cohesion. In view of the fact that Eritrea is a multi-faith and multi-ethnic polity, it examines whether the national service has enabled the conscripts who hail from disparate ethno-linguistic, religious and regional backgrounds to bond across the social cleavages of religion, ethnicity and region on the basis of shared values and secular national Eritrean identity. The chapter also discusses the factors that enhance national unity and trans-cultural understanding, such as enhanced knowledge of different places and communities in the course of performing national service, and the development of trans-ethnic, trans-religious and trans-regional friendships among the conscripts. Some space is also devoted to the dissenting opinion of a few respondents concerning whether the ENS promotes national unity and social cohesion.

Chapter 7 examines the extent to which the national service is executed with equality independent of religion, sex, ethnicity, class, wealth, power and family connections. The chapter also examines the prevalence of corruption and the extent to which it is possible to buy oneself out of national service and/or to influence the decision concerning location of assignment in the post-six-month military training at Sawa.

Chapter 8 examines in detail the impact of the national service on the social fabric of Eritrean society and the government. Drawing on the perceptions of respondents and in-depth interviews with key informants and on studies conducted by United Nations agencies, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and independent analysts, the chapter assesses the overarching impact of the national service on all aspects of Eritrean society. The extent of the militarisation of Eritrean polity and the securitisation of the educational system are also discussed in the chapter. In view of the fact that the former conscripts, in spite of their common experience at Sawa and after, do not speak with a single voice, the chapter also considers the dissenting opinion of a few respondents. Eritrean society is socially, economically and politically differentiated and therefore it is unrealistic to expect that the service would affect all citizens in the same way irrespective of their connections to the corridors of power and wealth. The chapter therefore attempts to identify the winners and losers. It also briefly discusses the plight of the conscripts who suffer at the hands of ruthless traffickers and smugglers en route to Israel via eastern Sudan and the Sinai desert, as well as to the EU+ countries through Ethiopia, Sudan, the Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea.

Chapter 9 presents an in-depth analysis of the impacts of the ENS on the livelihoods of families, and conscripts' careers, survival and wellbeing. Further, the dissenting opinions of a few respondents who see the ENS as the ultimate good and worth sacrificing one's own and one's family's present and future interests are considered briefly.

The main findings of the book are presented in Chapter 8.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES OF DATA-GATHERING

The data on which this book is based are derived from diverse sources. A detailed questionnaire comprising of 117 questions was administered to 190 respondents.<sup>9</sup> The ethnic composition of the respondents is as follows: Afar (1.1 per cent), Saho (4.7 per cent), Tigre (15 per cent), Tigrinya (64 per cent) and Blin (15 per cent). Among the 190 respondents, 30 per cent are Muslims. Among the respondents, 27 per cent were female and 73 per cent male. Of the total, 7 per cent, 30 per cent, 36 per cent, 24 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively were under 25 years, 26–30 years, 31–35 years, 36–40 years, and 41–45 years. Among the 190 respondents, 55 per cent, 37 per cent, 4 per cent, 3.2 per cent, respectively were single, married, divorced and cohabiting. Among them, another thirty-eight key informants were interviewed in depth. Of the latter, ten were Muslims, excluding the seven family members on whom information was acquired and eleven were female.

Researching Eritrea is not an easy undertaking. This is, *inter alia*, due to government restrictions on independent research activities and travel restrictions on foreigners and independent-minded researchers outside of Asmara, without which no meaningful fieldwork is conceivable. This is exacerbated by the dearth of research-based and official publications on the prevailing socio-economic reality of the country (see for example Reid 2009). Under these circumstances, there are no opportunities for empirical research in the country (see Hirt and Mohammad 2013). The restriction on research does not only apply to rural areas, but also throughout the country, including in the urban centres. It is not only foreigners who are unable to undertake research in urban and rural Eritrea, but all independent-minded Eritreans within and outside of the country who do not work under the auspices of the ruling party or the government are unable to obtain research permits. The process of application and approval of research permits, even for those who reside in the country, is highly securitised and restricted.

The problem of sources in the country is eloquently described in a brief report of the Norwegian Country of Origin Information (COI) Centre (Landinfo) (2015) that states:

It is very difficult to uncover facts about the social conditions in Eritrea, including National Service. Until recently, the government has not published information on the conditions of national service, the number of conscripts in service [...] Therefore most of the information on National Service comes from statements from Eritreans who have left the country or consists of anecdotal information passed on to representatives of the international community in Asmara. [...] The majority of our sources are anonymous at their [informants'] request. The disadvantage of anonymous sources is [...] readers cannot verify whether or not the sources and information are reliable.

Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre continues:

<sup>9</sup> The term respondent refers to those who were interviewed in the survey and key informant refers to those who were selected systematically for an in-depth interview.

Another problem Landinfo [the team from the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre] experienced [in obtaining information about] Eritrea is the likelihood of ‘round tripping’ or false confirmations, i.e. two sources say the same thing which seemingly confirm certain information when really they are referencing the same source. This can occur because there are few independent international sources in Eritrea. *The international community in the country is quite small and representatives Landinfo met with over the years have been up front about the fact that much of the information they share is not fact-based, but are points of view and sometimes speculation.* (2015: 5, emphasis added)

This honest revelation is edifying. Notwithstanding this fact, some of the so-called fact-finding missions, by organisations such as the Danish Immigration Service (2014) and the UK Home Office (2015), present these ‘round-tripped’ or ‘false confirmations’ as facts and as a basis for policy change. Not only do Landinfo’s insightful and honest observations indicate the extent of the inaccessibility of sources, but they also demonstrate that COI reports based on data gathered from interviews with diplomats, government and other informants in the country, where the opportunity to scrutinise, interrogate and countercheck the information gathered openly and transparently is impossible, is of insignificant value. In spite of the potential weaknesses in the quality of data gathered from Eritreans who have fled or left the country, under the present repressive political system in the country there is no other better option. Although it is important to acknowledge the weaknesses of the data gathered from conscripts who have fled the country in search of protection and a better life, if the necessary measures are taken to countercheck the different sources against each other, the risk of collecting inaccurate or wrong information may be minimised or avoided.

The data on which this study is based are derived from diverse sources. In Eritrea the introduction of new policies, no matter how profoundly significant, is seldom preceded by a debate, as is commonly practiced in democratic societies. For example, in the UK the publication of white papers (final policy) is sometimes preceded by publication of a green paper in the process of consultation and debate, intended to inform the public in order to reach general understanding and consensus. In Eritrea this is never the case. However, more often than not, the introduction of new policies is preceded or accompanied by in-depth interviews conducted by journalists working for the government and PFDJ-owned TV station, radio, newspapers, magazines and websites, with the personal ruler, Isaias Afwerki, the former Defence Minister, Sebhät Ephrem, and army commanders. These vital sources include Eri TV, *Dimtsi Hafash*, Hadas Eritra, *Eritrea Profile*, *Hidri*, *Sagem*, *Hiwyet*, *Ta’atek*, *shaebia.com* and *shabait.com*. These sources are indispensable for anyone writing on post-independence Eritrea. The aim of most of the interviews is to inform and ensure public compliance rather than to encourage debate and to arrive at a general consensus.

Nearly all of these interviews are in Tigrinya, save a few of the press statements translated into English and published on *Shabait.com*, the ruling party’s website, and in the government’s English newspaper, *Eritrea Profile*. Sebhät Ephrem’s many and detailed interviews, some of them

lasting up to eight hours at a time, published in the Defence Ministry's magazine, *Te'ateq* (Be Ready), are indispensable sources on the ENS. *Ta'ateq* also occasionally interviews the President and the military commanders at Sawa, especially during inductions and graduation ceremonies. I have used these sources extensively while researching this book.

In order to update the data, I have interviewed deserters in Geneva and London who left Eritrea in 2015. I have also conducted in-depth interviews with ten former EPLF combatants in the last five years who currently reside in the UK. The data gathered from the latter have been useful for comparative purposes. All the names of the people I have interviewed for this study have been changed to ensure anonymity and their safety. Whenever this was deemed inadequate their characteristics have been altered. Muslim, Christian, female and male names indicate the religion and sex of interviewees.

I would have been unable to gather all the data I needed to write this book had it not been for the wealth of data derived from interviews with the President, the Defence Minister and the commanders at Sawa military camp published in government and party owned newspapers, magazines and websites. This task would have also been very difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish if Tigrinya were not my mother tongue.

This book attempts to provide a qualitative understanding of the ENS, which, besides sinking hundreds of thousands of Eritrean households into abject poverty, has been an important driver of forced migration in post-independence Eritrea. By utilising structured and semi-structured interviews and by scrutinising primary sources such as policy documents, newspapers, pamphlets, and interviews and speeches of government officials, especially, as noted earlier, the Head of State, Isaias Afwerki, the chief architect of the national service, as well as the former minister of defence, Sebhat Ephrem, the book examines the extent to which the stated goals of the ENS have been, or are in the process of being, achieved. Some of the data are derived from interviews with those who are directly affected by the national service. These data are also supplemented and enriched by data generated from in depth interviews conducted with systematically selected key informants who prior to their flight had served in the ENS for an average of six and a half years.

In the course of researching for the book, I have also gained in-depth insights into the organisational structure and leadership of the Eritrean military, as well as the factors that previously motivated the combatants, the *yikealo*, during the liberation struggle; furthermore, I have gained a greater understanding of the changes and transformations they have undergone in the post-independence period and the extent to which these changes constrain their ability to maintain and transmit the core values they internalised in the liberation struggle to the *warsai* (conscripts). It is not suggested here that the quality of the data and the methods of data gathering are free of weaknesses. In an ideal world, the quality and reliability of the data would have been substantially improved had it been possible to replicate the study inside Eritrea to compare and contrast the two data sets. Unfortunately, this is not possible under the prevailing



political, human rights circumstances and the severe restrictions on research in the country.

The idea of random sampling was ruled out from the outset because there was no sampling frame from which a representative sample could be drawn. Post-independence Eritrean asylum-seekers and refugees are scattered all over the world and are permanently on the move. For example, in 2011 they lived in eighty-five countries,<sup>10</sup> and it was impossible to use a representative sample that reflected accurately the characteristics of the total population. Methods include the survey method in which structured and self-completed questionnaires written in English and Tigrinya (an Arabic translation was abandoned because all ENS participants were fluent in Tigrinya or English) comprising open and closed-ended questions, were administered to respondents selected on the basis of chain referral or snowball sampling. This was supplemented by unstructured in-depth interviews conducted with systematically selected individuals guided by an inventory of issues; focus group interviews; interviews with key informants; narrative analysis; personal histories; and government policy documents. President Isaias Afwerki's and Sebhat Ephrem's (former Defence Minister) numerous interviews in the Eritrean mass media, including state owned television, and magazines of the ruling party and the Ministry of Defence, nearly all of them in Tigrinya, are indispensable sources. Without delving into such rich Tigrinya sources in detail, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to gain in-depth insights and understanding of the rationales, meanings, aims, objectives and philosophy underlying the ENS.

In situations where no sampling frame exists or is difficult to create (this is generally the case in studies concerning refugees and asylum-seekers), the snowball sampling approach has been widely used by social scientists, especially in the area of hard to reach and deviant populations (see Bryman 2008). The population covered in the study is neither hard to reach nor deviant, but is scattered and hard to recruit. Alan Bryman, the author of the acclaimed book *Social Research Methods*, used snowball sampling in his study of Disney theme park visitor because of the lack of an accessible sampling frame. By the same token, the only feasible approach to the study of Eritrean deserters and draft evaders covered in this study has been snowball sampling. However, the use of this approach has by no means been straightforward. This was because the chain referral method of sampling was far from being a self-propelled process as once it was initiated it did not proceed smoothly. The success of the approach depended on active and deliberate engagement of the researcher and his assistants who organised, developed and controlled the sample's initiation and progress throughout the process. For a variety of reasons, including fear of the Eritrean state and its agents, and others which for lack of space cannot be presented here,<sup>11</sup> at the initial stage, the general tendency among potential respondents has been to say 'no' to being interviewed or included in the survey.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, Statistical Online Population Database.

<sup>11</sup> This will be presented in detail in a forthcoming work.

After undertaking an exploratory pilot study, it became clear that unless well-connected locators with easy access to potential respondents in their respective residential areas and cities were selected, the research project was unlikely to succeed. The locators were selected carefully, taking into account their gender, religion, ethnicity, political views, social positions in their respective communities, past experiences, connections through multiple and dense webs of networking, educational status and reputations. Not only did the locators develop referral chains but, more importantly, they spent an immense amount of time convincing and reassuring each potential respondent that the process was totally anonymous and the whole *raison d'être* of the study was academic and intended, *inter alia*, to advance knowledge and understanding of the different aspects of the national service and the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), including the plight of conscripts and their families, as well as their positive and negative effects on the Eritrean economy and society. The locators were already known to the author and were selected on the basis of strict criteria that included consideration of ethnic and religious identities and political affiliations and/or views. The purpose of such criteria was to ensure inclusion of women and men, different levels of education, ethnic and faith groups, as well as individuals representing an array of political views.<sup>12</sup> The central aim of the methodological procedure was, as far as possible, to include respondents, which in qualitative, if not, statistical terms might indicate the general characteristics of the subjects of the study.

As indicated earlier, a sample drawn up using a snowball sampling approach is unlikely to be representative of the whole population and, as a result, the findings of the survey are indicative rather than conclusive. Although this study has been underpinned by such an assumption, it is worth noting that there are specialists who emphasise the relevance of the snowball sampling approach to quantitative research. For example, referring to Coleman's classical work, Alan Bryman, after discussing the limitations of data gathered using snowball sampling, states: 'This is not to suggest that snowball sampling is entirely irrelevant to quantitative research: when the researcher needs to focus upon or to reflect relationships between people, tracing connections through snowball sampling may be a better approach than conventional probability sampling' (2008: 185). In our case, it is due to lack of choice that the snowball sampling approach has been used, but, although contested, this approach is commonly used in the study of unstable and mobile populations, such as refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people (IDPs). Nevertheless, given the relative homogeneity of participants of the ENS and WYDC, the survey data may indicate, albeit not conclusively, the general characteristics of the population. Alice Bloch argues that sampling frames may exist for sub-groups residing in settlements or camps, but not in countries of settlements: 'The consequence of the paucity of data on refugees and asylum-seekers from which to sample is that surveys are usually based

<sup>12</sup> The identity and other details of the locators are withheld as agreed with them.



on non-probability techniques and are almost always reliant on access to refugees through community-based organisations [...] or pre-existing contacts from which to snowball sample' (Bloch 2007: 233). But there are other analysts who call for a return to traditional sampling methods without offering an effective solution to the dilemma of dearth of sampling frame (Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

In this study the chain referral sampling method was used to select respondents in the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, South Africa and Kenya in 2012.<sup>15</sup> For no other reason than convenience and consideration for cost and time, the large majority of the respondents are in the UK. There is also no particular reason why 190 respondents rather than 200 or 300 were interviewed. It is important to state that although the data derived from the structured questionnaire are important, other qualitative methods of data gathering used in the study have also resulted in a vast amount of useful data, which informs the arguments in the overall research project.

Given the paucity of data, this study addresses the research question on the basis of perceptions of former conscripts who fled Eritrea, first to seek asylum in Ethiopia and Sudan, and later moving on to Kenya, South Africa, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway after serving in the ENS/WYDC for an average of about six years. The data based on the experiences and subjective perceptions of the respondents should be read bearing the following caveat in mind: the respondents, in spite of their experiences, do not speak in a single voice. In order to do justice to their diverse voices and to maintain the authenticity of their voices their narratives are presented verbatim as far as possible.

## THE ENS: A SYNOPSIS

The synopsis of the ENS is preceded with a succinct historical background to the provisional government of Eritrea (PGE). After Ethiopia's defeat, a provisional government of Eritrea (PGE) was established and, after an interim period of two years, a national referendum was held 23–25 May 1993, in which 99.9 per cent of the population voted in favour of independence (see Styan 1996). In May 1993 Eritrea became a member of the United Nations as an independent state and a government was formed, pursuant to Proclamation No. 37/1993 published on 19 May 1993 (see Provisional Government of Eritrea 1993). The proclamation stipulated that the government was to comprise three branches: (a) legislature known as 'National Assembly,' (b) executive known as 'Cabinet of Ministers,' and (c) a judiciary.<sup>14</sup> The National Assembly comprises members of the EPLF's Central Council and sixty others. The latter comprised thirty members from the regional assemblies, namely,

<sup>15</sup> Twenty-five completed questionnaires from the Sudan arrived late and were not processed, although part of the data in the open questions is used in the discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Article 3 (1[a, b, c]).