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## Eritrea: Take me to prison – they have food

More than 300 000 citizens have fled Eritrea's chaotic national service. This is the story of one conscript.

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Great

escape: Eritrea's repressive regime has sparked a mass exodus of its citizens.

Binyam\*, a refugee, lives in Kenya now, closing a circle that began with his birth. He's making a new start with the help of relatives after escaping from Eritrea last year, just as his mother had to do three decades ago.

She eventually went home. Binyam hopes that one day he can, too.

His mother fled Ethiopian repression during Eritrea's 30-year war for independence. Binyam fled Eritrean repression carried out in the name of national security and says Eritrea has become one of the most repressive states in Africa.

Binyam is the youngest of eight children. He was born in Nairobi after his father, an underground member of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), smuggled the family into Kenya in the 1980s when the Ethiopian authorities became suspicious of his activities. One of Binyam's sisters was born in an Addis

Ababa prison after his mother, also an activist, was arrested.

Binyam's father had been running 12 clandestine cells, whose members gathered intelligence on Ethiopian operations and spread nationalist propaganda. He is still with the Eritrean government – the country achieved independence in 1991 – whose repressive rule his own son has now fled. This reflects how divided some families have become over post-liberation politics.

The family returned to Asmara, the capital of the newly independent Eritrea, in 1992. Binyam was a student when a border war broke out with Ethiopia in 1998. He was taken out of school for military training in 2000, but didn't see combat. In 2003, after completing his 11th year of secondary school, he was called to the Sawa Defence Training Centre for his 12th, as has been the case for all who came of age since a truce that left both countries in a face-off that has yet to end.

Some within the liberation front's leadership criticised how the war was conducted and the president refused to honour a Constitution that had been ratified before it began. This led to a massive crackdown in 2001 during which some leaders were imprisoned and private media outlets were shut down. Since then, all dissent has been labelled "treason" and thousands have been jailed.

### **Asylum seekers**

As many as 300 000 people have fled the country over the past decade, making Eritrea, with a population of about six million, one of the largest per capita producers of asylum seekers in the world. Many are national service conscripts fleeing a programme initially set up for 18 months but extended indefinitely after the - conflict with Ethiopia and now requiring up to 20 years at bare subsistence wages for a generation of soldiers, teachers, labourers and low-level administrators.

Binyam's national service cohort was the 17th round – each "class" of conscripts is known by its place in the sequence since it was launched in 1994 with a term of 18 months –and it followed a particularly rebellious intake, so its members were kept at Sawa longer than usual, though neither Binyam nor his peers caused any problems.

"It was very tough, but we accepted it," he said. He had expected that, once the training phase was done, he would go to college, get a good education and do well in life. He now knows how naive that was.

In 2004, he was sent to a new technical institute at Mai Nefhi, set up two years earlier when the University of Asmara, the scene of vigorous student protests, was broken up into smaller colleges dispersed around the country during a wide-ranging crackdown on dissent.

### **Military college**

"They turned it into a military college," he said, describing a garrison surrounded by barbed wire that students could not leave without permission from the uniformed soldiers in charge of the campus.

"Mai Nefhi was a joke," he went on.

The teachers, mostly young Indians imported for the task, were unfamiliar with Eritrea and not qualified in the subjects they were teaching; the administrators were disorganised and untrained. He said he had no Eritrean teachers during his two years and learned very little. But he was not prepared for what would come next: teaching mostly illiterate EPLF veterans in a small village outside the town of Mendefera.

Binyam had been studying fine art when school officials told him they couldn't find his records, so he would have to take time off while they searched. This village is where they "parked" him under a ministry of defence programme staffed by national service conscripts.

For the next 10 months, he struggled to do the best he could, teaching two 45-minute classes each day. The classroom time was extremely stressful, he said, because he wasn't sure what he was doing, but the hardest part was the downtime when he had nothing to do: "You lose your mind there."

When he showed up at Mai Nefhi again at the end of 2008, he was told his grades had been lost so he would have to repeat a year, but he convinced his superiors to test him instead. When he passed, he was sent back to Mendefera to teach again, this time under the ministry of education.

"It was kids this time," he said, "but I was still unqualified to teach." No one was qualified, he added.

The national service teachers were paid 700 nakfa a month (roughly \$12). Binyam rented a four-by-four-metre room with no furniture and no toilet for 400 nakfa a month. He, like most conscripts, had to rely on money from his parents for basic living costs.

The day he arrived in Mendefera he had to sleep on the street because he hadn't been given proper identification documents and no hotel would take him. Nor did the school have quarters for teachers. The next day, the director placed him in a classroom and walked out without an explanation.

This time he had classes throughout the day attended by 70 fourth- or fifth-graders at a time, most of whom he was unable to control. Other instructors used abuse to get them in line, he said, but that was not his way, so he strove to get the pupils' attention through patient dialogue.

### **Dysfunctional education system**

But the education system was structurally dysfunctional, according to Binyam. He said everyone under 18 was required to attend school, giving the country a high statistical enrolment figure that belied the fact that little actual education took place. The curricula were inappropriate, teaching was done by rote and the faculty and staff were poorly motivated and untrained – and were nearly all national service draftees. The result was chaos.

Many teachers failed to show up for classes once the semester was under way, but there was no attempt to reel them in or punish them because this would likely result in the teacher's flight or arrest, leaving a classroom permanently empty. The upshot was untended classes in which the children went wild.

Binyam said that 12 of his pupils left for Ethiopia during this time. When one was caught, released and sent back, Binyam asked why he had fled. "If I stay here, I'm just going to turn out like you," the youngster told him. "That was a blow to the face," said Binyam.

After a while, the stress got to him. When he began to have fainting spells, he sought help. "It was a total breakdown," he said.

Things got worse when food rations ran short and teachers turned up at school hungry. Finally, he said, he told the authorities he could no longer teach and started staying at home. When others joined him, he was accused of fomenting an uprising and threatened with prison.

"I told them to take me to prison," he said. "They have food there. Here I am a slave."

But the next day the school director, demoralised but determined to fulfil his nearly impossible mission, came with cooking fuel and food of his own so they could eat. From that day onward, said Binyam, it felt like "we started working for him, not the government".

Nevertheless, by 2013, still under heavy stress and seeing no way out, Binyam went to Asmara to secure a sick leave pass. In the end he got one, but only after bribing a health worker with 20000 nakfa. They, too,

were conscripts earning between 700 and 1 000 nakfa per month.

He was released from national service that May, but it took him another 10 months to pay the bribes for an exit visa – 200 000 nakfa. Once he had it, he bought the first ticket to Nairobi and left Eritrea. “I was afraid to wait,” he said.

Today, Binyam is a first-year student at a Nairobi university studying computer technology and neuropsychology.

“It’s a new start,” he said with a shrug. He said he would go back to Eritrea, as his mother had done more than 20 years ago, but only if the government changed.

\*Not his real name

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