



Eritrea – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 11 January 2019

Updated information on Sawa military camp where students are trained and attend classes as part of their 12th year in school including how easy/hard it is for students to enter/exit Sawa

A report published by Amnesty International, in a section titled “Conscription Through The Education System - Sawa National Service And Training Centre”, states:

“Since 2003, all schoolchildren are required to undertake grade 12 of school in Warsai Yikealo Secondary School in Sawa National Service and Training Centre (Sawa). Grade 12 students are aged between late teens and early twenties, depending on the age at which they first joined school and on whether they had to repeat grades. Some grade 12 students transferred to Sawa are 17 years old, occasionally younger. The year spent at Sawa culminates in assignment to National Service.

Each annual intake of conscripts at Sawa is referred to as a ‘round.’ The 28th round graduated from Sawa in July 2015. According to the Ministry of Information, 11,000 students participated in this round.⁴¹ This number does not include people conscripted through round-ups and arrests and trained at different military training centres.

The year spent at Sawa consists of around six months of education during which students study for their final school exams, followed by four to five months of military training. Most of the instructors for both the grade 12 education and military training components are conscripts themselves. Former conscripts recounted that the military component involves physical fitness training, military discipline and procedures and training in the use and care of weapons and munitions. Students also undertake a two- to four-week ‘war simulation’ training in the bush away from the camp.” (Amnesty International (2 December 2015) *Just Deserters: Why indefinite national service in Eritrea has created a generation of refugees*, p.19)

In a paper prepared for the European Asylum Support Office Practical Cooperation Meeting on Eritrea Gaim Kibreab of the London South Bank University Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, states:

“Before the deterioration of the ENS into forced labour, there were four methods of conscription. In a survey conducted by the author in 2012 among Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, South Africa and Sudan who deserted and fled Eritrea after serving on average six years reported that 23 per cent went to Sawa to join the ENS voluntarily before receiving call up papers. Among the 190 respondents, 38 per cent went to Sawa after receiving call up papers. Another 20 per cent were conscripted through the Warsai School at Sawa at the end of 11th

grade. The remaining 16 per cent were rounded up and forcibly taken to Sawa to join the national service.” (Kibreab, Gaim (16 October 2014) *The Open-Ended Eritrean National Service: The Driver of Forced Migration*)

In a section titled “Militarisation of Education” this paper states:

“Present day Eritrea is among the most militarised countries in the world. Even the educational system is militarised. After the ENS became open-ended and consequently militarisation affected all aspects of life in the country, the unpopularity of the ENS among citizens within and/or approaching the age of conscription increased dramatically. This was reflected on the one hand, in the large number of people fleeing the country, and on the other, hiding within the country to avoid conscription. In an attempt to pre-empt this trend, in 2003 the government decided to increase the duration of secondary education by one year and relocated the final year students to Sawa where they combine military training with academic studies in which the former is prioritised.²⁶ After they complete 12th grade, the students who pass the matriculation tests join the different colleges to pursue post-secondary education, others are assigned to perform national service in different ministries, regional governments and PFDJ firms whilst the vast majority are assigned to the armed forces—the army, navy, air force and people’s militia. Students who drop out for any reason or fail their exams are automatically sent to the armed forces. No student can graduate without completing the final year secondary school and military training at Sawa.” (ibid)

A report published by the Landinfo Country of Origin Information Centre of Norway, in a section titled “Sawa – military camp or educational institution?”, states:

“To increase the control over young persons of service age, all school students in high school since the summer of 2003 must spend the twelfth and last school year in Sawa camp, which is located in the Gash Barka region by the River Sawa in the western part of the country, not far from the border with Sudan. The camp is currently the size of a city that can accommodate up to 30,000 persons, and was built in the 1990s as a military training camp. In the beginning all the recruits lived in bamboo huts. Eventually, groups who have served there built houses and dormitories.” (Landinfo Country of Origin Information Centre (20 May 2016) *Eritrea: National Service*, p.12)

This section of the report also states:

“Seemingly, the duration of military training in Sawa varies from one mobilisation round to another - some put it at between six and eight weeks, others say three months – and can be determined by both practical and political considerations. But everyone, including those who take higher education, has probably been through a minimum of military training. Information about when the training takes place during the school year also varies: Some believe the training is carried out at the beginning of the school year, others believe that the military training takes place after graduation.” (ibid, p.12)

Referring to allegations of sexual abuse in Sawa this section of the report states:

“Rumours and stories of sexual abuse, in both Sawa and other training camps, were previously not uncommon. Kibreab (2009b, p. 60) points out that it is impossible to distinguish between allegations, rumours and truth because of censorship in the country. Thus, a number of unconfirmed stories about suicide, fatal malaria and sexual assaults during service have circulated. Boys and girls live in separate dormitories, but associate freely during the rest of the day. According to a diplomatic source Landinfo met in Asmara in 2011, sexual abuse in Sawa occurred ‘as much as you can expect in a place like this.’ Another international representative stated to Landinfo in 2014 that the claims of abuse were probably exaggerated (interview in Asmara, March 2014). None of the sources Landinfo interviewed in Asmara in January/February 2016 mentioned sexual assaults in Sawa as a relevant subject. The Commission, however, argues in its report that there is widespread sexual abuse of women in the training camps.” (ibid, p.13)

In a section titled “Detention centres in Sawa” this report states:

“Several of the sources Human Rights Watch interviewed in the report Service for Life from April 2009 mentioned various detention centres in Sawa, including underground cells and metal containers. In interviews with the human rights activist Elsa Chyrum some Eritrean exiles stated that the Sawa prison is a fenced area consisting of twelve corrugated iron houses on a hill. The houses have names such as Wedi Shika, Bahta, Hinsu and Police (Chyrum 2006). A report from the US Embassy in Asmara to the US State Department in 2006 mentions Forto Sawa, the military training camp – and the detention centre – located approximately 2 km from the camp where schooling takes place (US Embassy Asmara 2006a). None of Landinfo's interviewees in Asmara in recent years has been able to confirm the information about the detention centres in Sawa.” (ibid, p.14)

A report published by the European Asylum Support Office, in a section titled “12th school year at Sawa” (section 3.4), states:

“The 12th school year at the Sawa-based Warsay-Yikealo school involves a combination of academic and military training and labour deployments. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the academic session, which begins after the conscripts are recruited in July or August, lasts seven or eight months and focuses on the propagation of national values, i.e. the PFDJ's ideology. Pupils are subjected to military discipline during this period and can be mobilised repeatedly for military training events. According to several sources of a Norwegian fact-finding mission, however, it is likely that the Warsay-Yikealo school has become less military in nature in recent years, since it is now primarily an educational institution.” (European Asylum Support Office (May 2015) *Eritrea: Country Focus*, p.37)

In a section titled “Desertion” (section 3.8) this report states:

“Individuals who leave national service (military and civilian) without permission are regarded as deserters. Most deserters leave either the training centre at Sawa or other military bases without authorisation or fail to return from leave. They then either hide or attempt to leave the country illegally.” (ibid, p.41)

See also section titled “Illegal exits” (section 6.4.3) which states:

“It is very difficult to obtain an exit visa and leave the country legally. Therefore, particularly deserters and draft evaders tend to leave the country illegally via Sudan or Ethiopia. There are several options:

- Leaving the country alone by foot from Sawa or other military bases close to the border.” (ibid, p.53)

A report from Al Jazeera quotes an Eritrean asylum seeker as follows:

“I ran away from SAWA (Eritrea's military training academy) when I was 16 because it was too hard,’ he says.

‘They came to my village and imprisoned my mother for not bringing me back. I didn't have an option. They blackmailed me because I wanted my mother to be freed. When I returned, they strung me up for days and tortured me.’

‘They do many things to you when they catch you,’ Adam continues.

‘They tell you that it's OK, that you are not the first one, that you should accept your mistake. They will try to trick you into admitting you were trying to escape. If not, they will use a more forceful mechanism,’ he says, staring down at the dust and rolling a stone under the blue plastic sole of one of his volunteer-donated Crocs.

‘They may put you underground in a prison. You never see light, you never go out. Maybe they will string you up for a long period of time so your veins will be cut off from circulation. Some people lose hands like this or bleed to death.’

‘They put your legs up and hit you under the back of them or on the soles of your feet - anything to pressure you into admitting you planned to escape... Some people can't have children because they have reproductive difficulties after the torture. Most people eventually confess simply because they can't take it.’” (Al Jazeera (31 March 2016) *Calais: Eritrean refugees tell of torture and fear*)

A UK Home Office fact-finding mission report, in a section titled “Conditions at Sawa” (paragraph 9.10.3) refers to information provided by representatives of the National Union Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) who state:

“The head of the zoba in charge of Sawa explained that between 18,000-23,000 go to Sawa each year. It depends on the number of children in high school. Students do 12th grade there. They stay there for one year and complete the matriculation exam. The ones who pass join the colleges or technical schools. Some also join the national service and join the ministries. We support various activities. In their stay there, they join different courses.

‘They eat together, sleep together, do activities together. They all know each other. They are from 6 zobas, 9 ethnic groups. After completion of the 12th grade, they do the military training.’ (UK Home Office (20 February 2016) *Eritrea: illegal exit and national service*, p.53)

The 2018 Amnesty International report for Eritrea, in a paragraph headed “Forced labour and slavery”, states:

“The mandatory national service continued to be extended indefinitely despite repeated calls from the international community on the government to limit conscription to 18 months. Significant numbers of conscripts remained in open-ended conscription, some for as long as 20 years. Despite a minimum legal conscription age of 18, children continued to be subjected to military training under the requirement that they undergo grade 12 of secondary school at Sawa National Service training camp, where they faced harsh living conditions, military-style discipline and weapons training. Women, in particular, faced harsh treatment in the camp including sexual enslavement, torture and other sexual abuse.” (Amnesty International (22 February 2018) *Eritrea 2017/2018*)

An article from Kenyan newspaper The East African, in a paragraph headed “Sawa Military Camp”, states:

“In their final year of high school, students attend the infamous Sawa Military Camp, where food and water are abysmal, and temperatures are extreme. Harsh punishment is meted out for minor infractions.” (The East African (1 August 2018) *A cruel graduation: In Eritrea, school remains a one-way ticket to the army*)

A Human Rights Watch Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea states:

“Physical punishment begins early. Students are initially assigned to a defense training center at Sawa for their last year of high school before being drafted into national service. In recent interviews, defectors told of physical punishments for even minor infractions, such as being late for class: ‘they hit you hard, until you are injured’; victims were ordered to roll on the ground, ‘some would fall and vomit when they stood up.’ One conscript summarized the Sawa experience as ‘[t]hey are making us into slaves, not educating us.’” (Human Rights Watch (16 December 2018) *Human Rights Watch Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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