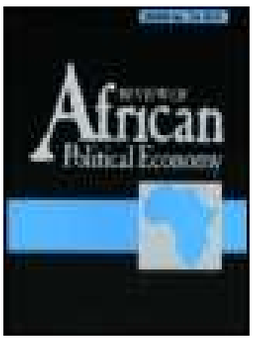

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BRIEFING

Eritrea: a mafia state?

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SUMMARY
Eritrea is no ordinary state; rather it resembles a criminal organisation designed to keep its citizens in perpetual servitude. It is behaves like a mafia organisation: with covert finances but without a constitution, legislature or elections, run by the country's president and his closest associates.

Introduction

Since its formal independence in 1993 Eritrea has taken its rightful place on the world stage as an independent nation. It is a member of the United Nations and the African Union. It controls its borders, administers its population and exercises sovereignty over its territory. In this sense, it is a state like any other.

Yet in a far more fundamental sense it operates unlike other states.

Eritrea lacks many other attributes of statehood. For a start, it has no effective constitution. The constitution, although written and approved by the National Constituent Assembly, has never been brought into force. President Isaias Afwerki ordered an alternative to be written, but none has appeared. Secondly, the president and his government have no popular mandate. There has never been a general election in Eritrea. Nor has the sole legal party (the People's Front for Democracy and Justice – PFDJ) even held an internal party congress since it was founded in 1994. Thirdly, Eritrea is run in an arbitrary manner by the president and his closest associates, with many of the normal administrative functions of a state almost completely absent. For example, Eritrea has no annual budget and the revenues from the mines are not publicly accounted for. As shall be seen, the country has a bifurcated economy, with much of its economic activity controlled by the party, or held offshore. The normal checks and balances that exist in most nations around the world are absent.

It is the arbitrary and personal nature of the Eritrean state that leaves it open to accusations of being a 'mafia state' since the country is effectively ruled by one man – the president – and his most senior military officers and political officials. They run Eritrea with a ruthlessness that has led to allegations that they have participated in the most serious human rights abuses. As Mike Smith, chair of the Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Council of Human Rights, concluded on 6 June 2016:

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> There is no independent judiciary, no national assembly and there are no other democratic institutions in Eritrea. This has created a governance and rule of law vacuum, resulting in a climate of impunity for crimes against humanity to be perpetrated over a quarter of a century. These crimes are still occurring today. (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016)

Eritrea is, of course, not the only state that exists under a dictatorship. Yet even in notoriously repressive states, including Sudan and North Korea, the head of state is nominally accountable to a parliament or legislature. In Eritrea's case this is absent. The National Assembly has not met since 2001. Legislative as well as executive functions are now effectively exercised by President Isaias Afwerki alone, or with a narrow circle of associates who are reliant on the president for their positions.

Having said this it is important to clarify one issue: Eritrea is not a 'mafia state' in the sense that the term is sometimes used. The designation is normally reserved for narco-states, which are captured by criminal syndicates (see, for example, Naím 2012). This is not true in Eritrea's case. Rather, the term is used metaphorically, suggesting that the state is controlled by a narrow circle around the president and that the president's authority is exercised in ways not found in most other states.[1] Two factors suggest that the designation is appropriate.

Firstly, President Isaias's writ is not only exercised with ruthless efficiency inside the country, but also among the country's extensive and growing diaspora. As shall be seen, the Eritrean state and party reaches out across the world to control its citizens with threats and intimidation. Secondly, the president's closest associates are implicated in a covert network of illegal activities which could not take place in such a highly controlled society if they were not sanctioned by the president. In the circumstances, it is hard not to conclude that the abuses are sanctioned at the highest level – by the president himself, acting more like a Mafia don enforcing his will than a legitimate head of state.

The nature of the Eritrean state can be traced directly from the 30-year-long struggle for independence from Ethiopia. It was a movement led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), of which Isaias Afwerki was the leader (Clapham 2017; Plaut and Jacquin-Berdal 2004; Plaut 2016). The EPLF received considerable political support from the intellectual left, with a number of writers for *ROAPE* – including Lionel Cliffe, one of the founding editors of the *Review* – backing the cause of independence. While the EPLF was, apparently, a broad popular movement with left wing credentials, it was in reality, controlled by a narrower, Leninist party. This clandestine party was the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party – usually called the People's Party – which was founded on 4 April 1971 (Connell and Killion 2011, 230–232). Through the People's Party's secret structures Isaias exercised an autocratic hold over the liberation struggle until the movement ousted the Ethiopians from the capital (Asmara) in 1991. It is arguable that tight discipline was vital to win the guerrilla struggle against Ethiopia, which was not only so much larger, but was backed first by the United States and then the Soviet Union. The argument falls away once Eritrea won its freedom.

Soon the authoritarian nature of the regime became apparent. Troops, some of whom had not been paid for many years, protested in May 1993, just prior to formal independence. President Isaias met them and promised to address their demands, only to renege on his promises, declaring that the protest had been 'illegal, misguided and infantile' (Plaut 2016, 119). Women fighters and disabled veterans were treated in similar manners. The repressive nature of the president's rule gradually became apparent.

Despite the repressive measures he introduced, Isaias's control began to be questioned, particularly after the disastrous border war with Ethiopia of 1998–2000. A group of senior party members challenged the president in an open letter, but in August 2001 they were rounded up and imprisoned without trial. Journalists were arrested together with university students and the country's fragile democracy was destroyed. Since then President Isaias and his associates have ruled without the pretence of democracy.

In the analysis below the human rights abuses committed by the Eritrean state will be taken as read. They are extensively recorded in two compendious reports by the Commission of Inquiry, which were endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council and referred to UN General Assembly (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2015; Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2016). Rather, this report will consider three areas: the involvement of senior Eritrean officials and officers in human trafficking, the bifurcated Eritrean economy and the operation of the Eritrean state in the diaspora.

Eritrean officials involved in human trafficking

The Eritrean government controls its borders rigorously, including implementing a policy of 'shoot to kill' for anyone attempting an unauthorised crossing (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2016, para. 56). At the same time there is mounting evidence that the same government not only controls the illicit flight of its own citizens but profits from it. How is it possible that both statements can be true?

The first point to make is that the Eritrean authorities have formal and informal systems of government. So, while it is formally policy to prevent the flight into exile, this is only applied to those who cannot afford to pay senior officials to facilitate their journey. With sufficient funds, it is possible to cross into Sudan in some comfort:

> [O]ne of the ways of escaping from Eritrea is to be transported by luxury SUV vehicle from Asmara to Kassala, but you have to pay 8000 to 10,000 USD. It is arranged by the military and in every vehicle there will be 10–12 people. The vehicle is government/military and it does the whole trip in about 8 hours. That system is known by everybody if you can pay. (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 32)

The government has established and controls an informal economy which facilitates these financial transfers (this is further explored below). This informal economy is not an operation run *unofficially* by senior officials and officers: it is a system that is *officially sanctioned* by the ruling party – the PFDJ. This point was made by the UN Monitoring Group established by the Security Council in its 2011 report. There is, the Monitors said:

> a vast and complex informal economy through which senior officials in the Government and PFDJ collect and control hundreds of millions of dollars each year in unofficial revenues, largely from taxation of Eritreans in the diaspora and private business arrangements involving PFDJ-run companies or business partnerships abroad. (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 365)

This is operated

> principally through this extensive, offshore and largely illicit financial apparatus, controlled and operated by intelligence, military and party officials, many of them operating in an 'unofficial' capacity. (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 366)

It is this system, controlled through the Office of President Afwerki, that is at the heart of the operation. The official in charge of this is the president's key economic adviser, Hagos Gebrehiwot Maesho (also known as Hagos 'Kisha') who is head of Economic Affairs of the PFDJ (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 21). Without this informal economy the ransoms and other payments made to the traffickers would be crimes committed by individuals. Since they are passed through an officially sanctioned system they can be regarded, rather, as forms of finance obtained (under the most appalling circumstances) by the ruling party on behalf of the president and his associates.

Since many Eritreans flee into exile into Sudan, Eritrea's western border is one of the key regions to control. This task has been given to General Teklai Kifle, known as 'Manjus'. His role as organiser of all illicit cross-border activities was again underlined in the UN Monitor's report of 2011:

> Arms trafficking from western Eritrea is just one component of a much broader, and highly profitable, smuggling operation overseen by General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus', Commander of the western military zone. (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 358)

The report accuses General Manjus of trading in everything from guns to people, in cooperation with a range of Sudanese officials, including Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, then Minister of State for Transport of the Sudan. The border is no barrier to the Eritrean military. The US State Department concluded that: 'Eritrean military officers sometimes operated within Sudan to abduct refugees from camps, particularly those who voiced criticism of the Eritrean government or were prominent political or military figures' (US State Department 2013). Similar intimidation has been reported amongst exiles from South Africa to the Netherlands.

The Sudanese authorities are part of the human trafficking chain that links Eritrea with the outside world. Just how close this relationship is can be judged from the Human Rights Report on the situation in the Sudanese border town of Kassala. Human Rights Watch found that Sudanese police arrested Eritreans before then handing them over to traffickers (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Eritrean nationals are the key traffickers in the smuggling operation. They have been identified and named by many of those they have transported (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 62–72). Living in Sudan, Egypt and Libya they have links to a wider network which stretches back to Asmara and onwards to Israel, Sweden, Italy and beyond. They act in Sudan and Egypt with impunity; an impunity bought from the proceeds of the human trafficking. As one witness put it about an Eritrean trafficker in Sudan: 'He is an Eritrean. But he lives in Sudan. He is very active with the Sudanese government and got full support. All work to collect too much dollars' (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 62). These allegations are corroborated in numerous witness statements.

Nor is it just a question of human trafficking. Eritreans were directly involved in the supervision and torture of their countrymen and women held captive in the Sinai (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 65–70). They used their skills to extract the highest ransoms and inflicted some of the most cruel punishments.

Perhaps the most disturbing allegation is that some victims of trafficking are actually abducted from inside Eritrea itself – including from the streets of Asmara. The testimony of a mother of three who was kidnapped from the capital is particularly distressing.

> She said she never intended to leave the country, but merely attended a meeting with her business partner in Asmara. At the meeting, there were three men she didn't know. The next thing she remembers is waking up in Kassala [Sudan] with the three men; her business partner was not there … The three others didn't remember how they got there either. They were asked to pay US$10,000 within a few days and told that if they didn't they would be sold to the Bedouins in the Sinai. (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 41)

The evidence therefore points to a highly organised network of senior officers and officials, who, together with Eritrean nationals abroad, control human trafficking of Eritreans for profit. As indicated above, such operations could not have escaped the notice of President Isaias, who not only appointed men like General Manjus, but relies upon them for his security. In a society as tightly controlled and monitored as Eritrea, where a network of spies stretches across the country, such an important and extensive operation could not be undertaken without official sanction. But there are other reasons why it is possible to say with certainty that the human trafficking is sanctioned by President Isaias: the country's bifurcated economy. It is this to which we will now turn.

Eritrea's bifurcated economy

Eritrea has two linked but distinct economies. One is a transparent, open economy, dominated by peasant agriculture, with a government sector that provides much of the regular employment that is available and a small, but growing, mining and manufacturing sector. Most of the active population is in the military: in the system of indefinite national service which can extended for years, sometimes decades (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2015, paras 1172–1506). As the UN Commission of Inquiry concluded:

> The duration of national service is indefinite, its conditions violate international standards and conscripts are severely underpaid. As such, it is an institution where slavery-like practices take place. (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2015, para. 1518)

This is one half of the Eritrean economy, but there is another: the covert economy which is run by and on behalf of the ruling party – the PFDJ. This secretive, often offshore economy, is directly controlled from the Office of the President. This second economy was extensively explored in the 2011 Monitoring Group's report to the UN Security Council:

> Essentially, Eritrea manages two parallel economies: a formal economic sphere ostensibly managed by the State, and an opaque, largely offshore financial system controlled by elements of the ruling party and their supporters. According to Government officials, the formal economic system involves transactions almost exclusively in nakfa, the non-convertible Eritrean national currency, and is characterized by a chronic hard currency deficit that theoretically curbs Eritrea's ability to provide financial support to foreign-armed groups.
>
> The informal, PFDJ-controlled economy is in many respects a legacy of the financial organization of EPLF during the liberation struggle. It involves a much higher proportion of hard currency transactions than the formal economy and is managed almost entirely offshore through a labyrinthine multinational network of companies, individuals and bank accounts, many of which do not declare any affiliation to PFDJ or the Eritrean State, and routinely engage in 'grey' or illicit activities. Although it is impossible to obtain reliable figures about the size of this informal economy, it is apparently more than sufficient to enable the kinds of external operations described in the present report.

> Official control of the Eritrean economy is exercised by two main institutions, the Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Eritrea, both of which experience a chronic deficit of hard currency. In September 2010, the Manager of the Commercial Bank of Eritrea, Yemane Tesfay, told the Monitoring Group that Eritrea held no foreign currency reserves to speak of, that 95 per cent of deposits with the Bank were held in nakfa, and that 'the Bank of Eritrea would manage hard currency reserves if Eritrea had any, but it doesn't'.
>
> Hard currency deposits, such as they exist, are officially managed by a hard currency oversight board comprising representatives of the Ministry of National Development, the Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Eritrea, the Commercial Bank of Eritrea and the Director of the PFDJ Economic Affairs Department, Hagos Gebrehiwot (also known as Hagos 'Kisha'). In January 2011, however, the Manager of the Commercial Bank of Eritrea told the Monitoring Group that the board had not met since 2009, and that decisions concerning the allocation of hard currency resources were in fact made by the Director of the PFDJ Economic Affairs Department. This implies that that Department exercises de facto control over the hard currency raised by Eritrean embassies abroad from diaspora taxes, as well as revenues generated by commercial attachés at foreign embassies who handle transactions on behalf of PFDJ-controlled enterprises. (United Nations Security Council 2011, paras 373–376)

The UN Monitors then revealed a complex network of relationships which were controlled by fronts for the ruling party:

> PFDJ-owned companies are one of the principal sources of revenue for the ruling party and, by extension, the Eritrean State. The most important of these is the Red Sea Corporation, originally established as a covert finance operation known as '09' which traded throughout Africa and the Middle East to raise finances for the Eritrean liberation struggle. Today, the Red Sea Corporation is a party-owned trading company with an official mandate to import basic foodstuffs, which it sells at fixed prices. (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 378)

The UN Monitors produced a detailed analysis of just how the Red Sea Corporation and other PFDJ-run companies control this covert economy. A great deal is handled through Dubai and Qatar. Embassies and private individuals around the world play their part. Honorary consuls have been enrolled. Ties were traced to the Office of the President. Here is a small selection of the relationships that were outlined in the report:

> The Government of Eritrea also has close ties with an Italian-based business, Officine Piccini, based in Perugia, which exports spare parts and machinery. The company's legal representative is Asmerom Meconnen, an Eritrean businessman who works closely with PFDJ and who is a business partner of Colonel Weldu Gheresus Barya. The company has been visited personally by President Isaias Afwerki. According to financial information obtained by the Monitoring Group, this company exports to over 100 different countries, including over 40 million euros each of exports to Eritrea and Equatorial Guinea over the last 13 years. The Monitoring Group has been reliably informed by a law enforcement source that one of Officine Piccini's shareholders is under investigation for money-laundering by the Swiss police.
>
> Abdullahi Matraji, a wealthy businessman, serves as honorary consul for Eritrea in Lebanon. According to a former Eritrean official based in the Sudan, Matraji's appointment was facilitated by his father, Ghassan Matraji, who worked closely with members of EPLF in laundering counterfeit dollars in the Sudan for 'Brigade 72'. Ghassan Matraji was sentenced in Beirut in 1997 for forging United States dollars and attempting to circulate those dollars in Lebanon. He was also apparently charged by a Beirut court in 1995 for trading in arms and military equipment. (United Nations Security Council 2011, paras 403–404)

Among the most important covert operations is the collection of a 2% tax from the diaspora, together with other levies upon Eritreans abroad. As the UN Monitors reported:

> Probably the most significant source of revenue for PFDJ is the excise of a 2 per cent income tax on Eritrean nationals living abroad. An estimated 1.2 million Eritreans — or 25 per cent of the total population — live in the diaspora, with the most important concentrations in North America, Europe and the Middle East. According to estimates by various national law enforcement officers, Eritrean eyewitnesses and former Eritrean Government agents in the diaspora, the Government of Eritrea is estimated to raise tens — and possibly hundreds — of millions of dollars on an annual basis. (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 381)

Much of the money is passed through a *hawala* system of person-to-person transfers, which is run by the PFDJ. According to Eritrea's former Deputy Minister of Finance, Kubrom Dafla Hasabay (who fled the country in 2009), the hawala system even handles the sums paid by Eritreans for their ransoms during human trafficking (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 86). The proposition that the ransoms are controlled at the highest level was corroborated by the testimony of a witness interviewed by the UN Monitors for the 2012 report:

> I left Eritrea in 2003. In between, I was in Libya and Sudan. On my way to Israel in 2011, I spent 20 days in the Sinai. I worked as a translator for the smuggler Abu Ahmed. Abu Ahmed is the boss of his family of smugglers. He brings people from Libya and Sudan to Israel and charges them $15,000 each, no more, no less. He also smuggles weapons. … There are two high ranking Eritrean soldiers involved in this, I know them well. Their names are Borhame and Yesef Hadegu. The main man who is in charge of all of this is [General] Manjus. The other two are the ones working. They bring the weapons in their cars to Wadi Sharifay. Then Manjus calls the Rashaida and they come and there is a handover – the smugglers take the weapons. These are the same gangs that smuggle people. I know the name of one of them is Abed. They are very tight with the military. Manjus gets all the money. They don't get anything. They are in the military so they just do what they are told. They money doesn't stop with Manjus, it goes all the way up – to the president. (United Nations Security Council 2012, paras 75–81)

What emerges from this evidence is a picture of Eritrea as a state that uses its border controls as a means of extracting funds from its citizens as they attempt to seek a better life by escaping abroad. The shoot-to-kill policy and other restrictions can be seen as a means of heightening the fears of those fleeing, in order to increase the payments that are controlled by President Afwerki and his associates.

Threats and menaces: the Eritrean state's control over the diaspora

As might be anticipated in such a repressive state, the Eritrean government's spies are to be found in all corners of the country, dividing communities and even families. As the UN Commission of Inquiry put it:

> The tentacles of the spy network have stretched to every part of Eritrean society and have consequently ruptured the trust that people normally have in their neighbours, friends and relatives. (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2015, para. 347)

What will perhaps come as more of a surprise is the strength of evidence that similar networks of spies and enforcers exist across the world, gathering information and threatening

members of the Eritrean diaspora. Again, this was highlighted by the UN Commission of Inquiry:

> The spying web has its outposts outside Eritrea, used to control the Eritrean population in the various countries where they reside. Eritrean representations in foreign countries recruit spies to conduct surveillance of Eritreans in the diaspora. Allegedly, Government operatives are active in almost every other place Eritreans live. Information obtained by the Commission indicates that, to conduct spying activities on their behalf, embassies often approach individuals from within the Eritrean communities abroad, in particular those who pay the 2 per cent Rehabilitation Tax as this is perceived as a form of support to the Government.
>
> One witness who reported having been a spy for an Eritrean embassy told the Commission that 'In 1997, Mr. [A], the consul in [a foreign country] … called me for a meeting joined by other spies. They told us we should continue our struggle in [a foreign country]. He introduced us to each other and started meeting us individually. There was an organisation … We were assigned to this organisation, not to work but to ensure the PFDJ was represented in every organisation. They wanted me to join the board. I refused, arguing I was too young and inexperienced. Later, Mr. A told me he had a job for me. He told me I should work for them as a security agent in [city Z]. He said this would only be between him and me. Later, he gave me appointments and said I would always be able to enter the consulate, without needing permission and without having to wait for an appointment. Even the people at the consulate were not allowed to ask us any questions. I received a schedule for the entire week. I was asked to go every day to different hotels or restaurants. There were three shifts per day. We were asked to chat with people who came to those places and report on what we heard. Every day, I had to report back to the consul in person. I believed this was the right thing to do … We had to observe every religious group. Those working in the religious groups are church members and PFDJ members at the same time … We did not know who was an agent and who was not. The work was organised by the consul alone, not with others. Now they have people who don't trust each other. At the time, it was different … I decided to discontinue my work with them.' (Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea 2015, para. 348)

These findings are supported by other reports. The United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants is reported to have said in 2009 that it had 'credible reports' of Eritrean government monitoring of refugees abroad (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009). In Switzerland, the Eritrean government has used a range of surveillance methods to keep control over its diaspora. Eritreans close to the embassy are reported to have infiltrated the refugee translation service, using it as a means of gathering information on Eritrean citizens:

> The Eritrean bureaucratic form of state surveillance—but this time considered on a transnational scale—remains at the center of the stories that circulate and that reanimate fears about the state. For instance, deserters seeking asylum in Switzerland are convinced that some Eritreans close to the embassy circle are working in institutions such as the federal office for migration and with NGOs in charge of delivering welfare benefits and legal assistance for asylum seekers and indigent refugees. Translators working in these institutions are widely believed to collect asylum seekers' personal information and report it to the embassy, and rumors exchanged among deserters have it that Eritrean embassies keep files on exiled citizens in order eventually to retaliate against their families back home. Tedros, who was registered in Italy, declared that the Eritrean translator whom he met in the camp turned out to be a hidden state agent since 'he advised us to ask for economic refuge, and he cheated in the interviews, giving us a bad name.' (Bozzini 2015)

This finding is replicated in the Netherlands where a number of court cases were brought by members of the youth wing of the ruling party – the YPFDJ – in relation to their employment by the Dutch immigration service (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 370–406). Professor Mirjam van Reisen had accused members of the YPFDJ who worked for the immigration service of having ties with the Eritrean government. Professor van Reisen was then sued for libel and slander, as were a number of newspapers and websites that carried her report. In the event, the Dutch courts found in favour of Professor van Reisen, ruling that the YPFDJ could indeed be referred to as the extended arm of the Eritrean state. The matter was taken up by the Dutch parliament, which called for strong measures to curtail the influence of the Eritrean government, and for an investigation into the illegal activities of the Eritrean embassy. A report, accepted by the Dutch government on 15 December 2016, listed a range of measures the authorities would take to prevent continued threats, intimidation, extortion and other illegal activities by the Eritrean authorities (van Reisen and Mawere 2017, 373).

These are only a small sample of the activities pursued by the Eritrean government abroad. All are designed to keep its diaspora in line and to extract the maximum revenue from Eritreans living outside the country. This includes physical violence, as inflicted on anti-government protestors during a festival in Bologna, and harassment of academics in London.

Conclusion

In its 2016 Report on Human Rights the US State Department wrote: 'Eritrea is a highly centralized, authoritarian regime under the control of President Isaias Afwerki' (US State Department 2016). After listing a host of human rights abuses the authors then noted that: 'The government did not generally prosecute or punish officials who committed abuses, whether in the security services or elsewhere in the government. Impunity was the norm.' The evidence points towards a single, controlling mind that exercises a pernicious influence over Eritreans, both in their own country and abroad. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the president himself is the malign force attempting to direct and control the lives of Eritreans wherever they live. Even when they flee abroad they are in danger of being captured, tortured and ransomed by Eritreans working directly or indirectly for his government.

The funds extracted from individuals and their families frequently return to Eritrea in a system controlled by the ruling party, or else end up in foreign accounts belonging to senior government officials (United Nations Security Council 2011, para. 424). The covert economy not only allows this to take place, it actually encourages the system of bribery and corruption that is now the hallmark of the regime.

Eritreans who manage to make a life for themselves in exile are subjected to intense surveillance, intimidation and violence. Funds are extracted from them and they are under pressure to attend meetings and rallies supportive of the regime, on pain of being prevented from having dealings with their families back home. Even foreign academics and journalists who speak openly about the nature of the Eritrean government have had attempts to silence them.

In summary, the Eritrean state is no ordinary member of the international community. With President Isaias at its centre, it plays a malign role across the Horn of Africa and

beyond. No firm, government or non-governmental organisation working with the Eritrean authorities can be certain where their finances and fees are going. None can be sure that they are not funding repression in the region, or covert activities around the world. Those who suggest that the time has come to 'reach out' to the Eritrean government, or who wish to establish ties with it – be they diplomatic, developmental or commercial – need to bear this in mind.

Note

1. I owe my understanding of the concept of a mafia state to an informal discussion with Professor Mirjam van Reisen of Leiden University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

Martin Plaut is a journalist and researcher working primarily on southern Africa and the Horn of Africa. He was until recently Africa Editor, BBC World Service News, but has since his retirement published a series of books, including *Understanding Eritrea* (2016, Hurst).

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