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Eritrea says refugees not fleeing political repression

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By Jeremy Clarke

ASMARA (Reuters) - Eritrea said on Wednesday the thousands of people who leave the Red Sea state every year were not responding to any political persecution, but seeking economic opportunities overseas.

Eritrea, with its population of 5 million creates one of the highest numbers of refugees of any country in the world not at war, according to the United Nations.

Unemployment is high and poverty rife. Mandatory service in the armed forces is a source of great discontent among young people wary of continuing border clashes with Ethiopia.

Eritrea is also the subject of United Nations sanctions imposed over allegations Asmara has supported Islamist rebel groups in Somalia. Asmara denies the accusation.

"Ninety-five percent of the population do national service very willingly, with pride," Yemane Ghebremeskel, director of the Eritrean president's office, told Reuters.

"National service has been extended because of the situation of the war (with Ethiopia) and there are some young people who feel they cannot serve longer. That happens (but) we are talking about a very small minority of people," Yemane said.

Passports are not commonly issued to young Eritreans. The United Nations say tens of thousands flee Eritrea in secret every year, often crossing the porous border with Sudan and attempting the dangerous trek towards southern Europe.

But Eritrea, which has traditionally shunned external aid and been suspicious of organizations wanting to operate there, disputes aid agency statistics on refugee levels, saying they are exaggerations designed to tarnish the nation's image. [Continued...](#)

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Guinea tests Western influence in Africa

Whether Guinea's absent junta leader Moussa Dadis Camara makes it back to his home country or not will be the latest test of Western powers' dwindling influence in Africa. [Blog](#)

Africa-Asia ties flying high

Investment from China and other Asian countries was an important factor in several years of unprecedented growth in Africa before the global downturn hit. [Blog](#)

How to win business in Africa?

African countries are often being told what they need to do to win more investment and expand their economies, but there is always a question as to whether making the changes will really deliver the rewards. [Blog](#)

Nigerian president on the way back?

So Nigerian President Umaru Yar'Adua has ended weeks of silence with comments on the BBC that he is getting better and hopes to be back home soon. That at least appears to have answered speculation in local media that he could be brain damaged, in a coma or even dead. [Blog](#)

Does Angola attack really endanger the World Cup or just Africa's image?

The bloody attack on Togo's team bus in Angola is a huge tragedy for African football and like it or not, has cast a shadow over the World Cup in South Africa in five months time — the biggest sports event ever staged on the continent. [Blog](#)

Nightmare start for Africa's year of soccer

Africa's year of soccer scarcely could have got off to a worse start. Days before the start of the African Nations Cup — a warm-up for the continent's first World Cup in South Africa this June — the gun attack on Togo's national team by separatists in Angola for many will confirm Africa's reputation for chaos. [Blog](#)

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