

Committee on the Application of Standards

Date: 1 June 2026

Governments appearing on the list of individual cases have the opportunity, if they so wish, to supply written information to the Committee.

► Information on the application of ratified Conventions supplied by governments on the list of individual cases

Eritrea (ratification: 2000)

Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)

The Government has provided the following written information.

I. Introduction

The Government reiterates its continued commitment to constructive engagement with the ILO and its supervisory mechanisms within the framework of mutual respect, sovereign equality, objectivity, and the principles enshrined in the ILO Constitution.

The Government is dismayed by the inaccurate, selective, and politically motivated characterizations contained in the observations of the Committee of Experts concerning Eritrea's National Service Programme. The Government regrets that the Committee of Experts continues to rely extensively on unverified allegations and politicized reports produced by external actors, particularly the reports of the so-called UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, a mandate the Government has consistently rejected as fundamentally flawed, and lacking impartiality.

The observations fail to adequately situate Eritrea's national service policy within the historical, geopolitical, and security realities confronting the country since independence. The observations indeed fail to recognize three cardinal factors and parameters that are pivotal in the whole discourse:

- (i) The National Service was enacted in the immediate aftermath of independence as the Government embarked on a massive demobilization of the freedom fighting army. In the initial demobilization programme, 65,000 freedom fighters (i.e. almost two thirds of the 100,000 strong liberation army) were demobilized with re-insertion packages. Government military doctrine centred on maintaining a small army of 35,000 with a National Service that would essentially act, for reasons of contingency, as a Reserve Army in the event of war. The National Service was, and remains limited to, 18 months in

statutory terms although it can naturally be extended in the event of war and a prolonged state of aggression or external belligerency.

- (ii) The National Service operated in accordance with the statutory provisions until Ethiopia declared war against Eritrea in May 1998. But, with the signing of the Algiers Agreement, the Government launched, in September 2001, a second and much larger Demobilization Programme (Commission for Demobilization was established) and earnestly begun to implement it with substantive financial support from its development partners. But the programme was terminated in 2007 as Ethiopian forces continued to reject the “final and binding” Arbitral Award of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission; continued to occupy sovereign Eritrean territories; and doubled down on its belligerent policies.
- (iii) The current Ethiopian regime has also reverted to much graver policies of aggression under the rubric of “sovereign access to the sea”, dashing the hopes for enduring peace enunciated in the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship signed between the two countries in Asmara in 2018.

As a committed Member State, Eritrea is currently forwarding a comprehensive technical report to address the specific inquiries raised by the Committee of Experts. This preliminary response seeks to clarify the legal, security, and developmental context of the National Service Programme.

II. Legal basis of national service under Convention No. 29

1. Application of Article 2(2)(a): Compulsory military service

The Government reiterates that the National Service Programme established under Proclamation No. 82/1995 is grounded in the inherent sovereign right and responsibility of every State to safeguard its national defence, territorial integrity, political independence, and constitutional order. The Government therefore maintains that compulsory military service, as provided for under domestic law, falls within the exception recognized under Article 2(2)(a) of Convention No. 29 concerning “work or service exacted in virtue of compulsory military service laws for work of a purely military character”.

The Government notes that Convention No. 29 recognizes the legitimacy of compulsory military service and does not prohibit Member States from maintaining such systems where justified by prevailing security conditions, nor does the Convention prescribe a uniform model regarding the duration or structure of national defence arrangements, which necessarily depend on the specific geopolitical realities confronting each State.

Under section 5 of Proclamation No. 82/1995, the objectives of the National Service Programme include:

- safeguarding national independence and sovereignty;
- ensuring national defence and security;
- preserving national unity and social cohesion; and
- fostering a disciplined and resilient citizenry capable of responding to national emergencies and existential threats.

The Government therefore rejects the characterization of Eritrea’s National Service as “forced labour,” noting that such assessments fail to adequately account for the prolonged security challenges and external existential threats that the country is encountering.

The Government further emphasizes that reserve mobilization measures, extensions of service, and periodic emergency call-ups undertaken during periods of heightened insecurity were directly linked to objectively existing security exigencies, including the recent tragic conflict in northern Ethiopia, that have and continue to pose grave threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

At the same time, the Government underscores that the Committee of Experts should not conflate Eritrea's broader National Service Programme with "compulsory military service" within the narrow meaning of Article 2(2)(a). Compulsory military service under Convention No. 29 refers specifically to service of a purely military character, whereas Eritrea's National Service Programme constitutes a broader institutional framework encompassing military preparedness, reserve mobilization, emergency response, and national resilience functions that involves the entire nation.

Accordingly, different components of the programme must be assessed separately under the applicable exceptions contained in Article 2(2), taking into account their nature, purpose, and context of implementation. Failure to maintain this distinction risks misinterpreting the structure and objectives of Eritrea's national service framework.

The Government therefore maintains that Eritrea's national service system constitutes a lawful exercise of sovereign authority consistent with Article 2(2)(a) of Convention No. 29, particularly in light of the exceptional and prolonged security circumstances confronting the country over the past decades.

2. Application of Article 2(2) (b): Normal Civic Obligations

The Government further maintains that certain duties performed within the framework of the National Service Programme fall within the exception recognized under Article 2(2)(b) of Convention No. 29, which excludes from the definition of forced or compulsory labour:

any work or service which forms part of the normal civic obligations of the citizens of a fully self-governing country.

The Government respectfully submits that the concept of "normal civic obligations" must be interpreted in light of the historical, developmental, and security realities prevailing within each Member State, particularly countries emerging from conflict and operating under severe resource and security constraints.

In Eritrea's case, civic responsibility is deeply rooted in the country's historical experience of collective struggle, national sacrifice, and shared responsibility. Following a prolonged liberation struggle, Eritrea faced devastated infrastructure, limited institutional capacity, environmental degradation, and significant developmental challenges. Under such conditions, citizen participation in reconstruction and resilience-building efforts became an essential component of national recovery and state-building.

The Government emphasizes that Proclamation No. 82/1995 was conceived not solely as a military framework, but also as a broader nation-building mechanism intended to strengthen social cohesion, promote self-reliance and mobilize national capacities in support of essential public interests.

Accordingly, certain forms of service undertaken within the national service framework constituted legitimate civic obligations aimed at supporting national reconstruction, emergency response, environmental rehabilitation, food security, infrastructure development and broader public welfare objectives.

The Government also recalls that many States maintain various forms of mandatory civic, reserve, emergency or public service obligations during periods of crisis or heightened insecurity. Such systems are widely recognized as legitimate manifestations of civic responsibility when directed toward the protection of the public interest and national well-being.

The Committee of Experts' interpretation of Article 2(2)(b), however, appears to adopt an unduly restrictive approach that insufficiently recognizes the differing historical trajectories and developmental realities of Member States. The Government respectfully submits that the determination of what constitutes "normal civic obligations" must necessarily allow a degree of contextual appreciation, particularly for States confronting exceptional post-conflict reconstruction burdens and persistent national security threats.

The Government also rejects the characterization that participation in development-related national service activities was undertaken for purposes of private economic gain or exploitation. The activities referenced by the Committee of Experts were implemented within a public national framework intended to address essential developmental and humanitarian needs affecting the broader population.

Furthermore, many of the programmes cited by the Committee of Experts – including environmental rehabilitation, food security initiatives, infrastructure reconstruction and emergency response activities – were directly linked to safeguarding the well-being of communities affected by war, drought, climate-related pressures and regional instability. Such initiatives therefore cannot be divorced from the broader public interest and national resilience objectives they were designed to serve.

The Government further reiterates that national service obligations and related administrative measures have evolved over time in response to changing circumstances, security conditions and development priorities.

At the outset, it should be clarified that prolonged national service does not generally entail continuous deployment within the armed forces. In practice, the majority of National Service members (90 per cent) are assigned to civilian functions within the Civil Service and other public institutions in support of essential national, developmental, and administrative needs.

The Government continues to undertake periodic assessments and adjustments within the framework of Eritrea's broader institutional, developmental, and security objectives.

In this context, the Government also wishes to provide additional clarification regarding ongoing domestic policy measures aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of public sector employees, including members of the Civil Service and the Defence Forces, as part of broader national efforts to strengthen institutional capacity, enhance motivation and improve living standards within available national resources.

In August 2015, the Government began implementing the first phase of salary increments and adjustments in the Civil Service and Eritrea's Defence Forces. This reform represented a significant policy initiative aimed at improving remuneration structures across key categories of public employment. The new salary scale envisaged a substantial improvement of the economy as a whole over the medium to long term, and involved an approximate three-fold increase across multiple categories of professional qualification and job classification. The revised salary structure for new entrants was as follows:

► **Comparative salary scales (New entrants in Civil Service/Army)**

Category of Employment/Qualification	Old scale (Nakfa)	New scale (Nakfa)
Post-secondary certificate	800	2 000
Diploma	1 250	2 500
First degree (four-year programme)	1 400	3,500
First degree (five-year programme)	1 400	4 000
National Service Army entrant	800	1 800

Within the framework of this reform, priority was given to members of the National Service. The Government emphasizes that all National Service members holding post-secondary academic qualifications, as well as those assigned to the Army, are remunerated in accordance with the new and significantly improved salary scale.

The Government further notes that this reform constitutes part of a broader and ongoing effort to enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of public service, strengthen human resource capacity within national institutions and improve the socio-economic welfare of public sector employees, within the constraints of national economic resources and external economic challenges.

The Government also clarifies that a fully comprehensive revision of the salary structure for permanent civil servants holding second degrees or higher qualifications, as well as for those with secondary education or below in certain categories, has not yet been fully implemented. This reflects a phased and resource-dependent approach to public sector reform, consistent with national development planning priorities and fiscal capacity.

The Government considers these measures to be relevant in assessing the broader context of national service and public employment policies, as they demonstrate ongoing efforts to improve remuneration conditions, recognize qualifications and enhance institutional motivation within the framework of national socio-economic development.

The Government therefore respectfully disagrees with the Committee of Experts' characterization that no progress has been achieved in either law or practice. Such conclusions fail to adequately acknowledge the complex and evolving regional environment, the extraordinary security burdens historically imposed upon Eritrea, and the gradual adjustments undertaken within the constraints of prevailing national realities.

Accordingly, the Government maintains that the civic and developmental components of its National Service Programme fall within the scope of permissible "normal civic obligations" contemplated under Article 2(2)(b) of Convention No. 29 when assessed in light of Eritrea's specific historical, developmental, and security context.

III. Observations regarding the Special Rapporteur

The Government reiterates its long-standing position regarding the mandate of the so-called Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and expresses concern over the Committee of Experts' continued reliance on reports produced under this mechanism.

The Government maintains that the mandate was established through politicized processes inconsistent with the principles of impartiality, objectivity, and constructive cooperation that should guide international human rights engagement. Since its inception, the

mandate has operated in a confrontational rather than cooperative manner, relying on political pressure and predetermined conclusions.

The Government therefore rejects the treatment of the Special Rapporteur's reports as authoritative evidentiary sources within the ILO supervisory system. The reports rely predominantly on anonymous testimonies, remote interviews, secondary allegations and information provided by politically motivated actors and hostile advocacy groups operating outside Eritrea. Such methodologies lack transparency, verifiability, and adequate procedural safeguards necessary to ensure credibility and objectivity.

The Government is therefore concerned that the Committee of Experts' observations reproduce allegations derived from the Special Rapporteur's reports without sufficient independent scrutiny, thereby risking the objectivity and credibility of the ILO supervisory system.

The Government respectfully recalls that the legitimacy of the ILO supervisory system has historically rested on technical expertise, tripartite dialogue and objective assessment grounded in cooperation rather than politicized external mechanisms.

The Government continues to reaffirm its commitment to continued dialogue and constructive cooperation with the ILO within a framework based on technical engagement, mutual respect, sovereign equality and the depoliticized application of international labour standards.

IV. Cooperation with the ILO

The Government reiterates its commitment to constructive engagement and dialogue with the ILO and its supervisory mechanisms within the framework of mutual respect, sovereign equality, objectivity and non-politicization.

The Government recognizes the important role of the ILO in promoting international labour standards and fostering technical cooperation among Member States. The Government has consistently engaged with the Organization through the submission of reports, participation in supervisory processes and interaction with relevant ILO bodies despite the challenging political and regional circumstances confronting the country.

At the same time, the Government notes with concern that discussions relating to Eritrea within certain international mechanisms have too often been influenced by politicized narratives, selective approaches and reliance on unverified external allegations that fail to adequately reflect Eritrea's realities and perspectives.

The Government respectfully emphasizes that meaningful and constructive engagement can only be achieved through dialogue grounded in:

- impartiality and objectivity;
- respect for the sovereignty and independence of Member States;
- recognition of differing historical and developmental contexts;
- reliance on credible, balanced and verifiable information; and
- genuine cooperation aimed at mutual understanding rather than political pressure or stigmatization.

The Government remains open to continued technical dialogue and constructive engagement with the ILO concerning labour-related matters, including discussions relating to

national service implementation, labour administration, employment policies, vocational development and institutional capacity-building.

The Government believes that cooperative engagement based on partnership and mutual respect is more effective than approaches rooted in confrontation, politicization or externally driven pressure campaigns.

The Government further reiterates that Eritrea's sovereign right to determine its national security policies, development priorities, and state-building strategies must be fully respected in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law.

The Government also recalls that the ILO supervisory system was intended to promote dialogue, cooperation, and progressive realization of labour standards while taking into account the differing conditions and circumstances of Member States. The Government therefore encourages the Committee of Experts to approach Eritrea's situation in a balanced, objective and context-sensitive manner that recognizes the country's legitimate security concerns, developmental realities and sovereign responsibilities.

The Government remains prepared to continue engaging with the ILO in good faith and welcomes constructive technical cooperation that respects Eritrea's sovereignty, national priorities, and independent development path.

V. Conclusion

The Government reiterates its commitment to the principles of the ILO and to constructive engagement based on mutual respect, sovereign equality, objectivity, and non-politicization.

At the same time, the Government firmly rejects the characterization of Eritrea's National Service Programme as a system of forced labour contrary to Convention No. 29. Such portrayals fail to adequately account for Eritrea's historical experience, prolonged and relentless existential threats and challenges against its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and broader state-building and developmental realities.

Eritrea's National Service Programme was indeed established as a legitimate sovereign instrument aimed at safeguarding national independence, preserving territorial integrity, strengthening social cohesion, promoting national resilience, and supporting reconstruction in the aftermath of prolonged conflict. Its practical prolongation at specific intervals has stemmed from and is interlinked with the perennial and continuing external threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In any event, the Government emphasizes that Eritrea's policies cannot be assessed in isolation from the realities the country has faced since independence. The Government accordingly maintains that Eritrea's National Service Programme must be understood within the framework of the exceptions recognized under Convention No. 29, including compulsory military service under Article 2(2)(a), and normal civic obligations under Article 2(2)(b).

The Government therefore respectfully disagrees with the Committee of Experts' conclusion that the present case warrants discussion before the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, as such action risks further politicizing matters that should instead be addressed through objective technical engagement and cooperation.