

Eritrea: A new country that WORKS

By DAN CONNELL

ASMARA, Eritrea — One of the poorest countries in the world, Eritrea, is rapidly shaping up as one of Africa's first, genuine success stories. As the continent's newest nation recovers from over a quarter century of war and famine, its leaders



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are already looking to the time when they can stop seeking foreign aid. However, as Congress moves to slash aid to Africa, they worry that assistance will end before they are on their own.

"We have been left with a very shattered economy, and that has compounded the dependence that we have," says President Isaias Afwerki.

"We would like to reach a stage where we can talk as equals to anyone, without asking for assistance or relief," adds the trim, 49-year-old, one-time engineering student, whose Spartan habits and

casual self-assurance were honed by the more than 25 years he spent leading the country's successful war for independence from Ethiopia.

Now the Eritreans have to create a country virtually from scratch. To conserve meager resources, the former guerrillas serving in the government, including the president, collect only a basic living allowance instead of salaries.

New laws requiring young people to serve 18 months of national service and reforming the country's arcane land tenure system undergird a reconstruction effort aimed at achieving economic self-sufficiency within a decade, according to President Isaias. Meanwhile, he says, aid is essential to help the country reach the take-off point.

The Eritreans' main challenge is creating a viable, secular, democratic government in a region rent by religious and ethnic conflict. The new country is sandwiched between Somalia and Sudan, whose ruling, Iranian-backed National Islamic Front — now embroiled in a fierce civil war — is promoting Islamist opposition groups throughout the



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EDUCATION A PRIORITY: Eritrean girls are attending school in large numbers for the first time.

region, including one that occasionally launches raids into Eritrea.

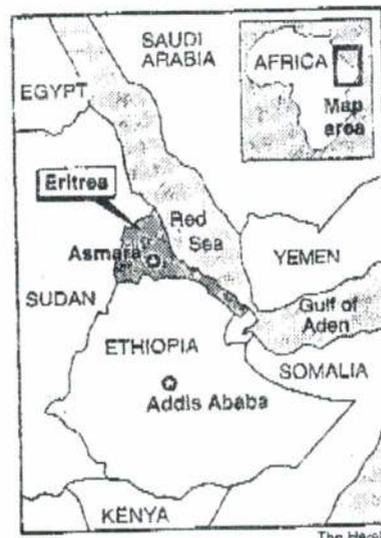
Despite this unstable environment, most observers give Eritrea a strong shot at making it. "I'd characterize their prospects for development as excellent," says U.S. Ambassador Robert Houdek, who compares Eritrea's potential with Singapore

and Korea. "The dedication of these people, combined with an incredible honesty and a capacity for hard work, augur well for their development."

Most observers point to Eritrea's lack of crime and corruption and to its high degree of social discipline as among the country's more attractive qualities. Even the police don't carry guns in the Asmara capital, where men and women walk the streets at night without anxiety.

Eritrea, a nation of 2.8 million people, won its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, two years after the war ended. The former Italian colony was linked to Ethiopia after World War II in a U.N.-sponsored federation that collapsed in 1962, when the land-locked empire swallowed Eritrea to gain control of its coastline, triggering the independence war.

The war left Eritrea in ruins. Water and sewage systems barely functioned; the few asphalt roads were torn up; the country's main port was badly damaged, and the only railroad was entirely dismantled, its iron rails used to make bunkers. Meanwhile, drought kept the rural population on the brink of famine. In 1993, the World Bank estimated the country's per capita income at only \$70-150, compared to \$330 for the rest of sub-



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Saharan Africa, marking it as one of the world's poorest states.

The new national service program requiring young men and women to undergo six months of military training and then to spend a year in construction projects, is intended to make up for the lack of development capital. It also shifts the defense burden from a standing army to a reserve force.

Its greatest impact is likely to be on Eritrean women, traditionally married off at puberty under arrangements negotiated at birth and often prevented from social interaction outside the family except with her husband's permission. A new law that for the first time gives women the right to own residential and agricultural land, whether married or single, provides a powerful economic incentive for these social changes.

Meanwhile, new nongovernmental organizations are slowly appearing in a society where the only private institutions until now were the churches, the mosques and the Red Cross. A national women's union with 200,000 members is engaged in education and training among poor and urban women. With only 100,000 members, a new trade union organization is already going head-to-head with the government, still the country's largest employer.

Eritrea today is a country in a state of transition. The government's leaders have set a goal of achieving economic self-sufficiency in a secular, democratic state. Given the rapid progress they have already made, this goal is achievable — if they receive the minimal level of support to get where they can stand on their own.

"The possibility of success in this country is better than in any other country I've worked in because of the commitment, dedication and sense of purpose of the people here," says a country director for the U.S. Agency for International Development, George Jones, whose experience includes 30 African states. "It's an honest government. We feel confident putting money into this country — we know it's going to be properly."

Development aid to Eritrea in 1994 was only \$6 million, up from \$4 million more for special projects, such as agricultural extension, the start-up of a transmission drafting the country's constitution. To cut this now would be a tragedy. Not only would it make a difference to the U.S. deficit, it would send a terrible message to Africa: hard work, sacrifice and dedication do not earn you respect or success. The new climate in Washington

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