

Struggling Eritrea agrees U.S. should cut foreign aid

By Terry Leonard
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ASMARA, Eritrea — U.S. lawmakers intent on cutting foreign aid have unlikely allies in this small, poor nation that receives more of it per person than any other country in Africa.

"Aid is used and abused, so why not cut it?" President Isaias Afewerki said in an interview. "We

favor the new American approach to reconsider aid."

He said the country must not depend on aid to survive. "If we here have faith in foreign aid as the maker and breaker of Eritrea, then that is the end of Eritrea."

Eritrea, Africa's newest country, is determined to avoid the same trap that has mired so many African nations in debt and dependence on foreign handouts.

"We believe we need aid. But we don't believe aid can solve our problems," Mr. Afewerki said.

The country desperately needs help as it emerges from 30 years of devastating war that finally brought independence from Ethiopia in 1993. But Mr. Afewerki and other government leaders say they would like to see aid limited to projects that promote development and not rely on handouts.

"The effective use of aid is to free society from any dependence on outside sources," the president said.

Eritrea was the most industrialized country in Africa before war took its toll. Now the economy and the infrastructure are in shambles. Average life expectancy is 46 years. Annual per capita income is

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less than \$150.

Two-thirds of Eritrea's 3 million people rely on food aid. Although most citizens make their living from agriculture, only 25 percent of the land is arable, and only about 10 percent of that is under cultivation.

This year, the U.S. government has promised Eritrea \$13.2 million in development aid and \$6.2 million in direct food aid. Under expected reductions for next year, development assistance is to fall to \$9.6 million and direct food aid to just over \$4 million.

Saleh Meky, Eritrea's U.S.-educated minister of marine resources, said he does not believe Eritrea will suffer from the reduction.

He said the United States is giving his ministry computers and teaching his people how to use them to determine the sustainable yield from Eritrea's bountiful fishing grounds in the Red Sea. They were virtually untouched during the three decades of war.

America provides up to 30 percent of Eritrea's food aid and is spending \$2.3 million to help analyze food security problems and develop strategies to solve them.

Overall, American contribu-

tions amount to only about 5 percent of the total bilateral aid to Eritrea, officials said.

U.S. aid is improving the woefully inadequate primary health care system in an effort to make the work force healthier and more productive. Washington proposes to spend \$3.7 million on that project next year and on support for family planning. The birthrate here of 6.8 children per woman threatens to double the population in 23 years.

The United States also intends to spend \$1.5 million helping the government transform the state-controlled economy into one dominated by private business.

Although U.S. lawmakers are still wrangling over which programs will be eliminated or reduced, reductions to all aid programs are expected to average more than 30 percent.

Eritrean officials have not said how they intend to make up the difference except that they want to become self-reliant.

"We get lots of offers of technical aid. Experts of all sorts, many of which have no use," said Nerayo Teklemichael, director of the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Agency. "We need projects that eventually will make us self-reliant in food. We must have more food, and we must cultivate more land for food."