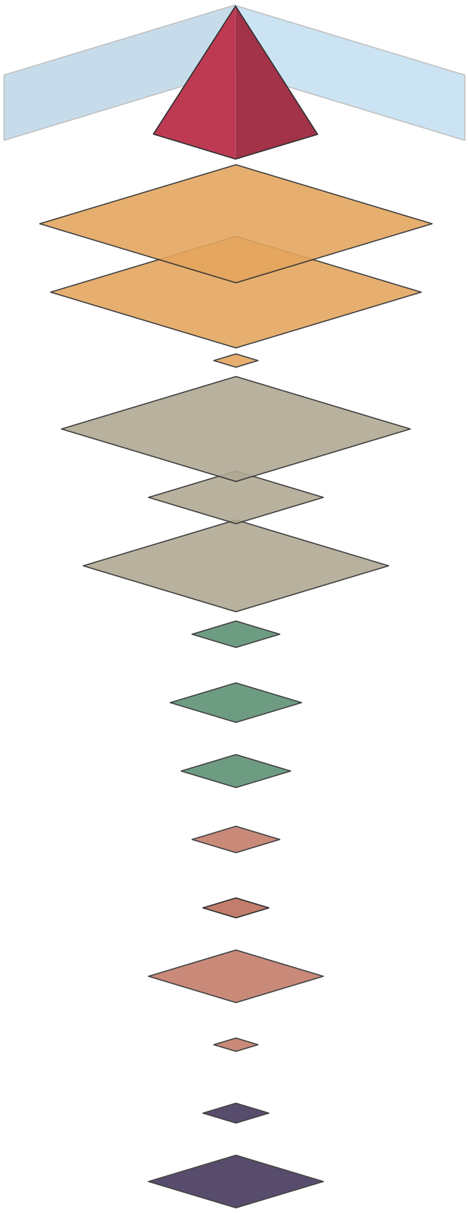
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

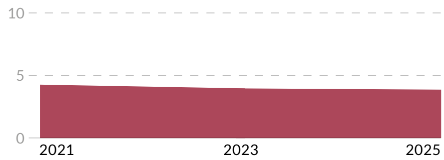
ERITREA



3.92 ↘0.05

CRIMINALITY SCORE

156th of 193 countries ↘3
50th of 54 African countries ↘1
9th of 9 East African countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS

CRIMINAL MARKETS	**3.93**	↗0.00
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	9.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	8.50	↘1.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	1.00	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.00	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	4.00	↗1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	7.00	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	2.00	↗0.50
FAUNA CRIMES	3.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	2.50	↗0.50
HEROIN TRADE	2.00	↘1.00
COCAINE TRADE	1.50	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	4.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	1.00	↘0.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	1.50	0.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	4.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**3.90**	↘0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.00	↘0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	9.50	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	2.50	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	1.50	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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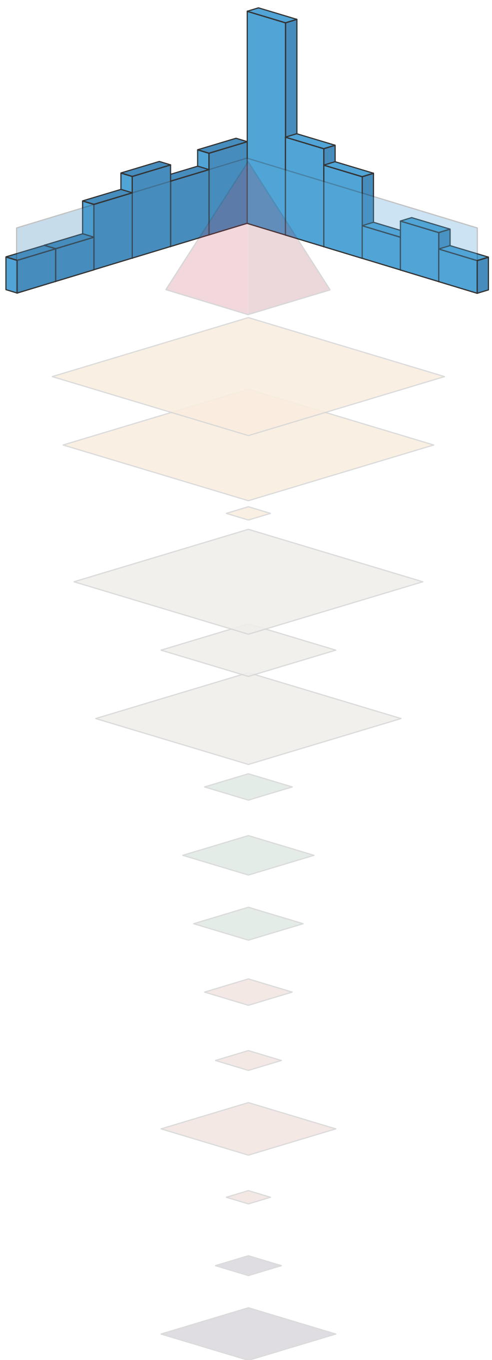
Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

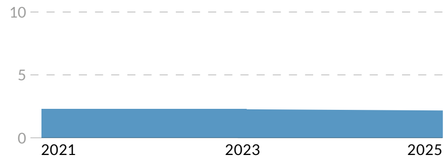
ERITREA



2.21 ↘0.12

RESILIENCE SCORE

177th of 193 countries ↗2
47th of 54 African countries ↗1
7th of 9 East African countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	1.00	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	1.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	2.00	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	2.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	2.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	2.50	↘0.50
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	6.50	↘0.50
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	3.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	2.50	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	1.00	0.00
PREVENTION	1.50	↘0.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	1.00	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Eritrea is a hub for human trafficking, with entrenched systemic factors sustaining the crisis. The country has the second highest prevalence of modern slavery globally, driven by indefinite forced labour in national service, repression of fundamental freedoms, and a lack of government accountability. State actors, military officials and foreign networks engage in trafficking, particularly targeting Eritreans fleeing to Sudan, Ethiopia, Libya and beyond. However, instability in Sudan and Ethiopia has contributed to a slight decline in trafficking. Eritreans fleeing to Europe often face forced labour and sex trafficking, especially in Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya. The cash-based economy, controlled by military elites, facilitates the movement of illicit profits from trafficking, reinforcing patterns of exploitation.

Eritrea is also a significant source country for human smuggling. Many Eritreans seek passage to Europe through Libya, but ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia have contributed to a decline in smuggling owing to increased risks and costs. High-ranking military figures are reportedly involved, and law enforcement is weak. Smuggling networks also engage in extortion, coercing families into paying ransoms. The Eritrea–Sudan border is a hotspot, with traffickers linked to kidnapping operations. Furthermore, there has been a notable rise in cross-border movement between Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, driven by an influx of people fleeing heightened violence in that country's eastern provinces. Social acceptance of smuggling as a means to escape reflects widespread disillusionment with systemic repression and reinforces the persistent outflow of Eritrean youth seeking freedom and opportunity.

No organized criminal groups are currently identified as engaging in extortion.

TRADE

Arms smuggling from Eritrea is persistent, with political crises in neighbouring Ethiopia and Sudan increasing the momentum of illicit trade. Eritrean involvement in supporting rebel groups, including Amhara forces, has escalated tensions in the region. The Red Sea coastline serves as a critical trans-shipment hub for arms destined for conflict zones such as Sudan and Ethiopia. State and criminal networks collaborate, using similar routes for arms and human trafficking. In addition, Eritrean military vehicles looted during the Tigray conflict are being rebranded and sold. Eritrea's strategic location and ports such as Massawa and Assab reinforce its role as a key player in regional arms trafficking.

The trade in counterfeit goods, including medicines, is a persistent issue in Eritrea, with counterfeit products often sold alongside genuine ones, undermining public health. This trade is facilitated by government-affiliated traders with connections to the military and political elites, who import goods through established trade routes with Sudan and through the ports. The lower prices of counterfeit goods, combined with limited public awareness, have made them socially acceptable. The involvement of high-ranking military figures is central to the trade's persistence. In addition, the Eritrean Ministry of Health has noted the prevalence of counterfeit food products in the country.

There are high levels of illicit trade in excisable goods in Eritrea, driven by a shortage of foreign currency and government restrictions on essential imports. The military and corrupt officials appear to be involved in smuggling, particularly alcohol, tobacco and agricultural goods, exacerbating economic challenges for citizens. Tessenei, a key smuggling hub on the Sudan border, is central to these operations, with cooperation between Eritrean and Sudanese officials. The illicit trade fuels the black market and drives up prices of goods. It extends beyond Eritrea, with proceeds allegedly supporting armed groups, including Amhara rebels in Ethiopia, which further complicates regional instability.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Eritrea are underreported, with little available data to assess the situation fully. Occasional illegal deforestation and logging have been noted, but evidence linking these activities to organized crime is scarce. Some reports suggest military involvement in illegal wood harvesting and charcoal smuggling, particularly amid the ongoing political tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Unconfirmed reports mention low-level smuggling of cactus species to Western Asia and illicit trade in gum arabic and frankincense is speculated. However, owing to the limited access to reliable data, the extent of flora-related criminal activity is unclear. Similar difficulties in gathering information also apply to the fauna crimes market.

Eritrea faces significant challenges in combating maritime crime despite international agreements. Authorities are reported to have released over 350 Yemeni fishermen detained for alleged illegal fishing since 2023. The country is also both a source and a transit point for illicit wildlife trade, with its Massawa port linked to ivory trafficking to Asia. Although Eritrea's role in wildlife crime appears to be minor, evidence suggests involvement in poaching. A slight improvement in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing has been noted during the reporting period, although it remains one of the countries most affected by this activity in Africa.

Illicit gold smuggling is a challenge in Eritrea, with reports indicating some growth in the market over the past two years. Government entities are implicated in exporting gold to Sudan through individual networks involving state actors and criminal groups. The trade undermines the legal export of gold, Eritrea's second largest export commodity, and impacts regional economies. Smuggling routes from Sudan to the UAE have been reported, but evidence is limited. Gold smuggling primarily involves elite individuals and is associated with little violence, but concerns about forced labour persist. Despite increasing reports of a growing illicit market, the country has denied allegations of smuggled gold entering the country from Ethiopia's Tigray region.

DRUGS

Information on the heroin trade in Eritrea is limited, but reports suggest the country's ports serve as transit points for heroin trafficking. However, Eritrea's involvement in global smuggling routes appears less significant than that of other regions. Hardly any heroin is consumed within the country, as the government relies heavily on its young labour force for military service and working in state-owned mines, likely limiting drug use to protect this workforce. Similarly, data on the illicit cocaine trade in Eritrea is scarce, with little evidence to suggest significant involvement in trafficking activities. The country does not appear to serve as a destination or transit point for cocaine, possibly owing to stringent border controls deterring such trafficking and no notable developments have been recorded since 2020. However, the country's strategic ports could still serve as minor entry points for cocaine being trafficked into East Africa.

Despite being part of regional smuggling routes, Eritrea's role in the global cannabis trade appears minimal, with no significant developments in recent years. Cannabis is widely cultivated within the country, but it does not appear to be produced on a scale large enough to support commercial trafficking. Although locally produced cannabis appears to be mostly for domestic consumption, reports indicate that Eritrean ports have increasingly become nodes in cannabis smuggling routes from South Asia to Europe and the Americas.

Hardly any data is available with regard to the synthetic drug trade in Eritrea, but the country appears to have minimal involvement.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Eritrea's underdeveloped IT infrastructure contributes to its low vulnerability to cyber-dependent crimes, with little data available on such activities.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

There are notable concerns about illicit financial activities in Eritrea. Large sums of money are reportedly often transferred to foreign bank accounts under the names of high-level political figures and their families, pointing to systemic issues with regard to financial transparency. The state tightly controls foreign trade and currency transactions, while restrictions on currency withdrawals and an overvalued local currency contribute to economic distortions. Despite controls, the hawala system enables illicit financial flows, including remittances, and Eritrea has become a destination for foreign currency from Ethiopia's black market. These practices exacerbate corruption and economic instability, benefiting both domestic and foreign actors.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

In Eritrea's criminal landscape, power is concentrated among a small group of government and military officials. The state maintains a strict monopoly on violence, preventing the formation of independent mafia-style criminal organizations typically seen in other regions. State-embedded actors, including corrupt military officials and members of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), dominate the organized criminal landscape. These actors control key sectors of the economy and are involved in illicit activities such as human trafficking, smuggling and the trade of counterfeit goods. Their influence extends beyond national borders, with Eritrean diplomats implicated in facilitating trafficking and corruption, particularly in Sudan. Corruption at border areas, notably with Sudan, facilitates smuggling operations.

Apart from state-embedded actors, loose networks involved in human trafficking, people smuggling, illicit trade and financial crimes operate in Eritrea. These networks are particularly active along the country's borders, especially with Ethiopia and Sudan, and maintain connections with transnational criminal groups. Human smuggling routes from Eritrea extend to Europe, Western Asia and elsewhere in Africa, passing through Sudan, Libya and Ethiopia. However, regional conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia have weakened these operations, increasing costs and limiting safe routes and clients. Despite these challenges, Eritrean smuggling networks continue to operate, often with individuals from migrant communities facilitating the illicit activities.

Foreign criminal involvement is limited owing to the state's tight control. Despite reports of potential connections to neighbouring Sudan and Egypt in illicit markets, substantial evidence is lacking. Still, the scale of these activities is likely reduced by Eritrea's strict regulatory environment. Political and economic conditions in the country have led to some private actors engaging in illegal hawala transactions, but there is no systematic evidence linking private sector actors to organized crime or money laundering.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Eritrea's governance is characterized by high-ranking military officials and members of the PFDJ involved in organized crime, including illicit trade, human trafficking and smuggling. Despite the challenges posed by compulsory national service and a lack of political reforms, there were no significant campaigns against organized crime during the reporting period. The country's involvement in regional conflicts, particularly the Tigray War, reveals further complicity in looting and exploitation by military leadership. Although Eritrea is bound by international agreements, internal governance is authoritarian, with limited democratic reforms. Government transparency and accountability are stagnant, with pervasive corruption in both civil administration and military ranks. High-ranking officials are often implicated in illicit activities, but rarely face prosecution. The country lacks independent agencies or systems to address corruption, and legal and regulatory frameworks are opaque, with no public access to key laws or regulations. Financial transparency is also deficient, and new policies are implemented without public discourse or oversight. As a result, Eritrea continues to face systemic corruption with minimal accountability mechanisms in place.

The country's efforts at international cooperation to combat organized crime are limited. Although it has ratified six out of ten relevant international treaties, key agreements – such as those addressing migrant smuggling, illicit firearms and corruption – are yet to be signed. Eritrea engages minimally with international organizations, preferring self-reliance. However, it has participated in some regional anti-trafficking efforts and wildlife protection initiatives. Eritrea's strained relations with neighbouring countries, particularly Sudan and Ethiopia, have affected its international standing, including targeted sanctions. In addition, the country hosts armed Sudanese opposition groups, contributing to regional tensions and concerns over escalating conflicts along its border with Sudan.

The Eritrean Penal Code criminalizes various forms of organized crime, such as corruption, trafficking and drug offences, but the legal framework for addressing organized crime has remained largely static during the review period. The country has also enacted laws targeting financial crimes as well as anti-money laundering with an Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Financing of Terrorism Proclamation. Additional sector-specific regulations cover mining and fisheries, areas prone to illicit activities. Despite these legal measures, implementation challenges persist, particularly concerning new forms of crime, such as data interference and computer fraud. The country's legal framework addressing organized crime appears ineffective due to entrenched state control and widespread corruption. Furthermore, the unimplemented constitution leaves gaps in governance, which complicates efforts to address organized crime effectively in the country.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Eritrea's judicial and detention systems show significant weaknesses. The lack of a specialized unit for organized crime, along with government influence over the judiciary, undermines efforts to address criminal activities. The formal judiciary is largely inactive, with special courts, often led by military officers, operating arbitrarily. This system contributes to widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and indefinite detentions without due process. Prison conditions are harsh, with facilities being inadequate and overcrowded. The absence of an independent defence system exacerbates the plight of detainees, many of whom are political prisoners or prisoners of conscience, facing severe mistreatment. Eritrea's law enforcement is under-resourced, ineffective and hindered by corruption. Despite legal provisions against criminal activities, enforcement is weak, with widespread bribery and corruption further impeding the system. The lack of an independent police oversight body and specialized units to address specific criminal challenges has exacerbated these issues. As a result, existing laws cannot be effectively implemented, which undermines the state's capacity to combat organized crime. The absence of institutional mechanisms to ensure accountability has contributed to the systemic inefficiencies in Eritrea's law enforcement agencies.

The country currently maintains control over its borders with strict measures against unauthorized crossings, including the use of lethal force. Despite territorial integrity, there are allegations of Eritrean support for rebel factions in Ethiopia and involvement in illicit activities such as smuggling and extortion. The country's militarized society, characterized by mandatory national service, has contributed to youth emigration and economic instability. Border demarcation with Ethiopia remains unresolved, and Eritrean forces' involvement in the Tigray conflict has escalated tensions.

In addition, Eritrea's limited IT infrastructure and stringent internet controls hamper digital access, with low internet penetration and citizens generally having to rely on traditional financial systems.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Eritrea's efforts to combat money laundering are limited, hindered by factors such as a largely cash-based economy, informal financial systems and the reliance on services such as hawala for money transfers. The country's non-convertible currency and proximity to regions with transnational criminal organizations exacerbate risks. Although Eritrea has enacted anti-money laundering (AML) laws and established regulatory frameworks, enforcement gaps persist. The creation of a Financial Intelligence Unit and regional cooperation, including membership of the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group, suggests some commitment. However, the country's limited cooperation with international financial institutions and the lack of regular reporting complicate the assessment of its AML efforts.

Eritrea's economy is tightly controlled by the ruling party and the military, with limited market freedoms and a repressed economic environment. Severe restrictions prevail, along with widespread poverty and state dominance over key sectors, including banking and trade. The government prioritizes regime survival over economic development, leading to power imbalances and economic inefficiencies. Despite the country's strategic location, it is excluded from regional trade initiatives, and transparency in sectors such as mining is lacking. Sanctions targeting military-affiliated entities highlight Eritrea's involvement in regional conflicts. Strict financial controls and a lack of formal financial systems further impede economic activity.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Eritrea's efforts to protect victims of human trafficking are virtually non-existent. The government has not implemented formal procedures to identify or assist victims of trafficking and in some cases, it has arrested individuals fleeing mandatory National Service. Despite the prevalence of organized crime, there are no significant initiatives to support victims or witnesses. The government has also been accused of human rights abuses against Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, including arbitrary arrests, forced repatriation and violence. Eritrea fails to meet any criteria for providing victim support, reflecting a lack of legal or institutional protections. Eritrea showed no progress in addressing the prevention of organized crime during the course of the reporting period. Military and political officials are reportedly involved in human trafficking and smuggling, but no measures are in place to combat these problems. The government of Eritrea continues its system of forced labour practices through compulsory National Service and student work programmes.

During the review period, Eritrea's political landscape remained stagnant, with the ruling PFDJ maintaining sole control and many non-state actors being imprisoned or not allowed to work in the country. Independent media outlets have been banned since 2001 and press freedom is severely restricted, with government-controlled platforms the only permitted sources of information. Civil liberties such as freedom of expression and assembly are absent and human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and religious persecution, are noted. Eritrea ranks last in the world for press freedom, with the regime maintaining tight control over the media, limiting online access and jamming independent broadcasts. The continued imprisonment of journalists underscores this dire situation.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.