In May 2016, global attention was gripped by the sight of hundreds of corpses washed ashore on the northern coast of the Mediterranean. About 450 of these bodies belonged to Eritreans who had undertaken the perilous journey across the Mediterranean from the Libyan coast. They had trusted their fate to boats that were hardly seaworthy in the hope of reaching Europe and finding asylum. This was not the first of such incidents; nor was it to be the last. Few people could fathom the reason why the victims would resort to such desperate measures, courting almost certain death, rather than remain in their own country. The book under review provides the answer in eloquent fashion. At the root of this exodus of Eritrean youth is the most heinous form of ‘national service’ that the world has ever seem. Initiated to inculcate the values of the liberation struggle to the Eritrean youth, the institution has degenerated into a regime of servitude costing each convict up to two decades of his/her life.

It is to escape this bondage that so many Eritreans have ‘voted with their feet’, as it were. The world witnesses only the terminal stage of their tragic odyssey. Little noticed and recorded is the no less perilous journey to Libya. The migrants had to cross the Eritrean border to Ethiopia or the Sudan, eluding the soldiers instructed to shoot to kill (unless the migrants had managed to bribe their way) and face the hazards of traffickers and scorpions to cross the Sahara desert. Most ended up in detention lasting many years in Libyan prisons, subjected to the extortions and harassments of their captors. Nor is arrival in Europe or the Middle East a guarantee of escape from prison. Those who tried to file asylum applications and only two of these have been accepted! Not only has Israel erected a wall in the Sinai to stem the tide of refugees, but it is precluding thousands of Eritreans to an unspecified African country at the time of writing.

Not all Eritreans took the tortuous path to safety. A few – a tiny minority, admittedly – were fortunate enough to exit the country legally. This included Eritrean sportsmen competing in global and regional events, notably football teams featuring in African championships. Almost invariably, members of these teams sought asylum in the host country after the end of the tournaments. The most dramatic case in this regard was that of the flag-bearer of the Eritrean team competing in the 2012 London Olympics, who sought asylum in England at the conclusion of the Games.

Drawing on interviews with refugees who had survived the treacherous journey, the rich data that is available online, the utterances of the architect of the odious system, the Eritrean president Isaias Afeworki, documents of human rights advocacy groups (notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), as well as the secondary literature, Gaim Kibreab has given us a comprehensive and nuanced study of the Eritrean National Service (ENS). The group, composed of professional military officers, had recommended a structure tailored to the country’s size and resources. The emphasis was on professionalism and institutionalization, on quality rather than quantity. The president overrode these professional recommendations to institute a regime of mass mobilization. He did this partly to prepare the country for the war with his southern neighbour (Ethiopia) that he deemed inevitable and partly to enhance his personal grip on power; the two phenomena were in fact interrelated. As one of the respondents to the author’s questionnaire asserted, ‘without the ENS, there would have been no border war with Ethiopia’ (p. 47). Not only did ENS precipitate the 1998-2000 war but the debacle of Eritrea suffered in the course of the war amply demonstrated the failure of the institution to create an efficient fighting force. In the words of another respondent, ‘It is not possible to build a country’s military power and fighting capability on the basis of slavery’ (p. 60, emphasis in the original).

The legal framework for the national service was first laid in 1991, even before...
the country’s independence had been formalized by the 1993 referendum. But the 1991 proclamation, designed to inculcate national unity and address the problem of youth unemployment, did not become operational until after formal independence. The principal legislation for the ENS was Proclamation No. 82/1995. The proclamation introduced an 18-month military service whereby conscripts were paid a pauper sum after the first six months. It also did away with the exemptions that the first proclamation had provided for, only veterans of the independence struggle being eligible for exemptions. But the legal basis for an institution that has assumed the form of permanent servitude was laid in May 2002 with the introduction of what was rather innocuously dubbed the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC). The ostensible rationale for the proclamation was the inculcation of the spartan values and the spirit of self-sacrifice of the liberation struggle by the yikealo (the veterans, literally ‘those who are capable of achieving anything’) to the warsai (the heirs).

In reality, however, the yikealo were scarcely in a position to transmit the values of the liberation struggle. ‘The former paragons of virtue have become corrupt and self-interested’ (p. 73). They were busy accumulating money ‘by any means to make up for lost time’ (p. 182). Corruption was rife throughout the country and the torrid training camp at Sawa, on the Sudanese border, was no exception. Those in charge of the camp were highly susceptible to corruption. Conscripts with the means could influence their place of assignment (the capital, Asmara, being the most popular for obvious reasons) or secure or renew the all-important travel permit (menqa-sexes) to visit their families. They could even buy their way out of the camp by bribing high-ranking military officers, who could go to the extent of providing military vehicles to transport them to the border.

The less endowed would have to endure a regime of penal servitude that had few precedents or parallels in modern education, like the rest of society, was also militarised. Perhaps the most disastrous outcome of ENS was the destruction of the family. Both conscription and the attendant migration were a drain on agricultural labour. Urban livelihood too was a delicate affair requiring the contributions of all members of the family. The author describes this situation in one of the most poignant chapters of the book (Chapter 9), drawing on the experiences of two families, one urban the other rural. The first was the case of Abdu’s family in Asmara, which had led a reasonably comfortable life through the income generated by the different members of the large family. Until, that is, six members of them were called up for military service and then recalled for indefinite servitude on the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia. The mother died heartbroken at the uncertainty of the fate of her enlisted sons, as the government was not particularly keen to release the names of those killed in combat. Three of them decided to flee. Two of them made it to the Sudan; the third was intercepted, tortured and detained in a container for a long time. Of the two who had made it across the border, one fell into the hands of traffickers who demanded a hefty ransom to release him.

The second case was that of Tekle’s family, whose members (including six siblings) contributed their share to achieve a fairly comfortable livelihood. This delicate balance collapsed when five of its young members were called up for military service. Here again, it was the recall for the border war and the subsequent indefinite detention, more than the initial call up, that led to the disintegration of the family. Tekle was forced to flee the country, eventually making it to England, via Italy and Calais in France. He then started sending money to his other brothers so that they can follow suit. He describes in graphic detail the anguish that he felt when one of them drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he tried to cross to Italy and the deep sense of ambivalence he felt about sending money to his second brother so that he could also try his luck.

The breakup of families and the erosion of values have other dimensions as well. The youth haemorrhage through involuntary detention in military camps and migration meant that the burden of caring for children fell on the elderly. In a manner that is reminiscent of the AIDS epidemic, grandparents had to take care of grandchildren rather than being cared for. Conscripts could not even get leave to attend funerals of parents and siblings, thereby being denied the most basic expression of family loyalty.

The only salutary aspect of this calamitous situation was the remittances that successful migrants were able to send back to their families. Remittances from the Diaspora constituted the backbone of the Eritrean economy. Although it is difficult to disaggregate the contribution of those who had fled from the ENS, such remittances were estimated at a total of over $400 million per annum. But no amount of money can compensate for the traumas and tribulations that the conscripts went through and the destruction of families that ensued.

In sum, an institution that could have had some rational basis had it been confined to a limited period has assumed the character of an onerous burden on the youth and society at large by virtue of its open-ended character. The contrast with the period of liberation struggle, when so many gave up their professions and businesses to join it, could hardly be any starker. Even in the initial phase of the ENS, it was not uncommon to see under-age youth faking their ages to enlist. The work under review proves conclusively that the ENS has been an unmitigated disaster on many counts. The only beneficiaries have been the smugglers and traffickers who extort enormous sums of enemy from the desperate refugees and the corrupt officers and commanders in the training camps who have used the institution to enrich themselves. Above all, it has helped to consolidate even further the autocratic power of the architect of the entire system, President Isaias Afeworki. The future of any country hangs on its youth. With its youth forced to flee their country in massive numbers, the future of Eritrea can only be surmised to be bleak.