

## Martyrs' Day: A Tribute to the Heroes



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Every year on June 20, Eritrea solemnly observes Martyrs' Day, a national day of remembrance dedicated to honoring those who sacrificed their lives for the country. The martyrs are both those who sacrificed their lives during the armed struggle for Independence (1961–1991) and those who died defending the sovereignty of the nation after its independence. Their legacy is honored every June 20th through community-driven memorial services, additional financial support for the families of martyrs, and music and poetry recitation that keep their stories alive. Martyrs' Day in Eritrea is a tribute not only to the fighters who fell in battle but also to the countless civilians—babies, women, and the elderly—who were deliberately targeted and killed by the successive occupationist regimes. These innocent victims suffered atrocities, massacres, and brutal executions in flagrant breach of all humanitarian laws of war. Their remembrance is woven into the fabric of Eritrean history.

The atrocities committed against Eritrean civilians were systematic and intentional. The Ethiopian regimes' policy of "drain the sea to finish off the fish" was designed to exterminate Eritrean resistance by targeting not just freedom fighters but civilians. During the liberation struggle, entire villages were burned, innocent people were executed, and terror was used as a weapon with the intention to crush the morale and fighting spirit of the people. Successive Ethiopian governments might have hoped that massacring civilians, destroying villages, and inflicting terror would end the resistance but in reality it only strengthened Eritreans' determination, making them fight more fiercely. Martyrs' Day ensures that every lost life is remembered, from the fighters to the civilians who became victims of these ruthless policies.

Eritrea's path to independence was marked by decades-long bloody conflict. The war against Ethiopian rule lasted 30 years, during which thousands of Eritrean fighters and civilians lost their lives. The day was officially designated as Martyrs' Day in 1991, following Eritrea's independence on May 24, 1991.

Martyrs' Day is very significant to Eritreans as it serves as a moment to reflect on the struggles endured for freedom. On June 20, Eritreans come together to honor those who gave their lives for the nation's independence. This solemn occasion – which, at a national level, is officially observed at Asmara's Patriots Cemetery – is a deeply personal remembrance, with almost every Eritrean family having lost loved ones in the struggle.



Families gather at home, light candles, and visit veterans' cemeteries or memorials to remember their loved ones. Communities take part in candlelight vigils, and at such gatherings artists sing songs, recite poems and tell stories to pay tribute to martyrs and ensure that the legacy of the martyrs remains alive. June 20th serves as a powerful reminder of the price of freedom. It's an ongoing commitment to preserve the values of resilience, unity, and patriotism. Through personal remembrance, community engagement, and acts of solidarity, Eritreans ensure their martyrs are never forgotten.

For Eritreans, independence is often spoken of as a gift of the martyrs, but their legacy extends far beyond liberation.

Their sacrifices have reinforced the seeds of national identity built on history, resilience, perseverance, commitment, and truth—values that continue to shape Eritrean society. Eritreans continue to carry these values forward, ensuring that the spirit of the martyrs remains alive through acts of service, dedication to the nation, and unity among communities. Martyrs' Day is an

occasion for the renewal of these ideals, reminding Eritreans not only of where they came from but also of the principles that will guide their future.

On Martyrs' Day/Week, Eritrea becomes a nation of light as every Eritrean, young and old, takes part in the candlelight vigil to honor the fallen heroes and heroines. Held on the eve of June 20 all over the country, the candlelight vigil envelops villages, streets, homes, and veterans' cemeteries in a moving display of remembrance. Students chant songs of resilience, wearing clothes emblazoned with slogans that pay tribute to the martyrs. Children, with their boundless creativity, construct symbols of martyrdom using whatever materials they can find, including turning the very ground into a canvas where they draw Eritrea's map.



The Testimony of Heroism of martyrs is hung proudly on the walls of their families' homes. The Testimony is more than just a document. Bearing the name, photograph, and date and location of sacrifice of the fallen hero, it is a badge of honor to remember every martyr as an individual, each with a personal story, a face, and a legacy. Such a way of honoring martyrs reflects the government's commitment to preserving the memory of its martyrs with dignity.

On Martyrs' Day, the Testimony/ies are often surrounded by candlelight and placed on tables. Illuminated by the soft glow of the candlelight, the certificates become sacred symbols. As families gather, emotions run deep. Tears spill, not in agony, but as a profound expression of gratitude, a silent acknowledgment of the price paid for freedom. In these moments, Eritreans do not mourn their martyrs; they celebrate their legacy. Children sit near the candlelit certificates, listening intently to the elders recounting tales of bravery. With every word, the values of

the martyrs are passed down, woven into the very fabric of Eritrean identity. At homes, on streets, and in schools, symbols of martyrdom crafted from stone, sand, and other materials are put on display, powerful gestures that ensure the fallen are never forgotten.



Martyrs' cemeteries are found all over Eritrea, serving as sacred resting places for the heroes and heroines who sacrificed their lives. These cemeteries are not just burial sites. They are symbols of honor, history, and national memory. Eritreans visit these resting places to light candles, lay flowers, and pay their respects, reinforcing their deep connection to those who gave everything for the safety and independence of the country.

Eritreans also see Martyrs' Day as a call to action, reminding them to stand in solidarity with the families of the fallen. The observance of the day strengthens their collective memory, ensuring that the sacrifices of the past are never forgotten.

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