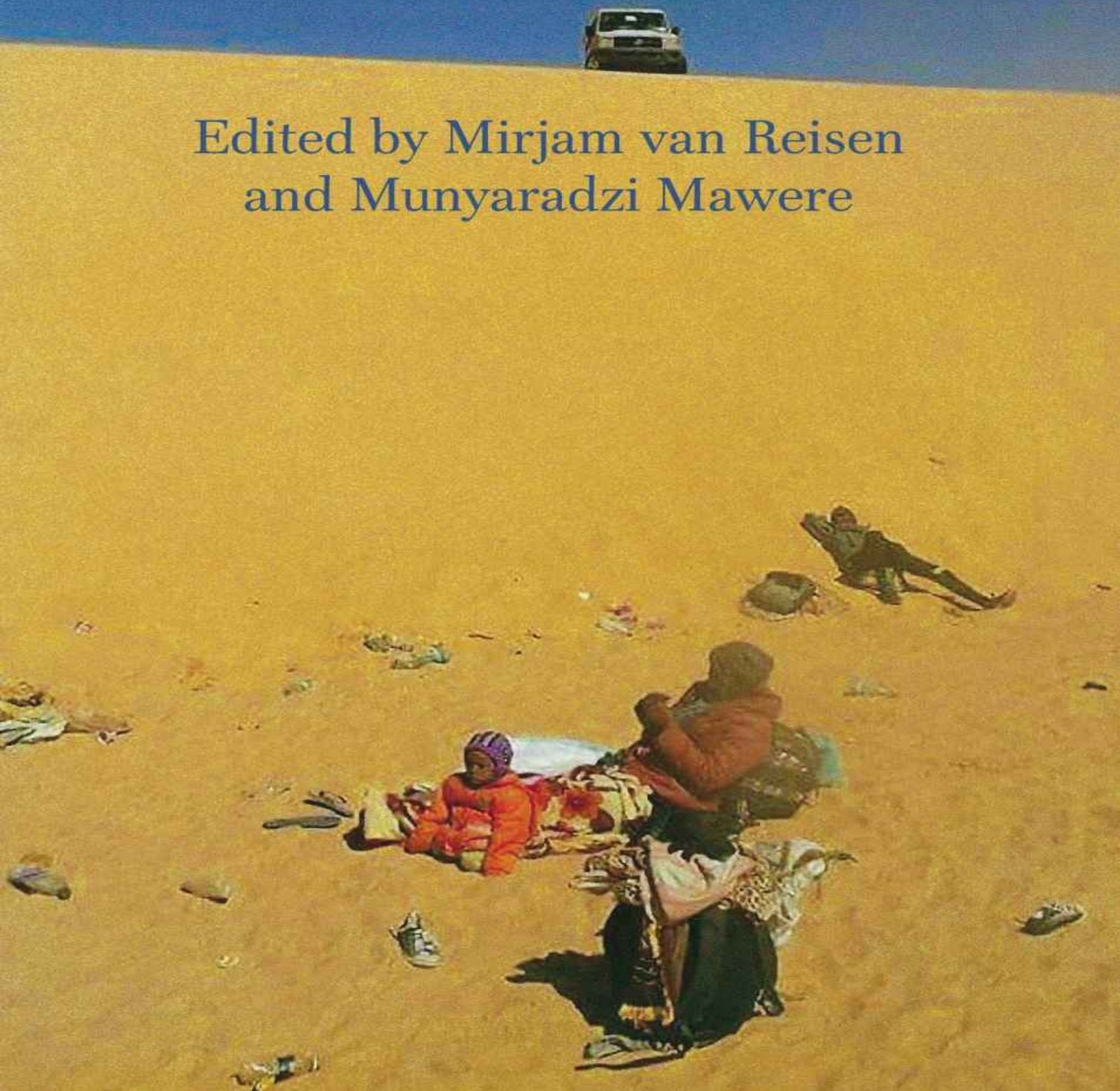


# HUMAN TRAFFICKING and TRAUMA in the DIGITAL ERA

*The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in  
Refugees from Eritrea*

Edited by Mirjam van Reisen  
and Munyaradzi Mawere



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**Human Trafficking and  
Trauma in the Digital Era:  
The Ongoing Tragedy of the  
Trade in Refugees from  
Eritrea**

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**Edited by  
Mirjam Van Reisen &  
Munyaradzi Mawere**



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2012, she received the Golden Image Award by Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in the category of 'Peace and Development'. Mirjam Van Reisen has (co-)authored numerous publications. Among others, she is author of *Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between Life and Death* (with Estefanos & Rijken, 2012), *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond* (with Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), as well as *Sinai Trafficking: Origin and Definition of a New Form of Human Trafficking* (with Rijken, 2015).

### **Zara Tewolde**

Zara Tewolde-Berhan currently interns at EEPA as research and communications assistant. She recently graduated in Modern History and Politics from the University of Essex. Zara Tewolde-Berhan is also a human rights campaigner and a member of the Stop Slavery in Eritrea Campaign.

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We sincerely thank all of the authors for their contributions. Furthermore, we would like to extend our gratitude to Lena Reim and Susan Sellars-Shrestha for their excellent work in editing the text and coordinating the production of this book. We would also like to thank Anirudh Krishnan for copyediting some of the chapters.

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**Mirjam Van Reisen and Munyaradzi Mawere**

## Justification

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The research in this book is based on interviews and data collected by the authors of each chapter. Where useful, information was shared between different authors and used in multiple chapters.

Over a hundred new interviews were conducted for the purpose of this research between 2015 and 2016 in various countries including several European countries, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia. In addition, information was received from within Eritrea and Egypt. Furthermore, several focus group meetings were held to discuss the findings.

Where interviews were carried out by two or more people, the book cites only the author of the interview transcript for security reasons. Information about co-interviewers as well as translators is available with the editors. The interviews that were transcribed and (written) reports received from monitors have been edited (without changing the meaning), in order to facilitate readability.

During one of the focus group meetings, a participant shared information about what was perceived as a retaliation in Eritrea. To protect those who have contributed to this work, we have, therefore, completely anonymised all respondents (sometimes also including the dates and locations of interviews) and have left out any details that may lead back to them. Letters used to refer to informants have been assigned at random; informants may have been assigned several letters and the same letters may refer to multiple informants. While some interviews were audio recorded, this was not always appropriate given the sensitivity of what was being discussed. All interviews and related materials are available with the authors and editors.

The intention of the use of material from respondents and interviewees and conversations held with them is to develop a more in-depth understanding of the situation of Eritrean refugees. Given the particular situations where these refugees are located, it was not always possible for the researchers to visit all places. None of the information should be conjectured as incriminating evidence. Any information needs to undergo new and thorough investigation if it is used for other purposes.



## Acronyms

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ASSAF	Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel
ARRA	Ethiopian Administration for Refugees
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AU.COMMIT	African Union Commission Initiative against Trafficking
BRO	Beja Relief Organisation
COIE	Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EC	European Commission
EEPA	Europe External Policy Advisors
ERN	Eritrean nakfa
EU	European Union
HGDEF	Acronym in Tigrinya for PFDJ
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICT	information and communication technology
IDP	internally displaced people
IES-R	Impact of Events Scale-Revised
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IGAD-RCP	IGAD-Regional Consultative Process

IMT	International Military Tribunal
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIS	Islamic State (also known as 'ISIL', 'IS', 'Daish', 'Daesh', and 'Islamic State group')
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NUES	National Union of Eritrean Students
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEY	National Union of Eritrean Youth
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister (Uganda)
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
R2P	responsibility to protect
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SDG	Sudanese pound
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
YPFDJ	

## Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice

### **Eritrean exchange rate (as at 27 December 2016):**

Official rate:	USD 1 = ERN 20
Black market rate:	USD 1 = ERN 55
Market rate:	USD 1 = ERN 100–120 <sup>1</sup>

### **Sudanese exchange rate (as at December 2016):**

USD 1 = SDG 6.39

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<sup>1</sup>See [Chapter 3](#) for a full explanation of these rates.

## Chapter 1

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### Introduction

*Mirjam Van Reisen*

Eritrea is a beautiful place. Any new visitor would enjoy the breathtaking views from the high mountain ridges. A tourist would marvel at the beauty of the Sahel and its picturesque landscapes of sand and camels. Eritrea boasts a long sea shore and, together with its islands in the Red Sea, it could be an amazing resting place for tired travellers. Eritrea boasts of two ports in Massawa and Assab – an incredible economic asset in a very well-established geo-strategic location. In Eritrea, one finds gold, among other resources, and the country is well endowed with the raw materials for extractive industries. It provides farmland, pastures and fishing opportunities, and the people of Eritrea have lived from the land for as long as they can remember. This land is their home.

Eritrea is a relatively small country (although four times the size of Belgium), with a population of between 3–6 million people. Its people, who are from diverse ethnic origins, have lived together for centuries. It has a devout population for whom tradition and religion play an important role and family responsibilities are of the highest priority. Its culture provides beautiful music as well as healthy and tasty food. The capital of Asmara is a pearl of architecture, where visitors can enjoy Italian cappuccinos in a traditional hospitable atmosphere. Eritreans are proud of their country. This is the country they built.

### **The ongoing human trafficking crisis**

Every Eritrean in the diaspora longs to go back to their country one day. Why, then, are Eritrean youth leaving their country en masse? This book seeks to answer this question. It identifies the harrowing trajectories that refugees from Eritrea follow to try and find a place that gives them some security. As this book demonstrates, such security is not easy to find. The long arm of the Eritrean regime in Asmara follows the refugees wherever they go. This book examines the

vulnerability of Eritrean refugees to human trafficking for ransom. It describes their migration trajectories and the trauma, torture and dangers that Eritrean refugees are subjected to. Many do not survive.

This book revisits the human trafficking crisis that emerged at the end of 2008, when many young Eritrean refugees were abducted from Eritrea, Sudan or elsewhere and trafficked to the Sinai. In 2012, Antonio Guterres, the then High Commissioner for Refugees, warned that thousands of Eritreans were leaving their country each month, despite a shoot-to-kill policy at the border. Guterres called for more protection in the refugee camp of Shagarab in eastern Sudan and identified that refugees were being kidnapped and taken to the Sinai. Human rights activist and radio presenter, Meron Estefanos, aired numerous interviews on radio, in which she spoke about the victims of human trafficking for ransom who were held in captivity, tortured and killed in the Sinai Desert. Sr Azezet and campaigners in Israel published the findings of thousands of interviews with patients in the clinic of Physicians for Human Rights, where former hostages came to seek help.

*'Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between Life and Death'* and *'The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond'* (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012, 2014) documented the phenomenon and gave a detailed description of the modus operandi used in this new form of human trafficking for ransom, also called 'Sinai trafficking'. Subsequently, in 2015, anti-terrorist operations in the Sinai Desert inadvertently ended this cruel form of trafficking, although some reports have been received of refugees held in the Sinai in 2015 and 2016. An estimated 25,000–30,000 people were trafficked and tortured in the Sinai (between 2009 and 2013) and over USD 600 million in ransoms have been paid (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). The majority of victims of human trafficking for ransom held in the Sinai originated from Eritrea.

[Chapter 2](#) documents the journeys of refugees from Eritrea to the Sinai and other places. All of these routes include components of human trafficking for ransom. It looks at why particularly young people are leaving and tries to understand how the different journeys of smuggling and abduction are connected. This chapter locates the origin of Sinai trafficking within Eritrea and points to how a deliberate policy of impoverishment and human rights abuses has driven the people out of the country. It argues that the creation of a widespread illicit internal and cross-border black market, together with stringent controls on the movement of people, has created an environment in which human trafficking and smuggling were able to flourish and became embedded in the 'system'.

This chapter presents evidence that arms smuggling routes and networks from Eritrea were used for the implementation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and that the Eritrean regime controlled the arms/trafficking operations. There is strong evidence that the trafficking networks are linked directly to the Eritrean military. In the Sinai, hostages were forced to collect ransoms from relatives over mobile phones while being tortured. These ransoms were routinely paid through mobile money transfer systems in Asmara or to agents abroad believed to be linked to the financial network underpinning it. From the analysis of the interviews, the shocking reality emerges of a country that trafficks and extorts its citizens outside its own territory. The authors raise the question to what extent the Government of Eritrea is responsible for human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and for the atrocities that were carried out as part of this practice against the Eritrean victims of such crimes.

**Chapter 3** looks at why there is a mass exodus taking place from Eritrea and who is benefiting. It is based on interviews that describe a deliberate policy by the government to rid the country of its youth, as they have the critical capacity to criticise the government. This policy has been carried out through the mass detention (and torture) of youth. The impoverishment of the population and the creation of a black market in Eritrea have resulted in an illicit culture of finances, in which the revenue generated by smuggling and trafficking is tied to those in power. In this chapter, Mirjam Van Reisen and Meron Estefanos demonstrate that the causes of human trafficking of Eritrean youth have not gone away. Instead, the practices and modus operandi have been extended to Ethiopia and Sudan. The modus operandi are facilitated by information communication technologies (ICTs): ransoms and other financial transactions are negotiated with relatives over the phone who contribute to the release and support of the refugees through mobile money transfers, while trafficking networks make extensive use of ICTs to coordinate logistics as well as global financial transactions.

In both of these countries, pressures caused by the harassment of Eritrean refugees have created an atmosphere of fear. In Sudan, large groups of Eritrean refugees have been deported back to Eritrea or are being detained. The collection of ransom and extortion of refugees is ongoing. Paramilitary groups are believed to be rounding up Eritrean refugees and hundreds of refugees are reportedly being held against their will and threatened with deportation unless they pay the ransom. From the interviews, the researchers understand that payments of ransoms for people held in Sudan are made in Asmara. The vulnerability of the Eritrean refugees – whom at all costs try to ensure that they are not sent back to Eritrea for fear of retaliation –

has been leveraged to create a widespread system of fear and exploitation. From the interviews carried out for this research, it emerges that the Government of Eritrea is directly involved in the organisation of the round-ups, extortion, and deportations from Sudan to Eritrea. With nowhere to go, refugees are crisscrossing between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya in search of a place with some relative safety.

[Chapter 4](#), discusses the excesses emerging in Libya and Egypt, fed by the ongoing pressures that young Eritreans are facing in their attempt to reach safer shores. In Libya, groups of hundreds of young refugees have been captured by the terrorist groups of ISIS, who have expanded their operations to North Africa. Based on interviews, the authors (Mirjam Van Reisen and Meron Estefanos) demonstrate that this situation is reason for serious concern. Among other things, tens (if not hundreds) of refugees have been beheaded, and a testimony was received that Eritrean refugees who had been deported from Israel to Africa have been killed in such incidents. There is systematic and widespread sexual violence against Eritrean women refugees, including rape. If they are Christian, women are forced to convert to Islam. Women are also forced to marry ISIS fighters, with the aim, according to one interviewee, to bear the children of ISIS fighters.

In Egypt, hundreds of Eritrean refugees who are declared illegal are in prisons and face deportation to Eritrea, creating fear and anxiety among the refugee population. Such fear is fertile ground for exploitation and the most vulnerable refugees face the most severe abuse. Eritrean refugees have for a long time spoken about the organ harvesting trade which, in their mind, is linked to human trafficking for ransom. One of the first reports on organ harvesting and human trafficking for ransom was published by Mekonnen and Estefanos in 2011. In 2016, members of an organ trafficking ring were arrested in Egypt. [Chapter 4](#) investigates the suspicion that organ harvesting is connected to human trafficking.

[Chapter 5](#) discusses the plight of unaccompanied children in the context of human trafficking for ransom and how they are particularly vulnerable. Having little access to resources to pay ransoms, they are exploited for their labour and for the services they can render to the trade in human commodities. Authors Mirjam Van Reisen and Taha Al-Qasim argue that, due to the fragmentation of Eritrean families, many young children and minors become divorced from their parents. The mandatory and indefinite national service in Eritrea, in which the government assigns most members of the population to a position in the military or civil service, has resulted in children being raised without one (or both of) their parents. The fear of being drafted, drives them to leave Eritrea at an early age. Being under-aged and

without resources, they are extremely vulnerable to being caught up in the human trafficking trade, as they are left without alternative options.

[Chapter 6](#) considers the particular situation of Eritrean women refugees. Based on interviews in Uganda, their difficult situation is explored. The vulnerability of women refugee is exacerbated by the fragmentation of their families and support networks. Many women who flee Eritrea end up alone or only in company of their children. They become the sole protectors, breadwinners and caretakers of their families. Single mothers are by far the most vulnerable to all of the risks faced by women refugees. The authors of this chapter, Eyob Ghilazghy, Sacha Kuilman and Lena Reim, find sexual violence reported by women refugees from Eritrea during all the stages of their displacement. Women refugees, who have experienced serious trauma in their migration journeys (and while living in exile), generally remain isolated from host communities. In exile, they continue to experience exploitation, extortion and extreme economic hardship.

## **Severe trauma**

In [Chapter 7](#), Mirjam Van Reisen, Selam Kidane and Lena Reim examine the mental and physical trauma that has resulted from the severe and inhumane conditions in which the victims of Sinai trafficking were held. This chapter brings together several pieces of research on Sinai trafficking victims in refugee camps in Ethiopia. A series of interviews were held with these victims. In addition, thirtyfive Sinai survivors filled out Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R) tests measuring post-traumatic stress and a medical examination was carried out on 28 survivors. The research inventorises the torture practices carried out in Sinai trafficking. The inventory of torture methods resemble those in Eritrea, as described in the report by the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). The medical examination established the severe impact of the torture practices experience by the victims. The findings reveal serious life-long damage, including as a result of severe and extreme forms of sexual violence. The researchers found extremely high levels of psychological trauma; the extent of these symptoms are cause for serious concern. The lack of attention to the victims' trauma and the lack of support systems, as well as the unavailability of any form of justice and accountability, has left them in a state of hopelessness and delayed their healing. They are victims of a forgotten crisis.

In [Chapter 8](#), Selam Kidane and Mirjam Van Reisen introduce the concept of 'collective trauma' to describe the collective nature of the trauma which is



experienced by the Eritrean community at large. They argue that the sharing of extremely traumatising events, including the situation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, has caused collective trauma in the Eritrean community. Collective trauma emerges when people who have a sense of belonging to one another perceive fearful and painful events together, which affects their collective consciousness and memory. Collective trauma impairs rational decision-making. It is argued that torture in the context of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai was organised to include family and friends who were contacted by mobile phone during the torture, hence, deliberately exposing relatives to the experience of torture as secondary victims. Traditional forms of trauma have re-emerged in diaspora communities (and in Eritrea). This chapter provides a study of ICTs used for communication among refugee communities and the sharing of the atrocities on ICT platforms is identified as contributing to the collective trauma. This chapter explores whether ICTs can be a possible means to help address post-traumatic stress symptoms by methods that make use of the same communication channels through which the traumatic events were shared.

## **A crisis of accountability**

The reports of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (COIE) (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016) constitute an important tool for the international community in developing accountability mechanisms for Eritrea. These reports describe the situation within Eritrea, from which the refugees are fleeing. In [Chapter 9](#), the findings of the COIE are presented, as well as the way in which these findings were received by Eritreans. While members of the Eritrean leadership denied the content of the report and argued that the methodology of the report was flawed, the authors, Höfner and Tewolde-Berhan, argue that the methodology is in line with other Commissions of Inquiry and consistent with the findings of independent academic researchers. The COIE gathered extensive evidence, using ICTs as a way of gathering a maximum number of testimonies, and carried out verification examinations to ensure the validity of the information collected.

The COIE produced two reports: one that provided extensive findings on the situation in Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015) and a second report in which the Commission concluded that ‘crimes against humanity’ are taking place in Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016). The 2016 report received widespread endorsement from Eritreans in the diaspora and was

welcomed with public demonstrations of support in refugee camps (Shemelba, Mai Ayni and Hitsats) and among refugee communities in Addis Ababa, Tel Aviv, The Hague, New York, and Geneva. The report of the Commission of Inquiry raised hope.

However, the report has not changed the policies of the Government of Eritrea, which, according to the COIE, qualify as crimes against humanity. A shoot-to-kill policy at the Eritrean border is still in place and fresh reports have been received of incidents at the border. The nature of Eritrea's national service and its character of slavery had not changed. National service continues to be indefinite. Recent reports by the UN have confirmed the expected serious level of malnutrition in the country due to a drought, which is denied by the government. The Arbi Harnet campaign identified cholera outbreaks in the country, which were equally denied by the regime (Asmarino, 2016a, 2016b). Eritrea is a country in denial.

[Chapter 10](#) discusses the control exercised by the Eritrean regime over members of the Eritrean diaspora in new countries of residence. Eritrean refugees constituted the second largest group of refugees in the Netherlands in 2016, after Syrian refugees, totalling 31,000 refugees (NOS, 2017). The chapter identifies three migration waves of Eritrean refugees. The last wave pertains especially to young refugees. While in other chapters, reference is made to the global presence of the Eritrean regime to control their (former) nationals, this chapter zooms in on the situation in the Netherlands. The authors of the chapter, Klara Smits, DSP Group and Tilburg University present a translation of a report by DSP Group and Tilburg University, on the situation of influence by the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands. Based on a hundred interviews, the group of researchers concluded that the regime organises surveillance of members of the Eritrean community in the Netherlands through the youth organs of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), churches and the Eritrean embassy. The chapter identifies the methods of progressive intimidation, as well as the practice of collecting payments (taxes and other financial contributions) from members of the diaspora. Such financial contributions are often paid in Asmara or to agents from Eritrea at festivals and meetings and in church.

[Chapter 11](#) looks how the Atlantic Council, a think tank on international affairs with its headquarters in Washington, has become a mouth piece in favour of the Eritrean regime, as part of a larger strategy to target opinion leaders, diplomats and politicians. The author, François Christophe, describes the situation in Eritrea, based on the analysis of Yoel Gibrehiwet (Jeangène Vilme, & Gouéry, 2015), as similar to Russian dolls: The tens of thousands of prisoners populating Eritrea's jails

make up the narrowest circle, the ‘prison within a prison within a prison’; a broader, middle circle includes the hundreds of thousands of military conscripts whom the government uses as forced labourers; and, finally, the outer circle encompasses the entire population, who live in fear of arrest and are forbidden from leaving the country; hence, the depiction of Eritrea as a ‘prison state’.

It is argued that the Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council’s Africa Center, Bronwyn Bruton, has persistently ignored the obvious realities in Eritrea, denying the scale and seriousness of the human rights violations taking place. Bruton particularly denies the shoot-to-kill policy at the border, ignoring the available evidence, including from military personnel who testified that they have shot at people trying to flee the country. This seems to be part of a broader strategy to play down the human rights violations taking place in Eritrea and to make them seem outside government responsibility. This chapter argues that the position of the Atlantic Council is linked to the donation it received from Mining Company Nevsum, which exploits gold extraction in Eritrea and has been accused of exploiting national service recruits as a means of forced labour (or slavery).

In [Chapter 12](#), Zara Tewelde-Berhan, Martin Plaut and Klara Smits discuss the policy agenda in Europe and Africa in response to the issues discussed in this book. This chapter gives an overview of the failure of engagement between the EU and Eritrea since 2000 until the present time. The refugee crisis has triggered response mechanisms in which the EU is seeking collaboration with the Government of Eritrea and other governments in the region in order to curb migration. In 2014, a ‘new beginning’ of cooperation was announced, which evolved into the Khartoum process, even though the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry has somewhat complicated the matter of active collaboration. The Khartoum process has transferred the problem of resolving the migration problem from the EU on to the countries in the wider Horn of Africa region. However, these policies do not tackle any of the root causes of the problems. The Africa Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development have started to implement policies to counter human trafficking, but with limited success. This chapter is pessimistic about the current policy direction as a realistic basis for the resolution of human trafficking for ransom in the region. The authors argue that the policies of the Europe Union seem to encourage those responsible for human trafficking for ransom to continue such practices with impunity.

In [Chapter 13](#), Daniel Mekonnen and Wegi Sereke analyse the crisis of accountability regarding human trafficking for ransom of Eritrean refugees. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea has provided a clear interpretation of its

findings regarding the situation within Eritrea. However, more work can and should be done to understand the responsibility of the state of Eritrea for human trafficking from within the country to places outside the country. The authors argue that the prosecution of the entire human trafficking chain is paramount to end impunity. Eritrea appears to be at the centre of human trafficking and enslavement, and the existence of a prima facie link between Sinai trafficking and the human rights situation in Eritrea can be established. The authors argue that the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea has applied a conservative *ratione loci*, especially in light of the widespread system in which high-level Eritrean officials are involved in human trafficking networks across the region. Having established the culpability and responsibility of the Eritrean State, the authors argue that accountability mechanisms must be established and those responsible brought to justice.

## **Main conclusions**

What emerges from the analysis in this book is the similarities between the systems governing the realities of Eritrean refugees within Eritrea and outside, which are distinguished only by different levels of excess. More research needs to be done to understand how, in what way, and why systems inside the country reflect those outside. Examples of areas on which more work can be done to understand the patterns and connections across geographical regions include the following:

- The similarity of torture practices within Eritrea and in the Sinai ‘torture camps’, where many Eritreans were held
- The connectivity of surveillance of Eritreans in the diaspora and the intimidation practices used
- The connectivity of financial networks across countries and the payment of ransoms and other financial contributions in Asmara
- Ongoing specific practices to drive youth from the country
- Patterns of sexual violence inside and outside Eritrea
- The fragmentation of families across geographies
- The use of ICTs to facilitate crimes such as human trafficking for ransom

This study identifies the link between human trafficking to the Sinai (and beyond) and Eritrea. It defines this tragedy as emerging from the new possibilities provided by ICTs. ICTs are an essential component of the *modus operandi* of human trafficking for ransom: through mobile phones, ransoms are collected and

mobile money transfers made. The trafficking networks operate at the global level, making maximum use of the flexibility that ICTs provide in managing and overseeing their operations. This constitutes a new business model, one that makes full use of the enhanced capabilities provided by ICTs. This study shows the potential for the use of new technologies to be perverted by criminal elements, particularly when introduced in the context of extreme poverty and vulnerability.

Furthermore, this study raises the issue of collective trauma. The direct communication between victims of human trafficking and relatives enabled by ICTs creates a virtual presence, resulting in the collective experience of trauma. This study concludes that Eritrean communities (within Eritrea and in the diaspora) and Eritrean society have suffered collective trauma facilitated by the use of ICTs, through which narratives of tragedies are shared and are integrated into a collective consciousness of desperation, vulnerability and shame.

In a sad state of affairs, refugees from Eritrea, many at a very young age, are driven out of Eritrea by a policy of deliberate impoverishment by the ruling regime as a way of exercising control. Young Eritrean refugees crisscross between countries in the Horn of Africa and North Africa in search of a safe place. They do so in the realisation that returning to Eritrea is not an option. But, there are few places of safety. Refugees from Eritrea are surveilled in many countries of the region, including Sudan and Ethiopia. The risk of deportation makes them vulnerable to extortion (to avoid being sent back to Eritrea). They are looted, threatened, intimidated, violated, and held for ransom. Women routinely suffer sexual violence.

At the same time, crimes against humanity are ongoing in Eritrea. Human trafficking is organised from within Eritrea and the lines between human trafficking and smuggling are blurred. Refugees believe that traffickers from within Eritrea are connected to the broader network operating outside Eritrea, which involves perpetrators along all the routes. Many who flee stay within the region, but feel that they are in constant danger. Thousands of Eritrean refugees are deported from Sudan and Egypt to Eritrea, where many disappear in national service camps, prisons or worse.

The current population of Eritrea is unknown, with estimates ranging from between 3 to 6 million people. In 2016, it was estimated that 60,000 people left Eritrea in the hands of smugglers or human traffickers. By 16 October 2016, over 105,000 officially registered refugees from Eritrea had arrived in Europe (cumulative total since 2009) through the Central Mediterranean route alone (Frontex, 2016). The average cost paid by a refugee from Eritrea to reach Europe is estimated at USD 10,000 (based on research conducted for this book). This

includes ransom payments. The most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion (calculated by author).

It is not Eritrea as a country that benefits from illicit trade including human trafficking, but individuals within the regime. In interviews, refugees never refer to the government, they refer to the 'HGDEF' (the Tigrinya abbreviation for the People's Front for Democracy and Justice – PFDJ) when pointing to those in power and controlling the country. They also refer to the HGDEF or PFDJ when identifying who is benefiting from the trade in Eritreans. The HGDEF or PFDJ is seen as the organisation running the country, as well as controlling Eritreans outside its borders.

Young people are especially vulnerable to human trafficking. Embarking on such dangerous journeys, often without support networks, they are at constant risk of extortion and exploitation. This reality is of great concern. The involvement of youth in establishing accountability and promoting healing and resolution for trauma is critical. This requires a set of policies that will help provide support for the trauma suffered. There is an urgent need to deliver justice for the crimes committed and to end the impunity that human traffickers have enjoyed. This will require actions that seek to protect the victims of human trafficking and integrate them into host communities. Programmes are needed that create safe places for the vulnerable refugees from Eritrea, including, and especially, youth.

Eritrea is a wonderful country of gentle people full of grace, strengthened in their resolve and old traditions, and a deeply-rooted sense of culture and religion. Any visitor who takes the time to enjoy the beauty of this country in the company of its hospitable inhabitants will appreciate what it has to offer. However serious the tragedy is of a country that trades in its own people, Eritreans are resilient. One day the people of Eritrea will celebrate a life in freedom in the country they call home.

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# **Part 1: The Ongoing Human Trafficking Crisis**



## Chapter 2

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# Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Mapping the Routes and Facilitators

*Mirjam Van Reisen, Meron Estefanos & Lena Reim*

*Let alone telling these stories to strangers, will we ourselves believe these stories once they are past?*  
(Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016)

*I fear that the Sinai [trafficking] is going to happen again. [...] Because of the war [Egyptian military intervention in the Sinai], it has been impossible to bring people into the Sinai. [...] My fear is that once the military operation is over, it might start again, because they miss the money they were making – millions and millions.*  
(Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

## Introduction

Human trafficking for ransom was first documented in the Sinai in 2008 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012 & 2014). The perpetrators have never been brought to justice. The root causes that created the pre-conditions for this crime to occur – including the human rights situation in Eritrea – have not changed, leading to fears that Sinai trafficking could re-emerge at a later stage. Furthermore, these practices have continued in the Sinai and elsewhere in North Africa and the Horn of Africa in various forms and continue to explicitly target Eritrean nationals due to their particular vulnerability, as well as their ability to collect sizeable sums of ransom through family in the diaspora (see [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#)).

This chapter explores the trafficking routes to the Sinai, where this practice first emerged. It looks at how Eritreans were abducted or smuggled from Eritrea and other places, the routes via which they were trafficked, and the actors who orchestrated and facilitated this business. Emphasis is placed on the involvement of state actors, particularly Eritrean state officials. As the full scope of human

trafficking for ransom in the Sinai came to light – with an estimated 30,000 people trafficked between 2009 and 2013 at an estimated value of over USD 600 million (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014) – it became clear that the involvement of state officials must be greater than originally assumed. Among others, the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (hereinafter called the ‘Monitoring Group’) has explained that a business of this size could not possibly function without the knowledge and assistance of government officials (UNSC, 2011). In fact, the Monitoring Group found evidence of the involvement of Eritrean and Sudanese officials in the facilitation of human smuggling alongside the smuggling of weapons (UNSC, 2011). This evidence is supported by the interviews conducted for this chapter.

Earlier publications have identified the involvement of the Sudanese and Egyptian military and other armed groups, and have pointed to the authorities of these countries as responsible for allowing such crimes to happen on their soil (Human Rights Watch, 2014a). What has not yet been described is the involvement of Eritrean officials and authorities in human trafficking in the Sinai (as opposed to the smuggling that feeds it). This chapter examines their role, alongside that of other actors, and their responsibility for this crime.

The work of Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, particularly, *Human Trafficking in the Sinai, Refugees between Life and Death* (2012) and *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond* (2014), function as the basis of this chapter. In addition, this chapter makes use of interviews with survivors of Sinai trafficking and former officials involved in the trade, as well as resource persons. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger research project on Sinai survivors. Former officials interviewed include the former Deputy Minister of Finance, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, who was granted asylum in the Netherlands. Interviews were also carried out with other former officials of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the political party of the Eritrean government. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with family members involved in the collection and payment of ransoms. These interviews were carried out face-to-face or by Skype in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The hypotheses presented in this chapter should be read as deductions developed from the analysis of the experiences presented in the interviews; these need further investigation and do not constitute proof of facts.

## **Deliberate impoverishment and control: Establishing human trafficking structures**

In order to understand human trafficking from Eritrea, including Sinai trafficking, and the role of government officials from Eritrea and other countries in this crime, we must place the phenomenon within the wider context of Eritrea's illicit economy. Eritrea's economy is run without a budget, without a Central Bank and without a statistics bureau. Importing goods is illegal. So, how is the economy sustained and what are the key sources of revenue for the Eritrean government and military?

Former Deputy Minister of Finance, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, who fled the country in 2009, identifies two principal pillars on which the Eritrean economy is based (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016). The first pillar is the Red Sea Company (often referred to by the code '09' (in Tigrinya referred to as 'bado tisha'ate') and the approximately 34 companies that come under the direct control of the PFDJ, the state party. These companies, which are involved in construction and numerous other areas, operate more or less within a framework agreed upon with the PFDJ and the government. These companies, including the Red Sea Corporation, are overseen by Hagos Ghebrehiwet, Head of Economic Affairs, also known as 'Kisha'. Ghebrehiwet is the right hand of President Isaias Afwerki, alongside Yemane Gebreab, Head of Political Affairs and Organisational Affairs, and Zemhret Yohannes, Head of Cultural Affairs. In addition to this regulated state monopoly, Hosabay describes a flourishing illicit economy that has been allowed to grow, and has even been encouraged, by the state. The former head of Organisational Affairs, Abdella Jaber, is in prison after allegedly leading a coup attempt in 2013:

*The 09 or the Red Sea Corporation is owned by the Economic Affairs branch of the PFDJ, meaning that it should traditionally have belonged to all members of the PFDJ, but now only the three or four people up there own it.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016)

The ministers in the area of trade and finance report to Hagos Ghebrehiwet: "The Minister of Finance is Berhane Habtemariam, the Minister of National Development is Dr Gergish Teklemikael, and the Minister of Trade and Industry is Nesredi Bekit (who was one of the main 09 handlers earlier)" (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016).

A deliberate policy of impoverishment is at the basis of the system, which promotes the black market economy and creates dependency: "Isaias first impoverished the whole population, by preventing them from earning a living on their own [... so that now] no one is allowed to earn money outside his corrupt

system” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016). A former official previously employed in the Eritrean government commented as follows:

*Yes, almost no-one in Eritrea can work freely. No one can farm. No one can fish. No one can trade. Everyone is doing national service. Fishing is prohibited, imports are prohibited. When the elderly die, there is no-one left to herd the livestock or farm the fields or keep the old shop. There are hard currency controls and currency change. Additionally, there are fines [for family members] when children escape the country. Working for ten years for the Ministry of Information the total amount of money they paid me was about USD 3,000. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016)*

This may be regarded as a deliberate attempt to reduce the influence of young people and stifle ambition as a means of maintaining power and control: “They want people to see you impoverished, skinny and graceless, so that you can’t influence others” (Interview, Van Reisen with Biniam Yohannes, Skype, 23 December 2016).

Referring to those holding power, Biniam Yohannes, who was assigned by the national service to work for the Ministry of Information, explained how the system deliberately takes away people’s self-respect as a means of undermining their confidence:

*That’s how they are. They give respect to no one. Never! Everyone should be as disrespectful as possible. If people see me wearing the cheapest dirtiest clothes, if they see me eating at the cheapest snack bars, if they see me drinking the cheapest local drink, smoking the cheapest cigarette brand, then I become a ‘nobody’; whatever ideas I bring up won’t be listened to. (Interview, Van Reisen with Biniam Yohannes, Skype, 23 December 2016)*

The system closes down the opportunities for people to work hard and earn more by doing so:

*If I walk through downtown on a very hot and sunny day because I can’t afford a taxi, it nullifies any possibility for me to influence anyone. We were not allowed to work part time, if you are caught working part time and they don’t like you, you could end up in prison. (Interview, Van Reisen with Biniam Yohannes, Skype, 23 December 2016)*

This undermines human rights and the rule of law. It ensures that everyone in Eritrea is focused on survival, with no time left for anything else, let alone politics:

*So you have to starve to death, or work part time and live in fear. They say it is the law, government employees can’t hold two jobs. ‘Employees’ hahaa. I couldn’t teach at a language school, act in a local*

*film production, or ask for a business licence. I couldn't read an advertisement script. You stay too poor and when you starve you either escape the country or you fit into their lines [corruption]. If I got sick and went to the hospital, the bills would be sent to the ministry, it would then be deduced from my salary (50%) every month for the next few months.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016)

President Isaias Afwerki has control over who benefits from this system, thereby tying high officials and the military to his rule. Hosabay explained: “So by closing all incomes in the country, and forcing the country to go on [a] coupon economy<sup>1</sup>, he is free now to give wealth to anyone who is willing to serve him” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, 30 November 2016). The only way to get bills paid is in fact to turn to the black market, tells one respondent: “If there was some merchandise that needed to be sold, I would walk all over town to find a buyer and connect seller and buyer. Like black market clothes, electronics, [...]” (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016).

This policy ensures that those in high positions are sufficiently engaged in corrupt and illegal activities so as not to constitute a threat to the ruling regime: “These officers are the ones who are holding for him the whole armed forces” (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016).

Hosabay explained that this is the result of a deliberate strategy:

*The impoverishment of the country is a deliberate policy to invite corruption. If a Minister earns only USD 80 a month, he can easily get corrupted. This gives them the right to earn illegally on the side.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)

Hosabay emphasises that this black market system is based on a void that is purposefully unregulated:

*It is in fact a system that is prepared as if it was a loophole, for whoever wishes to use it. It is like leaving money on the street without telling the people to take it. It is a system that is purposely left without administrative control, thereby inviting the military and others to exploit it. [...] Even the legal system is made not to penalise this.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016)

According to Hosabay, this helps to create loyalty among those in the lower ranks right up to those at the top of the system. Those loyal to the system benefit personally and individually:

*The work from the black market is individual, it is 'personal', but it is available as part of the overall system. The money can also end up with members of Isaias' [Afwerki's] family, ambassadors*

*and other individuals. It is unaccounted for.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)

The system has given rise to a mafia-style rule based on survival of the fittest:

*It is a system of the winner takes it all. There is no law, it is divide and rule. Because there is no law, two generals will not agree. Without the law, there is just corruption. Anybody who can do it will go on and do it.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)

The analogy with the mafia is apt – in Eritrea’s black market different illicit empires have been created and set against each other, which feeds the divide and rule strategy that characterises the control that President Isaias Afwerki has over the army and defence forces: “The two generals both have their own corruption networks. So the black markets are set against each other. This creates rivalry between the generals and the colonels: it is like Brooklyn and Manhattan” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016).

In this context, Hosabay relays an Eritrean proverb about benefiting from crime: “We have a saying: ‘When your father’s house is looted, loot with the looters.’ I take something for my children; you grab what you can” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

The smuggling and trafficking of people is merely one of the many informal cross-border trades from Eritrea. As explained by Hosabay, the official economy was essentially paralysed by the implementation of mandatory, unlimited and unpaid national service and the complete ban on imports. Yet, the informal economy is booming and does so with the secret approval and control of President Isaias Afwerki and his ministers: “It is not only people smuggling, it is all sorts of illegal trade, even in the city” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

The illegal cross-border trade is carried out with the full knowledge and participation of the government, its officials and the military:

*People [are] crossing borders illegally in cars, with the consent of the military; there is a roadblock every kilometre. It is done with the consent of the system itself. The oil and fuel come from Sudan in trucks to Asmara; this is illegal but all roadblocks know about it and it is part of the black market system. There is no licence to import. Importing was curtailed – so how to supply the market? It can only be supplied by the black market. There are no shortages, so how do all these goods enter the country? People are not afraid to sell these goods openly, the government does not care about the black market.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)

The active participation of government officials is a key element of the system:

*Diesel [...] is not available in the petrol stations, there is only benzene, but officials drive diesel cars; the diesel is sold from the government people, as legally you cannot get it. People are now trading in the diesel market.* (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)

There is no alternative to the black market, given that there is no regulation of imports and exports governing commercial relations in the country. Hence, a culture is created in which earning money illegally is the norm. This system forms the basis of the human trafficking from Eritrea: “It is the theory of using [the] already existing government apparatus and system to do [the] illegal activity” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

The impoverishment has occurred gradually as small businesses and farms have been made illegal and any thriving business has been monopolised by the state. Impoverishment is the result of the continuous intervention and monopolisation of import and export channels, as a result of which any independent business is undermined, unless it serves (and is controlled by) the leadership. Remittances (financial transfers from family members in the diaspora) have become crucial for survival: “There were times that some people I knew would send a hundred dollars now and then.” (Interview, Van Reisen with anon., Skype, 23 December 2016/5 February 2017).

The impoverishment is also a result of national service, which makes it impossible for anyone to independently earn a living. To have a small business one needs to have sufficient money to bribe the system and be exempted from national service:

*To have a shop, the licence would have to have been established before the war, or you have to have money, big money, for bribes. Also, one has to be exempt from national service. And how do you get that? You have to be pregnant, disabled, or over 50-years-old.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 23 December 2016)

In a bizarre move, the Eritrean government recently “ordered investigations into the sources of income of all people who deposited more than 5,000 USD worth of local currency during late last year’s currency change” (Africa Monitors, 2016a). As reported by Africa Monitors:

*In a third-world system that has poor institutional structure traditional businessmen will be asked for detailed records of their business activities of at least two decades. This is a continuation of the relentless efforts to criminalize and destroy private business in the country, and it will push tens of*

*thousands of people with 5,000 USD worth of money or more to escape the country as no government investigation ever ends in favor of the subjects. (Africa Monitors, 2016a)*

In the following interview, a former PFDJ official who worked in one of the towns in Eritrea describes deliberate looting from farmers, who are required to contribute their harvest to the military:

*After that, they wanted to confiscate the grain. The top army official was against me. It was harvest-time. He wanted to keep the harvest of the farmers for himself. The younger rank was with me. Some had already been taken to prison. I said, I will decide; I decided 50% can be taken away and 50% remains for the farmers. The army refused and came with the recruits to harvest. I went on sick-leave and I made my own travel permit to travel in February 2010. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The strategy of impoverishment features in the stories of Sinai survivors. But, from these stories it is also clear that those who could potentially create difficulties for the hierarchy are pushed out of Eritrea. According to one respondent, driving the youth out is a deliberate policy of the regime (see also [Chapter 3](#)), designed to prevent any future opposition:

*It was the objective to send the young Eritreans out of the country so that the youth would not create trouble. So that they would not have any opposition. They tortured them in the national service etc. Those living near the border, they had to leave. The objective of the Sinai [trafficking and torture] was to break those youth. (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, unpublished document, received by Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, E-mail, 10 December 2016)*

It is illegal for Eritreans to leave Eritrea without a permit, and permits are very difficult to obtain officially. This forces Eritreans seeking to leave Eritrea into the hands of smugglers. In the border areas refugees are actively persecuted. One Sinai survivor, S2, explained:

*I went to Sudan and here the spies of Eritrea gave me a lot of trouble. Because I know how they work and I heard people were disappearing, I kept moving and never spent the night where I spent the day. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Eritrean smugglers operate along the Eritrea-Ethiopian border.

*From the camps in Ethiopia, the smuggling networks are mainly Eritrean. It is not difficult to find a smuggler, although you have to be careful because the Ethiopians want to stop it. But they are mainly Eritrean smugglers, so it is easy to contact them. (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015)*



The local smugglers on the Eritrean-Ethiopian border know the area well and often smuggle for survival purposes:

*The smugglers between Eritrea and Ethiopia are mostly desperate and living at the border. They are earning money to get people out of Eritrea. They are local people who know the area and it is not a permanent job. It is a temporary thing. They have no protection. Those who get caught disappear. They are compassionate, they care for the people.* (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015)

This is in contrast to the sophisticated smuggling networks from Eritrea to Sudan (which sometimes go through Ethiopia) (see also [Chapter 3](#)):

*The smugglers to Sudan are sophisticated. They charge more money, they drink, they womanize and they don't want to go to Europe. One pick up from Hitsats [in Ethiopia] will take 22 people. They have to bribe on the way so they take a minimum of 20. The smuggler has well established family networks, you go from one to the other family member. [...] The chain is connected. Eritrea-Ethiopia-Sudan. And the money, they share it and they are paying it in the same pot. There were checkpoints before. This was expensive as you had to pay bribes. [...] So they removed them. So now it has become cheaper for the smugglers.* (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015)

This is a very connected business in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a key role. From the following account it is clear that all money collected goes into one pot before being distributed:

*They don't know each other in person, but there is a telephone chain. Although there is a set price for each of the legs, you don't pay until you are in Libya. So it is inevitable that it is one pot. So if one person in the chain betrays them the system collapses. Then the system dries out. And you hear conversations: 'let's do the accounts'; 'let's do the maths.' And all the time there is that phone link. Once you make the contact here, you are in the chain. Except for the DIY people, you are in the chain.* (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015)

Within the camps are 'representatives' where you can pay the money for the trip. Money can be paid in different places, in the refugee camps, in Khartoum, in Asmara, in Libya, in Cairo, in Israel and all over the world, through the embassies ('consulates') and through agents. The refugee receives a number and can then make arrangements with this number. This is the case both for travel and ransom payments when refugees have been abducted.

The Sinai trafficking organisation had specific agents for specific towns within Eritrea, according to a refugee, who explains in detail:

*Angesom is from Tsorona, he is the biggest trafficker. He started in Sinai. The biggest man in Mai Ayni is Tesfalem [...] [full name with authors]. He lives next to the Pentecostal church in Mai Ayni. He does all the smuggling from Dekemhare. There is also Bereket, he does all from Keren. And there was Goytom; he did all the smuggling from Adwale. Others were doing from Asmara and Barentu. Tesfalem receives USD 100 for each person provided. It costs USD 1,600 to go to Sudan. There are also small people, maybe they get USD 50. The consul [representative] in Mai Ayni came to my house and my husband paid him USD 1,300. I was in Khartoum waiting to travel on, but my husband paid him in Mai Ayni. (Interview Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 14–15 January 2017)*

A detailed account of the operations is provided online, where Angesom is identified as: “Angesom Teame .a.k.a. Angesom Wejahy/Angesom Kidane” (ICER, 2012), with a detailed description of the facilitating network of Eritreans in the refugee camps in Ethiopia.

Helping people across the border is often the job of local facilitators who know the area and they are often engaging in this because they are desperate and they themselves are vulnerable. If they are caught, they disappear, according to a respondent in one of the refugee camps.

Positions of those who have money in the camps are often used to bribe and retain other privileges. A respondent describes her frustration when she realized that the ‘traffickers’ paid to get their relatives into resettlement procedures, and once this has been successful, they would be able to follow themselves through family reunification.

The increased business of human trafficking has changed the situation inside Eritrea, where road blocks have been removed to make it easier for the traffickers to move people out of the country (Interview A, face-to-face, September 2015).

## **Eritrea’s illicit cross-border trade in arms and people**

Human smuggling, and later trafficking, developed alongside other unofficially sanctioned and, hence, accepted illegal crossborder trade. The trafficking of people is intimately related to the illicit cross-border arms trade: “The arms trade benefits Isaias. The refugees who go with the arms, go with the colonels” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, 30 November 2016). The cross-border military systems are heavily involved in smuggling people out of the country, with the full cooperation of the system and without any obstacles, despite the many military roadblocks and checkpoints:

*[...] one of the ways of escaping from Eritrea is to be transported by a luxury SUV vehicle from Asmara to Kassala, but you have to pay, 8,000 to 10,000 USD. It is arranged by the military and in every vehicle there will be 10–12 people. The vehicles is government/military and it does the whole trip in about 8 hours. That system is known by everybody if you pay. As many cars as there are customers. There are the petty brokers, and the maxi brokers. (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, 30 November 2016)*

Indeed, the involvement of state officials in the smuggling of people has been widely recognised. Meron Estefanos, human rights activist, journalist and radio moderator (and co-author of this chapter), has been interviewing trafficking victims for many years;<sup>2</sup> she explained the involvement of officials:

*...The officials are involved. They are corrupt, they are organized. I do not believe it is at the order of the state [...] itself [...]. [However,] they are free to do whatever they want. [...] For years, he [General Teklai Kifle aka 'Manjus'] was in charge [despite his known involvement in smuggling]. Anybody who is in charge of the border control is going to be rich, because [they] [...] are going to smuggle [...] people. (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)*

According to the Monitoring Group's report (UNSC, 2011), as well as respondents for this study, the Eritrean embassy in Sudan also plays a key role in the multi-million dollar cross-border arms and people smuggling trade:

*Fitsum [Colonel Fitsum Yishak aka 'Lenin']<sup>3</sup> also reports to General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus', commander of the Western military zone and border units, and reportedly works closely with him in cross-border smuggling activities. [...] The Monitoring Group has received information from dozens of Eritrean and Sudanese sources about the multi-million dollar contraband trade between Eritrea and the Sudan. The embassy of Eritrea in the Sudan plays a key role in this illicit trade. (UNSC, 2011, para. 261b & para. 415)*

According to Hosabay, the revenue from the arms trade does not go to the military, but directly to President Isaias Afwerki: “the [money from the] arms sales never goes to the military. It goes to Isaias' coffers. Yes, in Qatar or Dubai, or Pakistan, Iran, Libya” (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

The arms trade is key to understanding the illicit border trade, which is also associated with human trafficking. Military stationed in the border areas reportedly facilitate arms transactions:

*The Bedouins receive the weapons from General Teclé [Teklai] Manjus. The person who told me this in the UK, he was in military service in the border area of Eritrea and Sudan, the no-man's*

*land. They have sold trucks filled with weapons to the Bedouins. The soldiers had to guard the space and they were surrounded by the Bedouins, and they had to exchange the suitcases with the money. Very quickly the weapons were transferred to the other cars. This regime trades weapons with the Bedouins. The weapons were sold to the Bedouins by the regime. This was in 2008. The human trafficking was already beginning. The weapons were smuggled to Gaza. And the regime sold its people. (Interview, Van Reisen with L2, face-to-face, 20 December 2016)*

This testimony should be looked at in connection with information regarding a deal between Eritrea and Iran to supply arms to Gaza (through Sudan and Egypt), which is alleged in the following article in *The Atlantic*:

*The defense ministers of Sudan and Iran signed<sup>4</sup> a “military cooperation agreement” in 2008. Sudan has hosted<sup>5</sup> Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel, and allegedly served as a transit point for weapons bound for Hamas, in the Gaza Strip. The Israelis are acutely aware of the situation: an April, 2009 diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks paraphrases<sup>6</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as telling U.S. officials that “the arms pipeline runs from Iran to Sudan to Egypt.” And in a meeting with U.S. special envoy Scott Gration, Sudanese intelligence chief Salah Ghosh acknowledged<sup>7</sup> that anti-Israel weapons smuggling was occurring on Sudanese territory – but denied that his government was directly involved (“The Rashaida [a tribe in eastern Sudan that is engaged in smuggling] in many countries is now beginning to talk about killing Americans and Israelis,” Ghosh was reported as saying). (Rosen, 2012)*

A Sudanese resource person explained how a series of bombings by Israel on Sudanese soil in 2009, 2010 and 2012 were kept from the public. The Sudanese public eventually found out when the bombings were referred to in Israeli documents and the media. In the perception of the resource person, the Sudanese authorities could not publish the Israeli bombings because they would then have to explain the reasons for such bombings, which targeted arms facilities in eastern Sudan that were supplying weapons to Gaza).

From interviews of people who were abducted in 2009 and 2010 when human trafficking to the Sinai just started, it appears that those who were trafficked were transported together with arms convoys. E was not abducted, but paid to go to Israel from Kassala in 2009; he describes his journey as follows:

*In 2009, I decided to go to Israel after my house was burnt by people with dual Eritrean-Sudanese nationality operating in the border area. I met an Eritrean, Tsegai, who was a facilitator. He knew that I had no money, so he offered me help. It was a normal deal that if you had no money you could be added to a group of others who were paying. Most of the people then were going to Israel. Tsegai arranged Obed and Abu Mohammed, two Rashaida, and they brought us to the desert near Kassala, where we stayed in the open air.*

*I came with one other woman. There were 15 people and more people came until we were about 40 people, among us were 9 women and 2 children. Tsegai effectively sold us. I saw Tsegai taking 3,000 Sudanese pounds for me and the other woman, who had come with me. I thought it was a commission. I knew that this usually happened. I was told that they would call in the Sinai that I did not have to pay and also that I could work as a translator. (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

A former PFDJ official, referred to as S2, who worked at the regional level within Eritrea, relayed the following:

*I was not looking for smugglers and I did not want to go to Israel. When I looked for work I was abducted by Rashaida and taken to a place where many were held. We were 52, of which 20 were women. This was in April 2010. They divided us into groups of 20. I was in the middle of the desert. I was abducted randomly, but I believe firmly that they had links to Eritrea. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

S2 was abducted and transported in one of the first human trafficking convoys in 2010, shortly after Sinai trafficking started at the end of 2008. Around the same time, Israel bombed arms facilities in eastern Sudan. Sinai trafficking initially seems to be an attempt to create human shields to disguise the smuggling of arms:

*Although Tel Aviv will not admit it, this is their third attack on Sudanese soil in as many years. In 2009 they destroyed a convoy taking weapons to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and in 2010 they killed an arms smuggler who was also thought to have been supplying Hamas. (Tinsley, 2012)*

The vehicles used not only smuggled weapons and ammunition into the Sinai and beyond, but also carried people. One Sinai victim explained: “Trucks are loaded with weapons and ammunition, and the passengers and their goods ride on top to conceal the cargo” (UN Security Council, 2012, para. 84). In this regard, the Monitoring Group states:

*The well-documented exodus of young Eritreans to escape poverty or obligatory ‘national service’ represents yet another opportunity for corruption and illicit revenue. People smuggling is so pervasive that it could not be possible without the complicity of Government and party officials, especially military officers working in the western border zone, which is headed by General Teklai Kifle ‘Manjus’. Multiple sources have described to the Monitoring Group how Eritrean officials collaborate with ethnic Rashaida smugglers to move their human cargo through the Sudan into Egypt and beyond. This is in most respects the same network involved in smuggling weapons through to Sinai and into Gaza. (UNSC, 2011, para. 421)*

While the government-facilitated mass exodus of its own people has enabled Sinai trafficking, the specific trafficking structures seem to be the same as those used for the trafficking of weapons. This relationship between trafficking in people and in weapons in the Sinai, and the direct involvement of Eritrean officials in both, is explained by one of the Sinai survivors interviewed by the Monitoring Group:

*[...] On my way to Israel in 2011, I spent 20 days in the Sinai. I worked as a translator for the smuggler Abu Ahmed. [...] He brings people from Libya and Sudan to Israel and charges them \$15,000 each, no more, no less. [...] He also smuggles weapons. The way he brings them is through Sudan but their journey starts in a place called Allai, in the highlands of Eritrea. From Allai they are taken to Tesseney, which is the exit town of Eritrea. [...] From Tesseney they go to Wadi Sharifay in Sudan, which used to be a refugee camp. From Wadi Sharifay to Sitau Ashrin; which is also a refugee camp. [...] There are two high ranking Eritrean soldiers involved in this, I know them well. Their names are Berhane and Yosief H [full name with authors]. The main man who is in charge of all of this is Manjus. The other two are the ones working. They bring the weapons in their cars to Wadi Sharifay. Then Manjus calls the Rashaida and they come and there is a handover — the smugglers take the weapons. These are the same gangs that smuggle people. [...] [The] money doesn't stop with Manjus, it goes all the way up — to the president. The weapons are taken to Sinai. I saw with my own naked eyes, Abu Ahmed pays \$250 each for these weapons. [...] He then sells them to Palestinians for more. [...] The weapons are taken in a big truck from Eritrea to Sudan. But when they are transported from Sudan to Sinai, they are covered with people so they are not exposed to the satellites. [...] The routes into Egypt come from all different directions but they all cross at exactly the same point on the Suez Canal. They carry the weapons in ships covered with cartons and bags so as not to be detected and people sit on them. [...] Abu Ahmed would receive deliveries of weapons three times a week. In every two deliveries, there would be say 300 weapons; and countless bullets. (UNSC, 2012, Annex. 2.2 para. 75–84)*

This report is consistent with the narrative of other trafficking victims. A refugee interviewed by the UN Security Council described the weapons transported in the vehicle he was trafficked in:

*I was in Shegarab [also known as Shagarab] refugee camp in Sudan when they kidnapped me. I had only been in the refugee camp for two weeks. The ones who have been there longer don't fall for the trap. [...] Some Rashaida came into the camp saying: "Come quickly, come with us, there is work..." A few of us followed them and suddenly they jumped on us and forced us into cars. There are Rashaida in both Eritrea and Sudan — there's really no border for them — and there are words the Rashaida speak that we all understand. [...] I was taken to a place in Kassala and held there. There were four guards — different ones every day. [...] From there, we were taken to the border with Egypt. We were two cars with 15 people in each — we were stuff [sic] in together. There were Kalashnikovs, RPGS [Rocket-Propelled Grenades] and grenades in both cars. [...] They put in as many weapons as they could fit around us and some in the boot [trunk] of the car. These weapons came with us all the way to Sinai. I don't know where they were from but they were very new. [...]*

*It was impossible to know how many weapons there are but I knew there were at least two RPGs because I saw the heads of them.* (UN Security Council, 2012, Annex. 2.2 para. 4–8)

The narratives of these Sinai survivors are contextualised by former Minister Hosabay's explanation for the relationship between Sinai trafficking in arms and people. As mentioned previously, Sinai trafficking for ransom developed out of the arms trade, with the first Sinai victims taken along arms trading routes to the Sinai and into Gaza to protect the arms cargo from being discovered by satellites and bombed by the Israeli military. Another informant adds:

*Israeli planes had reportedly attacked Eritrean and/or Sudanese weapons convoys heading to Sinai during 2006 or 2007, so the transporters decided to load the trucks with people on top of the weapons. The Israeli planes couldn't bomb refugee trucks because they were not military targets [and] [...] drones wouldn't be able to detect any weapons. But [then] it was discovered that the human cargo [...] [was] more precious than the weapons, [and now...] we have the Sinai trafficking.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 1 December 2016)

It was soon realised that those involved in the smuggling of Eritreans could earn 10 to 20 times more if they betrayed their clients and handed them over to the Rashaida for sale to the Bedouins in the Sinai (*Ibid.*).

According to S2 the convoy that abducted him from eastern Sudan to the Sinai took off after the alleged bombing by Israel of arms convoys in eastern Sudan in 2009. This bombing is reported by the Times of Israel: "Three airstrikes carried out in March 2009 destroyed a convoy of trucks in eastern Sudan reportedly carrying long-range Iranian missiles to the Gaza Strip" (Miller, 2014). According to S2: "A lot of cars have a barrel of water in the middle. Other cars have fewer people, and they transport the arms" (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

An interviewee who worked for the PFDJ in a high-ranking position, provides the following explanation:

*Weapons came to the Sinai with the help of the Rashaida, under the command of Afwerki. Iran sent the weapons to Massawa through the Red Sea and the Swiss [Suez] Canal to Palestine, Gaza. Israel knew. These were transported by jeeps. Afwerki bought the jeeps.* (Interview, Van Reisen with F, face-to-face, September 2015)

## **Abduction and trafficking to the Sinai**

The Sinai trafficking routes for Eritreans usually involve three countries: Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt. In some cases, Eritreans first move to Ethiopia and continue their journey from there. Commonly, their journey begins as flight from Eritrea (often with the aid of smugglers) and can be transformed into trafficking at any point en route (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Some are abducted while in Eritrea, but many are abducted while crossing the border or residing in Sudan or Ethiopia (*Ibid.*). This being said, smugglers are often involved in their abduction, meaning that the journey of many Eritreans is orchestrated to end in trafficking, long before the victim realises it. Some Eritreans reported paying smugglers to transport them to Israel, only to find out that the smugglers had sold them along the way or once they reached the Sinai. In most cases, the refugees said that they had no intention of travelling to Egypt or Israel; instead, their common destinations were Shagarab refugee camp in Sudan or Mai Ayni refugee camp in Ethiopia (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012).

In many cases, Eritreans who had made deals with smugglers or border guards to facilitate their journeys found their voluntary journeys gradually turn into forced trafficking (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). Those who were supposed to facilitate their journey suddenly changed the terms of the arrangement by asking for more money or by changing the destination (*Ibid.*, 2014). Those 'helping' the refugees eventually revealed themselves as Sinai traffickers or sold their clients to such traffickers at the Eritrean border or in Sudan. Sinai victims reported finding themselves forced to pay for a journey through the Sinai to Israel that they had never wanted to take, in the hands of people with whom they had never made an agreement.

This section looks at the abduction of Eritreans in various locations and their journeys to the Sinai, focusing on the role of state officials and security personnel.



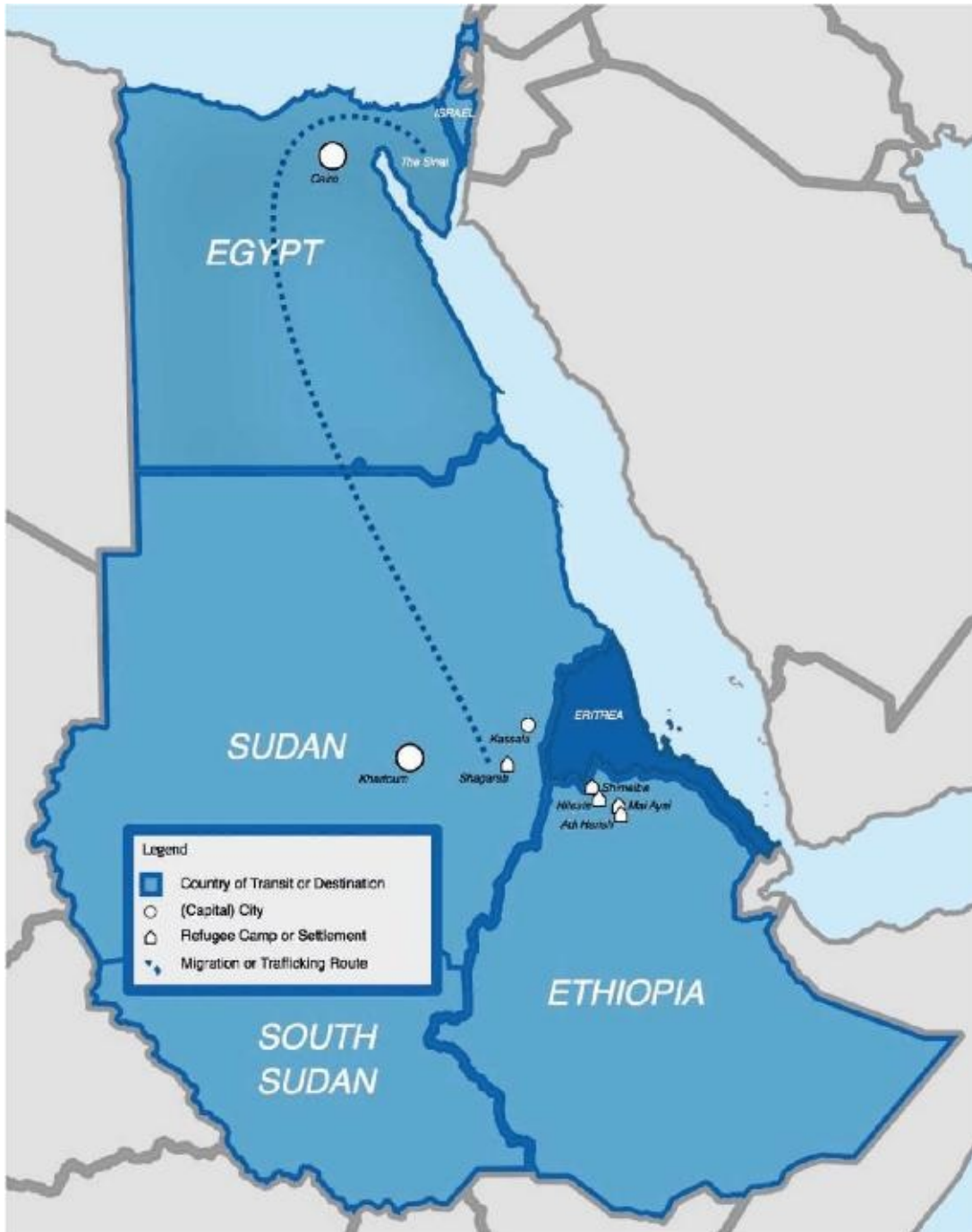


Figure 2.1. Trafficking route to the Sinai (Source: Lena Reim, 2016 – partially reproduced from Amnesty International, 2013, borders may not be exact representations)

### ***Abduction from within Eritrea***

While abduction from Eritrea appears to have been rare at the outset of Sinai trafficking in 2008, this changed by 2010 and increased dramatically in 2013 (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Eritreans were abducted from various locations in Eritrea.

Those working and living in the border regions, especially Tesseney and Golij, were particularly vulnerable to abduction (*Ibid.*). Van Reisen *et al.* report:

*There have been [...] reports of children under the age of 15 and others being kidnapped from Tesseney and Golij. Women and children looking for firewood in Golij have been targeted as have farm workers near the Sudanese border, who report being kidnapped by Rashida and Hidarib tribesmen. (Ibid., p. 46)*

Abduction became so invasive in Eritrea that it even took place in Asmara:

*A mother of three children told how she was kidnapped in Asmara. She said that she never intended to leave the country, but merely attended a meeting with her business partner in Asmara. At the meeting, there were three men she didn't know. The next thing she remembers is waking up in Kassala with the three men; her business partner was not there. The house where she woke up belonged to Rashaida people. The three others didn't remember how they got there either. They were asked to pay USD 10,000 within a few days and told that if they didn't they would be sold to the Bedouins in the Sinai. (Van Reisen et al., 2014, pp. 47–48)*

Particularly interesting with regard to the involvement of Eritrean military and state officials is the fact that abductions have happened in great numbers from within Sawa Military Camp, where all Eritrean children must spend their last year of high school. In fact, in October 2013, Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) reported the abduction of 211 children. One instance that occurred in 2012, indicates the complicity of officials in these abductions:

*In 2012, an Eritrean woman living in Sweden said that her son was abducted from Sawa Military Camp [...]. This woman explained that seven children, who were relatives of six families in Sweden, and some other children, who had relatives in other Western countries, were ordered by a high-ranking officer in Sawa to get into his car. They were driven to Sudan without their knowledge or consent. Once the children reached Sudan, the traffickers made the children call their parents and told them if they did not pay USD 7,500 they would be sold to the Sinai. (Van Reisen et al., 2014, pp. 46–47)*

In Van Reisen et al. (2017) an explanation for the beginning of Sinai trafficking is being provided in the development of ICTs enabling the connectivity necessary for the modus operandi.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Abduction while crossing Eritrean borders***

That Sinai trafficking involves an overwhelming number of Eritreans is strongly linked to the fact that thousands of Eritreans are fleeing Eritrea each month. While fleeing, they are easy targets for different forms of abuse, including human

trafficking. Leaving Eritrea is incredibly challenging, as exit visas are hard to come by, Eritrea's borders are heavily guarded, and Eritrea has a shoot-to-kill policy at the border with Ethiopia (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). This has led to the creation of a complex informal business involving smugglers, border guards and state officials, who sell cross-border mobility to those seeking to leave.

As mentioned above, the involvement of high-level government officials has been confirmed by several sources as a necessary precondition for this business to take place. In 2011, the Monitoring Group reported that, according to former Eritrean military officials and international human rights activists, "military officers involved in the practice charge roughly \$ 3,000 a head for each person exiting Eritrea" (UNSC, 2011, para. 421–422). Yet, it appears that rising insecurity regarding the safety of these trips has driven-up prices in return for greater security. Former Finance Minister, Hosabay, who was interviewed for this research, reported that people are now paying USD 8,000–10,000 to escape from Eritrea in luxury SUVs from Asmara to Kassala (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

Those who pay these high prices to state officials and smugglers are usually transported safely to Sudan. They are often driven in vehicles owned by the Eritrean Border Surveillance Unit and can cross checkpoints without trouble. However, those who are not able to pay for this 'premium deal', are smuggled at great risk. Estefanos explained:

*The safest way is to use these officials, because they will drive you all the way to Khartoum by car. [...] The reason it's safe is [that] they're not leaving you in Kassala [...] and [because] once you arrive in Khartoum, you call your family in Eritrea and you confirm that you are in Khartoum and that's when you will pay the money to the official. [...] [By using this procedure,] it becomes difficult for that official to sell you. [...] I know a few cases where some people [...] wanted to get out of the military camp without notifying their family members. [...] Here, the family is not involved, so there is no guarantee whatsoever. The person decides to trust this official. But once you arrive in Sudan you would find out that these are people are kidnappers and then there would be a ransom. The first arrangement is safe, but this [second] kind of arrangement, it often happens that these people call and say we are kidnapped in Sudan. (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)*

When Eritreans cannot pay officials to be taken all the way by car, they sometimes have to travel by foot through unprotected open areas where they are easy targets for trafficking groups. In these instances, smugglers and border guards are less willing to guarantee their clients' safety and are often directly involved in

their sale to trafficking groups, such as the Rashaida. This is especially the case for Sudanese border guards, as illustrated in the following narration by a Sinai survivor:

*S and a friend decided to leave Asmara and ended up at the border between Eritrea and Sudan. Once they reached Sudan, they met the Sudanese security guards at the border and told them they were on their way to the refugee camp. The security guards welcomed them and told them to wait for a car that would pick them up. They were told that the car would take them to Shagarab. The drivers were Rashaida and they asked for USD 3,000, and told them they were going to Israel. S and his friend protested that they did not have plans to go to Israel; then they were hit. They ended up in the Sinai [Interview 4]. [...] The interviewer asked whether they knew of the dangers, and S explained that in Eritrea everybody knows, but they thought they were safe with the security guards. S was eventually able to pay the ransom and arrived in Israel in February 2012. (Van Reisen et al., 2012, pp. 31-32)*

A recent set of interviews conducted with Sinai survivors in Ethiopia revealed the extent of Sudanese involvement in Sinai trafficking (see [Chapter 7](#)). Among the 28 interviewees, 21 were directly abducted at the Eritrea-Sudan border and 13 were initially arrested by the Sudanese police, who then handed them over to the Rashaida. This was also confirmed by interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch, in which Eritreans reported that that members of the Sudanese police force and soldiers in the border town of Kassala would arrange handovers to traffickers – even at police stations (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 5). Meron Estefanos explained how Sudanese border guards became so heavily involved in these abductions:

*[...] people became too aware of Rashaida; as Arabs, they could easily be identified, making it more difficult to arrange abductions. People start[ed] avoiding anyone Arab-looking because that means that they are Rashaidas. So, then they [the Rashaida] started hiring [...] corrupt [...] Sudanese officials, who would do the job for them. [...] In any country you enter, the first people you see [are the border guards] [...] and you go to them and you say you are asking for asylum; that's how it's done. So, they would tell them okay, come into the office, have a seat and we are going to bring a car that will bring you to the refugee camp. [...] Instead of bringing the UNHCR car, it would be the Rashaidas who would come and pick them up and bring them to the Sinai. This has happened very often, especially in 2012, 2013. [...] Most of the people kidnapped at that time were [abducted] through Sudanese officials. (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)*

But Eritreans were also involved in these hand-overs:

*[We went through] Tesseney. We were with three people. We reached the border and we were told there is a checkpoint. And we were told to wait for the smuggler, he would come back. He came back*

*with an Eritrean soldier. He told them, he is a militia. They gave him the money. So we were taken [...] and we were taken to Sinai.* (Interview, Van Reisen with W, face-to-face, September 2015)

A similar testimony is provided by V: “Abductions in Kassala are the PFDJ’s doing. I was abducted by Eritreans. The PFDJ is present. They can intervene. But they do not want to” (Interview Van Reisen with V, face-to-face, 19 January 2017).

In the following interview, it is clear that the refugee was sold from within Eritrea:

*I was in the military camp in Sawa. I was imprisoned because they caught me trying to escape. I tried again, but I was caught and then sold in around 2011. I ended up in the Sinai.* (Interview, Van Reisen with M, face-to-face, September 2015)

Van Reisen *et al.* (2017) sets out how cooperation between trafficking networks and officials make up the system, in which each party mutually benefits from the extortion and looting. More importantly, members of the Rashaida ethnic group have been integrated into the Eritrean system of border security and control on Eritrea’s western border. They enjoy protection within Eritrea and are given a free hand to engage in the smuggling and trafficking of human beings with full impunity (Interviews Van Reisen with V, W and X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017; Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, face-to-face, 20 January 2017). The collaboration between Eritrean officials and members of the Rashaida group in the trafficking of human beings also leads to a sinister form of competition, which drives up the price for trafficking. According to testimonies, the price of ransoms was also driven up by competition between Eritrean officials who paid members of the Rashaida to return refugees and Eritrean families seeking a secure exit for relatives. This is explained in the following testimony by W: “The PFDJ started to pay more to Rashaida to have people returned. Then the refugees paid more to stay out. So the Rashaida make more money all the time” (Interview Van Reisen with W, face-to-face, 19 January 2017).

If this scheme were proven to be true, it would point to the Eritrean government as responsible for creating and entertaining a system in which its citizens are fully exposed to the danger of human trafficking by perpetrators with the full knowledge of the government, which protects the perpetrators of such crimes. Moreover, the active persecution of Eritreans in Sudan by the Eritrean government further exacerbates the vulnerability of Eritreans to human trafficking, increasing the money involved. This hypothesis deserves further investigation.

### ***Abduction in Sudan and Ethiopia***

Once in Ethiopia or Sudan, Eritreans are at great risk of falling victim (again) to human trafficking, especially while in the refugee camps. In Ethiopia, particularly in Mai Ayni refugee camp, trafficking victims were lured by smugglers who promise to guide them to Shagarab refugee camp or other destinations (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, 18 December 2016; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). The refugees are then handed over to Bedouins in the Sinai or sold to trafficking groups, such as the Rashaida (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). One survivor narrated the following:

*When I was there, we decided to travel to Sudan, and one Ethiopian brought us to Sudan. [...] When we were crossing a river called Tkeze, one person died while crossing. Then the Ethiopian smuggler brought us to Shagarab. When the smuggler was aiding us into Shagarab, he entered with us. When he brought us into the area, he said he would allow us to spend the night there. When we did, he proceeded to take us where the Rashaida people were. [...] After that, without our knowledge they took us to another place for about a month. Finally, we reached the place where other Eritreans were held. We were mixed with them. And now we find ourselves here in the Sinai [Interview 3]. [...] (Van Reisen et al., 2012, p. 29)*

A former trafficker, who operated in Mai Ayni refugee camp identifies refugee camps as key trafficking points, adding that “if you stop the business in the camps then it will stop here [in the Sinai] also [Interview 65] [...]” (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012, p. 40).

Another great risk awaits refugees at the border between Ethiopia and Sudan, where Rashaida often wait for Eritreans seeking to travel to Sudan and beyond (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016).

In Sudan, and especially Shagarab refugee camp, the risk of being kidnapped by Rashaida is ever present. For many Eritreans, the camp is the first point of settlement in Sudan when seeking refugee status (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). While waiting for refugee status to be granted, many refugees have been abducted in the immediate surroundings of the refugee camp: while working in the fields, collecting fire wood, or washing themselves in a nearby dam. Some even report being kidnapped from inside the camp (*Ibid.*). In these cases, traffickers working and living within the camps often coordinate their abduction. Estefanos explained that abductions within the camp are usually done directly by Rashaida. However, she adds: “Where were [the Sudanese police in these instances]? I mean there is security in the camp. How did that happen? [...] Without any officials it’s impossible to do these things” (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016). The long list of human traffickers and smugglers identified as operating in eastern Sudan and Khartoum (see the list printed by Africa Monitors, 2016b), including

the refugee camp of Shagarab, illustrate the point that this region is a crucial coordination point for the entire trafficking operation.

In fact, strong evidence suggests the involvement of the Sudanese police, who turn a blind eye and even collaborate with the traffickers during the abductions (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). One group of Sinai survivors interviewed by Van Reisen *et al.* (2012) was initially able to fight off their attempted kidnappers, but when they contacted the police, they did not react to their plea for help. There is a lack of protection or security in Shagarab refugee camp and people are abducted from around and within the camp (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012 & 2014).

Others report the direct involvement of the police in their abduction. One of the Sinai survivors who was examined by a physician in Shemelba refugee camp in Ethiopia (see [Chapter 7](#)), explained that he was kidnapped by the Sudanese police from within the camp. Later, he was handed over to the Rashaida who sold him to Bedouins in the Sinai, where he was tortured for ransom. Upon his release he was imprisoned in Egypt and deported to Ethiopia.

In another instance, a refugee was abducted by the Sudanese police from a bus transporting refugees to another camp:

*He said that Sudanese police stopped a bus in which the refugees were being transported to another camp. The relative believes that the driver was also informed. The police took out three people, under the pretext of an issue with papers, even though they had the card issued by UNHCR. As soon as the bus and the police left, a car arrived and these people were abducted. His relative was sold to the Sinai [Interview by Van Reisen, 13 November 2013]. [...]* (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014, p. 52)

While Shagarab refugee camp was a central Sinai trafficking port, abduction was widespread across the whole of Sudan. Sinai survivors and others reported being abducted in Khartoum and along the common migration routes. In all instances, smugglers or guides, recruited by the refugees to facilitate their journey, translate or help them to find jobs, facilitated their abduction (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012).

The control of General Manjus in eastern Sudan and the collaboration between Eritrea and eastern Sudan has given the Eritrean government and military significant influence and control over operations in eastern Sudan from where many refugees were taken to the Sinai.

### ***Trafficking from eastern Sudan to the Sinai***

Once abducted, most people reported being brought to warehouses in Sudan, where they remained imprisoned for several weeks or months before continuing their journey (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Only when 'enough' hostages had been

collected would the traffickers transport them from the warehouses to Egypt and on to the Sinai (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). According to Van Reisen *et al.* (2014), these ‘holding areas’ were only a few kilometres away from Shagarab refugee camp.

The hostages were taken by car to Egypt. Once the vehicles reached Egypt, the trafficked persons were commonly handed over to Bedouin traffickers, who then arranged for their further transit through to the Sinai (UN Security Council, 2012, para. 85). The traffickers drove up all the way to the Suez Canal, which they had to pass to reach the Sinai (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014):

*There are three main routes across the Suez Canal used for the human trafficking: the Martyr Ahmed Hamdy Tunne, the Kobri (bridge) al-Salam and the canal itself, which they cross in small boats. [...] On the other side of the Suez Canal there are cars waiting to drive them to the Sinai. They then drive north to Arish, the capital of the Sinai. They enter Sheikh Zuweid, which is where the lawless part of the Sinai starts, and then move further to Almahdia. From Almahdia, they travel all the way to Raffa area, close to Gaza and the Israeli border. This is where the torture camps are located. (Van Reisen et al., 2014, p. 45)*

As is the case in Eritrea and Sudan, there is substantial evidence that such expansive trafficking through Egypt involved collaboration with officials and security forces. Based on interviews with Eritreans, Human Rights Watch reports:

*They [...] said that in Egypt, soldiers and police colluded with traffickers every step of the way: at checkpoints between the Sudanese border and the Suez Canal, at the heavily-policed canal or at checkpoints manning the only vehicle bridge crossing the canal, in traffickers’ houses, at checkpoints in Sinai’s towns, and close to the border with Israel. (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 5)*

Further, a report compiled by the US State Department on Human Trafficking in Persons in Egypt found that security forces “failed to investigate vehicles used by criminals to transport migrants across Ministry of Interior-controlled bridges into the Sinai, and accepted bribes from criminals transporting the migrants and trafficking victims into the Sinai” (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 49). A collusion with Eritrean representatives in Eritrea was also reported:

*So far the following persons are suspected as working hand in glove with the hostage takers and perhaps the Embassy in Cairo.*

*[...] Zeray Yitbarek [...] holds Eritrean diplomatic passport*

*[...] Solomon Tsegay [...] receives money from family members and instruct others to receive money on his behalf. The involvement of others is an effort in the part of Solomon to cover his track and avoid the scrutiny that he so abhors. (ICER, 2012, Tigrinya adapted, MvR).*



In fact, collaboration with officials is an essential pre-condition for such trafficking operations. Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) explain that the trafficking vehicles in which the hostages were transported through Egypt were easily identifiable and had to pass many checkpoints on the way. Notably, they had to cross the Suez Canal, an undertaking which, according to Bedouin community leaders, guarantees the knowledge of “authorities, including police and the military” (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, pp. 58–59). Estefanos, who has passed the Suez Canal, confirms that “without [the help of] an official there is no way a person can cross” (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016). One person’s report of his journey over the Suez Canal explicitly indicates the involvement of high Egyptian officials in the process: “We were smuggled onto a boat [...] with the help of a very senior Egyptian general. I saw him but didn’t speak to him and never found out his name but he was very high ranking” (UN Security Council, 2012, para. 96, also Van Reisen, personal conversations with anon. December 2016, January 2017; Military Map Sinai, unpublished, in possession of Van Reisen).

In the interview with S2, he mentioned that he did not understand the inaction of the UN peacekeeping forces:

*In the Sinai, at the river in the north, there is a UN peacekeeping force – and also in the south there is UN peacekeeping forces. In the north, we could even see them [from the torture house]. Even physically they could see it [the torture house]. They could see the movements. The northern peacekeeping force was a shot-gun away. When we were released, they [UN peacekeepers] saw us. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

A map of the Sinai and the military checkpoints indicates that it is difficult to imagine such a large-scale operation being carried out without the knowledge of the resident military (Military Map of the Sinai, unpublished, held by Van Reisen). At the same time, the interception of trafficking vehicles by Egyptian forces is indicated in at least two reports. First, in 2011, the Monitoring Group reported that a trafficking vehicle was attacked in what appeared to be a joint Egyptian-Israeli operation (UNSC, 2011, para. 359). Secondly, one Sinai victim reported witnessing shooting when Egyptian border guards stopped one of trafficking vehicles in front of him (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Yet, these instances seem to be the exception rather than the norm. Estefanos explained that, at that time, many trafficking victims reported the same experience:

*[They said] the military would stop the truck they were in and that the driver would go out and talk to them [the military] and then they would just let them pass. So, [...] the driver had given whoever stopped them some money and without searching the truck they would just tell them, go ahead. This*

*was happening quite often. [...] These people made an arrangement before their departure. [...] We are talking about thousands and thousands of people, so without the help of the Egyptian military it would be impossible.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

Within this context, the Sinai torture houses appear to be just one of a variety of criminal activities that have developed within the Sinai without serious persecution by the government or security forces (*Ibid.*). During investigations in the Sinai, Estefanos spoke to several Bedouin traffickers, who declared:

*Nobody can touch us because this is a demilitarized zone, so we will rule this area for years to come. So, [if] you want to stop us, get to the source, the people who are sending us [the hostages]. We are not going to Eritrea; we are not going to Sudan. [...] Cut off the source, that's the only way you can stop us.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

At the same time, Estefanos reports that the Egyptian government was able to 'stop' the Bedouin traffickers in several instances in which hostages were of different nationalities:

*...It has happened [that] [...] a Norwegian woman was kidnapped in the Sinai. The whole world was talking about it and she was freed. The government somehow negotiated with those who kidnapped her and two weeks later she was released. An Israeli man was kidnapped in the same area and he was released after four days. It has happened twice or three times that Americans were kidnapped in the same area and within 24 hours the Egyptian government did something and released people from those who were keeping them hostage.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

The conclusion that can be drawn from these instances is clear to Estefanos:

*...It shows you [that] when there are other nationalities [...], western nationalities, being kidnapped, the Egyptian government did act, but these were Africans. Nobody [...] really asked anything about these issues. No requests came from African governments to stop, so that itself shows you it has something to do with colour.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

In testimonies, refugees say that the trafficking operations were carried out with full impunity and that those carrying out the various activities enjoyed protection from the highest level. They emphasise this impunity in all geographical areas along the trafficking routes, and the protection from Eritrean high-ranking officials to carry out the operations, while the Rashaida and Bedouins are protected within Eritrean territory. This is explained in an interview with X: "The PFDJ provides impunity to the Rashaida for their movements. Big cars and trucks can pass. Soldiers see us moving with our chains. They cannot have this level of impunity

unless there is agreement at a high level” (Interview, Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017).

The Eritrean military knew the Sinai area well, and knew what it had to offer, having been engaged for years in the trade of arms and weapons, in which Rashaida and Bedouins were carrying out the logistics. Testimonies of the Sinai victims suggest that they strongly believe that an operation of this scale could not be carried out without the protection of the Eritrean government, its tacit or explicit consent, and possibly – hypothetically – it overseeing the operation from the highest level.

### ***The system of payments for trafficking***

Sinai trafficking is sophisticated in its organisation and involves a lot of logistics suggesting that it is connected in its entirety. This is assumed because there are only a few points at which payments are made. This indicates that the various payments carried out for logistics, protection, bribes, security and other activities involved in the trafficking are paid from one pot. The organisation of this is seen as a continuation of the previous route of smuggling Eritrean refugees to Israel (prior to 2008): “If people made it to Israel, people thought they paid for the route” (Interview Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017).

How the payments were made is related by S2 in the following:

*We were kidnapped and held in Sudan. We don't know the name of this place. Different groups were held in slightly different places. There, they only take the numbers. No information is taken from you. From this place they took them in cars. Inside Egypt we were transported in a convoy with four pick-up cars. Four cars were filled with arms. At the river they radio each other. Then they distribute the people. You don't pay anything then. No money is paid at the collection point or on the way. The only money negotiation starts in the Sinai. At the river, the distribution of people depends on logistical things, such as how many people the trucks can take. The black Egyptians took us from the Sudanese Rashaida. The black Egyptians run the cars from the river to the canal. The black Egyptians then hand you to the Arab Egyptians. From here you go the Swiss [Suez] Canal and then another convoy of cars will be waiting on the other side. Then you cross the canal and there the main people are waiting. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

A similar story is told by E:

*We started off (from Sudan) with four cars (two from Obed and two from Mohammed) and a fifth car with the ammunition and provisions. Three armed guards travelled for each of the two cars. We continued traveling north-east, through the Sudanese border, entered Egypt on our third day, then there were two hills. When we were at the Egyptian border, there was a change-over. Obed's cars and Mohammed's cars split. We were all running out of food. We stopped in the valley between the hills. [...] I heard the discussion about the transaction, talking about USD 5,000 per person for the*

*group of 38 people. [...] Hunger became a problem. [...] They told us, give us money and we will bring food.* (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)

S2 was witness to the key players on the Sinai side and the negotiations about the money that should be paid:

*Abu Abdellah is the leader. Abu Salem is the brother of Abu Abdellah. Abu Salem is based in and around Kassala in eastern Sudan. He controls the operation there. Abu Salem's deals were USD 3,000 less – then they reached the Sinai and were told to pay USD 10,000 by Abu Abdellah. Abu Salem is the security brother to Abu Abdellah. When Abdellah started charging USD 10,000 the other facilitators were really angry. And Abu Salem ran away. When they asked why they should pay more, as they had agreed USD 3,000, Abu Abdellah told, that his brother had already paid USD 100,000 for the group. Abu Salem paid the people on the ground in Kassala. But I don't think they paid them. I think it was to drive up the price. The Rashaida cannot operate without the protection of the PFDJ.* (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)

S2 worked out the system of payments made at the different stages of the journey:

*The payments did not add up. The Rashaida had paid the colonels (payment I) and added in the price for the transportation, including the payments to the facilitators (mini-smugglers). The mini-smugglers could be Sudanese, black Egyptians, Arab Egyptians, Eritreans or Ethiopians. The Bedouins were demanded to cover the payment (Cost I) and the costs for the transportation (Cost II) and the costs for holding us in the Sinai (Cost III). The amounts did not add up and there was a huge fight. This is when they started to torture us to extort the ransoms. In my view, this happened so that their costs were covered and they could make their cut.* (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)

An important element of the testimony of S2 is that he identified that the original price for his delivery from Sudan to the Sinai was USD 3,000. However, upon arrival, this price went up to USD 10,000. The conclusion that he drew from this was that more money had been paid for him in Kassala than had been expected. He thought he was the first group for which prices went up. According to this testimony, the ransom was levied to cover the fees paid to the Eritrean commanders and the cost of transportation and other logistics. Contributions for the smuggling from Eritrea were demanded and extorted in Eritrea, adding to the profit of the Eritrean traffickers. In Sudan, payments for smuggling were completed and extortion covered the transportation costs. In the Sinai, final transactions were demanded in the form of ransoms, which increased over the years (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014), sometimes resulting in serial ransoms being demanded and the on-selling

of trafficking victims from one Bedouin group to another (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

A hypothesis could be formulated that torture for ransom had to be carried out (and intensified) in order to foot the bill for the increasing prices associated with the convoys of arms and human commodities. Over time, the costs increased further due to the larger numbers and increasingly complex logistics and associated security payments, which may (at least partially) potentially explain why ransoms for Sinai hostages increased over the period that these practices took place (end of 2008 to 2015). Other testimonies have confirmed the theory that the overall costs associated with the trade in trafficking of human beings from Eritrea increased due to the increasingly higher costs of protection money, logistics and costs required to secure the free movements of the convoys. This would explain the steady increase of ransoms from a few hundred dollars in 2009 to USD 60.000 at the highest point in 2013.

It should be noted that this increase in ransoms only affected the Eritrean refugees and generally did not affect refugees with other nationalities, such as Ethiopians and Sudanese. This strengthens the case for a hypothesis that the Eritrean government was implicated in trade of Eritreans and the increase in ransoms benefitted all included in the Human Trafficking chain, including the Eritrean government.

More on the system of payments can be found in [Chapter 3](#).

## **Involvement of Eritrean officials**

### ***In Sudan***

According to Sinai survivors, the Eritrean leadership has a substantial intelligence operation in eastern Sudan:

*Teclé [Teklai] Manjus' division has an office in Kassala. The military division has this office. The intelligence operation is managed from this office. The place where the hostages are collected is only 1 hour, 30 minutes-drive from this office. The Border control equals intelligence gathering. Scouts from that division gather evidence of all the people who go to Shagarab. And they kidnap people from there. [...] They are operational there. Hence, I can only conclude that they [the Eritrean Government] do not want to interfere. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

In this interview, S2, a Sinai survivor and former PFDJ official, said he was detained for several weeks in a place that he believes was not far from General

Manjus' administrative office in Sudan. He also believes that the smugglers received direct orders from the Eritrean office in Kassala. He explained that the ethnic Rashaida, who detained him, reported to a leader who reported to General Manjus. What is important about this testimony is the understanding that the Rashaida in eastern Sudan were operating directly under the authority of General Manjus, according to an agreement between General Manjus and an unnamed Rashaida leader:

*The place in the desert where we were abducted is not far from Kassala, not far from the headquarters of the Eritrean informants and intelligence and border control. So how could they [the Eritrean government] not know?* (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)

This Eritrean authority in Sudan is pertinent and the mention of an 'office' and an 'agreement' indicates that it has a permanent and authoritative status in the Kassala region: "The border control authority command was under General Tekle [Teklai] Manjus. They work very closely with the Rashaida. In the torture camp it was very clear that they knew he [Manjus] was from the government" (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015). The purpose of the office is to gather intelligence from the large Eritrean refugee community in Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan, which is the main camp supporting Eritrean refugees (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

The collaboration between high-ranking officials engaged in the organisation of illicit cross-border trade is commonly reported as involving Eritrean officials, but also their Sudanese colleagues, members of the ethnic Rashaida (who often have passports for both countries), as well as some Bedouins in the Sinai. The head of the Rashaida is being paid by Asmara in dollars, according to a claim by one interviewee (Interview, Van Reisen with B, face-to-face, September 2015).

In this regard, the Monitoring Group explained:

*Arms trafficking from western Eritrea is just one component of a much broader, and highly profitable, smuggling operation overseen by General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus', Commander of the western military zone [...]. His principal Sudanese counterpart in this cross-border activity is Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, the current Minister of State for Transport of the Sudan, [...]. Salim, an ethnic Rashaida, works closely with other well-established Rashaida smugglers, who operate with the full knowledge of Government officials on both sides of the border.* (UNSC, 2011, para. 358)

Even more specifically, the Ambassador of Eritrea to Sudan was mentioned as the chief coordinator of Eritrean activities in Sudan, while General Teklai Manjus

was identified as the coordinator of the cross-border smuggling:

*The Group named Mohammed Mantai, the ambassador of Eritrea to the Sudan at the time, as the chief coordinator of Eritrean activities out of the Sudan, and General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus' as the overseer of cross-border smuggling operations (see S/2011/433, paras. 415-420). In 2013, the Monitoring Group reported that Mr. Mantai continued to be involved in smuggling activities between Eritrea and the Sudan. (UNSC, 2014, para. 17)*

The Rashaida traffickers were the most prominent traffickers facilitating forced journeys to the Sinai. The Rashaida tribe is believed to stem originally from the Saudi peninsula and is related ethnically to the Bedouins (Köhler-Rollefson, Musa, & Achmed, 1991, cited in Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). At this point it must be stressed that not all members of the Rashaida tribe are involved in smuggling and trafficking. Yet, those who are involved usually refer to themselves only as Rashaida, which has led to an entangled terminology in which the term 'Rashaida' is used to refer to both the ethnic group as well as the criminal group involved in smuggling and trafficking. Some ethnic Rashaida communities live in Sudan and Eritrea, providing them with a superb position from which to engage in trans-border trade, involving, among others, the trade in people and weapons (*Ibid.*). Rashaida are, thereby, rarely at the beginning or the end of the trafficking chain, but rather function as middlemen, in charge of logistics and transport (*Ibid.*).

According to Sinai survivor and former PFDJ official, S2, the Rashaida are crucial to the organisation of the cross-border human trafficking and other trade: "Tecele [Teklai] Manjus uses Rashaida at the border for intelligence and for arms smuggling" (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015). S2 believes that the Rashaida take orders from the Eritrean government, and, in his view, the Eritrean government was fully in control of the trafficking trade:

*If the Eritrean government can abduct people in Kassala, then they can stop the abductions by the Rashaida in Sudan. To convince people that they are trying to stop the trafficking they confiscate people in Massawa for instance, as a symbolic gesture, but the biggest number of cars remain untouched. (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

From the interviews, it appears that the Rashaida carry out logistics and the Bedouins pay the Eritrean officials for the commodities, including human commodities, which then become theirs. Former Minister Hosabay makes the following observation:

*No one pays the Bedouins. It is the Bedouins that pay the colonels, to 'purchase' the refugees and use their poor souls in whatever way is profitable. (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016)*

This was true for a Sinai survivor who explained the following about the payments she was asked to make:

*While crossing the border I was caught and sold, then I ended up in the Sinai and paid USD 3,000 to someone referred to as Gedaffi. Next we were blindfolded and asked to pay USD 36,000. De Rashaida, did not ask any money. The first time I heard about money was in the Sinai. (Interview, Van Reisen with M, face-to-face, 21 December 2016)*

This testimony confirms the idea that the money was collected centrally.

### ***In Egypt***

The involvement of Eritrean officials in trafficking operations in Egypt has been alleged by the Monitoring Group. In 2011, they reported the following:

*An Eritrean source, who claims to have long been engaged in people smuggling activities on behalf of General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus' [...], told the Monitoring Group that he was first deployed into Egypt in a convoy carrying weapons in 2008. According to the source, his contacts confirm that Eritrean agents based in Egypt were continuing to coordinate routine trafficking of people and arms via Sinai in 2011. (UNSC, 2011, para. 362)*

In the following, Africa Monitors talks about Angesom, an Eritrean national living in Kassala, who is a key figure in the organisation of the smuggling and human trafficking of Eritreans between Ethiopia and Sudan (destined for the Sinai):

*Angesom always changes SIM cards. He has nine individuals working under him. Living [...] in Kassala [...] the rather tall and approximately 40-year-old Angesom, with a rather wide facial bone profile, is actively involved in smuggling and human trafficking between the ethio-sudanese borders [sic]. He usually wears a Palestinian scarf and smuggles people from Ethiopia through Humera to the Sudan. [...] he changes [...] plate number and SIM card on arrival at the Sudanese border. An estimate of over 3,000 Eritreans are believed to have been sold directly by him or through his cooperation. This notorious smuggler and human trafficker is suspected to have strong connections with some authorities. He allegedly owns different amunitions [sic] and had previously been [...] [reportedly] recruited [...] under the Eritrean national security. (Africa Monitors, 2016b)*

Angesom works allegedly in three countries and carries different identities in each of them (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016). He is known as Angesom in Ethiopia, Teame in Sudan and



Wodjehai in the Sinai and Israel (a description is provided by Dehai.com, 2014). According to reliable Eritrean sources, Angesom was the Head of Security for the Eritrean Intelligence Ministry for ten years (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 30 December 2016). In addition, at least four top traffickers (identified by anonymous sources) are Eritrean, including Abu Khaled who is mentioned very often as a key organiser in the Sinai who held Eritrean hostages, and is responsible for the practices of torture, ransom collection and killing in the Sinai (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 22 January 2017).

In the following interview, a Sinai survivor refers to someone called Teame after they were sold by Abu Khaled:

*They forced the hostages to have sexual intercourse with the wife in front of the husband. This is very shameful. Especially for the women who are seen as 'used property'. The husband and wife are no longer together. This was in the Teame group. (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

In order to expand the trafficking business, it is believed that Angesom is responsible for the trafficking of many refugees from Ethiopian refugee camps to eastern Sudan, from where the refugees were transported to the Sinai. Angesom was arrested in Ethiopia in 2012 when returning from Sudan in his Land Rover. Allegedly he was carrying a 9 millimetre weapon, a Kalashnikov and USD 22,000. He was subsequently released on bail in June 2012. It should be emphasised that this information has not been proven (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 30 December 2016).

Furthermore, the Eritrean government's links with Rashaida traffickers in Egypt is strongly suggested by one instance in which a trafficking vehicle operated by Rashaida traffickers was attacked during their journey through Egypt. Following this attack, several sources reported to the Monitoring Group that the Eritrean government paid compensation to the families of the Rashaida traffickers who were killed (UNSC, 2011, para. 359). In other documents providing names of human traffickers alleged to be involved in smuggling thousands of Eritreans across the border of Eritrean and Sudan and then to Egypt, Eritrean nationals are alleged to be included (Africa Monitors, 2016b; Dehai.org, 2014).

Eritrean members of the human trafficking organisations receive full impunity in Sudan. A resource person, H2, identifies Ahmed (full name with author), as a key trafficker of Eritrean origin, who abducts Eritreans from Sudan to Egypt: "He is Eritrean. But he lives in Sudan. He is very active with the Sudanese government and

got full support. All work to collect too much dollars” (H2, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 21 January 2017).

In other interviews, it was explained that ‘good’ smugglers, who compete with the trafficking networks protected by the Eritrean military, are abducted to Eritrea, where they are imprisoned and tortured. It is suggested that in this way a monopoly on the human trafficking business is being protected (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 20 January 2017).

Several interviewees mentioned the trafficking of arms from Eritrea to Egypt. Abductees were used as human shields to ensure that the arms were not detected. Arms were recognised as originating from Eritrea as they had numbers painted on them with nail varnish (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 20 January 2017). In the interview with S2, he mentions that the arms used in the Sinai were recognised by the Eritreans who had done national service:

*In the Sinai, in the torture camps, the national service recruits recognised serial numbers written on the guns in permanent ink, like nail polish. These were written army divisions in Eritrea. They recognised the Eritrea army divisions of the arms used in Sinai. These arms had come with us all the way.* (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)

According to former Sinai hostages, there was a well-organised system of intelligence in the Sinai and information was reported back to Eritrean officials. Africa Monitors also supports this allegation in a document that identifies the key alleged traffickers as well as their role:

*Teklebrhan: This individual [...] is mandated by the Bedouin to glean and communicate personal information about Eritreans at the [r]efugee [c]amp. He receives his share from the Bedouin when his fellow compatriots are hijacked by the Rashaida and their ransom gets paid. He uses two officially registered SIM cards by different mobile operators in the Sudan [...].* (Africa Monitors, 2016b)

There is evidence that the Eritrean leadership exercised influence in the Sinai. S2 expresses the view that he was punished more severely because he had fled Eritrea as a regional commander: “I suspect firmly that they have got links with Eritrea. Because in Sinai the worst treatment was reserved for me” (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015). Other examples include the ability of the Eritrean commanders to impact on the release of hostages in the Sinai:

*The owner of a company in Tesseney [a province in Eritrea], his daughter was kidnapped and the kidnappers received a phone call from the head of the Rashaida and she was returned to Asmara.* (Interview, Van Reisen with L2, face-to-face, 20 December 2016)

In some instances, Eritrean officials exerted pressure to have a relative in the Sinai released by detaining the recipient of the ransom in Asmara:

*Well there were some who were related to officials who were kidnapped in the Sinai. When asked to pay in Eritrea, the officials held the person who received the money and they would then release the person in the Sinai. (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016)*

Another example of direct influence is given by Q2, who lived in Mai Ayni for many years. Q2 knew a lady whose niece had been taken to the Sinai. The trafficker lived in Mai Ayni next to this lady (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 15 January 2017).

Further corroboration is provided by the interview with B, a minor who was a hostage in the Sinai, but became a translator and subsequently a cruel torturer, rapist and killer (see [Chapter 5](#) for B's story). In an extensive interview with Meron Estefanos, B identifies the role of Eritrean influence or even control in the Sinai. According to B, the people giving instructions in the Sinai are Eritreans. He explains this as follows:

*B: I was only compelled to torture people because of Eritreans; they're the ones who showed me what to do and the limits of mercy. Not the ones who were held with me, but there were others in another location. I saw that they were torturing others and used to work with the Bedouins. They were trusted and they were the real enforcers, they dressed as they pleased and in nice clothing, and I thought I could do the same to buy my freedom.*

*I think all the actions of those Bedouin were directed by those Eritreans, they're the ones who taught them what to do and how to act. The Bedouin aren't capable of thinking or organising something to this level. They used to tell me that they don't wish to put me on the street, I just have to follow their instructions. (Interview, Estefanos with B, 16-years-old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

Whether or not the details in the above example could be proven to be true, it is noteworthy that such details were provided directly from the Sinai to Mai Ayni, which in itself indicates that the Eritrean trafficking network was linked. Another example shows a direct financial relationship between the money paid in the Sinai and the influence exercised in Asmara:

*There was a relative of a General who had died in the Sinai. The relative died after the ransom was paid. In this case, because these were relatives of the general, the money paid for the ransom was returned to the family. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to face, 25 January 2017)*

This example is remarkable, as the general pattern known is that relatives of Sinai survivors who had been killed and for whom ransom had been paid were not repaid (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). In this example, it is believed that an exception was made due to the power exercised by the General, which led to the repayment of the bereaved family. This shows explicit influence over the money generated from ransoms in the Sinai.

Another reason provided for believing that Eritreans were involved in instructing the trafficking in the Sinai is the similarity of the torture methods used, such as the 'Jesus' hanging, a method which, according to S2, is also used in Eritrea (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

## **In the Sinai and beyond: A coordinated network of traffickers**

By the end of 2014, the number of houses in Sinai where hostages were held against ransom had increased to approximately 64. Once the camps in the Sinai were reached, the trafficking victims were transferred to members of the Bedouin tribes who were in charge of the torture houses in the Sinai (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). In 2009, there were four principle houses (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015) run by: Abu Khaled (also referred to as Khaled; a principle trafficker with Eritrean nationality), Abu Abdallah 1 (the old one), Abu Marek and Abu Sultan. Other names mentioned are Abu Salem, Abu Shaher, Abu Mussa, Abu Abdallah 2 (the young one), Abu Omar (his real name S – name with authors), Abu Ahmed, Yonas (also known as 'China' or Mihretab, who is Eritrean), Yusuf and Gadafi. (ICER, 2012; various sources and interviews including: Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

Abu Abdallah has an Eritrean assistant called Mebrahtu. Mehari is an Eritrean national also known by the name Anwar or Tadesse as well as Kornel working for Abu Mussa. The Eritrean Mosola Tesfai, who grew up in Teseney and is also known as Robel, allegedly worked in Sinai within the human trafficking operation. He is understood to have come to Israel with a lot of 'protection-money' and he is understood to have extorted many Eritreans for ransom. (ICER, 2012; various sources and interviews including: Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

The Eritrean Medhane Yidhago, understood to be originally from the Anseba region, is allegedly responsible for the transport of people from Kassela to Khartoum. He was seen to be working with Abu Khaled and Abu Abdallah. He kept close contact with Filmon ‘the collaborator’ who was working in one of the Sinai houses where hostages were held. Angosom Teame Akolom, also known as Angosom Wajehey or Angosom Kidane, is alleged to be a key player in the human trafficking from Eritrea, including to Egypt and Sinai, and he is believed to have been previously a member or the head of the Eritrean Intelligence agency in Asmara. (ICER, 2012; various sources and interviews including: Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016; Dehai.com, 2014).

The picture emerges that the key players Angosom, Abu Khaled and Medhanie are Eritreans, allegedly in charge of the overall operation, logistics, distribution and handling of money and ransom collection. Within the main houses where the hostages are held for ransom, Eritrean collaborators assisted the main Beduin heads of these houses. The key-players connected their operations between Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Lybia and Ethiopia and are allegedly still active.

Hence, the trafficking operation is a networked collaboration, with key players in different locations. The following information illustrates the networked and underground nature of the operation:

*Full name anonymous [sic]: With his full name being unidentified, he works hand in glove with the Bedouin in human trafficking and smuggling activities. It is also in the grapevine that he cooperates and has strong connection with senior government officials and military commanders in Eritrea. He is reportedly a member of People’s Front for Democracy and Justice – the only ruling party in Eritrea. He has allegedly accumulated a large sum of money from Eritreans in Norway and [...] Scandinavia. Formerly an alleged officer in the Eritrean Defense Forces, he now lives at Shegerab Refugee Camp. (Africa Monitors, 2016b).*

A Sinai survivor, T, explained how he saw the connectedness of the operation:

*They know their business and they only take people that they know will pay. They will never take a Kunama, because they don’t pay. They know whom they are abducting. (Interview, Van Reisen with T, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The testimony of S2, Sinai survivor and former PFDJ official, corroborates this; he claims that the Eritrean leadership knows exactly who is held in which torture places in Sinai: “They know exactly which people are held in what torture houses” (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

Abu Khaled is often mentioned as the coordinator in Sudan and the Sinai, who works closely with the Eritreans. He is part of decisions made about the hostages and how they are distributed among the various groups:

*They [the traffickers] are all related anyway. They just use a series of houses. After I ran away in a group and arrived at the shelter where we stayed for one month in the Sinai, people told us that they are all related and from the same extended family. Abu Khaled was the one to receive us. He negotiated the transactions and, right at the end, before we fled, he came. He sold us to Teame, the Teame group. Sometimes they don't get all the money. Our ransom was USD 35,000. We were for three days with Abu Khaled. They were looking at us and saying: 'this does not look as if they will pay'. They come and talk to you, they look at how you react when they intimidate you, and then when you are scared, you beg them, they will take you. If you are strong and resist, you may not be sold. (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Another Sinai survivor confirms the central role played by Abu Khaled in the Sinai:

*Abu Khaled controls everything. I is his Eritrean helper. Abu Khaled owns the whole operation. He speaks some Tigrinya and Idris is Eritrean. Abu Khaled would go round to the torture houses. Khaled negotiated the money. He asked: how much you have been asked to pay? I said USD 3,000. He laughed, he said USD 33,000. [...] Idris the Eritrean is very cruel. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

According to sources Abu Khaled is allegedly of Eritrean origin:

*[Abu] Khaled: He is from Barentu, Eritrea, and works with Ibrahim. He has also associated himself with a Bedouin named Abu Ahmed in selling migrants. He is rumored to have sold a number of Eritreans for \$ 8,000. (Africa Monitors, 2016b)*

Other sources also identify Abu Khaled as from Eritrea (Personal communication, Van Reisen with anon, email, 22 January 2017). In a document published in 2012, he identifies as follows:

*Khaled Wedi Barentu [...] is smooth operator where he sold unknown number of Eritreans at 8,000 USD few years ago when price was fare. He works for Ibrahim [...] sometimes called Abu Mohammed/Abu Hamid [...] a Rashaida who worked on human trafficking for a long time. He is also associated with known smooth talkers, turned human kidnappers and traffickers such as Wedi Haile [...], Wedi Qeshi [...], Teklit [...] and Kflai Teklezghie [...]. (ICER, 2012)*

The different traffickers had their own special regimes: “Abu Omar times the torture. He has people to torture the hostages – these were all Palestinians”

(Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015).

According to the hostages, Abu Khaled collected all the money:

*In all places Abu Khaled is always there. Abu Khaled takes the money. If anybody pays, Abu Khaled takes the money. Because he has sold them. When he sells them the buyers do not pay. They pay him back. Abu Khaled comes around and asks 'who has paid?' Khaled asks then whether they themselves [the other traffickers] have paid. (Interview, Van Reisen with D and T, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Another refugee also confirmed the role of Abu Khaled:

*I was abducted in Kassala and taken by Abu Khaled. I was sent to Abu Omar. When the war started they changed places. [...] Abu Khaled would come and did a head count and asked who had paid. Abu Khaled was the main distributor. We were blindfolded and it was so smelly that he would not come in, but just asked questions. They get paid only after the money has come in. (Interview, Van Reisen with D and T, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Sinai survivor D narrates how he was 'stolen' by the person torturing them, who sold him and other hostages to the young Abu Abdallah 2, a teenager (who is not the same person as the old Abu Abdallah 1, who was the coordinator of one of the larger trafficking groups):

*He hung us. Abu Khaled was still looking for me because I had been stolen. Because I was stolen, I was out of the system. Abu Khaled was looking for Abu Asher, where I had been before. Abu Abdallah 2 then got paid ransom for me [USD*

*10,000] even though he had not bought me. The money was paid by two cousins in Israel and the village of my father. This money was paid in Tel Aviv. Abu Abdallah 2 [the young one] then took me to the fence. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

It would appear that D was taken out of the system and that the teenager Abu Abdallah 2 made his own arrangements for the ransom payments, which were then paid in Tel Aviv (not in Asmara, where ransom payments were usually made).

The young Abu Abdallah 2 is known among Sinai survivors for 'stealing' or reselling Sinai hostages who had already paid the ransom; these hostages were dressed in new clothes and resold for more ransom collection (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

The old Abu Abdallah 1 is known as one of the cruellest traffickers. He also is known for demanding the highest ransoms and demanding ransoms from families

even after hostages had died (Van Reisen, *et al.*, 2014; Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

In a list of names associated with human trafficking in Sudan, Egypt and the North Africa region compiled by Africa Monitors (2016b), Abu Khaled is identified together with the old Abu Abdallah 2 and Medhanie Ydego Meredas working together in a coordinated way:

*Medhanie Ydego Mered: Being a representative of notorious smugglers, Abu Khaled and Abu Abdela, he maintains strong relationship with the Bedouin and smuggles people between Kassala and Khartoum. He also collaborates with Filmon, a perpetrator in the Sinai.* (Africa Monitors, 2016b)

Medhanie is allegedly linked to ransom collectors of Eritrean decent in Sweden; these were arrested and tried in a Swedish court after an extortion attempt in Sweden. Following the court verdict, the ransom collectors have been imprisoned in Sweden (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016; Mezzofiore, 2013; Rolander, 2013). Medhanie is also called ‘The General’. He is well known as a trafficker and refugees regard him as “very wealthy” (Interview, Van Reisen, face-to-face Q2, 16 January 2017).

Medhanie was arrested in 2016 by Italian authorities; however, survivors of human trafficking claimed that the wrong person had been arrested.

*In June, Italian and British officials claimed to have helped arrest Medhanie Yehdego Meredi, one of the alleged masterminds behind the smuggling of thousands of people from north Africa to Europe. After being extradited from Sudan to Italy, the alleged smuggler faced two prosecutions, first in Sicily and then in Rome, despite a series of Guardian articles that revealed doubts about the identity of the man in custody.* (Tondo & Kingsley, 2016)

In December 2016, Italian prosecutors publicly stated that the wrong man might have been arrested:

*The document corroborates reporting by the Guardian, which suggests that the man in custody is in fact Medhanie Tesfarmariam Berhe, an Eritrean refugee with no connection to Mered’s alleged business. The Guardian has previously published testimony from other alleged Mered customers, all of whom said the Italian and British police had made a mistake. Mered has himself also said in Facebook messages published by the Guardian that the wrong man is on trial in his place.* (Tondo & Kingsley, 2016)

All of the above names used in this section are provided to help reconstruct what transpired in the Sinai. The names refer to persons named in the interviews and/or identified in public sources. Names may be referring to different persons or the



same person (some traffickers have many aliases). The information provided does not constitute proof, but should be read as a narration.

## On release: Imprisoned and deported

When released, or if they managed to escape, Sinai survivors were often caught by the Egyptian police. Most were imprisoned in Sinai police stations in what Human Rights Watch terms “inhumane and degrading conditions” (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 69). Their rights under international and national human trafficking and refugee law were violated, as they were detained indefinitely without access to a proper legal process, until they gathered the necessary funds to pay for their own deportation (Human Rights Watch, 2014a). Van Reisen *et al.* explain:

*In the detention centres and prisons the refugees live in very poor conditions, with very little food, no beds and no basic facilities. They only have access to very basic medical care. In such conditions, they are still robbed of their freedom. The Sinai survivors continue to have to pay to get phone time to collect money and they are still collecting money to try and get out of detention. The soldiers profit from the little illegal trading that the refugees have to do to plan for their future. (Van Reisen, et al., 2014, p. 97)*

In such situations, survivors had to ‘choose’ between being deported to Eritrea or Ethiopia. If they chose the former, most Eritreans would face severe punishment for deserting national service or leaving the country without permission. If they chose the latter, they would likely face the same risks that had brought them to this point, i.e., of being trafficked, tortured in the Sinai and imprisoned on release (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#) for more information on the deportation/refoulement of refugees to Eritrea).

When hostages are released in the border area between Egypt and Israel, they face a serious risk of being shot by Egyptian border guards (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014a). One man explained how Egyptian soldiers were most likely involved in the disappearance of his sister after she was released from the Bedouins:

*Egyptian soldiers saw them when they crossed the Egyptian-Israeli border [...] and started shooting at them. They were 72 people but after the shooting they were only 70. My sister and another girl disappeared. Never to be seen again. (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013, 11:03–11:29)*

When asked how it was possible that only two women were separated from a group of 72, he explained: “They had to get over a fence, those who were physically able jumped. But it was difficult for my sister, because she was pregnant” (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013, 11:03–11:51). In this documentary, Meron Estefanos explains that there are two options: “one is that she’s somewhere in the prisons of Egypt [...]. The second option is that she died at the border after being shot by the Egyptian border guards” (*Ibid.*, 12:03–12:20).

The inactivity of the Egyptian police continues in relation to publically-known torture practices. This needs to be highlighted as one of the factors that enabled Sinai trafficking. Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) cite Egyptian journalist Ahmed Abu Draa (2013), who covered the police’s response to Sinai trafficking:

*[...] a security source in the district, who preferred to remain anonymous, confirmed that the security services know exactly the names and places of smugglers [Sinai traffickers]. However, they do not pay attention to them as they are satisfied with only focusing on the priority of restoring safety to Sinai’s streets and are not interested in solving the problem of illegal African migrants.[...] [p. 5] (Ibid., p. 93)*

Several reported instances illustrate the extent of this deliberate lack of responsiveness by Egyptian police. In one situation, hostages were able to overpower their trafficker and bring him to a police station in the southern Sinai, but the police let the trafficker go free and imprisoned the hostages (*Ibid.*). In another instance, reported by Human Rights Watch, a Bedouin community leader, who sought to end the torture practices, reported the names and locations of four traffickers in 2012. Yet, once again, the police failed to follow-up:

*He said the police told him they could not leave Arish to investigate crimes committed outside the city and that he should instead speak to the General Intelligence Services. When he approached them, he was told they had ‘other priorities’. The same man said that in August 2012 he prepared a printout of a Google Earth map on which he had marked the locations of known kidnappers and torturers in areas close to Arish and gave it to the Criminal Investigation Department in the Arish Security Directorate. He said he repeatedly asked them how they had followed up but received no reply. (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 58)*

Even the Egyptian government remained inactive despite clear knowledge of the situation:

*I know the Egyptian government knows, because I was doing [...] a monthly report to the American embassy in Israel and then I know they were passing this to the [...] [American] embassy [in Egypt] and the [...] American Embassy in Egypt was passing all these information to the Egyptian*

*government. [...] But the Egyptian Government decided to ignore it, they never did anything.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

Van Reisen *et al.* conclude that “the lack of action against the trafficking and the criminalisation of the Sinai hostages seems to be part of a more general pattern. The traffickers seem to be operating under a general impunity [...]” (2014, p. 94). This may be related to the general security vacuum in the Sinai, which was created after the 1978 David Accords by declaring a “demilitarized security buffer zone for Israel” (Human Rights Watch, 2014a, p. 64). An organised impunity in Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea would seem to be the basis for this ongoing state of affairs. This impunity has now led to a continuation of variations of the same modus operandi carried out in both Sudan and in Libya (see [Chapter 4](#)). There are indications that the same network of smugglers and human traffickers are involved in the organisation of this new trade, including key coordinators such as Medhanie Yehdego Meredi (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

Even the way trafficking in the Sinai ended (perhaps temporarily), shows a lack of concern on the part of the Egyptian government and security forces for the trafficking victims. Estefanos explained that Sinai trafficking stopped due the ongoing Egyptian military intervention aimed at eradicating Islamic extremism in the area. Stopping the trafficking was merely a side effect of this intervention. She explained:

*They were searching house to house for Islamic extremists; in some cases, they did find [...] hostages and nobody really looked at it as [...] trafficking. They freed these people, but only to put them in prison and deport them [...]. So, it [Sinai trafficking] was never addressed.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

Unfortunately, it appears that some of the trafficking victims did not survive the military intervention:

*Many [trafficking victims] disappeared at that time. [...] At that time, I was still talking to those who were being kept hostage in the Sinai and they told us that they were being [...] bombed. [...] Some people were missing. We can assume that they have died.* (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016)

The last record of African refugees being found in the Sinai was on 17 November 2015. Information was received from a police station in Nekhel, in the middle of the Sinai, where in January 2015 they had arrested 13 Eritreans and 8

Sudanese after they had escaped from being held by the Bedouins (K, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 21 December 2016). This last incident on 17 November 2015 gives a chilling account of the persecution of the refugees, who may have been already on the brink of death due to severe torture, and who were now without any protection, hiding from the Egyptian military and the anti-terrorism military actions in the Sinai:

*I found a paper saying that Egyptian security forces found a report. I forgot to tell you about it. It is saying that Egyptian border guards found 15 bodies of Africans plus 8 infected by a gunshot near the border area with Israel and that the date was November 17, 2015. I think that they were shot by Egyptian border guards, which claimed later they found them: 15 dead at the border and 8 injured... and they were transported in a military truck, taken to the military hospital in al-Arish, not the al-Arish civil hospital. I think even forensics does not reveal the type of shots used and it's certainly a military weapon... because in November 2015 there is no definitive stories containing Africans in the Sinai because the aircraft damaged all the houses at the border. Up to 5 km inland there are no houses, no stores. Maybe these Africans escaped from a far place in the middle of the Sinai and waited for a few days in the desert to reach the border and lost direction, and the Egyptian military shot them. (K, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 23 December 2016)*

From what we know, assuming that these were indeed human trafficking survivors, it is likely that these refugees would already have suffered severe torture in captivity. It is unfathomable that they were not freed from the places where they were held, but were persecuted and eventually shot at the border trying to find a place of safety.

## **Towards Israel**

At the beginning of Sinai trafficking, many of the hostages who were released were able to find at least temporary safety by crossing into Israel. In 2012, it is estimated that 1,000–1,500 refugees, including human trafficking victims, entered Egypt through the Sinai every month (Van Reisen *et al.* 2014). At that time, trafficking victims were allowed to reside in Israel, although without support from the government (*Ibid.*). However, in 2012, Israel built a fence to curtail migration from Africa, thereby effectively cutting off the trafficking survivors' path to safety. Even when the victims identified themselves as having been trafficked to the Sinai and sought protection from the Israeli state, in most instances they were not allowed to enter Israel (*Ibid.*). While some managed to pass the fence on their own, most were pushed back to Egypt, among them the most vulnerable (including those injured, minors, pregnant women and women with infants). In fact, in July 2013,

only one refugee managed to pass through to Israel (*Ibid.*). These push-backs, which arguably amount to a violation of the international legal principle of non-refoulement<sup>9</sup>, created new risks for the survivors of abduction by traffickers, shooting and imprisonment by Egyptian border guards, as well as eventual deportation back to Eritrea.

A new testimony provides further evidence of the practice of push-backs and the involvement of the military on both sides of the Israeli-Egyptian border:

*M came with three cars. Eight of us were put in one Toyota and the others split in the other two cars. The Israeli border was 200 m away, very close. They gave instructions to jump over the fence. You just jump. Many were injured. So the first one, F and two people passed it. A and one of the children. The other two cars were just watching. They wanted to show what would happen to us if they made us cross. The Israeli were waiting and had switched on all the flight lights and the Egyptian soldiers were shooting. They tried to cross the second fence. It became impossible. I hid behind a shrub. The little boy disappeared. They shot at the one who was climbing. He begged: I am just a Muslim, save me, but they just shot him. [...] They took all of us back, except one little boy who had managed to cross. (Interview, Van Reisen with F, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Those who managed to enter Israel after the fence was built were criminalised under Israel's Anti-Infiltration Law, which "allows Israel to punish all irregular border-crossers by detention – including asylum seekers and their children" (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014, p. 206). Under this law, Sinai survivors were detained indefinitely without the ability to apply for asylum. Although this law was declared void in 2013 by Israel's Supreme Court, the government failed to follow the Court's demand to release the detainees and to provide them with a proper status procedure (*Ibid.*). Instead, the Israeli government passed a new Anti-Infiltration Law that would allow them to detain refugees and human trafficking victims in an 'open detention facility' (*Ibid.*). While Israel did not officially take part in deportations, refugees in detainment were "encouraged to leave 'voluntarily'", as this was usually the only way to be released from detention (*Ibid.*, p. 109). Once again, Sinai survivors had to choose whether to go to Eritrea or Ethiopia or to be sent to a third country, Rwanda or Uganda. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz headlined in April 2014 that "Israel is flying asylum seekers who've agreed to 'voluntary departure' to Rwanda, as well as Uganda" (for more information see in Lior, 2014). Avraham *et al.* (2015) confirm that this practice started in 2014:

*Throughout 2014, especially from late March onwards, an increasing number of asylum seekers began leaving Israel to third countries. Their testimonies paint a chaotic and unmonitored transfer procedure: Those departing do not receive any information on their country of destination, risk*

*arrests upon arrival and face difficulties accessing asylum procedures because their identifying documents are taken away when they arrive. (Avraham et al., 2015)*

Basing itself on government reports to the Knesset (Israeli parliament)<sup>10</sup>, International Refugee Rights Initiative, expressed the opinion that the practice of deportation started as early as 2013<sup>11</sup>:

*Since the beginning of 2013, approximately 10,000 African asylum seekers who had fled to Israel seeking refuge have left. [...] Israeli authorities classify these departures as 'voluntary', but in reality those choosing to leave do so as a result of severe pressures and violations of their rights. The majority of those who have left Israel have returned to Sudan and Eritrea, their countries of origin. However, during the last two years, more than 1,500 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan have also left Israel for unknown 'third countries' [Lior, 2015]. [...] Although these third countries have not been officially identified, it is now widely known that African asylum seekers in Israel who are not willing to go back to their countries of origin are being sent, almost exclusively, to Uganda or Rwanda [Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel & The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2015]. [...] (IRRI, 2015, p. 2)*

In 2015, it was formally announced that asylum seekers, referred to as 'infiltrators' in Israel, would face indefinite detention in Israel or deportation to a third country, promoted as 'safe' by the Israeli government:

*On March 31, 2015, the Israeli Ministry of Interior announced that it would begin forcing 'infiltrators' to leave Israel to third countries. Those who refuse to leave will be indefinite [sic] jailed in Saharonim prison under the Entry to Israel Law, which allows to detain a foreigner who is not cooperating with his removal from Israel. Citizens of Eritrea and Sudan who are detained in Holot and whose asylum claim has been rejected or those who never filed asylum claims are the first victims of this policy. Asylum-seekers are invited to interviews at the Ministry of Interior where clerks hand them a letter promising them a good and safe life with legal status and the right to work in an undisclosed third country. (Avraham et al., 2015)*

While Israeli authorities continue to present the scheme as voluntary (up to the date of print), Avraham *et al.* (2015) question this representation, taking the view that asylum seekers are forced to leave Israel due to lack of any alternative:

*In conclusion, Eritrean and Sudanese nationals who are forced to choose between leaving Israel and prolonged detention do not necessarily leave 'voluntarily.' The procedure for the 'voluntary' return to Eritrea or Sudan of those imprisoned in Holot or who are in imminent risk of detention constitutes a violation of the principle of non-refoulement – the prohibition against forcibly returning 'in any manner whatsoever' a refugee or asylum seeker to a risk of persecution, or anyone to likely torture or inhuman and degrading treatment. (Avraham et al., 2015)*

There have been several reports in the media suggesting that an arrangement with African countries to take asylum seekers was based on aid and arms deals. For instance, the Times of Israel reports the following: “Israel and Rwanda are discussing a deal in which the East African nation would take in illegal migrants from the Jewish state in exchange for favorable contracts” (JTA, 2015).

Investigative journalist Peter Doerrie raises the possibility that refugees are used in trading deals that involve aid and military support:

*In exchange for helping Israel to get rid of its unwanted refugee population, East African military and intelligence officers travel to Israel to receive training and go on shopping sprees for high-tech military hardware. Refugees, especially from Eritrea, have become a kind of currency in arms deals between some of the world's shadiest and most corrupt governments.* (Doerrie, 2016)

In a damning report on the practice of refoulement of Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel to Eritrea, Human Rights Watch (2014b) concludes that these returns are unsafe and that guarantees are lacking to ensure the safety of the refugees:

*The fate of Eritreans returning from Israel is unknown, although Human Rights Watch has documented how the Eritrean authorities abuse some Eritreans returning from other countries.* (Human Rights Watch, 2014b)<sup>12</sup>

Ziegler (2016) expresses a similar concern, stating that “Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers in Israel face an impossible choice: stay and risk detention or leave ‘voluntarily’ for Rwanda or Uganda.”<sup>13</sup> Avraham *et al.* (2015) mention two cases of asylum seekers being deported to their country of origin, effectively constituting refoulement:

*In two cases, for instance, asylum seekers who thought they were on their way to a third country were effectively deported to their country of origin. In other cases, an Immigration Authority representative allegedly provided asylum seekers with forged passports.* (Avraham *et al.*, 2015)

The report raises grave concerns about the lack of protection ensured by the programme and the lack of follow up to ensure the safety of deportees:

*Alongside questions regarding the lawfulness of Israel's ‘voluntary’ return procedure, testimonies have raised grave concerns regarding the conduct of the Israeli authorities. [...] Israel's ‘voluntary’ return to third countries procedure does not guarantee asylum seekers are protected against refoulement to their country of origin or that they have access to basic services and rights. Asylum seekers are not individually assessed prior to transfer, and no regular monitoring or follow-up takes place – all in complete disregard of recommendations by UNHCR.* (Avraham *et al.*, 2015)

In a series of cases the Courts in Israel rejected the policy of Israel to not grant asylum to Eritrean asylum seekers who fled to avoid indefinite national service:

*The Jerusalem appeals court rejected the Interior Ministry's legal opinion, according to which deserting from the Eritrean army does not constitute grounds for asylum. The Interior Ministry has rejected thousands of asylum requests submitted by Eritrean citizens based on that legal opinion. (HRM, 20 September 2016)*

Avraham *et al.* (2015) conclude that the deportation scheme increases the vulnerability of the refugees to human trafficking and that, despite the known dangers of trafficking in the countries where the refugees are deported to, the authorities have disregarded such information and gone ahead with the scheme.

*In light of the lack of protection and access to rights in the third countries, many of those who leave continue on their journey towards Europe; a journey during which they face arbitrary arrests, demands for ransom, and abuse by smuggler. (Avraham et al., 2015)*

Avraham *et al.* (2015) point to the failure of the Israeli authorities to protect refugees from human trafficking and its active involvement in perpetuating a vicious cycle of human trafficking. Avraham *et al.* (2015) suggest that the perpetuation of human trafficking in the region is caused by the failure to protect the asylum seekers, as required under international law, by the countries of the region, including Israel.

## **Following the ransom back to Eritrea**

Following the ransom of Sinai trafficking, one finds collectors in all corners of this world. In the beginning, ransom was commonly paid either to someone in Eritrea or Israel. However, later, Bedouin traffickers had agents in many European countries, as well as Egypt (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, Skype, 18 December 2016). Eritrean officials are involved throughout this process and reportedly functioned as collectors in some instances. The question is whether or not, and if so how, the ransom money flows to Eritrea. The Monitoring Group reports:

*The Monitoring Group has attempted to obtain evidence of extortion payments for which Eritrean agents are the direct beneficiaries in order to demonstrate, as clearly as possible, the continuing involvement of the Government of Eritrea in this trade. [...] The Monitoring Group has obtained copies of money transfer receipts documenting the extortion payments made by the families of*



*Eritrean victims of such kidnappings in 2011 and 2012, and where the recipient of the funds are named Eritrean individuals who collected the payments from locations within Egypt. [...] The recipient on one receipt is a self-confessed agent for the Eritrean Government. [...] The Monitoring Group has also received testimony regarding ransom fees that have been paid directly to Eritrean officials. In one case, a Germany-based Eritrean citizen was forced to raise roughly 9,000 euros from friends and family to release two of his cousins who had been kidnapped in Sinai, Egypt, in 2011, after they had escaped from Eritrea and had joined a human trafficking caravan in the Sudan. The funds were transferred to a family member in Eritrea who delivered it in cash to a Government security office in Asmara. (UNSC, 2013, para. 127–138)*

Most of the money paid for Sinai trafficking was paid in cash in Asmara. Many families said that they paid it in person after receiving instructions by phone. And some were asked to pay in Eritrean nakfa, but to bring it to Sudan. Estefanos reports:

*Up to 2012, most of the money [...] was paid in Eritrea. The thing is we don't have names. [...] Sometimes, families would tell me, 'we paid the money in Eritrea and then we found out [...] [that] the person that was supposed to pick up the money [was] [...] an official', any kind of official. Then people get afraid [...] they don't tell you the name. (Interview, Reim with Meron Estefanos, 18 December 2016)*

Many Sinai survivors confirm that the ransoms were paid in Asmara:

*My husband was held in the Sinai and I was in Dubai as a hairdresser. So, I had a little money. I kept quiet. Therefore, I phoned his mother. She was in charge of begging all the Eritrean people. Even my own mother paid. They cry. Then they beg. My brother was also in the Sinai. His ransom was also USD 32,000. My father was so stressed that after one week he died. Everything was collected from within Eritrea. (Interview, Van Reisen with R, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Sinai trafficking had emerged on a human trafficking route from Eritrea to Israel, which was developed as early as 2007:

*From 2007 onwards all payments could be done and were done inside the country [Eritrea]. It was 120,000 nakfa, you paid inside [Eritrea] for the Eritrea-Sinai route. They started to insist that you have somewhere the possibility to pay it in Israel or Dubai, as part of the deal. This was after 2010. (Interview Van Reisen with W, face-to-face, 19 January 2017)*

The same transition in which the payments were transferred from Asmara to Israel or Dubai is explained by X:

*Before 2009/2010 you would make a deal with Eritrean operators in Eritrea or outside. It would be paid when you reached the border with Israel. From 2010 onwards the refugees were now held for*

*ransom and the ransoms had to be paid in Israel or Dubai. People inside Eritrea paid it to people in Israel. (Interview Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017)*

The information provided in the interviews by survivors of Human Trafficking against Ransom in Sinai is consistent with the information reported in Israel in 2010 and by ICER in 2012, that ransom payments were transferred:

*Two Eritreans Negasi Habte [...] and Fatwi Mehari [...] were arrested in early January with 100,000 USD in their possession.*

*Another agent residence of the human traffickers in Sinai, Mohammed Ibrahim [...] was caught by the police with huge sum of 50,000 USD.*

*Since the arrest of Futun [...] and Muhamed [...] by the Israeli police in Jerusalem, the Eritrean collaborators have stopped using Israeli Banks as medium of transaction. It is rumored that they are using the Arab Banks in Jerusalem for transferring funds to Dubai Banks where the ransom money is in turn transferred to Sinai. (ICER, 2012)*

The transfer of the payment system to Israel is also illustrated with this example:

*In the past he was intimately connected with an Eritrean husband and wife in league with traffickers that were caught red handed with hundreds of thousands of dollars in their internet cafe in Neve Sha'anani in Tel Aviv. (ICER, 2012)*

A member of the Eritrean diaspora who assisted in the payment of a ransom for a Sinai survivor explained the process that was involved:

*The wife of my nephew was abducted to the Sinai. Then we received a phone call from my father-in-law. We had to pay USD 30,000. My father-in-law came to my family in Asmara and we had to cough it up. It was impossible. My mother and all my aunties sold all their gold jewellery. And they have given the money in cash in Asmara. They were told in the Sinai where they should pay in Asmara. And then I received a phone call that I had to pay USD 5000. I sent it to my mother. I paid it in cash, I have sent the money with someone to take it to Asmara. I did not have that kind of money, so I also had to borrow this from others. All the money, gold jewellery has been used to pay. All the nephews and cousins paid, wherever they were. This way the daughter was saved. (Interview, Van Reisen with L2, face-to-face, 20 December 2016)*

The testimony of R also shows that he believes that the money was kept back for the local traders in Kassala, and hence the money he paid for the journey was not paid for those who were organising the logistics for the journey:

*Some money had been paid for me in Kassala. It was kept back by local traders. It probably had been paid to the initial smugglers, and it was never passed on for the money for transport to the Sinai. Hence, there was a shortage when we arrived in the Sinai for those who were taking us. We were tortured more severely. And one of them was killed.* (Interview, Van Reisen with R, face-to-face, September 2015)

Eritreans speak among each other about the direct involvement of President Isaias Afwerki:

*Through Paltalk I heard that the recipient of all these payments lives in the area Space 2000 in Asmara. He is a leader of the Rashaida and close to all those in the leadership and visits the restaurant where President Isaias Afwerki and generals and colonels go to eat.* (Interview, Van Reisen with L2, face-to-face, 20 December 2016)

For ransom payments, the Eritrean hawala system, a money exchange system that relies on payments via social networks, was used (for further discussion on this see [Chapter 3](#)). The hawala system became increasingly sophisticated and controlled by the PFDJ, according to Hosabay, who claims that even ransoms are paid through the PFDJ hawala system (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016; for more on this see [Chapter 3](#)).

Meron Estefanos researched the payment structure and emphasises that in most cases there were options provided to pay in Asmara (Eritrea), or elsewhere, through the hawala system (informal system of payments through social networks). From her investigation, she concludes that use was made of the Palestinian community, of people linked to Hamas (Gaza), for arrangements for the collection of ransoms (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

In an analysis provided by survivors of Sinai trafficking, the hawala system played a crucial role in the payment of the ransoms. Sinai survivors explain that, until 2010, agents in different towns in Eritrea collected payments in relation to the facilitation of smuggling of Eritrean refugees to Egypt and Israel (and possibly other destinations). According to their analysis, the position of these payment agents inside Eritrea became sensitive when increasingly more families had to make large payments for ransom in the realisation that relatives were being severely tortured in the Sinai. Angry families stopped using these agents. Instead they used the hawala system to transfer money for ransom payments to Israel (or Dubai). This hawala system is operated by the Eritrean government (the PFDJ) (Interview, Van Reisen with V, W and X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017). See [Chapter 3](#) for more on the hawala system of payments.

The abductees in the Sinai, who were held for ransom were forced to appoint an 'agent' who would be in charge of collecting all the ransom money (through mobile money transfers) from relatives in different locations around the globe. These agents were often former survivors of Sinai trafficking who had made it to Israel. Family members living in Eritrea would sell their jewellery, their house, land and other property to pay the ransom demanded; the money from these resources was then transferred through the Eritrean hawala system to the agents of the human trafficking victims. The agents of the Sinai victims would collect all of the transfers and meet with the agents appointed by the human traffickers and hand over the money. It is not known how the ransom money paid was shared between the different operators in the chain (Interview, Van Reisen with V, W and X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017). The Eritrean government (the PFDJ) must have been fully aware of these transactions as it controls the hawala system in Eritrea.

According to a well-informed anonymous source, the split of the earnings from human trafficking would be: "70% for big people in the army and police and 30% for traffickers (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017). This information corroborates the analysis above, which leads to the hypothesis that human trafficking is protected and controlled by the governments of the region, and possibly controlled by the PFDJ, which is the key driver and facilitator of the trafficking in the North African region and the Horn of Africa.

## Conclusion

When following the journeys of Sinai victims and their traffickers, evidence seems to emerge that this criminal business was built with the cooperation of high-ranking government officials in all of the countries involved (Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt). Without such involvement, Sinai trafficking could have never developed on such a massive scale. While information about the active involvement of governments is still rather limited, the information gathered clearly indicates that Sinai trafficking was able to emerge and flourish because governments actively ignored these illicit activities within their borders and even when government officials were involved.

The combined evidence suggests that Eritrean officials and security forces were inherently linked to Sinai trafficking for ransom and that this form of trafficking is only one of many illicit forms of trade that have developed with the implicit approval of the Eritrean government. State officials and military personnel were involved in some of the abductions that took place within Eritrea and were clearly

implicated in the facilitation of the cross-border movement necessary for the trafficking. Moreover, officials and security forces have been identified as directly selling Eritreans to the Rashaida and being involved in the coordination of trafficking through Egypt. That some Eritrean officials were involved until the very end is further evidenced by the reported involvement of officials in collecting ransom payments in Eritrea.

Although it appears that Eritrean government officials have played a primary role, the facilitation of other state actors should not be overlooked. High-ranking Sudanese officials were involved in the coordination of illicit trade between Eritrea and Sudan, which involved both the trafficking of weapons and people. At a lower level, although likely influenced by the action of high-ranking officials, Sudanese border guards and police were also clearly involved in Sinai trafficking. Many victims reported having been sold to the Rashaida by Sudanese security personnel, while others complained of the general lack of protection surrounding refugee camps, in which abduction was a known and common problem.

Similarly, the inactivity of Egyptian officials and security personnel in stopping Sinai trafficking, despite the common knowledge that this practice was happening on Egyptian soil, and despite the fact that the locations and names of traffickers were well known, was one of the main factors enabling Sinai trafficking. Moreover, Egypt's unlawful criminalisation of released hostages – including their shoot-to-kill policy at the Egypt-Israeli border and the frequent imprisonment of hostages followed by deportation – makes it an accomplice in the perpetuation of this cycle of insecurity and violence.

In the same vein, one must acknowledge Israel's role. Israel stopped the refugees, often in dire need, from entering the country, imprisoned refugees indefinitely without access to asylum procedures and refouled them back to Eritrea. Refoulement of released hostages at the Egypt-Israel border, as well as the imprisonment and facilitated deportation of trafficking victims to third countries, is not only a violation of international law, but clearly contributes to the continued suffering of Sinai survivors.

Members of the Eritrean government (the PFDJ) financially benefited from Sinai trafficking. The trafficking operations were carried out while making use of systems provided by the Eritrean government, including the free access provided to members of the Rashaida ethnic group to operate in border areas, control these areas, and organise smuggling and trafficking operations together with the Border Control Authority. The Rashaida enjoyed full impunity within Eritrea where they were protected. The systems used for Sinai trafficking also include financial systems

such as the hawala system, which was used for the transfer of financial resources collected for ransom payments. These are estimated to have totalled over USD 600 million in the period 2009–2013. It is possible that Sinai trafficking was run as a chain operated with one financial pot, and that the Eritrean government was fully aware and possibly involved in, or even leading, its organisation. This hypothesis, which has been deduced from the analysis of the interviews carried out, must be investigated further.

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<sup>1</sup> Eritrean families receive coupons for food and other goods.

<sup>2</sup> Meron Estefanos is also co-author of Van Reisen *et al.* (2012 & 2014).

<sup>3</sup> “Colonel Fitsum acts as [...] deputy [of the chief of Eritrean external intelligence operations in the Horn] for external operations and supervises training for regional armed opposition groups. He is also directly involved in training of highland Ethiopian (i.e., Tigrayan and Amhara) armed opposition groups. Fitsum also reports to General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”, commander of the Western military zone and border units, and reportedly works closely with him in cross-border smuggling activities. The Monitoring Group has obtained a photograph of Colonel Fitsum and verified its authenticity” (UNSC, 2011, para. 262(b)).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.sudantribune.com/Sudan-Iran-sign-military,26294>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8782103/Iran-steals-surface-to-air-missiles-from-Libya.html>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09TELAVIV952&q=hamas%20iran%20sudan%20weapons>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09KHARTOUM469>

<sup>8</sup> Alternative or additional explanations for the emergence of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai are also being explored.

<sup>9</sup> Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, Article 33(1): “no Contracting State shall expel or return (“refoul”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (United Nations General Assembly, 1951).

<sup>10</sup> The statement of the IRR is based on the State’s Letter of Response on HCJ 8665/14 Desta *et al.* v. the Knesset *et al.* (27 January 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The report of IRRIs is based on interviews. The Report states, “based on 24 interviews with Sudanese and Eritreans who have left Israel, this paper seeks to document the experiences of asylum seekers who have been subjected to Israel’s “voluntary departure” procedure. It focuses on the reasons they left Israel, their status in the receiving countries, and the reasons they have often left these countries shortly after arriving in them” (IRRI, 2015, p. 2). IRRI cites a secret document signed between the Government of Israel and African countries, which is available here: <http://www.acri.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/hit8425hisayon.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch (2014b) states that: “By the end of June 2014, at least 6,400 Sudanese and at least 367 Eritreans had officially left Israel for their home countries, while Israel had only recognized two Eritreans, and no Sudanese, as refugees”.

<sup>13</sup> “Israel gives Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers a choice: to leave ‘voluntarily’ to a third state, or be deemed non-cooperative and therefore liable to indefinite detention. In the first three months of 2016, 955 Eritreans and 152 Sudanese chose the former option. In 2015, the figures were 2,480 and 600, respectively” (Ziegler, 2016). Ziegler cites the government report on foreign workers, available here: [https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/2015\\_summery\\_foreign\\_workers/he/summary\\_2015\\_new\\_1.pdf](https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/2015_summery_foreign_workers/he/summary_2015_new_1.pdf).

## Chapter 3

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# The Exodus from Eritrea and Who is Benefiting

*Mirjam Van Reisen & Meron Estefanos*

*In addition I would like to say that the vested interest of the PFDJ is in the disintegration of the youth.*  
(Interview, Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017)

## Introduction

What is the reason for the exodus of Eritreans from Eritrea? The country is not at war and there is no natural disaster underlying this mass migration. The Wall Street Journal (2016) called it “the fastest emptying country” in the world. Currently, it is estimated that a quarter of a million refugees from Eritrea reside in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan (Laub, 2016).

This chapter traces the beginning of the haemorrhage of people from Eritrea. How and why did this begin? Who is benefiting from this exodus? And, how is it linked to smuggling and trafficking across borders? These were our starting questions.

This chapter draws on information provided by journalist Zecarias Gerrima to Mirjam Van Reisen in a personal communication, as well as two unpublished documents by Mussie Hadgu, a former aid worker in Eritrea, which describe in great detail how the cross-border trafficking in human beings evolved (Hadgu, 2009, 2011).<sup>14</sup> Information collected by Africa Monitors since the beginning of 2016 is also used, including interviews with refugees with regard to their experiences as they crossed the borders and tried to reach safety in Ethiopia or Sudan. The chapter makes further use of conversations between Eritrean refugees and the authors through Skype, Facebook Messenger and in face-to-face conversations. Some interviews were conducted particularly for this chapter. In

other instances, interviews and conversations recorded previously were reexamined to understand certain aspects in more detail.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter looks at how the Eritrean government, which is run by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the state party in Eritrea, has conducted a systematic campaign against its own people since the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia ended in 2000. This period has seen one of the most extreme examples of a prolonged refugee crisis in modern times:

*After 2001 the government engaged in war against its own population and even the few who had returned from exile in the early 1990s had to migrate again, and hundreds of thousands [of] new refugees followed over the next 15 years. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

By the mid-2000s, the smuggling business in Eritrea had grown into a major industry. However, this mode of migration was not safe for refugees, as smugglers were hard to trust and the government was a significant threat. It was at this time that people who could afford to pay thousands of dollars started using the services of the army and intelligence colonels to 'safely' reach Sudan. As the colonels and their superiors started amassing wealth, they developed a new taste for money that was not easy to satisfy (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016), and even harder to abandon. In 2011, Hadgu wrote:

*The trafficking of Eritreans has even been globalised up to the point where extensive networks of traffickers have been involved in the trafficking process of Eritrean refugees to Europe and the USA and demand huge amounts of money (USD 10,000–20,000) under life threatening conditions and low rates of success. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 1)*

The US Trafficking in Persons report (United States Department of State, 2016) concludes that the Government of Eritrea is failing to combat human trafficking:

*The government has demonstrated negligible efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims. [...] It did not develop procedures to identify or refer trafficking victims among vulnerable groups, including Eritreans deported from countries abroad or persons forcibly removed by Eritrean security forces from neighboring countries. (US Department of State, 2016)*

Human trafficking for ransom in the North African region has been recognised as predominantly associated with Eritrean hostages (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The terms 'smuggling' and 'human trafficking' are often used interchangeably by the victims of this crime as they experience smuggling and trafficking as part of a continuum: while the refugee may actively seek assistance to flee the country

(smuggling), those facilitating their journeys may be part of an (informal) organisation that systematically seeks to gain from the smuggling through exploitative practices (human trafficking). It is contended that the conditions in Eritrea are causing this crisis. Knowingly, “hundreds of thousands of Eritrean migrants go through a series of suicidal journeys to escape the suffering at home” (Africa Monitors, 2016d).

Chapter 2 looked at the dangerous journeys undertaken by Eritrean refugees, many of which start as smuggling and end up as human trafficking. This chapter delves more into the background against which these smuggling and human trafficking practices have developed. The first section investigates the reasons for the systematic exodus of Eritreans (mainly youth) from Eritrea. This is followed by an examination of the policy of detention in the country, its connection with indefinite national service, and how this has instilled a culture of fear among the people. The chapter considers the Eritrean government’s economic and financial policies and argues that these create incentives for the mass smuggling and human trafficking of Eritrean citizens. The cross-border engagement of the Eritrean military is explored in the next section, as well as its role in illicit trade, including human trafficking. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and the reasons why they engage in journeys of smuggling or human trafficking from Ethiopia. Finally, the situation in Sudan is reviewed, as well as the recent forced deportation of refugees back to Eritrea. The role of the Eritrean government and other state parties is considered throughout the chapter.

## **Eritrea’s policy to push out youth: The student arrests of 2001**

Since 1998, many Eritreans have left Eritrea and have paid large sums to do so. According to various sources who were in the country from 1998 onwards, these payments are made illegally, but often involve illicit payments to government and military officials, creating an apparent contradiction (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012, 2014): On the one hand, the government prohibits the movement of its citizens (travelling in Eritrea is restricted and those who disappear must be accounted for by their relatives or they will be punished; there is also a ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy at the border to deter Eritreans from attempting to leave the country illegally), while on the other hand, the Eritrean government seems to promote a culture in which its people, especially youth, are pushed out.

Due to the illegal nature of travel and migration, leaving the country involves illegal payments and illicit money transfers, which appear to be condoned by the government (or at least overlooked) – evidenced by its total inaction to curb these activities. In fact, the illegal smuggling and trafficking of persons from Eritrea is created and capacitated by the mix of policies of the leadership and benefits government and military officials in the system.

The creation of this situation of rampant smuggling and human trafficking can be traced back to the Eritrea-Ethiopia war of 1998– 2000. Since this war, the Eritrean government has implemented a policy of mandatory national service (which has been in place since 1994). There has been no freedom in Eritrea since then. Although national service is supposed to last only 18 months, in practice it is indefinite. This national service policy can be pointed to as the starting point of the ever-increasing outflow of migrants and refugees from Eritrea.

*The idea of utilising people's need for movement as a business opportunity started within the Eritrean army during and after the war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. Every able-bodied adult between the ages of 18 and 40 was in the military. Their lives had been put on hold. Many people wanted to be free of the inhumane treatment of national service recruits in the army and elsewhere, and go on with their lives. By forcing everyone to serve in the military and other government ministries for no pay, and by declaring that only in exceptional cases could a person be allowed to travel, the government had effectively created a state of panic such that everyone wanted to escape as soon as possible. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

The national service policy and its indefinite nature have created a state of fear in Eritrea. It means that youth no longer have a future of their own and their lives depend exclusively on what is prescribed to them by the army:

*The state of panic was created when people were, in effect, told that they could never leave the country or the army; that the government would control every aspect of their lives, that there would never be any certainty about life afterwards. That's when young people started leaving the country. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

This situation did not improve after the end of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In fact, it deteriorated in 2001 when the Eritrean government arrested members of the government (including cabinet ministers), journalists, and any opponents to the regime. These people are referred to as the 'G-15' and 11 members of this group are still in prison today (Wikipedia, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2002). In addition to these high-level arrests, which received international attention, what is much less known is that the crackdown also specifically targeted

youth, especially those at Asmara University. In 2001, government forces took 5,000 university students to Wi'a and Gelaalo, two notorious military prisons:

*They accused us [students] of siding with the G-15 [those who had been arrested in the 2001 crackdown]. The reason was because we refused to work in a failed summer work programme. They told us we would all do research on IDPs [internally displaced people] and that we would move from place to place to do that. The amount needed to cover hotel expenses, food and transport would normally have been 4,000 to 6,000 Eritrean nakfa [ERN] per month, but they said we had to make do with 400 nakfa a month. Obviously, there was no way 400 nakfa would cover our expenses for more than three or four days. So none of the 5,000 students showed up at the appointed time and later they rounded us up and took us to the Gelaalo military detention centre. We lived in iron sheet barracks for two months, where temperatures sometimes reached as high as 48–50 degrees centigrade. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype 26 December 2016)<sup>16</sup>*

The G-15 were arrested after having issued an open letter criticising President Isaias Afwerki's actions, calling them 'illegal and unconstitutional.' They were arrested in the second week of September 2001, days after the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001. The IDP research 'summer camp' programme took place prior to these arrests.<sup>17</sup> However, the tension in the country was already rising and the G-15 had been 'frozen' by the government, which means that they were no longer able to carry out their public functions and it was publicly known that they were being targeted.

*People like Ali Abdu (former Minister of Information) and others like Abdela Jaber were holding meetings and seminars to convince the public that those people were traitors. Of course, everybody was discussing that. The private newspapers were very vocal too. Most of the contributors and staff of the papers were university students. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016).*

Zecarias Gerrima describes how the students were rounded up:

*Those at the court [the students were at the court house for the trial of the student union president] were taken away, and this was followed by military police rounding up people and taking people with university IDs. They collected a total of about 400 students from the court and the streets. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

The campaign is also narrated in an online testimony:

*Nonetheless, the president of the University of Asmara explained that the campaign envisioned that the students' task would be to conduct census, research and outreach to the people and that the compensation would be 800 Nakfa, meaning 26 Nakfa per day (USD 1.30 [per day]). The*

*students' committee explained that the amount would not even suffice to cover meal and lodging expenses and asked for their rights in a legal and orderly manner. (Awate, 2014)*

This story demonstrates how youth – and especially students – were persecuted (and indeed continue to be persecuted) and how fear was instilled in them:

*And, without providing any explanation, they attempted to load the students. But the students said that they had committed no crimes and that they had asked for their rights legally and in an orderly manner and asked where they were taking them. They were told to embark without asking questions. (Awate, 2014)*

This is confirmed by Gerrima, who interprets the situation in hindsight as one in which the students were confused and feelings of patriotism competed with feelings of uneasiness over what was happening to them:

*There was a sense of unease about the direction the government was heading, but no one was thinking about protesting. Only the previous year, in May 2000, all university students had asked to be taken to the frontlines to fight in the war. Ethiopia had controlled more than a fourth of Eritrean territory, and everybody was in shock. Memories of Amhara's cruelty were still fresh in everyone's minds. Those of us who had been trained before entering the university were taken to frontline units. Those who were not trained were taken to areas near Gahtelay, on the road towards Massawa, for training. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December, 2016)*

When the students refused to leave, they were threatened by the military:

*They [the students] responded that they would not [embark]. One of the pistolcarrying supervisors ordered the soldiers to move in. About 50 soldiers, some carrying Kalashnikovs, some carrying batons, filed in. They ordered them to embark. The students said they wouldn't. They locked and loaded their weapons. And those carrying batons started beating the students. Screams could be heard. Entering from the upper and lower level of the stadium, the soldiers started beating the students wantonly. Many had broken limbs. The parents and siblings who were outside started screaming. The soldiers dispersed them by beating them with their sticks. Some had broken legs, others fractured skulls and when they were exhausted, they dragged them and loaded them [on the trucks]. (Awate, 2014)*

The students were taken by force to some of the harshest prisons in Eritrea, Wi'a and Gelaalo.

*They took them, to destination unknown, past the outskirts of Asmara city towards Massawa. We had no idea where. But after a few days, all students would follow them, and would see them with their own eyes. This was when every student was taken to Wi'A. (Awate, 2014)*

This example also shows how ‘truth’ was bent to serve the interests of those in power. In a follow-up to the students roundup related above, the students were forced to sign self-incriminating statements. This was a clear signal to those in the university that there was no future and that it would be better to leave:

*...all of the university students have in some way severed ties with the government since that day. People started leaving right when we went back to Asmara. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

The crackdown by the government was not only a warning. It fundamentally changed the relationship between Eritrean youth and the government – and the military leadership, which was increasingly being regarded as one and the same. The use of administrative measures to trap the population was very much resented, because of its untruthful, random and incriminating nature. P narrated the following:

*Two or three weeks later [after the students were detained], each and every one of us was asked alone a single question. I do not remember the exact question, but it was about if what we did was wrong or not. The question was tricky and I would sound like a traitor who does not love his country if answered ‘I was right’. All this time we were there [in Gelaalo], we were guarded by soldiers who would strike in an instant. They were uneducated and thought of us as the enemy. (Interview, Van Reisen with P, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

A similar account was given by Gerrima:

*When they wanted to return us to Asmara, they made us fill out a small questionnaire:  
Do you think it is wrong that you have disrupted work that was planned by the people and Government of Eritrea?*

*A – It was wrong*

*B – It was right*

*Ha, if I answered that it was wrong, then it means that I agree that I have done something wrong. If I answered that it was right, then not only do I agree that I did something wrong, but that I am also ‘happy’ that I committed a crime against the people and government of the state of Eritrea. About eighty percent of us either said it was right or did not answer the question, but wrote that we did not commit any crime below the title. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

Such incidents not only instilled fear, but also created a lot of anger among the students. The students did not want to sign papers that would incriminate them and tried to avoid doing so, but were eventually forced to sign the questionnaire by the soldiers:



*Especially those of us in the sophomore and freshman years were too angry; the older ones had learned to be afraid. Most of those who had answered the way the security guards wanted were in their final years. So, when that didn't work, they came with a list of our names and ordered us to sign [...]. I was too angry. The soldiers there were calling out the names of those who didn't sign and forcing them with guns. So, we consoled ourselves saying that we did everything until they brought the guns on us. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

In order to instil more fear, after the students returned from detention, rumours were circulated that there were 250 new 'listening recruits' (spies) deployed among the students (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016). The following year, in 2002, the university closed, further exacerbating the outflow of young people from the country: "People had to run away because the truth was no more sacred" (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016).

Alongside these events, the Government of Eritrea arranged for around 600 students to be taken to South Africa for 'exchange visits' under a World Bank project, the Eritrean Human Resources Development Programme<sup>18</sup>, which ran from 2000 onwards. Most of them were sent to obtain post-graduate qualifications. Students were essentially forced to sign an agreement and many students got stuck in South Africa unable to return, partly because no proper arrangements had been made for them to stay. These students were not protected by South Africa or Eritrea. The level of fear that the students experienced is noticeable from documents written at the time to advocate for their position. The following narrates a visit of President Afwerki to South Africa in 2002, at which time he met with the students:

*Asked by Hussien as to when the government will release political prisoners or bring them to a court of law, including his father, the President [Afwerki ] answered blatantly: 'Whenever we feel like doing so. Do you have any idea about the Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where the United States has detained prisoners of Taliban for reasons of national security? So can we do; just like that. We can detain people whom we believe are a threat to our national security, if we want indefinitely. We will bring them to trial when we feel like doing it, in a closed session of a special court in which we try secretly those who are a national security threat...' (Mekonnen & Abraha, 2009)*

Mekonnen and Abraha, who were among those who participated in the student 'exchange' programme, describe how students were refused visas in South Africa and harassed due to what they believe were instructions from the Eritrean Ambassador in South Africa. Some students had their Eritrean passports cancelled and became effectively stateless. Some students felt that they were subjected to surveillance and punished for activities they engaged in after they arrived in South

Africa (Mekonnen & Abraha, 2009). At the same time, students were deported back to Eritrea, also allegedly upon the instructions of the Eritrean Ambassador in South Africa: “Isaak and Rahel were, unfortunately, deported last year without the knowledge of their host university and [without having access to] an appropriate South African court” (Mekonnen & Abraha, 2009, p. 16).

Many of the students who participated in the exchange programme never returned. In Eritrea, the situation worsened when the military began to organise random campaigns to round up youth: “2003 was a transition. I, myself, wanted to leave since then, and everybody else I know. Most of my friends who could travel for government business wouldn’t return” (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016).

Gerrima recalls a campaign in 2003 that targeted young people who had (some) money:

*I remember during the summer of 2003, they were jailing dozens and dozens of young men who were seen as extravagant spenders. They would be kidnapped by security agents, taken to prison, and interrogated harshly about where they got the money they were spending. Most of them were let out after a few weeks to months, but the campaign created the feeling that home was no longer home. [...] there was one like that in 2005. They took anybody they found on the streets to Adi Abieto [a notorious prison in Eritrea]. Some people died trying to break out. But the summer of 2003 roundup targeted people with money. Anybody who spent too much was accused of doing illegal business. ‘How are you so fat when everybody is so skinny?’, they asked one guy. They asked him if he was a night robber. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

This appears to have been part of a deliberate strategy to impoverish the majority of Eritreans in the country (on this point, see also [Chapter 2](#)). In addition, this campaign created uncertainty and diminished confidence among citizens:

*Such random general roundups still happen to create a continuous feeling of unease. I always had papers, but I hated being stopped every 10 to 15 minutes. You can’t walk with your family or friends with dignity when any random soldier in the streets calls you up disrespectfully and checks your papers over an unnecessary period of five minutes. This means every sign around us told us to go, everything whispered ‘run away before you drown’. I still hate seeing people in uniform. There is always that involuntary jolt of fear when I first notice police. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

Students were ordered to do national service and the government instructed students who had completed their studies as to what position in society they could take:

*The following year all university students who had finished their final year were posted to the worst possible places and posts. For example, an agriculture graduate would be posted to water and garden in a military division farm; an engineering student would be posted as a builder; and a mechanical engineering student would be posted to a military garage to repair old military trucks. They wanted to tell us that we amounted to nothing. Students who wanted to continue their masters elsewhere were told to do national service first. After, when they had done national service, they were told that there was simply no going out [of Eritrea]. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

In 2005, further mass arrests took place when people began to protest against the national service programme (Tronvoll, 2009). In an attempt to repress this protest the government began to arrest and detain relatives of those trying to avoid national service and those fleeing the country (*Ibid.*). This was referred to as ‘punishment by association’ in a press release by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, which concludes that the policy of fear and repression constitutes an important reason for the mass migration from Eritrea:

*While reiterating their concern over the increasingly alarming refugee exodus reaching the coasts of Europe and in particular the sizeable component of Eritreans in this group, the Commissioners explain why the numbers of Eritreans fleeing the country has steadily grown, citing the persisting climate of fear and lack of hope for a future as the main culprits. (UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 2015).*

The conclusion that Gerrima draws is that all of the combined Eritrean policies and actions are driving youth away:

*The whole thing is like rounding cattle towards slaughter – you push them from all sides so that they run to the trap. This is the same: life is made impossible in every way so that the only remaining logical decision becomes to leave. Yes, the cause is political, economic, social, and so on. But all of these causes are themselves manufactured to deliberately push society away. People run away because they can’t eat, they can’t eat because they are poor, they are poor because they have not been allowed to work as they wish for a decade and a half. (Interview, Van Reisen with Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

This combination of actions can be understood as a deliberate policy to rid the country of its youth. Hadgu came to the following conclusion:

*Understand it this way: 1) youth are used as slaves or as sources of free labour, 2) youth are terrorised and marginalised so that they do not participate in the political, civic, socioeconomic life of the country, and 3) youth are used as a source of income through revenue generated from human*

*smuggling and trafficking.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 26 December 2016)

According to Hadgu, the policy of the Government of Eritrea is purposely designed to diminish the role of youth as they are viewed as a threat to those holding power: “the systematic way that youth have been targeted makes me believe it is an intentional policy” (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 26 December 2016). The conclusion drawn by Gerrima is equally sharp; he says that the policy has explicitly resulted in the haemorrhaging of Eritrean youth into neighbouring countries as refugees: “Everything on the ground that happened and was done in Eritrea was not only pushing, but forcing people to leave” (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016).

The following perspectives, which have emerged from the interviews, are particularly noteworthy:

- The intimidation and detention of students, which ultimately resulted in the closure of the University of Asmara in 2002, and the severe and denigrating treatment they suffered, including being forced to incriminate themselves (by answering and signing a questionnaire)<sup>19</sup>
- What seems to be a deliberate policy by the government to rid Eritrea of its youth, as they may challenge the power-base in the country
- The use of the World Bank’s Eritrean Human Resources Development Programme by the Government of Eritrea to rid the country of its youth and, with them, the potential to challenge the establishment
- The role of the Eritrean Ambassador in South Africa, who, among other things, cancelled the passports of Eritrean students, leaving them without legal documents, making them vulnerable to being labelled ‘illegal foreigners’

## **Mass detentions of 2001**

The reports of the students who were detained during the 2001 mass arrests give a rare insight into the detention practices in Eritrea. The students were detained under corrugated iron sheets in extreme temperatures. P describes how they were detained and the situation in the detention camp:

*First they took us to Wi’a, which is located at sea level with an average temperature of 38 degrees centigrade. After a day they took us to a stream to cool off, but two of the students got ill from the sudden change in body temperature. This is because the water is very cold, as it flows from the*

*highlands. Later, both of them died. After a week with nothing to eat except canned food, most of us were transferred to Gelaalo. (Interview, Van Reisen with P, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

During their detention in Wi'a and Gelaalo, the students were forced to do heavy labour:

*We would walk for two hours every morning and collect stones. We would collect them into 1 by 2 by 6 metre-long rectangular cubes [...]. When I travelled to Assab 8 years later, the cubes were still there, like strange graves of giants on the moonscape. Whole mountain sides in the area looked like a huge cemetery. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)<sup>20</sup>*

The students in Wi'a prison also collected stones in a Sahospeaking village called Lahazien (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016). This can be classified as forced labour, but with one important difference – the tasks were entirely purposeless and, therefore, intentionally demoralising. One of the students explained: “Forced labour usually has a purpose, in our case it was simply a punishment [...] so that we would become exhausted” (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016).

Labour also included tasks for the military commanders: “Sometimes we would be sent on shifts to the ovens to make bread for the army that was guarding us” (Interview, Van Reisen with P, Skype, 27 December 2016).

At around the same time, in 2001, arrests were taking place among aid workers in Eritrea. A detailed account has been given by a former aid worker, Mussie Hadgu, who was detained in 2001, 2002 and 2007 in the infamous prisons of Aderser (an underground prison), Sawa military camp, Ani Abeito and Wi'a. Hadgu (2009) describes the extremely harsh conditions in prison, including the overcrowding, extremely high temperatures (of around 45°C), underground prison facilities, poor food, poor hygiene and torture:

*Another problem was extreme overcrowding which made the living conditions in the prison combined with the high temperature unbearable. The room was so overcrowded because it was accommodating about 90 prisoners at a time. In the first 2 weeks of my stay in the prison, we were about 70, but later about 20 new prisoners were added to us making the number above 90. In the weeks preceding my arrival, there were about 120 prisoners (as narrated to me by the prisoners) in the underground cell where I was held. Because of the extreme overcrowding, one could not sleep dorsally or ventrally (because sleeping in these ways takes more space than sleeping on the sides), thus we were forced to sleep on our sides. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 5)*

In Aderser prison, most of the prisoners had been arrested in Gash Barka while arranging to flee to Sudan (Hadgu, 2009). Hadgu tells that those who tried to

escape were shot immediately to discourage fellow prisoners from attempting to do so. Hadgu described his fellow prisoners in 2001 as:

*...civilians, mainly alleged [accused] of plotting to cross to Sudan. [...] With the exception of few cases such as mine, the majority of the prisoners were arrested at Tesseney roadblock while entering Tesseney. The people were on a trip to Tesseney unaware of the new measures introduced by the military – i.e. the new measure that requires every traveller to the area around Tesseney to hold a movement permit that is specific to the area. At the time of my detention, this measure was shortly [recently] introduced and the public were not informed by any means about the new measures. Before this measure was introduced, if one had a movement permit, he/she could travel unrestricted all over the country. The prisoners in this category were composed of students, workers and traders and the age group ranged from 18–40 years. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 4)*

Hadgu describes the following methods of torture used to discipline the prisoners:

*They beat him severely for almost a week and tied him up regularly for days – this include tying him up [by] his four limbs together and hanging on the tree for hours on a daily basis until his arms had become almost paralysed but gradually improved with time. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 7)*

The torture included collective punishment and sadistic, denigrating treatment:

*Also we were collectively punished and tortured when the prisoners expressed their anger by throwing shoes at the entrance door of the underground cell. When the prisoners beat the door, it made a noise. Though the prison guards know well [that] because of the darkness we cannot see who did it, the guards ask us to pick up or indicate those who did the throwing. In such cases the guards [...] make us lie on our abdomen and beat us on our buttocks. As we used to wear only pants, the beating was extremely painful and left wounds/scars. [...] Sometimes after beating us they took us outside and made us roll on the ground. Rolling while you are naked and covered with sweat is painful and makes the body dirty and muddy for there was no water to wash until the next Sunday comes. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 7)*

Many of the prisons are in undisclosed locations and family members may not know that their relatives are detained, or even of the existence of these detention centres (Amnesty International, 2013). Makeshift prisons have been created in every sizable military facility and there are hundreds of conventional prisons and detention centres as well:

*1. Each army division and sub-unit has its own prison i.e. division, brigade, and battalion-level prisons. 2. Each town has various police stations with detention/interrogation facilities i.e. 1st and 2nd police station in Massawa, and stations 1 to 5 (at least) in Asmara. (Human Rights Watch,*

2008; see also: Amnesty International, 2013; CSW & HRCE, 2009; UN Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016)

Inquiring about the existence of prisons or the whereabouts of disappeared relatives can result in punishment or even arrest (Hadgu, 2009; N, personal communication, with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 2016; T, personal communication, with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 2016).

Amnesty International recorded the following testimony regarding the underground cell in Wi'a Military Camp, which processes mainly youth and people detained during roundups: "We couldn't lie down [in the underground cell]. It's best to be standing because if you lie down, your skin remains stuck to the floor. The floor is terribly hot" (Amnesty International, 2013).

The following types of punishment were reported by Hadgu as common in Wi'a:

*Beating using clubs, whip, plastic tubes, fist and foot at any part of the body; Tying up in different ways such as 'oto' (number eight) and 'helicopter' and making [the prisoner] lie on the burning ground for many hours; if the case is considered very heavy, the victim is only released during meal times and while relieving his/her waste (twice per day); thus the length of time varies, in some cases it can go to 48 hours. They also beat the victim with the different tools and methods while still tied up. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 27)*

In a description of the torture practices used in the over 300 prisons and detention facilities in Eritrea, a report submitted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights Concern-Eritrea to the 2009 Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights in Eritrea lists the following torture methods:

*Many are housed in underground dungeons, overcrowded sitting-room-only cells, narrow and low-roofed cubicles and metal shipping containers. Conditions in prison are appalling; prisoners are humiliated and subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. Thousands have also been abducted and disappeared into the system by the government security apparatus. Extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions are extremely common. Prisoners are also routinely tortured. Brutal beatings, innovative and cruel ways of tying up prisoners for extended periods, electric shocks, genital torture, rape and sex slavery and hard labour are common. Deprivations of sleep, food, water, clothing, medicine, sanitary essentials, company and visitation are routine. Many have died due to these appalling conditions. (CSW & HRCE, 2009, p. 2)*

Tronvoll (2009) lists and describes six different torture methods ('the helicopter', 'otto', 'Jesus Christ', 'ferro', 'torch' and 'almaz'). Tronvoll cites the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (2007)<sup>21</sup>, in which Eritrea was

ranked among the top-ten “torture victim producing” countries in the world (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 84–85).

From the detailed personal description by Hadgu, a picture emerges of how prisoners are detained in successive facilities and how those weakened by torture suffer increasingly severe abuse. The imprisonment of Hadgu appears to have been a direct result of the cross-border collaboration between the Eritrean and Sudanese groups on different sides of the border. The aid programme that Hadgu was responsible for (as project officer) was intended for Sudanese rebel groups in eastern Sudan, but under the implementation authority of the Eritrean government.

*In 2000, [X][...] was one of the few organisations remaining in Eritrea, when others were expelled. The reason it was left behind was that the Eritrean government was openly supporting and arming several groups including the Sudan People’s Liberation Front (SPLF) in eastern Sudan, directly under command of Teklai Manjus. This [Manjus] was the Border Surveillance Unit looking at the border security [between Eritrea and] in Sudan. So by that time [...] Eritrea was arming Sudanese rebel groups under direct command to attack eastern Sudan. [...] [My aid organisation] was given the privilege to remain in Eritrea to support the Sudanese opposition group. They were directly asked by Yemane Gebreab [Head of the PFDJ ] to stay. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 26 December 2016)<sup>22</sup>*

The cooperation would be in exchange for other gifts from the Sudanese side, so this was benefitting both Eritrea and eastern Sudan in making deals around cross-border trafficking:

*At the same time, the border surveillance unit officials used to receive a lot of benefits from the Sudanese opposition officials by means of bribery and material gifts and, in exchange, the Sudanese opposition received good cooperation and collaboration from the border surveillance officers. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 2)*

Meanwhile, Hadgu was experiencing difficulties in implementing the food aid programme:

*Beja Relief Organisation (BRO) staff were hindering the timely and smooth distribution of the food and were playing a lot of tricks in the process. As a result they plotted a conspiracy to eliminate me. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 2)*

Hadgu was arrested in 2001. The vehicle that came for his arrest was the vehicle provided to him by the aid organisation. It was being used by the intelligence officer of the border surveillance unit, who had been instructed by the head of the eastern



Sudanese office of the Beja Relief Organisation (BRO) (Hadgu, 2009, p. 3). The following points emerge from the evidence on detention in Eritrea:

- The targeting of youth for detention
- The detention of people attempting to flee the country
- The severe torture used in the detention facilities
- The shoot-to-kill policy in relation to prisoners who attempt to escape
- The lack of information given to family members, who are often not informed about the detention and whereabouts of their relatives, and who risk being arrested if they make inquiries
- The cooperation between eastern Sudan and the cross-border surveillance unit headed by General Teklai Manjus
- Practices of fraud related to (cross-border) aid programmes.

## **The consolidation of power: 2003–2007**

The period between 2003 and 2007 can be regarded as the consolidation of power by the PFDJ, in preparation for unchecked control. This was achieved by organising a failed economy and creating scarcity and poverty in the country:

*The period from 2003 to 2007 was a transition from the war period to this Orwellian reality we see today. Things were developing fast; Isaias' [President Isaias Afwerki's] group was restructuring, planning how to move ahead. There was the support by the PFDJ to Al Shabab, to eastern Sudan, to South Sudan, and the involvement in Ethiopia. Business people were getting kicked out of the country. The number of people who left the country was steadily growing and smuggling and human trafficking was refining itself. The economy was failing. There was no bread, no petrol. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

This period was a prelude to the grim years ahead, during which Eritrea would experience the largest exodus of a population from a country in living history:

*The period [2003–2007] can generally be viewed as the intensification, over a period of time, of PFDJ's control tactics. People begun seeing beyond the idea of a failed government to a government dedicated to creating suffering. So it was the strengthening of the hold on power that came after 2001, and the ground laying for the situation that followed after 2008. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

By 2008, all international organisations had left the country (Kibreab, 2009), foreign aid was suspended and, in December 2009, the UN Security Council

adopted a resolution imposing sanctions on Eritrea based on the financial support of Eritrea and the PFDJ to the rebel group Al Shabab and rebel groups in Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan (UN Security Council Resolution 1907). Independent researchers no longer felt safe carrying out research in the country.

In this heightened situation of fear, anxiety and desperation, a new exodus of refugees began. This time the refugees were not only students, but youths who had received little or poor education, who were often raised by one parent as a result of the ongoing national service, and who were increasingly from rural areas. With the tight security and surveillance network installed in the country, the dependence on facilitators to help refugees leave the country increased. Anyone in a position to benefit from the new smuggling and trafficking trade would be tempted to do so, especially given the lack of any alternative source of income.

## **The post-2008 economy: Sources of funds for the regime**

### *The 'business' of leaving*

Eritrea's National Service programme has stripped Eritrea of its main workforce, leaving women at home to look after children and the elderly. With the able-bodied workforce conscripted, there is no one left to run and staff private businesses. The leadership assigns individuals to military or civil administrative positions. The wage received by conscripts in the military is too low to live on, creating a situation of impoverishment, in which a black market economy has emerged. This black market is encouraged and controlled by the regime. Trafficking and smuggling form an integral part of this black market, as an increasingly large number of people are willing to pay for the chance to escape (see [Chapter 2](#) for more on the black market and illicit cross-border trade).

In the military, people began paying their superiors thousands of Eritrean nakfa in exchange for being allowed to stay at home for most of the year. Military commanders would collect the salaries of the absentee soldiers and the commanders' families would also receive bribes in the towns. For people who had family businesses to run back home, who had to take care of their families and those who had health problems, or who simply did not wish to live in the remote frontlines, such arrangements were a temporary way out. According to former Deputy Finance Minister, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, the system of an informal black economy has been intentionally created by the ruling regime (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, 30 November 2016; see also [Chapter 2](#)).

As a result of the uncertainty, unpredictability and fear in Eritrea, a whole new area of business has emerged surrounding services that enable people to leave the country:

*The money related to this business was, and remains, quite substantial. Fifteen years ago people paid as much as 15,000 nakfa [ERN] for a year's leave [from national service]. Others would simply leave their monthly pay for the commander. If a recruit was past the 18 months, then they would get 440 nakfa or so monthly pocket money. If a commander takes the pay of 10 or 20 people who have gone home or left the country, then he would be one of the best paid people in the country. [...] some were issued movement papers by their units while they spent their time at home. The papers would be sent to their homes and they would pay at least 10,000 nakfa a year. Others would spend that money on the commander's family. They would buy a goat or a sheep for a child's baptism, pay for the children to go to a nice private school, give the son pocket money and so on. For an army commander, that is the only way to survive. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)<sup>23</sup>*

The Sudanese border is of particular importance, as it is the route by which most refugees flee Eritrea. Formally, the military units overseeing border control are required to prevent illegal or unauthorised border crossings from Eritrea. In reality, they control the flow of migrants and refugees. This control is exercised with the aim to extract the maximum benefit from migrants and refugees leaving the country.

Planning to flee illegally begins with the need to get papers to allow movement within the country to a destination from where one can flee. Handsome bribes are paid to superiors and various authorities to sign papers approving the release of national service recruits and vehicles from the Border Control Authority drive across the border with 10–12 people who have paid their way out from Asmara to Kassala. This costs around USD 8,000–10,000 and is arranged by the military (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, 30 November 2016). A refugee who fled along this route and was abducted to the Sinai where he was held for ransom explained:

*The Rashaida have full impunity in Eritrea. They can move without a single problem through the checkpoints. They are fully free to move around in the cars. There is no other conclusion than that the Rashaida are used by the PFDJ. It is very clear in Tesseney [a province of Eritrea border Sudan] that they cooperate in the trade in the border area. I used to see it when there is a shortage of petrol, the Rashaida bring it. (Interview, Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017).*

Smuggling and trafficking networks run across borders from Eritrea to its neighbouring countries, from where trajectories extend to Libya and Egypt:

*Operations and activities of the human trafficking networks extend from inside Eritrea towards Sudan and Ethiopia and then to Libya and Egypt. Some of these networks are interconnected and operate and coordinate among themselves over these countries. There are also clandestine links between the smuggling networks of various nationalities in this area. Some of these networks [even] have [...] links with some members of the security agencies in these countries, because of the exorbitant money, which some of these networks earn as a result of human smuggling operations [which is] shared with the security members. Some of the smuggling operations from Eritrea to Sudan cost [...] approximately (7 to 8000 US Dollars) and from Sudan to Egypt (about 1,500 to 2,000 US Dollars) [sic] for an individual respectively. (Africa Monitors, 2016e)*

The US Trafficking in Persons Report (United States Department of State, 2016) laments the lack of protection provided by Eritrea to its citizens to protect them from human trafficking. It confirms that Eritrean nationals are kidnapped from neighbouring countries and deported to Eritrea:

*The [Eritrean] government has demonstrated negligible efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims. [...] It did not develop procedures to identify or refer trafficking victims among vulnerable groups, including Eritreans deported from countries abroad or persons forcibly removed by Eritrean security forces from neighboring countries. Eritreans fleeing the country and those deported from abroad – including some who may be trafficking victims – were vulnerable to being arrested, detained, harassed, or recalled into national service upon return. The government did not provide foreign victims with legal alternatives to their removal to countries where they faced retribution or hardship. (United States Department of State, 2016)*

According to the US Trafficking in Persons report (2016), the risk of human trafficking of Eritrean refugees is ongoing. It concludes that the Eritrean government carries responsibility for the trafficking of its population and is complicit with the trafficking.

*Eritrea is a source country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor. To a lesser extent, Eritrean adults and children are subjected to sex and labor trafficking abroad. The government continues to be complicit in trafficking through the implementation of national policies and mandatory programs amounting to forced labour within the country, which cause many citizens to flee the country and subsequently increases their vulnerability to trafficking abroad. (United States Department of State, 2016)*

The US Trafficking in Persons Report (2016) concludes that the Government of Eritrea has failed to investigate reported incidents of human trafficking of its citizens, despite a number of national laws requiring it to do so.

### ***Revenue from ransoms***

In its report, the International Crisis Group (2014) identifies President Isaias Afwerki directly as having instructed General Manjus to control the refugee stream going out of the country. The report concludes:

*To stem the flow [of refugees], the president reportedly initially turned to Brigadier General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”. Manjus fell back on his guerrilla instincts, allegedly imposing a shoot-to-kill policy for deserters and retaliation against their families. But the prevalence of conscripts in the army made implementation difficult, since it required targeting peers and undermined morale. Border garrisons faced a surge in insubordination, and more conscripts absconded. (International Crisis Group, 2014)*

The International Crisis Group also describes how General Manjus hired Rashaida paramilitary groups to police the Eritrean border, which ultimately led to the first ransoms being raised for deserters captured by the Rashaida trying to cross the border:

*In the face of growing desertions, Manjus allegedly sub-contracted border policing to remnants of the Rashaida paramilitary groups active in eastern Sudan that were previously trained by Eritrean forces and were backed by Asmara before the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement. They reportedly deployed on both sides of the border to fire at deserters. “Unlike the conscripts, they had little compunction in killing deserters. But soon, they started detaining them, and ordering [them] to contact families inside [Eritrea, asking] for a ransom to avoid execution” [Crisis Group interview, Dubai, July 2013]. (International Crisis Group, 2014, p.7)*

The International Crisis Group goes on to explain how the money generated was paid to Manjus’ representatives (mostly members of the Eritrean Defense Forces) in Eritrea: “Once money was involved, business interests rapidly expanded in both Eritrea and Sudan” (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 7).

As the extortion for ransom business has increased, the military has found multiple ways to profit from it. The involvement of the Eritrean military in the smuggling of refugees across the border was described by the Monitoring Group as a key source of illicit financing.

*The Monitoring Group has in the past reported on smuggling activities between eastern Sudan and western Eritrea. In 2011, the Group found that the crossborder operations between Eritrea and the Sudan provided a key source of illicit financing for Eritrean officials and regional armed groups. The Group named Mohammed Mantai, the ambassador of Eritrea to the Sudan at the time, as the chief coordinator of Eritrean activities out of the Sudan, and General Teklai Kifle “Manjus” as the overseer of cross-border smuggling operations. (UNSC, 2014, para. 17)*

From this study it seems likely that the overarching management or control of resources goes beyond General Manjus. A source with some insight into the operations at the highest level of the military in the region provides the following explanation of how finances are operated, (presumably beyond the control of General Manjus):

*[The money goes to] Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Dubai. [...] it's big, big game. They used this money to buy weapons, they have militia, they have an army of people to protect them and their business and they got political support. That is in Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea too. (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017)*

### ***The misuse of aid***

Assistance programmes have also been abused to serve various purposes. Hadgu reveals the use of fake lists to show donor compliance, while in fact the money (or food aid) was used for other purposes: "...BRO prepared a fake beneficiary list of non-existent beneficiaries for which I challenged them and recommended a correct beneficiary list" (Hagdu, 2009, p. 2).

The aid programme in question was carried out with the Border Surveillance Unit, which arranged for the arrest of project officer Hadgu when he did not cooperate with the fake distribution. Other examples of fake implementation include the following:

*They got funding for demobilizing the army. They included in their list of those who still had to be demobilized all veteran fighters who had already been demobilized, such as the disabled and child bearing women, and re-demobilized and paid them 5,000 nakfa. Then this figure went to the donors as being for demobilized combat forces (national service). (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

Further areas of corruption in the aid industry are described in the following:

*I know some who were working with the NGOs who had salaries of around 2,500–3,000 nakfa per month, but they would only receive 150 nakfa; the remainder would go to the Ministry of Defense. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

The World Bank, Emergency Reconstruction Programme, which was established after the 1998–2000 border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia and dealt with the results of internal displacement caused by the war, also experienced widespread corruption. This is what Gerrima recalls of what was discussed about the incident:

*The responsible organisation was providing 300 million nakfa for research into the conditions of internally displaced people. The pay [according to the project ] would range from 4,000 to 9,000 nakfa for the two months [per researcher ], but Weldeab Isaq said we would only get 800 nakfa for two months. That wasn't going to cover even part of a day's expenses. And then [...] someone wrote an e-mail to the World Bank about how Weldeab was using the funds to please Isaias. The money was instantly withdrawn and the PFDJ got mad. [...] They wanted to give us about 400,000 nakfa and take the rest. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

Eritrea was highly indebted after the 1998–2000 war and its financial system was precarious and dependent on foreign assistance:

*Finally, the war has seriously affected Eritrea's financial sector. As of December 2000, 42 percent of the combined portfolio of the three banks was non-performing. [...] However, the banking sector as a whole is unprofitable, and unless remedial steps are taken the other two banks may also run into trouble. (World Bank, 2002)*

In this situation of increasing government debt, tensions arose between the PFDJ and the Government of Eritrea:

*Right after the war, the PFDJ announced that they had lent the Eritrean government 300 million dollars and they, therefore, took this money from the Treasury. People were confused as to how the party had more money than the government. Taking 300 million USD away seriously weakened the government. That is when the PFDJ began taking the nation hostage. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)<sup>24</sup>*

In this context, international donors urged Eritrea to initiate a national budget process that would increase transparency, including over the PFDJ-related businesses (such as the Red Sea Corporation). It appears that the donors were increasingly questioning the business activities of the PFDJ, as revealed in what may have been the last publicly-available budget of the country:

*A better functioning budget process may have led to the questioning of a number of prestige projects that have been undertaken, even during the war: the Intercontinental Hotel in Asmara, the jumbo jet capacity airport in Massawa, the Massawa-Assab road. Expenditure on the Intercontinental Hotel and the Massawa airport were both greater than total spending on education in 2000, including donor expenditure on education. It may have also led to the questioning of the business activities of the PFDJ. (World Bank, 2002, p. 27)*

The concern expressed by the international donors is consistent with the following observation by Hadgu:

*After the EPLF [Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the predecessor to the PFDJ] took power, it declared that, except for military equipment, every asset at its disposal was party property. Thus, the government had nothing from the beginning. It was dependent on the party and outside funding under the various rehabilitation and development programmes. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

### ***Skimming remittances: The exchange rate***

The Red Sea Corporation (also known as '09'), which is one of 34 companies controlled by the PFDJ (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016), plays a critical role in determining the exchange rate. The exchange rate for the Eritrean nakfa (ERN), can be calculated in three ways. The official exchange rate is USD 1 = ERN 20 (as at 27 December 2016). However, the black market rate is the most commonly used and is currently at approximately USD 1 = ERN 55. The third method is the floating currency (or market value), which is used to identify the purchasing value of the currency, which is USD 1 = ERN 100–120. This means that the average cost of an item that is valued at 1 USD would be ERN 100–120 in the market place.

This leads to a very confusing reality. For example, if USD 10 was to be transferred by hawala agents, the recipient in Eritrea would receive ERN 200 (official exchange rate), but one would not be able to buy an item at market valued at USD 10 for ERN 200, rather such an item would cost around ERN 1,000–1,200 (market rate). The exchange rates do not reflect the market inside the country. Therefore, neither the bank rate nor the black market reflect how much money people inside Eritrea are forced to live on. As both the exchange rate and the prices of goods are centrally determined without oversight, what the population can get in exchange for money is politically controlled (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 17 January 2017).

In addition, these values hide another issue. In Eritrea, families are highly dependent upon remittances sent from refugees and members of the Eritrean diaspora. The remittance transfer system is controlled by the Government of Eritrea. High profits are being made on the basis of these payments:

*When I send USD 100, with a market value of about 10,000–12,000 nakfa [ERN], the recipient in Asmara will receive only 2,000 nakfa [official rate] to 5,500 nakfa [black market rate]. The remaining 4,500–10,000 will be profit for the PFDJ remittance hawala networks. (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 17 January 2017).*

When the PFDJ collects foreign currency and transfers it to family and friends of refugees using the black market rate (USD 1 = ERN 55), recipients receive only half



the market value (USD 1 = 100–120). Therefore, the Red Sea Corporation is in effect levying a hidden tax of at least 50% on all remittances to Eritrea. The Red Sea Corporation then uses the hard currency to buy supplies and sell it in Eritrea for the real market value of the USD against the ERN. This means that while recipients of remittances might get ERN 55 for every ERN 100–120 sent to them, an item that costs 1 USD is not sold for ERN 55, as the exchange rate would suggest, but for ERN 100–120 (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 17 January 2017). Thus, the Red Sea Corporation is making money twice off this uneven exchange rate (*Ibid.*).

### ***The hawala system***

Money from the diaspora is generally transferred through the hawala system, which is a network of agents that informally exchange money. The Red Sea Corporation controls the hawala system in Eritrea (called the Himer Exchange and Transfer Office of the Red Sea Corporation).

*They [the Red Sea Corporation] control most of the black remittances coming through illegal hawala. They have agents who distribute the hawala money to families. I know because more than 90% of remittances to Eritrea are done by their agents. Some people I knew used to work for them. There are dozens of them here, in Juba, in the Emirates. It is common knowledge. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

Former Deputy Minister of Finance, Hosabay, explains that hawala plays a critical role in the web of payments that facilitate all the different international revenue streams:

*The remittance system is now so well oiled; if you pay ransom you pay it through the collaborators assigned by the PFDJ. People are trading in the PFDJ hawala system. The people who are paying in Eritrea are licensed to do so through the Red Sea Corporation. You pay out of the bank illegally. For the Sinai ransoms [ransoms paid for Eritrean hostages held by human traffickers in the Sinai ], the same system of payments was used through assigned trusted people. (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 18 December 2016)*

A clue to how this system operates was exposed by SwissLeaks, which revealed HSBC Bank account details, showing that Eritrean individuals (not the country) were among the richest bank account holders with hundred millions of US dollars. The journalist Marie Maurisse, who specialises in Eritrea, explains the systems in an article in L'Hebdo as follows:

*As revealed by the SwissLeaks operation, several Eritreans also owned accounts at HSBC Geneva, at least until 2007. The group detailed it in its 2011 report: the Asmara regime passes the tickets through sympathizers domiciled in Italy, the United States or even in Switzerland. These people, officially taxi drivers or mechanics, serve as account-names for the Eritrean ministers. (Maurisse, 2015, translated by Van Reisen)*

Maurisse (2015) explains that this money is not owned by the Government of Eritrea, but by the PFDJ through a network of individuals in whose name the money is transferred. HSBC is listed as having 32 Eritrean clients with a total of USD 700 million (Ryle *et al.*, 2015). The ransoms paid for the release of victims of trafficking in the Sinai are believed to be part of an informal system of payments (see also [Chapter 2](#)). Eritreans fleeing their country have become a ‘commodity’ in a lucrative human smuggling and trafficking business, which is valued at hundreds of millions of dollars (Hughes, 2015). A wide international network of financial agents is used for the reception of money paid for the smuggling of relatives outside the country:

*In most cases the money is paid outside the country – Sudan, South Sudan, Dubai or other countries. I know personally many people who paid this way. But also in my study to know how the networks work, I found out that is how it works. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

The transfer of payments is arranged as follows:

*...when the person who is smuggled arrives in Sudan or Ethiopia, there is a call to the payer to confirm that he has arrived. Then the payer delivers the money to an agreed third person, or to one of the smugglers’ middlemen. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

Another refugee explained the system as follows, pointing to the role of the embassies and consulates as well as PFDJ and hawala agents in one financial system:

*They are all one. You have places in Asmara, in Khartoum, in Israel, in Jordan (in the consulate), in Europe (in the consulate), in America (they have agents) – there you pay. If my sister pays for me in America, then she receives a code. For instance she gets the code number 76. She gives me the code number by phone. I go to the agent in Khartoum and he asks me the code. Then they know I have paid. They are very clever. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 14 January 2017)*

Q2 travelled from Eritrea to Ethiopia, and from Ethiopia to Sudan, Libya and Europe. She explains that she paid most of the fee in Khartoum to Eritrean agents,

who were in charge of organising the journey:

*In Khartoum, [...] I went to an Eritrean called Zeki. I paid 1,600 USD from Khartoum to Libya. I went to Asmara Market in Khartoum. I paid to a Eritrean man, Welid, USD 2,200 for the crossing by boat. Then they split it, they pay the Sudan people and Libya people and they keep the rest. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 14 January 2017)*

According to Q2 the payments for the fees are much higher for Eritrean refugees. In order to pay less for the journey from Ethiopia to Sudan, she spoke Amharic and acted as if she was Ethiopian. She paid USD 200 instead of the USD 1,600 required for Eritrean refugees (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 14 January 2017).

### ***Other sources of income***

Other sources of revenue for the regime include the fines extorted from families whose relatives are presumed to have fled the country without prior authorisation. The fine, which is around “50,000 nakfa per individual” (Hadgu, 2010), is collected by the government and the military. The fine is impossible to pay with the wages provided by national service (around 440 nakfa in ‘pocket money’). If the fine is not paid, the relatives may be arrested (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

Other levies directly associated with the refugee exodus are the 2% tax raised by the embassies on the diaspora and other financial contributions collected by the embassies (see more on this in [Chapter 10](#)). Eritreans in the diaspora also contribute extensively in terms of remittances to supplement the incomes of family members left behind in Eritrea. In a briefing, the International Crisis Group (2014) states that the Eritrean government is purposefully driving youth out of the country, as they seem more useful (and profitable) outside than inside:

*The large emigration of youths is the clearest sign of extreme domestic discontent with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki’s government. Social malaise is pervasive. [...] Asmara’s response to the exodus [...] has evolved in recognition of its uses. [...] a symbiotic system has emerged that benefits a range of actors, including the state. The government ostensibly accepts that educated, urbanised youths resistant to the individual sacrifices the state demands are less troublesome and more useful outside the country – particularly when they can continue to be taxed and provide a crucial social safety net for family members who stay home. (International Crisis Group, 2014)*

## **Crisscrossing borders: No safe haven in Ethiopia or Sudan**

### ***Ethiopia***

Since colonial times, Eritreans have lived and worked in Ethiopia and Sudan and have been a very influential part of both societies. Ethiopia has been receiving Eritrean refugees since 2000 and the first refugee camp, Shemelba, was created in 2004. The five large camps on the border house an estimated 45,000 Eritreans (authors' estimate based on interviews). Ethiopia is regarded as the safest destination for Eritrean refugees – especially the highlanders, who are ethnically related to the Tigray population in Ethiopia. However, Eritrean refugees are vulnerable to being trafficked. This is largely due to their tenuous financial situation.

Some Eritrean refugees are in Ethiopia to obtain documents for legal migration, others are waiting for family reunification. Some Eritrean refugees live in cities in Ethiopia. The situation of Eritrean refugees is especially hard because they are not allowed to work. Some are supported by remittances sent by family in the diaspora and can live relatively comfortably (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 26 July 2016).

In the refugee camps, the main challenges for Eritreans are: lack of safety, inadequate supplies, and the corruption of officials who use resettlement opportunities for financial gain. Refugees in the camps complain that Ethiopian or Eritrean clients who have money can buy resettlement quotas reserved for the most vulnerable refugees.

The refugees who do not receive support from abroad and do not have professional skills to support themselves in the camps or as urban refugees are the most vulnerable. These refugees are at the most risk of human trafficking. Leaving Ethiopia is challenging (Hadgu, 2011). Refugees who want to move to other destinations travel predominantly to Sudan, facilitated by smugglers and traffickers.

*The journey to Sudan is either facilitated by smugglers inside Ethiopia or they make the journey on their own without the help of smugglers. Most of the refugees travel long distances on foot through the wilderness. In the process of escaping the refugee camps, many are being captured by the Ethiopian authorities and returned to the respective refugee camps. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 7)*

The refugees from rural areas of Eritrea identified the drought and political tension in the country as principal reasons for fleeing to Ethiopia (Interview, Selam Kidane in reception centre in Ethiopia, March 2016).

### ***Eastern Sudan***

Sudan has traditionally been one of the main refugee destinations for Eritreans. For decades, Eritreans have coexisted with Sudanese communities. In fact, two major ethnic groups in eastern Sudan live on both sides of the border, making it

common for Sudanese families in eastern Sudan to have family members from Eritrea. Sudan has hosted Eritrean refugees since the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict began in 1968 making Shagarab refugee camp (the largest refugee camp in eastern Sudan) one of the oldest refugee camps in Africa (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016). Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have been integrated into Sudanese society. Eritreans enjoyed Sudanese hospitality in the 1980s and the country gave both refugees and the armed forces a safe haven during difficult times.

However, as migration flows to Sudan increased after the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the hospitality that Eritreans knew in Sudan in the 1980s began to change. Reception centres and refugee camps in Sudan are now the most dangerous places for Eritreans to stay, even for a few days. Anti-migrant sentiments have risen. The situation at the border is now very dangerous for Eritrean refugees, who are vulnerable, often resulting in exploitation, as explained by Hadgu:

*The risks and threats to Eritreans do not end in Eritrea; after crossing the border into the Sudan, the refugees still face huge risks of life loss, detention, abuse, harassment, rape, deportation, torture, humiliation and looting of their properties and money. Their security is [worrisome]. As the result of the decade long smuggling activities of Eritreans to the Sudanese towns and [other destinations] involving tens of thousands of dollars, [the perception is] that Eritreans have money [...]. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 1)*

Mobile phones, money, and any other belongings are regularly ‘confiscated’ from refugees by the security forces (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 14 January 2017). Hadgu also mentions this problem:

*The security forces loot the Habesha [Eritrean] refugees from the moment they arrive in the Sudan. There are three reception points in Eastern Sudan (excluding the red sea part): [...] Kassala, Hafir (Located west of Gergef, Eritrea) and Hamdait (located west of Omhajer). On arrival, every person is taken to the security forces/Intelligence office and [...] his body and belongings [are thoroughly searched]. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 3)*

Refugees report that trafficking facilitators and security forces in Sudan work together, while trying to make it appear that this is not the case so as not to spoil their credibility as trustworthy facilitators (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017).

The camps in eastern Sudan are not considered safe. Rashaida traffickers randomly kidnap refugees from the camps. Women are taken by armed Rashaida groups and raped, often multiple times and by different groups; many of them give

birth while still in the camps. The US State Department describes this situation in its Trafficking in Persons report (2016):

*International criminal groups kidnap vulnerable Eritreans living inside or in proximity to refugee camps, particularly in Sudan, and transport them primarily to Libya, where they are subjected to human trafficking and other abuses, including extortion for ransom. Some migrants and refugees report being forced to work as cleaners or on construction sites during their captivity. Reports allege Eritrean diplomats, particularly those posted in Sudan, provide travel documents and legal services to Eritrean nationals in exchange for bribes or inflated fees, potentially facilitating their subjection to trafficking. Some Eritrean military and police officers are complicit in trafficking crimes along the border with Sudan. (United States Department of State, 2016, p. 165)*

The rations provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the camps are wholly inadequate. In the refugee camps of Shagarab, the refugees are interrogated by security forces about their financial situation for the purposes of extortion:

*The security forces have an absolute authority to loot, torture, and intimidate the refugees before they hand them over to the UNHCR authorities. Even in Shagarab security forces camps, refugees have been made to stay temporarily for some days before being transferred to the UNHCR and the Sudanese refugee commission. During this period, the security forces search and interrogate the Habesha [Eritrean] refugees under very intimidating, harrowing, humiliating, and degrading conditions in private at their residence. The interrogation is aimed at collecting necessary and relevant information about the refugees that would enable them to know about their financial capacity. The main tool they use is threatening to deport the subjects to Eritrea. Before they start the interrogation, the first thing they do is search their pockets for money, valuables (such as mobile phones and watch etc.) and documents. They seize any money and valuables immediately; they check the documents to find out information on contacts the refugees have abroad, e.g. telephone numbers of people living abroad who can support them financially. In some instances, they beat the refugees being interrogated. From this interrogation process and the documents, they get information on whether their victims have escaped through smugglers (implying that the escapee has the financial capacity). On these bases, they ask for a specific amount of money in exchange for their release. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 3)*

Women are particularly vulnerable:

*If the escapee is a woman, they ask her for sex in exchange for her release. Refusal to meet the demands results in delays in transferring the escapees to the UNHCR office. The delays in transfer to the UNHCR office combined with the non-stop threats of deportation to Eritrea causes the refugees psychological stress and anxiety, and they submit to their demands as a result. In many cases, the security forces delay the transfer of women they raped to the UNHCR so as to have more time to continue raping them. (Hadgu, 2011, pp. 3-4)*

A poignant story was published by Africa Monitors in 2016 demonstrating the severe difficulties encountered by refugees fleeing Eritrea through Sudan. The story narrates the flight of a disabled Eritrean, called Yasser Idris:

*He set out [...] [at the] end of May 2016 along with his three friends. As they did not have any travel document that allow[...] them to freely move from one Eritrean region to the other, Yasser and associates had to trek out in the night past the northwestern checkpoint in the outskirts of Keren to [...] Sudan with utmost care. [...] By the time Yasser with his travel companions sallied out towards the Kassala city, a white pickup fast approached them apparently flying swifter than the wind and drew up before them. Armed men jumped out of the small truck and pointed muzzles of AK-47 warning them to not make any move. They bulldozed them in Arabic to board, or else, they [would] fall victim to bullets. [...] the pickup hit the gas northbound. They did not know where it was heading. Having reached a small village of the Rashaida, it was quite evident that they had fallen into the hands of the Bedouins. (Africa Monitors, 2016g)*

Yasser and his companions were thrown in an underground cell until they were told that they had been ‘bought’. He was told to phone his friends and relatives in the diaspora and collect a ransom of 20,000 Sudanese pounds (ca. USD 3,130). Yasser was the only one who could not pay the ransom, coming from a poor family:

*Yasser’s father, Mr. Idris, was a driver, who provides for his family with subsistence living. As a result, Yasser endured an inconceivably harsh physical and psychological torment for three months. They even went on to torture him with beads of melting plastic on his back and called his parents so that they would hear the agony of their son on the phone. [...] Yasser was sold to other smugglers during which time his parents had to pay 45,000 Sudanese pounds [ca. USD 7,042]. With no choice left, Yasser’s parents had to take up a collection raised through alms and loan for his redemption. (Africa Monitors, 2016g)<sup>25</sup>*

In another story reported by Africa Monitors, the plight of a young under-aged Eritrean girl, trying to support herself as a refugee in eastern Sudan is narrated. The young girl eventually fell pregnant, after trying to find support from someone involved in human trafficking:

*Here while I am a child myself I am carrying a foetus from a worthless person which I was forced to do when life became unbearable here. At first when I came here, since I had no remittance, I was working in cleaning profession. The work was hard and working hours lasted from eight in the morning to six in the evening. As [...] [a] result my health was deteriorating to the extent [that] my menstrual cycle was disturbed. (Africa Monitors, 2016f)*

Africa Monitors also recorded the story of Nazret, a young girl from a poor family in Eritrea, who was sold and re-sold several times in Sudan and asked to

collect a ransom:

*Nazret is an Eritrean born and raised in Weki-duba, a small town in the central region of Eritrea. In 2012, she was [...] [sold] to Rashaida gangs by a smuggler named Daniel while she was crossing the border to Sudan through Haikota (western Eritrea). Under the Rashaida gangs, she was asked to pay a ransom amounting 20,000 USD. [...] [As] she was from a very low income earning family, that amount of money was beyond her capacity. [...] The gang boss beats her whenever she is communicating with her family. Whenever she called her family, she cries loud for help as a result of the pain caused by the beating. [...] While the family through all means managed to collect 20,000 USD, from relatives and friends and were planning to make the payment, Nazret was called by the Gang's Translator and ordered to mount [...] [on] the back of [a] Toyota pick-up. [...] After 4 hours of journey[ing,] they reached a tented compound where about 200 [...] [sold] immigrants were kept. She couldn't believe what she had seen. Most of the [...] [sold] immigrants were degraded to half-alive human beings. And then she knew she was sold again by her former gangs to a new one. After 3 days, her name was called by the leader of the new Rashaida gang, named Babeker, who bought her, and instantly told her that she would pay 35,000 USD for he had bought her for a very huge price from the other gang. [...] She called to her family and her little sister picked [up]. (Africa Monitors, 2016b)*

The family collected the ransom and Nazret is currently living in Khartoum.

### ***On to Khartoum***

Given the precarious situation in the camps, refugees often travel on to Khartoum. They collect money from friends and relatives and sell the little food rations they receive to pay for transport to Khartoum in the back of small pickup trucks across the desert. These journeys are extremely dangerous:

*The safety of the refugees is endangered because the smugglers load 25–30 refugees (including mothers and children and infants) on [Toyota] Hilux vehicles, which should not carry more than eight people, and drive at extremely high speed and in a very dangerous way, ignoring the safety of lives of the refugees. (Hadgu, 2011, p.4)*

If refugees manage to remain out of the hands of traffickers for ransom and make their way to Khartoum, they face the hazardous situation of having to cross the Tekeze River. The crossing is illegal, therefore, the refugees depend on traffickers or smugglers:

*To cross the [...] Tekeze/Atbara River during the night, in the darkness, in human-powered boats under high security conditions to avoid being captured by the security forces, is life threatening. The smugglers loot the refugees themselves or collaborate with the Sudanese security forces or police to loot; or else they force the refugees to pay extra money when they are on the way, in addition to financial agreements made earlier. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 4)*



Refugees are smuggled through deserts and on rough roads in the back of pickup trucks, piled on top of each other, like merchandise. Based on many stories, Gerrima observes the following:

*They are offered no water and the trucks do not stop if people fall out during the bumpy ride. Traffickers or police can catch those left behind and demand money or kidnap them for ransom, and the smugglers randomly punish, and even shoot at, their passengers when they complain about thirst, hunger, or needing rest. When the refugees reach Khartoum, they are covered in layers of dust, have various eye or throat infections or breathing problems, their muscles ache from sitting in a single position for too long, and they are tired and dehydrated.* (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 30 December 2016)

Refugees moving from Kassala to Khartoum face detention and deportation back to Eritrea (see next section for more on deportation):

*The refugees can be sentenced up to one and a half months imprisonment for illegally moving from the camp to other parts of Sudan. Subsequently they can be released by paying substantial amount of money, be deported to Eritrea, or be sent back to the refugee camps and their refugee identity cards confiscated for about one year.* (Hadgu, 2011, p. 4)

In Khartoum, the new arrivals have to find a safe place to stay, and that is usually more difficult for unaccompanied women or women who do not have relatives in Khartoum to receive them. Gerrima observes:

*In many instances refugees live in groups of up to half a dozen people. According to Sharia law, men and women who are not married and who are not siblings are not allowed to live under the same roof. This has allowed Sudanese police officers to randomly break into refugees' homes and demand marriage papers or threaten the refugees with imprisonment and deportation. The refugees have no choice but to pay all the money they have in bribes. In addition, any phones, computers, and jewellery found during such unauthorised raids are privately confiscated by the police officers.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 31 December 2013)

The refugees are also exploited when they work, as they have no labour protection or rights: "Refugees who work may not get paid their wages or do not get paid for the services they provide" (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015). Hadgu (2011) describes the insecure position of Eritrean refugees in Khartoum, who have become a source of income for anybody who looks in their direction. Traffickers, smugglers, police officers, security agents, and even civilians who target individual refugees all want to profit from Eritrean refugees. Civilians randomly stop refugees and ask them to pay money, and threaten to report them to the police if they refuse. Even when refugees show their refugee papers, civilians and

police destroy the cards and proceed to make their demands for money. Human traffickers pay the police to terrorise refugees by launching random roundups for deportation.

## Surveillance and deportation

### *From Ethiopia*

Since the state of emergency was announced in Ethiopia on 8 October 2016, the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia has deteriorated rapidly. Refugees living in urban areas are under close surveillance by the authorities. District administrators in Addis Ababa, who host tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees, have repeatedly announced the need for Eritreans to attend compulsory weekly Sunday meetings. During these meetings, the ruling party invariably calls on Ethiopians to keep an eye on Eritrean refugees. Eritrean refugees suffer from being labelled as “agents of the government in Asmara” (Anon., confidential unpublished report, 10 October 2016, held by the author). Administrators and cadres in some districts of Addis have warned Ethiopian landlords to not lease accommodation to Eritreans (Anon., confidential unpublished report, August 2016, held by the author).

All of the landlords in Addis Ababa are now required to submit copies of their national identity cards and those of their tenants. Areas of Addis Ababa in which Eritreans live, work, or gather now have a heavy police and security presence (Anon., confidential unpublished report, August 2016, held by author).

The other threat against Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia comes from the Oromo-speaking and Amharic-speaking ethnic groups, who oppose the current government of Ethiopia. The opposition groups identify Eritreans and Tigrayans as similar. The uprising is a revolt against Tigrayan rule in Ethiopia, which is perceived as being the same ethnic group as many of the Eritrean refugees. All of this increases the fear among the Eritrean refugee population in Addis Ababa:

*...hundreds died last week reportedly from stampede when helicopters fired warning shots and tear gas canisters in the course of the Oromo’s traditional ritual of Irecha, which yearly takes place on October 2. Following this tragic incident, mainly Oromo villagers in the outskirts of Addis have continued to mob up to the point of stoning strangers, including nationals from other countries, to death. 11 factories staffed with thousands of employees and 60+ vehicles owned by the Tigrayans [Tigrayans] and Eritreans were torched to ashes around Sebetain the Oromia Region over the past week alone. (Anon., confidential unpublished report, held by the authors, 10 October 2016)*

Some refugees report surveillance by Ethiopia Telecommunications:

*A number of people report to have experienced eavesdropping of telephone calls. Several others are receiving SMS messages from Ethiopia Telecommunications requiring them to register or reregister customer service with this same authority. In line with the rescinding of customer services from the telecommunications and other financial institutions to Eritrean refugees, no Eritrean refugee have I heard in 2016 claiming to have got hold of a SIM card all on his own. (Anon., confidential unpublished report, held by the authors, 10 October 2016)*

By 2016, it was very hard for Eritrean refugees to buy a SIM card in Ethiopia and most communication channels (Internet, social media) were regularly closed down.

*A week has elapsed since the Internet data package service has been rendered ineffectual. Consequently, mobile Internet data package as well as the Internet service in most Internet cafés throughout Addis has stopped. People are travelling miles in search of Wi-Fi Internet services. (Anon., confidential unpublished report, held by the authors, 10 October 2016)*

### ***From Sudan***

Eritrean refugees are being kidnapped from refugee camps and towns in Sudan to be returned to Eritrea. In Eritrea, their fate is unknown. They may be imprisoned or forced to return to indefinite military service. Some of those returned have disappeared. Some of these kidnappings are directly linked to the refugee's earlier position in Eritrea. If the refugees are wanted by the Eritrean regime, they may be kidnapped in Sudan and returned to Eritrea: "For example they kidnapped a colleague – a journalist – who was going from Ethiopia to Sudan in 2014. They have also kidnapped singers [popular singers are kept under tight control]" (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 11 December 2016).

Hadgu (2011) alleges that the Eritrean government is collaborating with Sudanese security officials for the return of Eritrean refugees wanted by the Eritrean intelligence:

*Furthermore, the Eritrean government agents bribe the security forces or convince or persuade the Sudanese authorities to hand over any refugee they target. There are many cases in which the Sudanese security forces collaborated and arrested and handed over refugees to the Eritrean government, including in the capital, Khartoum. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 4)*

Hadgu (2011) states that the Eritrean refugees continue to be controlled and surveilled by Eritrean government officials in Khartoum:

*The Eritreans fall prey to the Eritrean act of exploitation whenever they apply for immigration services such as holding passport, Identity card [...]. What is worse is that all of the names of those applying for ID cards or passports are checked against the data bases they have in Khartoum and*

*Asmara. Based on this checking, those that are on a blacklist are denied the right to the services. Not only that, this checking also serves as intelligence tool to identify the whereabouts of these people. The blacklist includes officers (including junior officers in the army) and people of specific profession such the Navy and the air force. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 4)*

The refugees feel constantly exposed to risks, both from Sudanese security officials and police and from Eritrean intelligence agents operating in Sudan:

*There has been mass rounding up, detention and deportations of Eritrean refugees in Sudan in the recent months carried out by the Sudanese security forces. Some are temporarily released after paying 500 USD bribes. Those deported to Eritrea face the risk of being detained, tortured and even being killed by the Eritrean security forces. There are credible information that those who have been deported have been subjected to such acts. They are held in secret torture detention facilities. The consequences for blacklisted refugees by the Eritrean authorities are even more dangerous when they are deported to Eritrea. Journalists are among the blacklisted nationals who face severe reprisal if deported or if abducted by the Eritrean security forces. (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 31 December 2016)*

There are numerous testimonies of hundreds of Eritrean refugees in Sudan who are held and threatened with deportation to extract ransom. Eritrean refugees in European countries often contribute to such ransom payments, which are reportedly thousands of US dollars. The money extorted from Eritrean refugees to avoid deportation is paid by the refugees or their families through overseas remittances. Routinely the payments are made in Asmara directly or through the hawala web of agents (see section earlier in this chapter on ‘The hawala system’). The principal aim of the (threat of) deportation to Eritrea is to extort money.

The consequences for deported refugees who have been blacklisted by the Eritrean authorities are particularly grave. Refugees who worked as journalists, police, national security staff or agents, staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the President’s Office, the economic or political branches of the PFDJ, and the headquarters of the various ministries are among those automatically blacklisted and face severe reprisal if deported to Eritrea or abducted by Eritrean security forces. Even in hiding, journalists fear for their lives, and as the house-to-house searches and harassment of refugees in Sudan continues, refugees live in fear that they will be caught and handed over to Eritrean agents (Anon. personal communication, [email from anon. 6 July 2016], shared with Van Reisen by Gerrima, 31 December 2016).

In 2016, the Eritrean authorities blacklisted five exiled journalists who sought asylum in Sudan after three of their colleagues disappeared in mid-May 2016 after going into hiding. There is no information as to what might have happened to their

colleagues, but the journalists believe they could have been rounded up by the Sudanese authorities and handed over to the Eritrean authorities or abducted by the Eritrean security forces, which operate freely in Sudan (Anon. personal communication, [email from anon. 6 July 2016], shared with Van Reisen by Gerrima, 31 December 2016).

In 2016, the reports of violence inflicted on Eritrean refugees in Khartoum (Sudan) increased. The constant stream of reports has given the impression that Eritrean refugees in Khartoum are living under the constant threat of being stopped by security and prefer to stay indoors as much as possible (Anon. [various sources], personal communications, with Van Reisen, 2016). If possible Eritrean refugees carry some cash whenever they go out in case they are stopped by security forces. If they cannot pay the bribe involved, they fear they will be deported to Eritrea:

*Last week I was going to the office of IOM [International Organization for Migration] to follow up with my sponsor and to complain about the delay. Again, I was caught while I was on my way and paid 4,000 Sudanese pounds [ca. USD 626]. The money was not mine, but whenever I am arrested I call some friends to come with money.* (N, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, 9 October 2016)

The same refugee had been stopped a few months earlier and was also asked to pay:

*Me, I eat outside sometimes, although I am very careful. Then suddenly they told us to stop and they picked us up on a truck with a lot of Oromo Ethiopians and a few Eritreans. I was begging them on my knees, fearing being deported, but thank God I paid 3,000 Sudanese pounds [ca. USD 469] [and was released].* (N, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, 9 October 2016)

A similar experience was recorded by Hagen-Zanker & Mallet in 2016: “If you don’t give them [local people] money, they will take you to the police where you will be prosecuted for not having papers” (Hagen-Zanker & Mallet, 2016, p. 18).

However, the most serious source of insecurity for Eritrean refugees in Sudan is threat of forceful return to Eritrea. On 29 August 2016, Africa Monitors (2016c) reported how paramilitary groups in Sudan (the Janjaweed) were involved in assisting the Sudanese military to repatriate Eritrean refugees. This happened after the governor of Sudan’s Northern State gave a speech in which he asked the federal state of Sudan to support the fight against “human-trafficking and drug-smuggling activities in his state”, stating that this “kind of organised crime cannot be fought by the state alone and needs federal intervention” (Plaut, 2016, p. 157).

*It did not take long for 'the help' to come. It came in the form of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which is a new and advanced form of the Janjaweed force that wreaked havoc on Darfur, mostly in the early days of the conflict [...] [T]his new force came into full-force in 2014 as a paramilitary force to support the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) counter[-]insurgency in Darfur and also to suppress the conflicts in the two areas, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan. The RSF have an awkward position, they are not integrated in the SAF and they receive their funds from the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), but are directly managed by the president himself as stated in a recent presidential decree. (Africa Monitors, 2016c)*

According to Africa Monitors, in July 2015, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) leader, Mohamed Hamdan, stated that his forces were involved in anti-trafficking measures on the Sudan-Libya border and that his troops had captured 300 victims of human trafficking (Africa Monitors, 2016c):

*As the RSF found itself in the midst of securing borders from refugees, the SAF came forward and said that it is doing its role in protecting the border areas. In fact, the border patrol troops who are the actual body entrusted with securing Sudan's borders are part of the SAF while RSF is not. At the same time, on the 30th of July 2016, the joint Sudanese-Libyan Forces celebrated the opening of a new headquarters for its leadership in Dongola, Northern State. One of the major tasks of this force is to secure the borders and in the opening ceremony, a representative from the armed forces said that Sudan is putting a lot of effort in[to] fighting trafficking. (Africa Monitors, 2016c)*

Another refugee told of a Eritrean refugees being held for ransom on threat of deportation in a prison in northern Sudan:

*My younger brother is 17-years-old and is among those who are captive in Dongola, northern Sudan. They captured them in the Libyan [D]esert [Sahara] and they transferred them to the prison located in northern Sudan called Dongola. We are expecting them to bring them to Khartoum and what they ask for is money. I hope they are fine after being in the harsh Sudanese prison for more than three weeks. (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, 16 July 2016)*

It was later reported that the group detained in Dongola were deported to Eritrea (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, July 2016).

A report by Africa Monitors provides another example of the deportation of refugees in groups from Sudan to Eritrea:

*Abdullah Tesfay [...] [name changed], an Eritrean refugee living in Khartoum, was in touch with his friend, a young woman refugee and her child, hours before they were deported to Eritrea in late May 2016. [...] "They were arrested in Omdurman, she was with over 400 Eritreans who were*

*going to make the same journey, they took them to Al-Huda prison in Omdurman then to another prison in Kassala,” said Tesfay in an interview. (Africa Monitors, 2016a)*

Other reports confirmed the deportation of refugees from Sudan back to Eritrea:

*Meron Estefanos, an Eritrean-Swedish activist who specializes [...] [in] Eritrean refugee rights told me that “the refugees were put on trucks and dumped at the border with Eritrea and after that, the majority never made it home to their families.” Six days later, Human Rights Watch said in a press statement that “the Sudanese authorities deported at least 442 Eritreans, including six registered refugees, to Eritrea” in that fateful month to “likely abuse”. Once the deported refugees landed in Eritrea, they were divided into groups. The women and girls were taken to Adi-Abeto prison and those who never finished the mandatory military service required by Eritrean men and women were taken to Hashferay. (Africa Monitors, 2016a)*

Another report was printed on the Tigrinya website Erimedrek in 2016:

*As part of such arrangements, 78 newly arrived Eritrean refugees, including 5 mothers and their children, were captured in Suakin by Sudanese police, handed over to Eritrean agents, and taken to Eritrea on 10 June 2016. According to a report published on Radio Forum Eritrea at the time, the roundups were nationwide. While mothers and children were being returned to Eritrea, the Houda and Jawazat prisons in Khartoum were overflowing with Eritrean refugees captured in random roundups. There were more than 800 in both prisons combined, 115 of whom were marked for return without any legal process or contact with concerned organisations. At least one refugee had died trying to escape deportation as a truck was taking them to complete final procedures to be deported from the Houda prison. Earlier in the month, 87 refugees, including 5 women, had been waiting to be released after paying USD 500 each in bribes, but they were given to Eritrean agents to be taken back to Eritrea. (Erimedrek, 2016)*

## Conclusion

This chapter looks at the reasons for the mass exodus of Eritreans from Eritrea and their situation as refugees in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan. It looks at the conditions following the Ethiopia-Eritrea War of 1998–2000 and identifies the period from 2003–2007 as when the Eritrean leadership consolidated power. During this period, the functioning of democratic institutions effectively ended and youth were targeted with mass detentions, including of 5,000 university students in 2001. Some of Eritrea’s brightest students were sent to South Africa under a World Bank programme, where they were subjected to control and surveillance by the Eritrean Embassy. Some were deported back to Eritrea (after their passports were allegedly cancelled by the Eritrean Ambassador to South

Africa). Asmara University stopped enrolling students in 2002. The impact of these attacks on Eritrea students were designed to break them and neutralised them as a potential threat to the regime. These, and other harassment, have effectively pushed youth out of the country, often into the arms of traffickers and others seeking to exploit them.

In the period 2003–2007, the national service programme allowed the leadership to assign individuals to military or civil administrative positions. The low pay ('pocket money') created a situation of impoverishment, in which a black market economy emerged and flourished. Meanwhile, the monopolisation of the economy through the Red Sea Corporation and its 34 associated companies has given the PFDJ total control over the economy. The PFDJ leadership is controlling exports and imports, the prices of goods (including food stuffs), as well as the exchange rate for the currency (both formally and on the black market). It is suggested that a deliberate policy of impoverishment and targeted scarcity has been adopted by the regime to make every member of the population dependent on the PFDJ for survival. In order to supplement their inadequate income and purchase necessary goods, dependency on illicit trade grew, involving society at large.

During this time, the distinction between the Eritrean government and the PFDJ became increasingly blurred. Concurrently, most, if not all, foreign aid donors withdrew and national budgets were no longer produced. The PFDJ took over the financial web underpinning the country under the guise of promoting 'self-sufficiency'. Through an extensive network of individual foreign accounts, the PFDJ maintains a robust financial position. There are indications that the human trafficking trade is related to this financial web, with agents of the PFDJ around the world collecting ransoms, which support members of the military and security establishment. The bribes (for exit visas and papers to move around), payments for services (transportation across borders), and ransoms generated by human trafficking and smuggling provide a sustained income stream to the military and security forces, especially the Border Control Authority.

In addition, development programmes carried out in the early 2000s appear to have been used for the enrichment of those managing and overseeing the programmes. Those who did not cooperate in the diversion of aid were imprisoned under extremely harsh conditions, a fate that befell former aid worker, Mussie Hadgu. Essentially, it can be concluded that development programmes have been used by the country's leadership to deepen the repression, further control youth and line their coffers.



The period up to 2007 prepared the country for the more sinister situation in which the country was locked down through a shoot-to-kill policy at the border; the introduction of exit visas, making it impossible for most people to leave the country; and the introduction of measures to effectively stop movement within the country. These were backed up by a large web of prison and detention centres, many in unknown places. The policy of mandatory and indefinite national service continued and the human rights situation deteriorated further.

Many sought to leave Eritrea. But fleeing the country was dangerous, which raised the price for facilitating escape. This generated a new income-stream for the military, security and administrators. The more difficult it was to escape from the country, the more income could be generated from its facilitation.

It is in this light that the expansion of human trafficking in neighbouring countries should be understood. If they manage to flee across the border to Ethiopia or Sudan, the situation for Eritrean refugees is difficult. Although historically regarded as a relatively safe destination for Eritreans, since the state of emergency was announced in 2016, the situation for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia has deteriorated with reports of surveillance and deportation. Despite the efforts to control human trafficking in Ethiopia, there is a lively trade from the refugee camps and especially youth are vulnerable, due to lack of prospects for their future and because of their desire to rejoin their families who are disbursed all over the world. The Eritrean hawala system (of informal money transfers) plays a central role in the various payments made in relation to the trafficking in human beings from Eritrea – including ransom payments and payments related to smuggling – and the arrangements associated with this in the various countries. As pointed out by the International Crisis Group (2014), the Eritrean government appears to be purposefully driving youth out of the country, as they seem more profitable outside than inside.

In Sudan, Eritrean refugees are afraid to go out due to harassment, persecution and exploitation. Eritrean intelligence operates in Sudan. There is a real fear of deportation and evidence that Eritreans are being forcefully deported from Sudan to Eritrea in large numbers, where they risk imprisonment and worse. Due to the unsafe situation for refugees in Sudan, many feel motivated to try their luck elsewhere and embark on even more dangerous journeys, such as to Libya and Egypt, in a desperate attempt to find a more hopeful and better place to live.

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<sup>14</sup> Excerpts from these unpublished reports have been lightly edited where necessary for comprehension and may vary from other published forms.

<sup>15</sup> To facilitate readability, the authors have edited quotes from the interview transcripts. For security reasons, sources have been anonymised.

<sup>16</sup> A similar story is narrated in an online report, but this report (mistakenly) speaks of ‘harvest tasks’. It was not the harvesting season and the event described would appear to be the same as the one narrated here, in which the task was to research IDPs (Awate, 2014). The ‘Harvest programme’ was part of an earlier campaign, which took place in 1999 during the Ethiopia-Eritrea war.

<sup>17</sup> Part of the Emergency Reconstruction Programme; for project description see: <http://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/eritrea-icc-weekly-humanitarian-update-27-nov-2000>

<sup>18</sup> The programme is fully recognised and supported by the World Bank, with funding of USD 53 million secured from the World Bank. The University of Asmara, the only university in Eritrea, coordinates the project on behalf of the Government of Eritrea (see Mekonnen & Abraha, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> See also the account in Wikipedia, which states that in 2002 the University stopped enrolling students and students were allocated to tertiary institutions. According to the site, the aim was to control the students: “The university stopped new student enrollments in 2002. In 2002, the government issued a directive reconfiguring the university and effectively shutting down all of the university’s undergraduate programs. Ever since, prospective students (those who score a passing grade on the National High School Leaving Certificate Exam) are directed to one of five tertiary education institutions that opened after the university was shut down. [...] The Eritrean government’s claim that the university was restructured and its resources reallocated to new institutions of higher education in order to grow student population is criticized by many. Critics claim the closing of the university was a political move aimed at growing the government’s control on college students.” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University\\_of\\_Asmara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Asmara) (accessed 14 January 2017)

<sup>20</sup> This report is corroborated by another student who was taken to Gelaalo: “We were sent for hard labour, which was to compile huge stones to be grinded and used for laying a road to Assab. We were woken at 4 am and walked for an hour and a half to the work site. Then we worked for two to three hours and walked back for the same hour and a half to our incarceration area. The area was hostile to any layman, let alone to students who had no experience of such extreme weather.” (Interview, Van Reisen with P, Skype, 27 December 2016)

<sup>21</sup> This document cited statistics based on data obtained from over 29,000 torture victims referred to in the UK centres in 2007.

<sup>22</sup> See also, Kibreab, 2009, which includes a list of all the donor programmes in Eritrea and the years in which these were implemented.

<sup>23</sup> “The activities associated with smuggling have also become a source of income for the military and the entire society. Impoverished military officers in command of national service recruits engage in smuggling to extract financial gains. Local civilian administrative offices are also in on the business of selling eligibility to leave the country. In many cases, even those who are legally eligible to leave are forced to offer some amount of cash in order for their papers to be processed smoothly. As more and more people become dependent on the military and government ministries to broker mobility, it has grown into a multi-million dollar business. Army commanders and staff, decision makers and staff of local administrations, officials and staff at government ministries, brokers, and forgers make up the thousands of people who engage in the business of selling mobility to anyone who can pay.” (Zecarias Gerrima, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Hadgu confirms the announcement of the 300 million loan from the PDFJ to the Government of Eritrea: “So, the announcement of 300 million was not a surprise. The only surprising thing about the announcement was that the party and the government are two separate entities” (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 27 December 2016).

<sup>25</sup> The matter was brought to the Head of the Police Department in Kassala, Yahya al-Haddi, who said “a special court in the district of Kassala passed in October 2016 a death sentence on eight criminals who were involved in smuggling and human trafficking as well as transfer of amunitions [*sic*]. In an interview he gave to the Sudanese news agency, Mr al-Haddi explained [that] one of the convicts is a notorious smuggler in the Kassala Region.” (Africa Monitors, 2016g)



## Chapter 4

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# Human Trafficking Connecting to Terrorism and Organ Trafficking: Libya and Egypt

*Mirjam Van Reisen & Meron Estefanos*

*I can't expect to be treated fairly in this country if I wasn't treated respectfully in my own country [Eritrea]. If my countrymen can't help me, no one can. Because the route we take is illegal, we can't do anything.*

(Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)

## Introduction

This chapter looks at the connection between human trafficking, terrorism and organ trafficking with a geographic focus on Libya and Egypt. Since 2014, the political situations in Libya and Egypt have been evolving rapidly. With the overthrow of President Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, conflict between the militia and various fighting factions has resulted in civil war and great instability. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned in 2011 as a result of the 'Arab Spring' uprising. His successor, President Mohamed Morsi was replaced by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, the third president in as many years.

In both countries, new practices of human trafficking have emerged. In Libya, the new modus operandi involves state military alongside terrorism-related militia and organisations, with an increasing number of groups and factions jostling for power. In Egypt, there are concerns about the Egyptian government's collaboration with Eritrea on the deportation of Eritrean refugees. There are also reports of organ trafficking associated with the trafficking of Eritrean and other refugees in Egypt (Mekonnen and Estefanos, 2011).

Following the overthrow of President Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, for a brief period, Libya provided a new route to the Mediterranean Sea for Eritrean refugees.

However, in February 2015, Islamic State (ISIS) published a video in which Christian refugees were beheaded (Black, 2015), showing that it had gained foothold in Libya. The majority of victims shown in the video were later recognised as Eritrean or Ethiopian (Loveluck, 2015). Vice (2015) reported that hundreds of Eritrean migrants were being held in Libyan migrant prisons, as the country was increasingly becoming lawless (Vice, 2015).

Since the end of 2016, Egypt has provided a new route for the smuggling and trafficking of Eritrean refugees. However, crossing the Mediterranean Sea has become increasingly dangerous, with 4,913 people recorded as perished in 2016 (Missing Migrants Project, 2017). Because of the increasing difficulties that Eritrean refugees encounter in traveling to Europe, their safety in Egypt and Libya – or lack thereof – is becoming more relevant.

This chapter examines the new forms of human trafficking for ransom and related phenomena in Libya and Egypt. It follows the routes of Eritrean refugees to these countries from Sudan. It draws on direct testimonies from victims of human trafficking obtained in 2016 by journalist Meron Estefanos and by Mirjam Van Reisen. These interviews were carried out by Skype, by phone and face-to-face, and transcribed and translated. With regard to the description of the situation in Egypt (in relation to deportation of Eritrean refugees and organ trafficking), different channels of information have provided additional source materials. Testimonies collected by Africa Monitors, which collects information from Eritrean refugees on their experiences along the refugee routes in North Africa, are also analysed.

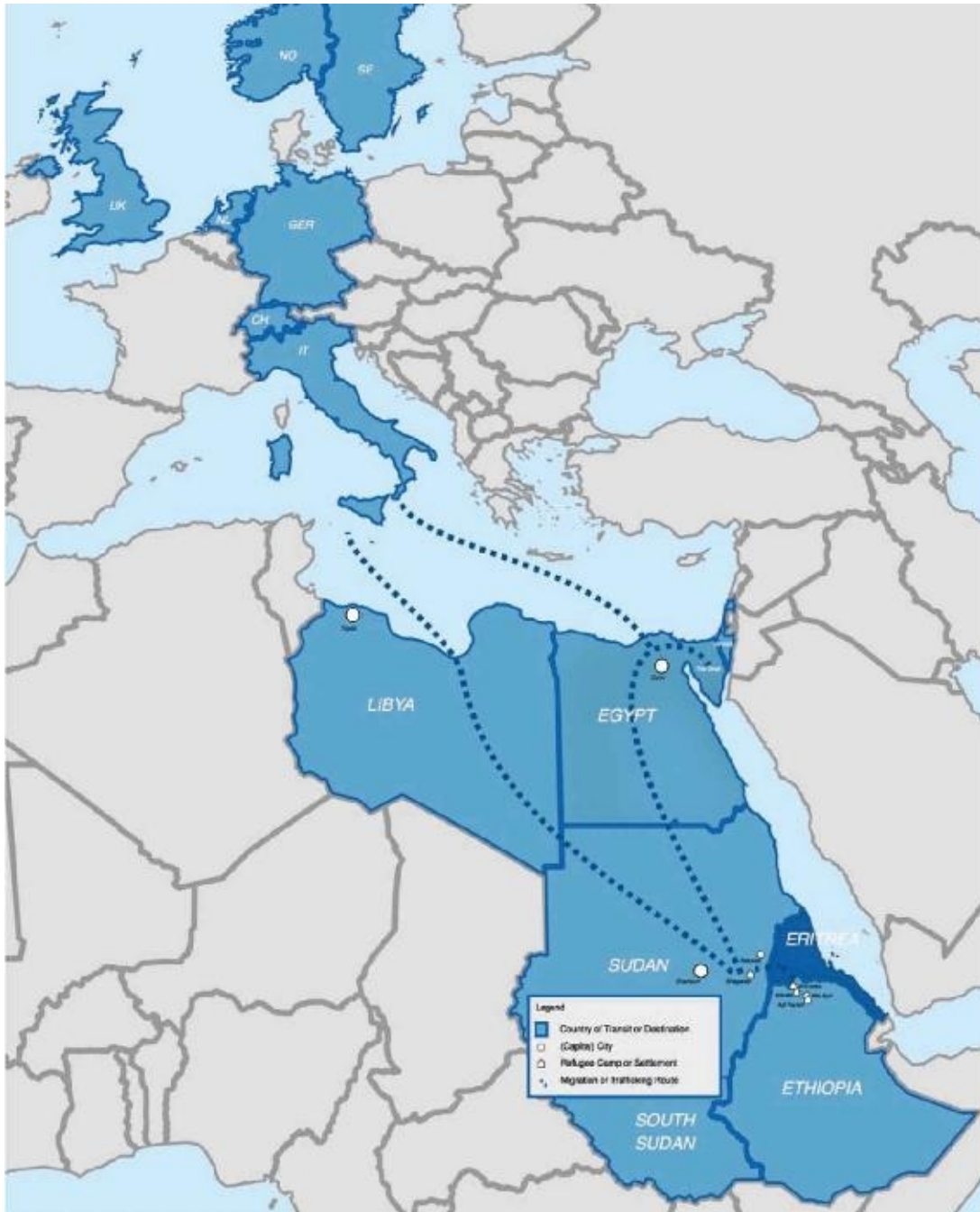
In this chapter, we limit the description to what is publicly available, given the sensitivity of the topic. All of the information published in this chapter has been cross-checked by the authors through various independent channels. These checks have been carried out to minimise the risk of possible disinformation.<sup>26</sup>

The map in [Figure 4.1](#) shows the two principle routes for Eritrean refugees from Sudan to the Mediterranean Sea, either through Egypt or Libya.

## **New routes from Sudan to Egypt and Libya**

In 2016, the Sudanese government started deporting Eritrean refugees back to Eritrea. Africa Monitors reports that round-up exercises for deportation include refugees legally registered, as their papers and ID cards are destroyed in the process (Africa Monitors, 2016b & 2016c). To avoid deportation, refugees are required to pay hefty sums of money (K, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook

Messenger, 10 January 2017) (see [Chapter 3](#) on deportation from Sudan). To avoid being returned to Eritrea, many refugees moved on to Libya and Egypt. Africa Monitors reports that it costs around USD 7,000 to 8,000 per person to be smuggled from Eritrea to Sudan and around USD 1,500 to 2,000 per person from Sudan to Egypt (Africa Monitors, 2016d). According to Eritrean journalist Zecarias Gerrima, the current fee for being smuggled across the desert from Sudan to Egypt ranges from USD 800 to 1,000 per person (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 28 December 2016). The cost from Ethiopia to Khartoum is approximately USD 1,300; Khartoum to the Libyan coast USD 1,300; and across the Mediterranean Sea USD 2,200 (Interview, Q2 with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 January 2017; Gerrima, Z, personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 17 January 2017).



*Figure 4.1. Migration routes of Eritrean refugees* (Source: Lena Reim, 2017 – partially reproduced from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016, cited in Laub, 2016, and Amnesty International, 2013, borders may not be exact representations)

Gerrima has studied the new routes being taken by Eritrean refugees to the Mediterranean Sea and describes how they have emerged:

*As a transit stop for refugees planning to embark on a journey across the Mediterranean, most refugees head to Egypt, with plans to continue to Israel or Europe. From Alexandria, refugees are taken either to eastern Libyan towns like Benghazi or sail directly to Greece. The journey to Greece is more dangerous than the direct route from Libya because of the greater distance. People are more likely to die of hunger and thirst, and less likely to receive help from rescue ships. (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 28 December 2016)*

Africa Monitors (2016d), which follows the situation of Eritrean refugees on the routes in North Africa and publishes their experiences on their website, identifies that the route through Egypt has emerged as an alternative for Eritrean refugees, who are experiencing increasing difficulties in Sudan and Libya (see also [Chapter 3](#)):

*The illegal route of migration to Europe, which was in the previous years, through the Sudan to Libya since 2004 and until the year of 2013, turned to the Sudan-Egypt route, since the end of 2013, due to [...] the civil war and the proliferation of militias and armed gangs in Libya, since 2011. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

This chapter identifies the situations that refugees from Eritrea face in Libya and Egypt.

## **Deportation from Egypt**

Although a destination for Eritrean refugees for decades, Egypt is now one of the most dangerous places for Eritreans. Since the early 2000s, Egypt has deported hundreds of refugees in line with statements by the Eritrean government that Eritrean refugees are economic migrants who should be returned to their country (Amnesty International, 2008). In October 2016, the Egyptian Parliament approved a law to combat smuggling, which:

*[...] imposes prison terms and fines on those found guilty of smuggling potential migrants or acting as brokers or middlemen. It also imposes prison sentences on those who provide shelter to trafficked migrants, and gather, transport or otherwise facilitate their journey. (Hashem & Noueihe, 2016).*

Although the law also provides for the humanitarian treatment of migrants and access to health care and legal assistance, with special emphasis on women and children (Hashem & Noueihe, 2016), it has led to increased security measures. According to Africa Monitors, these security measures are affecting refugees' ability to reach Europe:

*...With the growing number of Eritrean refugees in Egypt in recent years, the number of those who managed to reach Europe [...] has seen a dramatic decline for several reasons, [...] including [...] [t]he intensive security measures, which were taken by the Egyptian authorities along its coastal lines with the Mediterranean Sea and particularly in the port-city of Alexandria, which [...] [has become] the main place in Egypt for illegal immigration to Europe across the Mediterranean. Hundreds of Eritrean immigrants have been arrested and detained by the Egyptian coast guards, while trying to reach Europe illegally as a result of the security measures. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

These security measures include the deportation of refugees from Eritrea, especially those who are not in possession of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee identity card or other legal documents (Africa Monitors, 2016a):

*These refugees were caught in different times by the Egyptian security forces [from 2015] [...] until the recent days. Some of these refugees are registered in the UNHCR office in Egypt and hold the yellow and blue refugee cards while others are arrested and put in prison before they register in the UNHCR. (Africa Monitors, 2016a).*

Eritrean refugees report experiencing difficulties in receiving documents from UNHCR, which, according to Africa Monitors, is a deliberate policy to create obstacles for Eritrean refugees and make their trajectory to Europe more difficult:

*Many migrants have also been deported to Eritrea, for not possessing refugee cards or any other legal documents. [...] [There has been an] intentional delay of the UNHCR's office in Egypt, in offering Eritrean migrants the refugee asylum seeking cards. That delay, forced the migrants to miss the illegal migration season for this year, which led to the smaller numbers of Eritrean migrants, who tried to emigrate to Europe for fear of arrest and deportation by Egyptian authorities to Eritrea, for the lack of refugee documents. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

These refugees are identified as ‘illegal’ for crossing borders without the necessary papers (which they cannot obtain in Eritrea or Sudan): “Some of these refugees were caught while entering to Egypt by illegal means while others when sailing illegally to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, according to a member of the Eritrean refugee committee in Egypt” (Africa Monitors, 2016a).

According to Africa Monitors (2016a), by the end of July 2016, approximately 150 Eritrean refugees were in prison in Aswan, Alexandria, Algander and Portsaeed, including youth, women and children. Information received by one of the authors is that hundreds of Eritrean refugees are now awaiting deportation from Egypt to Eritrea (Anon., 2016, personal communication, unpublished documents received by Van Reisen, email, 14 January 2017). It seems that Ethiopia is no longer

prepared to accept Eritrean refugees (Africa Monitors, 2016f), even if they have refugee cards from UNHCR.

If returned to Eritrea, the prospects for refugees are grim. The testimony of A illustrates this, as well as the circular migration and trafficking patterns that many Eritreans get stuck in. A fled from Eritrea to Sudan in 2007 and subsequently moved on to Cairo and Israel where he ran a successful business. In 2013, he was abducted from Israel (from Barsheeba) and brought to the Sinai through the high security fence:

*ME: You crossed a fence?*

*A: Yeah, they took me and went there. All their Sinai co-traffickers were there.*

*ME: There weren't any Israeli soldiers?*

*A: [...] Since when do they monitor who goes from the city into the Sinai? Maybe the other way around. They kind of work together, anyway. The people of the country work in that type of trafficking too. I was hearing about how they take [people] into the Sinai and Sudan and stuff like that, but I never thought that kind of thing would happen to me. [...] They took everything I had on me, including my gold jewellery. (Interview Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

A was kept in captivity in the Sinai and severely tortured until he managed to escape. He was then taken to a police post in Egypt, where he was arrested:

*There was also a wall with information about Eritreans, with the numbers of Dr Alganesh, the Eritrean embassy, and the Ethiopian embassy. I saw all that written up on the wall. I thought it was good. Then I told him [the policeman] my information – this number, this street, my aunt's phone number. I shared everything with him. (Ibid.)*

A was contacted by an official from the Eritrean embassy:

*A: I didn't have any news for about a month or so. After that month, I receive a phone call from this guy named Binyam or something, an Eritrean, he happened to work for the embassy.*

*M: Now, the guy who called you, Binyam, he was an employee of the embassy?*

*A: Yes. (Ibid.)*

Arrangements were then made for A to be returned to Eritrea. On the flight back, the victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were separated from ordinary passengers. At the airport, A's family was waiting, but he did not get to see them. He was immediately taken to prison where the officials had a file on him. A was accused of carrying out opposition activities in Israel:

*Yeah, the Eritrean embassy sent all the papers from Egypt, with the information, so they knew. So he asked me “then, when you were in Israel, what were you doing?” I told him I was working in the fields and I’m young, I don’t know about anything.*

*So he said “you were there with the ones badmouthing their country and government, you’re from that group”. Well, what could I say? The Israeli embassy knew what we were doing day-to-day, our work. They’d have no problem checking the information with them. They know who everyone is and can even say A with the hair like so? I mean, even by my restaurant, I heard that the freedom demonstration had passed by there. So then, problems came. I was really afraid then. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

A eventually escaped from prison and spent several months hiding in Asmara before fleeing to Ethiopia, Sudan and then Libya, where he ended up in the hands of ISIS.

## **Held by ISIS in Libya**

Some Eritrean refugees who try to reach the Mediterranean Sea by crossing the Sahara from Sudan to Libya end up in the hands of ISIS (Gebrekidan, 2016s & 2016b). In recent years, this route has become very dangerous because of the presence of armed groups. This section brings together testimonies from Eritrean refugees who were abducted by ISIS and armed groups in Libya.

In a recent report the UN expressed concern over the increasing interconnectivity between terrorism, militia, smuggling and human trafficking groups (also see Human Rights Watch, 2016):

*Armed groups, criminal gangs and networks, smugglers, traffickers have cooperated and competed in the smuggling and trafficking of migrants through Libya, while carrying out serious human rights abuses and violations against migrants. UNSMIL [United Nations Support Mission in Libya] has also received credible information that some members of State institutions and some local officials have participated in the smuggling and trafficking process. Exploitation and the buying and selling of individuals have taken place frequently. (UNMIL & OHCHR, 2016, p. 12)*

In this same report by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNMIL) & the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN expressed concern that 4,000–7,000 migrants are being held in detention centres run by Libya’s Department for Combatting Illegal Migration (*Ibid.*).





Figure 4.2. Map showing the Libyan coast with Ajdabya in the east, south from Benghazi, Tripoli and Zuvara (Source: Google Maps)

In an interview with Meron Estefanos, two Eritrean refugees testified that they were abducted by an armed gang, possibly ISIS, while being trafficked from Sudan to Libya:

*I was caught on August the 8th; we were caught about two hours out of Ajdabya. Two armed men came and stopped us and were joined a little later by many armed fighters. There were 67 of us. We were in Abdella's place, but from different traffickers from Sudan. Those of us who had paid [the ransom] were the ones who left. There were some underage boys and some girls too. (Interview, Estefanos with L and Y2, Skype, 21 January 2015)*

D2, an Eritrean refugee, describes how he came through Omdurman in Sudan to Libya. The trek from Omdurman to the Libyan Desert is especially dangerous:

*As you leave Sudan, in Omdurman, they hide you in lorries. The way they frisk you is so repulsive. I don't know if the government knows those armed Sudanese who frisk you. I didn't have any other option; I mean, I can't expect to be treated fairly in this country if I wasn't treated respectfully in my own country [Eritrea]. If my countrymen can't help me, no one can. Because the route we take is illegal, we can't do anything. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Eritrean (and other) refugees are badly exploited along the routes from Sudan to Libya, but have no other option given their vulnerable position. D2 explained that

anything was better than returning to Eritrea, so he was ready to take the risk:

*[...] for me, I accepted everything because anything was better than the life I had in Eritrea. That's why I accepted it, but it was just as he [a fellow refugee who was interviewed] told you. Even those things that didn't happen to us personally, happened to those around us. I recall one instance of people having to bury their siblings who died because of hunger, thirst or torture. There were even times when the girls were raped in front of us. I can't imagine anything worse than that. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Money transfers take place after the refugees have crossed the Sahara to Ajdabya or Benghazi in Libya. D2 does not make a distinction between the money paid for crossing the Sahara and the money paid to the traffickers to be released, both of which he calls 'ransom':

*Ajdabya is also a place where money is transferred, for those who arrive there from the Sahara. It is a small city; there are a couple holding centres where one is held until they pay the money or the ransom. You're held there until you pay [...]. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

The refugees survive on what little money they receive from relatives and by sharing food. Among them are youth and young children. A describes the following:

*You ask them to send you money for tea time, you beg. [...] And if you hoard it to yourself, they [the other refugees] don't see you as a person. You eat by sharing, what else? Even from hunger, a person would wrap herself with a cover and cry. There were young siblings. Young kids. The ones I'm talking about in this period were young. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

An anonymous Eritrean refugee explained how she was abducted outside of Ajdabya:

*The first time we were coming here from Ajdabya they caught us and loaded us on a truck. After we travelled for a couple hours, we were stopped by the police, and we saw them [the police] talk to them [the kidnappers]. As they were talking, one of the police came and recorded us on his phone. Then they sent us away. After travelling for about three hours, three Toyota pickups loaded with machine guns stopped us and a man covered in black wearing a mask boarded the truck and told us to get down. We saw a bunch of soldiers, some of them were Sudanese and Nigerians, and they told us to sit down. They told the Egyptians to separate and they started separating the Muslims and Christians. They told the others [Muslims and Egyptians] to board the truck and asked us [Eritrean Christians] for our ID cards. (Interview, Estefanos with Anon., Skype and phone, 16 June 2015)*

A friend of this refugee, H, described the journey and the money involved:

*For those of us who arrived from the Sahara, we were required to pay the amount either when we reach Ajdabya or Benghazi. We transferred money when we got to Ajdabya, we stayed there until the money was paid. I want to mention that in Ajdabya there's hunger, there's disease – there's everything there. All those bad things that could happen to a man happen to you there. Anyway, when we left, there were about 150 people together in one vehicle: Egyptians, Somalis, Eritreans and other African nationalities. But we [Eritreans] outnumbered everyone; we were 88 Eritreans, 2 people remained there who couldn't pay, 86 of us left the place. Out of the 86, there were 23 women. We were mostly from Adi Keih. A few of the people with us were from Mendefera and Agordat. [...] People saw us as we left and first we were found by the Libyan police. I don't know whose side they are on; I'm not sure if they are part of the government or the opposition, but they found us anyway. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

This group of refugees were then abducted and taken to what appears to be an ISIS-controlled area where they were split into groups of Christians and Muslims. H described what happened next:

*They held us for about 30 minutes and then we kept going. We got to this village called Ben Juwal. We went right through it and about 25 km from Ben Juwal (around 300 km from Ajdabya) we were found by ISIS; this was on the 2nd of June at around 10 pm. We were initially escorted by armed people flying a black flag, some of them wearing masks. Anyways, they asked us if we were Somalis. They spoke to us about what nationality we were; we didn't reply. They started asking us to form separate lines of Muslims and Christians. The Egyptians were Muslims so they got separated. Of us [Eritreans], five people said they were Muslim and they were separated from us. One thing I want to mention here is that [...] we Eritreans are a scared bunch; we have no guts and are used to being quiet. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

D2 and H found that they were with a much larger group, including minors. They decided to take a chance and jump off the truck to escape:

*It is true, there isn't anything worse than death – and death by knife is the worst. We shouldn't get on the car knowing that we are going to die. There were 23 women though, mind you, and most of those who were with us were underage. Even at that time, people were just divided. Some of us were rendered immobile, whereas some of us were really sick and incapable. Anyway, [pause] only the few who could think were like let's do something, but we couldn't decide. When we got on top of the truck, I was next to H. I told him that we'll die, but the choice of how to die is still open. I would rather die by bullet than by knife. With me at that time were my cousin and my sister. H's wife was with us. So we were not sure what to do because of them, but we decided that there wasn't anything to do so we just jumped. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Although they were shot at, D2 and H managed to escape:

*How could we wait until they put us to death? We prayed and then we decided to jump. We decided to jump leaving everyone behind. There was this guy called Merhawi, from Mendefera; D2 already decided to jump and we jumped. He jumped to the left and we jumped to the right. We fled as they fired bullets at us. I find it hard to believe that I survived; it was almost impossible given the amount of bullets that were being fired at us. We walked the whole night and hid the whole day the next day. And then, finally, we arrived in Ben Juwal. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Later, there was an air raid and the other members of the group were also able to escape. D2 and H reported that ISIS are positioned to abduct people who cross through the Sahara: “They’re basically located around the areas of Ben Juwal and Ajdabya, that’s where they catch a lot of people trying to cross the Sahara” (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015).

D2 and H then moved to Tripoli where they waited for a possibility to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This holding place was also an ordeal without hygiene or food:

*Anyway, we had to get to Tripoli. We got together and we didn’t want to take the same route, so we took a longer route around Ben Juwal. We got to this place called Em Weli where we got on top of those Toyota pickup cars and set off. They just stacked us on top of one another. They don’t even care if one is dying; they tell you death doesn’t matter. Anyway, we got to Tripoli and were placed in this holding place waiting to set to sea. There’s so much hunger there, the place is beyond dirty, infested with lice – everyone contracts some sort of rash. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

According to one refugee, Q2, who travelled through Libya from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan in 2014, the main traffickers controlling the human trafficking are Eritrean nationals. She had paid for the journey through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Eritrean handlers located in Khartoum in what is known as Asmara market. The alleged head of the human trafficking organisation in Libya, whom she knew as a child, is now a wealthy man, reportedly called Ismael Abderaza Saleh. According to various sources this Eritrean started his involvement in smuggling and human trafficking in Libya in 2005. He has residences in Libya and Dubai. Other Eritreans, working for him, such as Kidane, were involved in the day-to-day organisation and collection of the payments. He is also mentioned in a report published by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), where he is identified as Abdurazak Esmail – referring to the same person as identified above:

*Multiple sources in Sudan and Libya, as well as the Glauco 2 and Tokhla operations, identify Abdurazak Esmail, an Eritrean national, as one of the largest smugglers operating in Libya. Esmail*

*has over the years cultivated extensive political connections to various security forces who control the management of detention centres once administered by the Libyan state. In addition to collecting money for the transfer of migrants and refugees across Libya and the Mediterranean, Esmail collects roughly \$4,000 for releasing migrants and refugees who may have been captured and placed in various detention centres, and providing them passage to Italy. Esmail has been based in Libya since 2006, but is known to travel internationally – notably to Dubai, from where he manages his financial affairs. During his frequent absences from Libya, Esmail delegates his Libyan operations to a local fixer known only as “Jaber”, with financial operations co-handled by a Sudan- based accomplice known as “Hamed Omar”. (IGAD and Sahar Foundation, 2016, p. 19)*

She explained how she was lucky in that the journey only lasted ten days on a Toyota pickup – which was fast. At night they stopped and slept under the pickup canopy. She described a Libyan Government Colonel, Saleh, came to inspect the bus in Ajdabya, mainly overseeing the transport arrangements. She said that the Toyota was a government car. Saleh paid the driver, provided the food and water, and provided the car. From Ajdabya, where she heard a lot of bombing, she was then transported in a container truck with over 140 people in a journey that took almost 20 hours. She explained that, in her view, all those arranging the trafficking were from the government:

*In Eritrea, they are from the government. In Sudan, was also a Colonel, he was from the government. They are not ordinary people. They phoned on their mobile phones with military. Then I had to give them my phone. [...] In Libya it was also the Libyan Government. The Colonel Saleh was from the government and we came in a car from the government. In Libya an Eritrean called Kidane arranges the boats. He checked the code I had to be allowed on the boat. He had a notebook with names and codes. I had received the code in Khartoum after my husband had paid the consul in Mai Ayni. He phoned Kidane to inform him about the code. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

Q2 explained that the man in charge of her journey in Libya was an Eritrean, whom she knew well:

*In Libya the big man is Ismael Abderaza Saleh. He is Eritrean. He is my age, we used to play together. He is 35 years. [...] He began in 2006 to take Eritreans from Tigre. Now he is too much rich. He lives in Dubai. He is a BIG man. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

When asked what precautions she had taken to protect herself on the way through Libya, Q2 explained how she had decorated her feet and hands with henna so that she would be respected as a married woman. She was severely beaten up during the journey through Libya and attacked with a knife.

In another interview, the conviction is expressed that those in charge of the trafficking of human beings to the Sinai are now involved in human trafficking to Libya. This perception is illustrated in the following interview with E3, whose brother was kidnapped, first by Bedouins and then by ISIS, as he was travelling through Libya to reach Europe:

*E3: I was working two days a week; I was studying five days a week, so I didn't know what to do. And after two weeks, I heard that my brother was in Libya, but I didn't talk to him. But I heard that when they arrived in Libya, ISIS attacked them... they took about 150 people from them. So he was under ISIS for a week and a half. They just told us to pay the money and we didn't hear from him. I asked if I could talk to him, but no, I could not.*

*It was such a long way, he's 17. And you know how it must have been with ISIS, people forcing him to read the Quran... putting a gun to him... and you know... the same traffickers who used to be in Sinai are operating in Libya now. (Interview, Heisterkamp with E3, face-to-face, 27 August 2015)*

Further research is needed to investigate the hypothesis that those involved in the Sinai trafficking moved their operations from the Sinai to Libya. The interviews obviously do not constitute proof, but it is certainly a view that is broadly held by the victims of human trafficking, who believe that the human trafficking organisation organised operations from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Sinai and to Libya.

A refugee mentioned that he saw that a representative of the Eritrean Embassy in Tripoli assisted specific refugees who had been captured by the Libyan authorities while moving across Libya to Europe; and he believed this refugee was supported or sent to Europe by the PFDJ (personal communication Van Reisen with anon., face-to-face, 2015). The IGAD report alleges that the Eritrean Embassy in Tripoli is involved in facilitation of human trafficking:

*Destabilisation in Libya has led to the withdrawal of international diplomatic presence, including African ambassadors from many of the irregular migrants' home countries. This has led to a situation where migrants are at risk of being detained indefinitely, because there is no communication at the diplomatic level to repatriate them. Nevertheless, one NGO official based in the region for a significant amount of time alleges that some remaining diplomatic personnel profit from the irregular migration routes, by charging "fees" to negotiate the release of people from detention centres. Two eyewitnesses appeared to corroborate these allegations when they reported that they have seen high-profile smugglers at the Eritrean embassy in Tripoli. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 13)*

The report published by IGAD made the allegation that (some) Eritrean members of the human trafficking and smuggling organisations do not fear persecution in Eritrea and rely on assistance from Eritrean diplomatic missions abroad:

*Some prominent Eritrean human smugglers appear to be unconcerned that their own government might take action against them. Before his arrest and prosecution by the US criminal justice system, Habtom Merhay made frequent trips to Eritrea. A number of known smugglers also appear to rely upon the services of Eritrean diplomats abroad. The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat has noted that some Eritrean migrants are reported to have obtained Eritrean ID cards or passports at the Eritrean embassy in Khartoum because “a person who applies for a passport does not have to prove that their exit was legal”. Several individuals interviewed for this study also reported visiting the Eritrean embassy in Tripoli during the course of 2015, despite having left their country illegally. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 29)*

Some alleged human traffickers or smugglers have been seen participating in visits of official Eritrean government delegations to Europe. The following is cited from the report:

*In February 2015, media reports in Italy surfaced concerning a Milan Flying Squad investigation that resulted in the arrests of a number of Eritrean smugglers. Among those arrested was Efreem Misgna, who routinely serves as an escort for Eritrean government and party officials when they visit Europe. In April 2012 he was included in the entourage of a senior official of the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) arriving at Stockholm airport. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 29)*

Over 100,000 officially registered refugees from Eritrea have reached Europe through the Central Mediterranean route since 2009 (Frontex, 2016). The journeys are often interrupted by collections of bribes, ransoms or other money to ‘facilitate’ the journey. Mobile money is an important means through which these financial transfers are facilitated. Reportedly air transfers, with a value of hundreds of USD, are transferred - amongst others on the Zain mobile phone network in Libya.

It is estimated that the average cost paid by a refugee from Eritrea to reach Europe is USD 10,000, including ransom payments. The most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion. This amount could not be substantiated or triangulated; hence it should be interpreted as an indicative and conservative number provided by well-informed sources, given here as a very rough indicator to estimate the order of potential value of the organ trade and human trafficking in the North African region.

## Beheadings by ISIS

A, who was abducted from Israel to the Sinai and subsequently deported from Egypt to Eritrea (see earlier section on ‘Deportation from Egypt’), explains that after he fled Eritrea for the second time, he went through Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya:

*I stayed there [in Sudan] for five days. At the end of five days, I left for Libya quickly. [...] For two months, we were there [in Libya]. [...] The ones who came right before us and those who came right after us encountered a bad situation; they were beheaded [by ISIS]. Some folks who were beheaded were people we knew. Many of them [were people] who we knew. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

Given that A spent a long time in Israel, he knew the Eritrean community there well. This community includes many survivors of human trafficking in the Sinai. As described in [Chapter 2](#) of this book, many Eritrean refugees left Israel ‘voluntarily’, where they are treated as illegal immigrants. From his testimony, it appears that A recognised several fellow refugees, whom he had known in Israel, who were beheaded by ISIS:

*There was one who was my Facebook friend, I’ll find him. He came from Israel and was beheaded. There was also a guy from Adi Keyih. He was also on Facebook. There were a few I knew in Sudan, in Ethiopia, who I knew in Israel, who were killed. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

According to A, approximately 80 people were beheaded or killed by ISIS, some of whom were able to escape. Among them were Ethiopians and Eritreans. Some he recognised from Israel; a number of whom were beheaded. In a subsequent incident, a group of 80 refugees were killed in Libya, including more Eritreans (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016).

Having experienced severe torture in the Sinai, where he had been hung, and months in prison in Eritrea, A found the situation in Libya a terrible ordeal:

*In Libya, I was hearing many things and, after what I went through, to me, it was very crippling to hear. Death is better than Daesh [ISIS]. After what I saw in the Sinai, Libya’s circumstances were heavy. Even for me, it was heavy. For me, I thought, from now on, I’ll never encounter something so bad again as what I escaped from. I had hunger, there was hunger. There were 1,500 or 1,800 people in one room all squished together; you sleep on top of each other. And the boat that you will use to cross, they would say tomorrow, day after tomorrow – just stringing you along. Everything was a struggle. Why couldn’t they just send us on a crappy vessel? Over there [in Libya], illness upon*



*illness, diarrhoea and other illnesses. All squished together.* (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)

ISIS fighters come from all over Africa, as described in the testimony of S:

*There were a bunch of fighters: Somalis, Nigerians, Sudanese, Tunisians and Libyans too. But we never were allowed to see them. Some spoke French. They lived around the courtyard we were held in. The Nigerians who were caught told us that they lived in a nearby area. There was one Sudanese guy guarding us like that – he's not a bad person, but he was also powerless to help us. He was a prisoner just like us I guess. He was armed, but I think he was being paid 250 dollars a month. We wanted to assault him at first, but then we decided against it as we saw that he was a prisoner too.* (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2016)

A Muslim survivor who was abducted by ISIS said that people are treated differently depending on their religious affiliations. The treatment of Muslims is different from those of Christians. Christian women are forced to convert before they can get married to ISIS fighters. One anonymous female refugee interviewed questioned the extent to which the ISIS fighters were knowledgeable about Islam:

*They [ISIS fighters] are not Muslims, they wouldn't know. I don't think they know the details [of Islam], but they know a bit. Even the Egyptians [hostages] stopped them in their questioning because they [the Egyptians] seemed to be more knowledgeable about the Quran. They [ISIS fighters] only asked us when we should pray, what time and all that. Anyway, finally, the Libyan driver came back and took us away. But they [ISIS] took the Christians. We were left about 1 hour from this place where we were supposed to make a pit stop.* (Interview, Estefanos with Anon., Skype and phone, 16 June 2015)

## **Women abductees held by ISIS**

There has been little research done on the situation of women who are held by ISIS. This is partly because it is difficult to work with the abductees, who are traumatised and, therefore, reluctant to talk about their experiences, and also because they are difficult to contact. However, there are some recent publications based on testimonies of survivors (Gebrekidan, 2016a & 2016b). More research and analysis is required in the future.

The situation of Eritrean women and girls in Libya is especially difficult. A explained that they have to take precautions as they cannot expect to avoid sexual violence along the way:

*The sad thing is that every girl who sets out for Europe should take it as acceptable that they might get raped. It is a regular thing to see the girls take either the antipregnancy shots or carry condoms on them. These things are taken for granted and people are willing to undergo such an ordeal. The main reason, of course, beyond the things that happen en route to Libya, is the dictatorship in Eritrea. This would never have happened if it wasn't for the things that happen to people in Eritrea. This is what happens in Libya. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

From the interviews conducted for this chapter, it appears that the groups abducted by ISIS are relatively large. S counted 68 in her group. S and her friend were abducted in Ajdabya, but escaped:

*They [ISIS] were keeping us under lock and chain. We were captured a few miles out of Ajdabya. We figured that we had been caught by ISIS when we saw a bunch of soldiers armed and happy at seeing us. They obviously must have thought we'd make great wives. There was this guy called Alemayo who was doubling as a translator. He said that they wouldn't do anything to us so long as we told them our names and religions. We were all Christian except for this one girl [...]. She was off the truck at first saying she was a Muslim, but she got scared and came back to us. She said she was Christian and got back with us saying she wanted to be with her sisters. They kept moving us around during this time. One of the days when they were going to move us, we ran to the other Eritrean girls who were there before us and they told us that we only needed to pretend that we were changing our religion. (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype and phone, 2016)*

From the testimony of F, it appears that this group of women and girls were 'bought' by ISIS:

*When we were caught, we were somewhere in the Sahara Desert. We were the only ones in that area – our holding cell was the only house for miles. But later we were hit by an air raid, so they [ISIS] transferred us to a populated place. They recorded everything, our names, ages and religions. [...] We spent three days in the place they took us to. They kept locking us up and we asked him [their captor] what we were doing there. He told us that he had bought us [...]. "I can do anything to you now", he told us. We begged him and then he said that he bought us for marriage and that one will remain with him and the other two will be married to other men. He told us that if we dared to run away he'd return us to where we were first held. [...] we managed to run away from him. (Interview, Estefanos with F, face-to-face, 27 June 2016)*

From the testimony of another refugee, Y2, it appears that the main purpose of capturing the women was for them to be married to ISIS fighters:

*When they [ISIS] first found us, we were around a checkpoint. And we thought they were going to escort us at first. We didn't recognise them as they were wearing civilian attire. So, after we travelled for a bit, they stopped the trailer, got the men down, and they started putting handcuffs on them. Then they asked everyone what religion they belonged to? They asked us if we were Orthodox [Christians] or Muslim? We told them we were Orthodox Christians. Three others were Muslims, so*

*they let them go. They kept us in captivity. They took us to the group of 86 [Eritreans already held by ISIS]. We saw female shoes and we knew there were other women. The guard kept telling us that we were going to be on our way soon enough, right after we saw the Amir. There was an air raid after three days and they transferred us to a rural area, we spent about five months there. They told us to become Muslims, but we wouldn't agree. We kept asking them to let us go and the Amir finally came and asked us how we didn't seem to know who they are. We said we didn't know him and were willing to pay him to let us go. He laughed it off saying that he would give us money himself, and that he had no need for our money. Then he announced that they were ISIS. After he told us we broke the window and tried to run away, but we got stopped. We asked the guard not to tell on us and the guard agreed and told us to just capitulate [convert to Islam]. So after we heard that the 86 arrived, we agreed to become Muslims. We started fasting so they would believe us. After teaching us for two months, we were transferred to the city where we were received by an elder who kept us locked up. When we asked him what he wanted with us he told us that he had paid to marry one woman and was going to gift us to other men if he wants. We couldn't sleep at first when we heard the news, so one day, right after they went to pray, we tied the bedsheets together and escaped through the window. (Interview, Estefanos with Y2, face-to-face, 21 January 2015)*

F explained how they were forced to convert to Islam. F was held in a place with 22 other women and girls:

*They [ISIS fighters] asked us why we left [Eritrea]. We told them that we came to this country to work and we were held for three or four months and that we wanted to go back to our country. He [the ISIS guard] didn't say anything, he just locked us back in the cell for four days, after which he let us out. [...]. They kept telling us to become Muslims. We didn't accept it for about three months, but then we capitulated and they started teaching us about Islam, the Quran and Sharia law. Then we were able to run away while they were teaching us. (Interview, Estefanos with F, face-to-face, 27 June 2016)*

S and her friend were held in a place with a large group of other women. Those who were not Muslim were locked up and some were told that they would be killed.

*All of us were in the same place, about 56 people. It was a huge courtyard. They started showing us their propaganda videos. They forced us to watch the videos of them slaughtering people. If you are Muslim, but you don't know how to pray, they slaughter those people. They kill everyone; the videos were from all over. [...] Our days were hard, we cried all the time. We were worrying nonstop. We couldn't eat or drink, but we always managed to tell ourselves that we might get out. We were not together with the others until we converted to Islam. Then we were able to exchange thoughts – the classroom was a meeting place too. They say that they [ISIS] don't kill children and women; women are considered property, nothing more nothing less. The lives of ISIS captured women are always in the hands of whosoever they assign you to. (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2016)*

S and N2, two of the women held captive by ISIS, can still list the names of the girls and women that they were with, as they had promised to remember their

names and get information back to their families, if they managed to escape.

N2 mentions the solidarity among the women as an important way for them to survive the situation: “Those of us who were there were taking care of one another and loved and helped each other like sisters” (Interview, Estefanos with N2, Skype and phone, 21 February 2016).

From other interviews, it is clear that separation is the thing that these women and girls fear the most and that their priority is to remain connected to the group so that they can draw support and strength from each other. When the women and girls are married off against their will it is hard in many ways – including because they are isolated and separated from their group. In the testimonies some refugees tell of being supported by Libyan nationals when they escape.

What stands out from the stories of the women and girls held captive by ISIS is that they are: forced to convert to Islam; forced to marry ISIS fighters; and expected to render sexual services.

## Organ trafficking in Egypt

Since 2010, concerns have been raised about the connection between human trafficking for ransom and organ trafficking. In 2012, UNHCR Chief, Antonio Guterres, said that there have been reports that some migrants in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula were being “killed for the traffic of organs” (BBC, 2016). A 2013 review of the human trafficking cycle in the Sinai (2013) reported the following:

*An Eritrean opposition official on Friday told Sudan Tribune that if relatives fail to raise the money the children either are tortured to death or will be subjected to organ harvesting such as to the extraction of kidneys. (Tekle, 2013)*

In 2016, a people smuggler told Italian prosecutors that those who could not repay their debt were sold to the organ traffickers (McKenna, 2016). In recent months the Egyptian police have arrested some of those allegedly involved in the trade, as described in the following BBC report:

*Egyptian authorities have arrested doctors, nurses and professors suspected of being involved in an international organ trafficking ring. The arrests of at least 25 people on Tuesday also included organ buyers and middlemen, the country’s Administrative Control Authority said. Authorities also found “millions of dollars and gold bullion”. It is illegal to purchase organs in Egypt, but poverty drives some to sell their body parts. The Administrative Control Authority, a powerful anti-corruption*

*body, claimed the network targeted on Tuesday was “made up of Egyptians and Arabs taking advantage of some of the citizens’ difficult economic conditions so that they buy their human organs and sell [them] for large sums of money”. (BBC, 2016)*

The Egyptian trade has now been comprehensively documented (Columb, 2016). Unfortunately, the criminal sanctions introduced to curb this illegal trade have only pushed it underground (Columb, 2016) and have not deterred Egyptian surgeons from performing operations: “Should a transplant professional (surgeon) suspect that an organ has been donated illegally there is no legal duty to report this to the relevant authorities” (Columb, 2016, p. 15). The article adds that surgeons turn a blind eye to the fact that some refugees give up body parts against their will and some brokers threaten donors with big fines if they don’t go ahead with removal. “Undocumented African migrants arriving in Cairo, desperate for cash, told [...] that sex workers were offered as a ‘sweetener’ before or after removal of their organs” (Esslemont, 2016).

Eritrean refugees trafficked for ransom in the Sinai are told that they will be killed or their organs harvested for sale if they cannot afford the ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). In early 2016, an Italian court in Sicily was informed about the practice by Nuredin Wehabrebi Atta, an Eritrean smuggler who was caught by Italian authorities in 2014. The smuggler was given a shorter prison sentence and witness protection in exchange for sharing vital trafficking intelligence, which enabled Italian authorities to crack down on a smuggling ring that extended between Europe and North Africa. In his statement to investigators, the smuggler told Italian prosecutors that he “was told that the people who can’t pay are given to Egyptians who kill them to take their organs and sell them in Egypt for USD 15,000” (ANSA, 2016). “The Egyptians come equipped to remove the organ and transport it in insulated bags”, he stated (*Ibid.*) In June 2016, it was reported that 38 people, mostly Eritreans and Ethiopians, were arrested in connection with this illicit activity (Latz Nadeau, 2016).

An Australian radio station broadcast the following report based on interviews with Eritrean refugees living in Melbourne:

*Samson Habtemariam was 26 years old when he fled Eritrea, hiding in a truck. He had been imprisoned for more than a year, then held under house arrest, accused of cooperating with opposition forces. [...]. Habtemariam told SBS how tribal leaders ordered them all to pay a ransom of more than USD 30,000 or they would lose their kidneys. “They told us that they would sell one kidney for USD 25,000 and two of our kidneys for USD 50,000.” (Weldegiorgis, 2014)*

In Eritrea, sudden wealth is associated with the lucrative human trafficking trade: “In the summer of 2013, graffiti was painted on the house of two colonels in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, which read: ‘You built this house with the kidneys of our children’” (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken, 2014, p. 52). A refugee who lived several years in Mai Ayni refugee camp between 2010 and 2014 told the following story:

*There was a lady, the aunt of a child, who had been abducted to the Sinai and was tortured for ransom. There was no money to pay the ransom. The child was killed. The aunt asked the trafficker, who was living next to her. Why did you kill the child of my sister? He explained they took the organs. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

According to a confidential and well-informed source who has been investigating organ harvesting for many years, the organ harvesting includes Eritrean victims. These are often difficult to identify as (some) Eritrean refugees use Sudanese passports in an attempt to avoid statelessness. A source explains it succinctly:

*I would like to inform you, many Eritreans who live in Egypt have a Sudanese passport; they buy it, it only costs USD 25, and the traffickers in Egypt use them to get their organs. (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017)*

This source explained that the recent operation to arrest a ring of professionals engaged in organ trafficking in Egypt has only arrested the smaller ‘fish’. The documentation suggests the potential involvement of Eritrean traffickers in smuggling and trafficking for this purpose. The suggestion provided by this source is that high-ranking Egyptian military and security officials are also implicated in the trade, but were not arrested. The source suggests that the organ trafficking trade would be worth a minimum of USD 200 million for the period 2011–2016. (Anon., personal communication and unpublished documentation with/received by Van Reisen, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter describes new practices related to the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees that have emerged in Egypt and Libya since 2014. These practices – which include organ trafficking, beheading, forced conversion and forced marriage – must be seen in the context of the desperate journeys that Eritreans embark on to escape Eritrea and to avoid deportation from Sudan and Egypt. This chapter is largely

based on the testimonies obtained from resource persons and refugees who travelled these routes.

The testimonies reveal how Eritrean refugees are crisscrossing between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya in search of a safe place. This is well illustrated by one testimony of an Eritrean refugee who was abducted from Israel and brought to the Sinai, from where he was deported back to Eritrea. In Eritrea he was imprisoned, but was able to escape and flee through Ethiopia (where he was also imprisoned) to Sudan and Libya, where he was captured by ISIS. He now lives in Germany.

Eritrean refugees feel threatened by the prospect of deportation from Egypt to Eritrea, where they are marked as having left the country illegally. This fear of harassment and deportation adds to the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees and is driving up the costs associated with their survival. Such costs include bribes, ransoms, smuggling costs, and general expenses for survival. There is increasing evidence that organ traffickers are exploiting such vulnerabilities, with refugees being forced to give their organs.

Since 2011 when organ trafficking was first associated with human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, more and more evidence has become available about organ harvesting, including from Eritreans. In 2016, the Egyptian authorities arrested members of an alleged ‘organ trafficking ring’. However, informed sources indicate that the arrests made do not include high-ranking military and security officials who have been implicated in the trade. The potential connection between human trafficking for ransom from Eritrea and the organ trafficking trade deserve further investigation.

The situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya is presented based on new testimony collected mainly by the co-author of this chapter, Meron Estefanos. The interviews evidence the extremely brutal treatment of the refugees, whose vulnerability is exploited as they arrive in Libya at the end of their dangerous journey through the Sahara. In Ajdabya, Eritrean refugees are expected to pay for their transport and it is significant to note that the distinction between such ‘payments’ and ‘ransoms’ is not always clear. The reality is that exploitation is so inherent in the smuggling context that, in Libya, the Eritrean refugees assume that their freedom is held as collateral for the payment. In this way, such transactions can be equated with ransoms – at least this is the reality as it appears to the refugees.

That this is a matter of life and death becomes absolute when the Eritrean refugees are confronted with the beheading of those who have fallen into the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS. The number of people who have suffered this fate

cannot be deduced from the relatively small number of interviews conducted for the purpose of this chapter, but the testimonies indicate that at least hundreds of Eritrean refugees are held by such groups. One Eritrean refugee from Israel was recognised fellow Eritreans he had known in Israel as among those beheaded by ISIS in Libya.

Although Eritrean refugees are among other nationalities, Eritreans seem to be more substantial in number. From the testimonies, it seems that Eritrean refugees believe that sexual violence against women is unavoidable on these journeys. Rape and sexual violence seem to have been 'normalised' and men and women accept that the girls ought to take precautions to at least not get pregnant.

In Libya, Eritrean refugees are sorted according to religion and gender. The women are forced to convert to Islam and marry ISIS fighters. In one testimony, the refugee understood the objective of their capture to be for the women to bear children to ISIS fighters.

The human trafficking networks include Eritrean nationals operating across Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. Embassies from Eritrea are alleged to help in the facilitation of the smuggling in these countries. Eritrean refugees have become a valuable commodity throughout the North African region. The human trafficking trade in refugees is an important element that drives the economy. Mobile money (such as airtime transfers) facilitate the payments. Linked across the region between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya, the Eritrean refugees are traded as priced commodities: the most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking in trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion.

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<sup>26</sup> Given the severity of the issues discussed, the authors state their awareness of their responsibility to provide credible information in the public interest on the topics discussed. If the reader finds any information in this chapter that they believe to be false or wrong, s/he is kindly invited to bring this to the authors' attention.

## Chapter 5

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# Eritrean Unaccompanied Minors in Human Trafficking

*Mirjam van Reisen & Taha Al-Qasim*

*I was just doing what the other people were doing.*  
(Interview Estefanos with B, Skype, 19 October 2012)

## Introduction

The large number of unaccompanied minors among the refugees characterises the human trafficking crisis from Eritrea. The exploitative character of the trafficking of unaccompanied minors is directly associated with their vulnerability. This chapter examines how unaccompanied minors are exploited as they are separated from their parents, adult siblings or carers during their migration journeys.

It is shocking to see very young children, as young as four or five years old, crossing the border in the company of siblings who are only a few years older (Zeeman, 2016). The fragmentation of families in Eritrea combined with the push to drive youth out of the country (Chapter 3) has caused a dramatic exodus of unaccompanied minors. The ongoing recruitment of young people into indefinite national service is cause for deep desperation and parents see no future for their children within the country.

The situation is summed up by a recent report by Africa Monitors (2016) entitled ‘*Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*’, which states that:

*Children, as young as 8, have been reported to have crossed the border to Ethiopia from the southernmost parts of Eritrea. This has been happening since the early 00’s but started turning into a major phenomenon after 2007 when droughts hit the southern region’s farmers. The economy was failing, most basic supplies were scarce. In some towns like Mendefera, water, if available at all cost as much as 2 USD for a barrel before the summer of 2007. Before 2009 the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] was arranging the return of young minors to their*

*parents from the camps. Those children usually crossed the border from the last villages near the border with Ethiopia. Those children who expressed willingness to return back to their homes were sent back within few months but many chose to remain. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

As early as 2013 concerns were expressed about the conditions leading to the large number of Eritrean unaccompanied minors among refugees (Women's Refugee Commission, 2013). There has been a rapid and steady increase in unaccompanied minors from Eritrea arriving in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan (Vice, 2015). A recent report by the EU's Frontex identifies the main route used by unaccompanied minors to Europe as from Ethiopia and Sudan, through Libya and the Mediterranean Sea to Italy (Frontex, 2010). According to figures provided by the UN Special Rapporteur, Eritrean children constitute the largest group of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy. In 2014, 3,394 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 13,026 unaccompanied children and, in 2015, 3,092 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 12,360 (UNHCR, 2016). There is a possibility that these numbers are underestimated as many unaccompanied children might not be registered (Anon., personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017).

The research carried out for this chapter focuses on the extent to which unaccompanied minors became involved in practices of human trafficking for ransom during their migration journeys. This chapter will first address the circumstances driving young Eritrean refugees and unaccompanied minors to leave their country. Following this, the particular experiences of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking for ransom are identified. Finally, the trauma and psychosocial needs of unaccompanied minors are identified.



Figure 5.1. Map of routes taken by unaccompanied minors to Europe (Source: Frontex, 2010, p.19)

An earlier version of the research carried out for this chapter was published in a report and some parts are reprinted here (Van Reisen, 2016). The research is based on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2016 in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Israel, and Libya, as well as in refugee camps on the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with unaccompanied minors aged from 15 to 17 years and their guardians aged from 27 to 29 years.<sup>27</sup> The research was undertaken with the aim of understanding the experiences of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea on their migration journeys, with a particular focus on smuggling and trafficking experiences. It uses a phenomenological approach, in which rapport and trust were created to facilitate the interviews (Angrosino & Rosenberg 2011; Kakuru & Paradaza 2007).

## Reasons for fleeing Eritrea

Many researchers and scholars have identified the main reason why minors are fleeing Eritrea as the national service programme, which is mandatory and indefinite for Eritreans. In 2012, Mekonnen & Van Reisen reported on the forceful recruitment of children into national service. They also reported that female conscripts were used as sexual objects and forced to perform sexual services for military commanders:

*Children are being recruited for military service forcefully. As regards the twentysecond round of the NMSP [National Military Service Programme], which concluded in June 2009, official government sources indicate that the majority of participants in this round were born in the post-independence era, which would mean that all such recruits were underage children at the time of conscription. Witnesses report that in several instances girls have been obliged to perform sexual services for military commanders; if they become pregnant, these girls are dispelled from military service with no option but to undertake the dangerous journey to leave the country illegally without any means of support. (Mekonnen & Van Reisen, 2012, p. 334)*

The testimony of Mussie Hadgu, former aid worker in Eritrea, elucidates this point further:

*In my own battalion there were 17 children (17 of out 500 participants); if we take 17 as average number per battalion, this means in 10 battalions (each battalion has on average of 500 people), there were about 170 children in total between the age of 11–14 out of about 5,000 prisoners. To mention some from those who were in my battalion: Meron (11 years), Semere (11), Huruy (14), Osman (14), Dejen (14) all from Tesseny; Abdurehim (12) from Aligeder; Mahmud (14) from Akurdet; Hassen (12) from Keren; John (11) from Asmara. John was captured with his 8 year-old brother attempting to cross over to Sudan when the guide his mother had arranged was captured. He, his brother and his mother were jailed for about 3 months after which his mother and his younger brother were released while he was taken to We'a [a prison in Eritrea]. (Hagdu, 2009, pp. 29–30)*

The testimony of Hadgu is consistent with the issues raised by Mekonnen and Van Reisen (2012). Hadgu, adds:

*In the case of women, some women have been jailed with their children because they could not get people to take responsibility for, and look after, their children. These children, I had seen, were between 3–5 years old, but there could be others younger than this age range [...]. There are also girls below the age of 18. Those women who came first to the camp have stayed in the camp for more than one and half years without being assigned to any unit/department or ministry and it is not known how long they will stay in the camp in a frustrating, depressing and humiliating condition. (Hagdu, 2009, p. 29)*

The primary reasons cited by many unaccompanied minors for fleeing Eritrea are: the knowledge that their father, elder brothers or sisters were in national service indefinitely; their personal experiences serving in the military; and problems with security officials. This is evident from interviews with 16-year-old C and 15-year-old S. C left Eritrea when he was 16. He left elementary school with three other friends as he did not want to do military training. As a punishment, he was sent to prison for one and half months. Upon his release from prison, he escaped from Eritrea because he was afraid of the government. He fled to Ethiopia, in the company of another friend, without knowing where he would go, only that he wanted to leave Eritrea. After two days, C and his friend arrived in Ethiopia. C is currently residing in Belgium (Interview, Heisterkamp with C, face-to-face, 30 August 2015).

Similarly, 15-year-old S reported that he left Eritrea in 2008 at the age of 12 with his paternal uncle. His uncle died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea and he was left behind in Libya. When asked about his family background and his life situation in Eritrea, S

reported that his mother was in Eritrea and his father was killed during the Ethiopian-Eritrean War in 2001 (Interview, Estefanos with S, March 2011).

O, who is now 17-years old, came to the Netherlands through Sudan and Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. O left Eritrea when he was 15-years old. At that time his father was in prison. Here is an excerpt from the transcript of the interview with O:

*O: You see, my father is in prison. We do not know where he is.*

*TA: Really, how did he disappear?*

*O: He is in prison, but we do not know where he is imprisoned.*

*TA: How long has he been in prison?*

*O: Since around, 2013*

*TA: Uh ha. Did they just come and take him with no reason?*

*O: No, he was in national service and his colleague and friend told my mother about what happen. He quietly told my mother that they took him. And my mother asked where he was imprisoned. He was stationed in Zoba Gash Barka. My mother went there and asked about his whereabouts. They told her that he was not held there. Then my mother asked where he is. They told her again, he is not here and we do not know where he is.*

*TA: It is okay, A. May God help him to get released. Just pray for him.*



*O: We lost hope now. We prayed. We cried [choking voice]. You see with regard to my father now, I am losing hope. I became zero and zero.*

(Interview, Al-Qasim with O, phone, 9 December 2016)

The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetharuth, presented a report on Eritrean unaccompanied minors as refugees in 2016. She reported the following in relation to the reasons why minors leave Eritrea:

*The exposure of Eritrean children to violence and arbitrary arrest both as witnesses and victims was among the top compelling reasons Eritrean unaccompanied children cited for leaving the country. Several among the unaccompanied children highlighted experiences in which they witnessed violence against a family member or friend, thereby creating fear that the same fate could befall them. Some of the unaccompanied children experienced violence first-hand, including arbitrary detention after the 'giffas' [conscriptio round-ups] or for inquiring about relatives who were detained, or because they were suspected of wanting to flee the country. Fear that this could happen again was expressed as a reason for leaving. One female interviewee was suspected of planning to leave the country, as a number of her friends had already left. She was not planning to do so, as her mother was mentally disabled. She was put in detention for three days, an experience which traumatised her to a degree that she eventually left the country, only to be injured at the border when shot at during flight. (UNHRC, 2016)*

Keetharuth points out that the large number of people fleeing Eritrea and leaving relatives behind in national service, military service, or in one of the many prisons or detention facilities has effectively orphaned many Eritrean children in a practical sense, as they are separated from their parents and adult caretakers and may not know their whereabouts. The indefinite national service in Eritrea affects children very seriously. Keetharuth expressed concern for the vulnerable position of Eritrean children, especially children of “national service evaders and deserters, who face detention and enforced disappearance” (UNHRC, 2016), effectively leaving children orphaned or semi-orphaned.

Keetharuth also pointed to “the allegations of forced underage recruitment, including through the frequent practice of round-ups called ‘giffa’, despite the legal minimum age for recruitment being set at 18”:

*Some of the unaccompanied children said that if they were caught without identity documents such as their student cards, they would risk being rounded up and conscripted during ‘giffas’ or raids. One of the unaccompanied children said he was caught in a ‘giffa’ after he had gone to the market to buy food for his family. He was detained together with other boys who were even younger than him and his parents were not allowed to see him while he was in detention. He was sent from prison to military training until he fled the country. Another unaccompanied child noted how his brother was forced into military conscription and he feared the same would happen to him due to his poor*

*performance in school and the mere fact that he looked older than his age. Witnessing this spurred him to leave the country [...]. (UNHRC, 2016)*

These roundups are experienced as a threat by Eritrean minors (UNHRC, 2015, 2016).

This issue was also discussed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

*After Grade 11 children were sent to 'SAWA' which was a military training camp according to many reliable reports. There were several thousand children under the age of 18 in SAWA. The Government stated that SAWA had been a military training camp but was today an ordinary school – could the delegation provide information on that transition? Children often fled Eritrea and claimed asylum in other countries because of the fear of conscription and the fear of being sent to SAWA which they believed was a military training camp. (UNHRC, 2015)*

During one of the research-visits to camps in northern Ethiopia in 2016, staff in one of the camps explained that 700 unaccompanied children had arrived in the camp to date and that a large group of around 50 children arrived that very day (Zeeman, 2016). It was also clear that despite the relatively safe environment established for children in the camps, officials had little confidence that they could keep all of the children out of the hands of the traffickers. They said that, from experience, a good number of the children would continue on their hazardous journey to Sudan and Ethiopia, a trip that cannot be made without the involvement of the trafficking networks. In interviews carried out in the refugee camps in Ethiopia in April 2016, it was found that many unaccompanied minors (often at very young ages) cross the border in search of relatives who have already fled the country hoping to be able to join them (Interviews, Van Reisen with various refugees, in Hitsats refugee camp, face-to-face, April 2016).

The ongoing national service and military training affects the situation of minors in several ways. Firstly, the recruitment of minors in forced labour and indefinite conscription, as well as their detention, may be a direct cause for minors to flee Eritrea on their own due to lack of other options.

The breakup of the family because of indefinite military service has been identified as a major factor in the mass exodus of unaccompanied children from Eritrea, as explained in the report by Africa Monitors (2016):

*When the government wouldn't let the fathers of the school age children of the early 2000s take care of their families, it was in effect deciding the fates of the children. Tens of thousands of young fathers had died during the war, leaving the women to raise their children alone. The economic policies of the government made the situation worse for the poorest part of the society. And this was happening*

*before there was time to address even the issues that originated before 1991. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

The ongoing indefinite national service policy continues to be a major factor in the disintegration of families and leaves minors without parents or carers to look after them, causing them to flee the country often in search of relatives abroad.

## **The exploitation and extortion of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking**

When unaccompanied minors from Eritrea cross the border, they are extremely vulnerable. Many will try to reach relatives in other places of the world. Those who arrive in the refugee camps on the Ethiopian border are placed in special care facilities. However, there are also many children who arrive in the camps with adults, but remain behind on their own and without any support (Interviews Van Reisen with V, face-to-face, April 2016 and 19 January 2017).

The in-depth report into unaccompanied minors in Ethiopian and Sudanese refugee camps in Kassala by the Women's Refugee Commission identified some of the challenges that these children face:

*A significant number of Eritrean refugees, no matter their age, do not remain in the refugee camps but cross into Sudan or live outside the camps in Ethiopia. Some of those who stay in the camps seem to do so only as a last resort and a consequence of the ongoing economic stresses affecting their families. Various protection concerns were raised by the [unaccompanied children] living in the camps, including but not limited to: a real threat of kidnapping and forced abductions in Sudan; potential refoulement by the Sudanese government; and potential forced conscription by an Eritrean opposition movement in northern Ethiopia. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2013)*

Special Rapporteur Keetharuth finds that “a large number of people leaving the country, including unaccompanied children, face the risk of being trafficked, smuggled, or abducted” (UNHRC, 2016). Keetharuth expressed concern that these children need special protection:

*...it is important to ensure protection in the treatment of unaccompanied children, as they face greater risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, military recruitment, child labour and detention. It has been brought to my attention that some States have failed to provide adequate protection as some children continue to be exposed to various human rights violations while in refugee camps or along migration routes. (UNHRC, 2016)*

She added that some fall into the hands of smugglers and traffickers:

*In leaving Eritrea, the unaccompanied children are subjected to an array of protection risks, starting right during the clandestine border crossing. In doing so, they become vulnerable to other violations including trafficking, abduction for ransom, sexual violence, torture and other cruel and inhuman treatment, among other numerous dangers. They shared with me some of their experiences in travelling from Eritrea in the hands of smugglers and traffickers in the different territories, though this was not the focus of my investigations. (UNHRC, 2016)*

A 16-year-old minor called R left his village in southern Eritrea for Ethiopia where he stayed in a refugee camp. Eventually, he decided to go to Sudan and then on to Libya. With the help of traffickers, he arranged to cross to Sudan. While en route, the traffickers demanded more money. Fortunately, the whole convoy was caught by Sudanese security forces. R was temporarily detained before being sent on to Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. During the interview, R spoke of his fears during the ordeal:

*What I would have done if they sold me to another smuggler? From where would I get the money? I did not have anyone to pay for my release. My father is in prison in Eritrea, and my mother has small children. We have nothing. (Interview, Al-Qasim with R, face-to-face, 15 October 2015)*

The minors experience uncertainty, insecurity, and violence and express this reality with brutal honesty:

*At exactly 6:31, I reached the outskirts of Kassala and when I saw the radar with a red-light on it, I was completely exhausted and wanted to sit and rest for some time, but I was taken away by sleep. When I woke up I saw a man wearing a jallabiyah and he spoke to me in Tigrinya. The person asked: "You came from Eritrea, right?" And, added: "What can I do for you?" Since I do not know exactly the place, I asked back: "Where is Kassala?" He replied, "I am also going to Kassala, come with me."*

*When we reached Kassala, I didn't have any money at all. The person invited me for a meal, he said, I will invite you for ful [meal] and he takes me to his house. Then, he asked me to wait for him until he comes back. After, 10 minutes he came back with two Rashaidas and a pick up car.*

*The person said if you go with them, they will reward you for your work. I was so happy and took the opportunity. They drove to a secluded area and stopped. They asked me to remove my clothes. I tried to ask why, but the person who was friendly before suddenly changed. I begged and pleaded for him to leave me, but the person said if you do not do what they say they will kill you here.*

*As I was told, I wore the jallabiyah and the other clothes they provided me. Inside the car I was sitting between them. The person who handed me to them remained there. He did not go with us.*

*After 30 minutes of the ride, they took me to one agudo [hut] where they beat me with sticks and bottom of a Kalashnikov on my head and all over my body. Then they took me to different locations and mixed me with other Eritreans and Ethiopians captives. In the house they took me there were 2 people from Asmara and its surroundings and 3 girls. In that place, there were 18 people. All in all, 18 in one house and 10 in the house where I was staying – 28 people in total. (Written testimony, W, 10 February 2012)*

Unaccompanied minors who are trafficked and who do not have access to financial resources are forced to repay their debt in several ways. Their lack of protection makes unaccompanied and separated minors vulnerable to abuse and extortion, especially if they do not receive any support from family members living abroad or from other support networks. Some are forced to beg for ransoms from relatives or family members whom they call by mobile phone (see also [Chapters 2 and 7](#)). In the *'Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond'*, Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) identified a number of ways that children from the camps in Ethiopia are lured into trafficking through 'no-fee deals'. The following modus operandi was identified:

*There are also reports of organised trips from the Ethiopian camps to the refugee in Sudan by traffickers. Children (aged 13–14) are: "being enticed [...] without paying anything and their respective families are extorted when they get there. They're basically taken without the consent of their families." Being presented with these observations, an interviewee from Mai Ayni camp in the Tigray region (Ethiopia) commented: "It is a bit hard. We know what's actually going on; we know those things are being perpetuated by individuals who live in this camp or its environs with us. We're incapable of addressing the issue ourselves even though we know everything." (Van Reisen, 2014)*

The practice of no-fee or low-fee deals was also reported in the following account in which a 15-year-old Eritrean girl and her three friends were lured by a smuggler to Sudan for a relatively low price. According to the girl, the smuggler knew that the girls' parents were in Europe and the girls did not realise at that time how low the payment was compared to a normal fee. The smuggler told them that they did not need to pay until they had reached Sudan and they walked for eight days. When they reached Sudan, the smuggler handed them over to kidnapers and they were sold to the Sinai where the 15-year-old girl was raped and fell pregnant. She was eventually released in the Sinai for USD 25,000, having paid other fees at various points (Van Reisen, 2014). Africa Monitors has also reported no-fee deals:

*Some of the deals traffickers bring to minors are the promise to be smuggled for free in return for bringing clients. For children who grew up seeing people leaving by the hundreds from their communities and who have come to believe that migration is the best choice they can make in the*

*future, such deals are deals sent from heaven. Families are constantly worried that their children might try to cross the border without telling them. Most families hold family sessions for their children who go to military training to warn and convince them not to try to go to Sudan. But at their age, and with the general atmosphere of hopelessness the young students see, it is difficult to have a powerful influence on them once they go to military training or when posted to remote army units or other government agencies. In border towns near Sudan or Ethiopia those in their early teens know nothing except a culture of migration in their lives. They have grown up hearing stories about people making money from migration. As the possibility of making money becomes an important part of their plan to improve their lives and the lives of their poor families, their closeness to the migration routes, their knowledge of the localities, and their young age make them ideal agents for traffickers who need locals to help them smuggle people safely from the country. The traffickers study the possibility of making money out of each underage refugee very easily. As children, most of them are no match for the experienced traffickers who know how to make sure beforehand if the child's family can pay the demanded money. When the traffickers know the possibility of anyone paying for the children is very low they usually keep them as messengers. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

No-fee deals aim to bring the minors out of the context that they know. Once they are no longer in a place they know and are isolated from family or community who can protect them, they are forced to phone relatives to beg for ransom. If the relatives cannot be reached or are unable or unwilling to pay the ransom, the children are completely left to the abuse of the trafficking gangs, who can then force them to support their activities.

Another refugee explains how the no-fee deal works as a way of moving across the Eritrean border:

*I don't think there are any people who are forced to work with traffickers. But there are people in Eritrea who are forced by the government to pose as traffickers to bring in those who wish to cross. Those who voluntarily work with traffickers are those who cannot afford to pay to cross between borders. They bring people to cross hence they pay less or nothing. (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen and Klara Smits, email, 14 June 2016)*

Asked about the way in which the traffickers operate, the same refugee explained the following:

*Traffickers and mediators keep in touch with their families either by phone or through the Internet. They risk their family's life in Eritrea if they are identified so they work with the utmost secrecy and by using codes. The mediator exchanges code names and numbers with the traffickers and in turn passes it to their clients. It is with these codes that the traffickers and the people to be smuggled meet. (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen and Klara Smits, email, 14 June 2016)*

The minors face the same situation as the refugees in general, which is a collaboration between the trafficking organisations and the officials. The

unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable in such situations, as illustrated in the following interview:

*KS: I see, so you believe that the smugglers made a deal with the police, so that they could loot you?*

*Q: Absolutely. This is what I personally observed, but from similar incidents that happened to others, it is a pattern that is clear to everybody. The authorities and smugglers and traffickers collaborate and coordinate their activities.*

*In many instances, the traffickers or smugglers will work using the custody of the police and demand ransom for the release. This happened to my niece in 2008. She and more than 20 girls were abducted by some Sudanese while travelling to Sudan [inside Sudanese territory], then they were demanding about 20,000 nakfa [about 8 USD] in that. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

Unaccompanied minors who travel without financial support will need to negotiate an alternative way out of such circumstances. They may be forced to work for the traffickers for some time to pay the 'debt' incurred. This can be classified as forced labour or slavery as it is involuntary, unpaid and forced. Alternatively, or in addition, they may be forced to beg relatives to send money for their release. The involuntary character is explained in the following example, which refers to girls being subject to sexual violence as part of the practice of extortion, force and torture:

*KS: Were your niece and the other girls mistreated while in the custody of the police in Sudan?*

*Q: They made her to communicate with my brother who was in Khartoum, every time she called him to beg money, she was crying but the problem is that the women they do not tell if something embarrassing has happened. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

The prices charged by the trafficking organisations are subject to negotiation, but also subject to change. It is, therefore, difficult for refugees to plan their journey and they do not know what challenges they may face:

*KS: Can you negotiate about the amount you pay? And do people end up having to pay more when they reach their destination?*

*Q: You can negotiate, but it is common to demand money more than you initially agreed to, and if you refuse they hold you hostage and torture you. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

*As refugees who cannot pay additional fees are taken hostage they become subject to further exploitation, including being asked to collaborate within the routines of the trafficking organisation (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016).*

Minors who cannot make payments may be forced to carry out activities to support the work of the human trafficking organisation. These most vulnerable children are forcibly recruited for activities that support the human trafficking networks. Africa Monitors reports that children are an easy target to bring into trafficking networks and describes the practice as follows:

*Some minors, desperate to make easy money, and manipulated into it, join the trafficking and smuggling networks. Although the children do not have the capacity to become traffickers themselves, they are used as smugglers in border areas and as brokers in towns and other communities. Some children from mostly very poor families are also recruited by smugglers or traffickers at a young age because there is no other way for the trafficking networks to reach high school students. The fear around migration from Eritrea makes information about traffickers very hard to access, which means that traffickers have to prioritize their major targets and have agents representing them in those parts of society. For most traffickers having representatives/brokers in high schools, military training centers, colleges, churches and other places where young people are found is a business strategy. The easiest to recruit are teenagers who come from very poor families or those who have already developed habits like drinking and smoking for which they cannot ask their parents for money. Children and young teenagers do not make an obvious target for security agents trying to catch independent traffickers. They are ideal for smuggling clients in high security border areas. They can transport clients and money without raising any suspicion and can work for years without getting caught. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

The integration of unaccompanied minors in the human trafficking organisations is illustrated by their integration into human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. Based on in-depth interviews with minors and documentary film analysis, it appears that traffickers lured unaccompanied minors from Eritrea to work as translators and torturers in the Sinai torture houses.

For example, S, known as 'the Kid', left Eritrea in 2008 at the age of 12. His father had been killed in action in national military service in the 1998–2000 war (known as the Third Offensive) when S was a baby. S left with an uncle and was taken to Libya. His uncle died in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, while S was told to stay in Libya, and to follow later. When his uncle died, he was left alone and without any money. He was taken to the Sinai where he was held in captivity and tortured. He was then given a job as a translator and required to support the torture of the abductees as a cleaner. After a year working for the Bedouins he was released and dumped at the Israeli border. Up until last year he lived in Israel (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2011).



Another example is M, a 16-year-old Eritrean boy. M left Ethiopia for Libya at the beginning of 2015. Once in Libya, his family could not pay for his trip from Ethiopia to Libya and Libya to Italy. The smugglers made him work as a translator, cleaner and cook for almost a year. He was also required to make sure everyone paid the smugglers. At the end of December 2015 he was allowed to board the boat to Italy and, with the help of some friends, he travelled to Germany where he is now waiting to receive asylum (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

Estefanos also narrates the story of a 16-year-old female refugee from Eritrea, by the name of L. L is a former Sinai hostage and went through horrendous experiences in the Sinai. After her ransom of USD 40,000 was paid, she was deported to Ethiopia. In 2015, she decided to go to Libya and was kidnapped by Chadians at the border of Libya and Sudan. She told them she had no money to pay the ransom demanded, which was USD 5,500, so she had to clean and to give sexual favours in exchange for payment. Two months later her ransom was paid for her and she was released (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

These are all extremely sad narratives. The following dialogue is taken from the documentary film the 'Sound of Torture' (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013). It is a powerful example of the vulnerability of unaccompanied refugee minors. The documentary involves a minor known to the audience as M. When M is introduced, he is standing in a prison cell in the Sinai. Inside the prison cell, there are plastic bags hanging from the wall, presumably the possessions of the prisoners living there. M looks scared. He is being shown a photograph by investigative journalist and human rights activist, Meron Estefanos. The photograph is of Timnit, a 19-year-old girl who disappeared while crossing the border to Israel. M puts his hands on the paper and asks: "Was she with her mother?" Estefanos replies, "Alone". Moving his head from side to side, M quietly utters, "no...no". The following is an excerpt from Estefanos' (ME) conversation with M and HA, a human right activist based in Egypt:

*ME: How long have you been in the Sinai?*

*M: (Sweating and closing his eyes trying to remember something) I don't know her.*

*ME: How long have you been in the Sinai?*

*M: (Looking up trying to remember) For over a year now.*

*ME: You were 12-years old when they caught you? What were you doing in Kassala?*

*M: We were caught here?*

*ME: Was anybody with you?*

*M: Some guys.*

*ME: But how did you make it from Asmara to Sudan? Who gave you the idea? You were only 12-years old.*

*M: They told me they're going to cross. What?*

*ME: Did you travel with them? Did they see you?*

*M: First we paid, and then we were kidnapped.*

*ME: How did you pay?*

*M: I did not pay.*

*ME: You did not pay?*

*ME: I just want to know why he's here.*

*ME: He has to be deported?*

*HA: He was caught by the police...Meron!*

*HA: There is a possibility to talk with the UNHCR, to give him permission to stay here.*

*ME: That's what he wants, yeah. He does not want to go to Eritrea.*

*HA: I can talk with Ambassador Muhammed Al Doyri.*

*ME: Do you have any wounds?... What is this?*

*M: They beat me.*

*ME: With what? A whip?*

*HA: Oh my God.*

(Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013)

In this film, you cannot help but notice the fear in M's eyes and his tremendous vulnerability. It seems that his eyes and his gestures are crying out for help. Estefanos' follow-up and analysis of M's situation is as follows:

*He [M] left when he was 12–13 and got kidnapped from Sudan. He did not have money and doesn't even want to call to his family. He had to work for the Bedouins burying dead bodies. That's how he paid-off his release. He's been in prison for 8 months, and he is only 14! I mean, a 14-year-old is not supposed to be in prison. His only crime is that he was kidnapped and brought to Egypt: not by choice, but by force. His family doesn't even know. (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013)*

This desperate situation in which unaccompanied minors may find themselves is fertile ground for exploitation in all sorts of ways. An Africa Monitor explains:

*I reached an understanding that many regardless of their age worked as human traffickers or assisted in human trafficking for many reasons. Some of the reasons being economic grounds. They have no remittance so they are forced to go for desperate measures. (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 27 May 2016)*

The way in which unaccompanied minors may end up carrying out activities in the context of human trafficking is a long process of increasing destitution and despair. In the following section, several life stories will be provided to illustrate the

circumstances that can lead to the integration of unaccompanied minors in (at times cruel) activities associated with human trafficking.

## When minors become torturers

The following interviews, which were carried out by Meron Estefanos, provide a deeper insight into the way in which unaccompanied minors are integrated within the human trafficking organisations. Their tasks could include translation, serving as guards, burying the dead, carrying out torture and possibly worse. Here follow four examples.

In an interview with B, a 16-year-old Eritrean boy, it is identified that he not only worked as a translator, but was also involved in severe torture practices. He was accused by 150 victims of having tortured them. They accused him of having been particularly cruel and sadistic. B was 16 years of age when he was abducted for ransom and brought to a torture camp in the Sinai. He was abandoned by his family. He was given the choice to collaborate with the traffickers or be tortured to death. In order to survive he started to translate, as he spoke good Arabic and Tigrinya.

*B: When I left Eritrea, it wasn't a premeditated decision, the Eritrean security people were looking for me, and I left the Shegerab camp within one night. Estefanos: Where did you leave Shegerab to go to?*

*B: Israel, I told the trafficker that I wanted to go to Israel, and he said that he has people leaving the next day, so I left after one day.*

*Estefanos: Did you have any money to make such a deal with that trafficker; after all, aren't you expected to pay for his services?*

*B: I just was doing what other people were doing, and I couldn't go back to Eritrea, Eritrean security forces were looking for me, I didn't really have a choice, I was forced to go there.*

*Estefanos: Tell me about the route.*

*B: All in all, between 33–35 people left for the Sinai and it took us about 3 weeks to get there and there were 5 girls. When we arrived in the Sinai, we were asked to pay 3,300 dollars. I couldn't call my family, so I called a friend of my father and asked him for the sum, and he told me that he'll come up with a solution and will talk to my father. I saw people leave after they paid. There were two people, they paid and they left to Israel, but I couldn't pay for a full month, so I was beaten. I had wounds and all, and after that my family managed to pay the money, so I was let go. However, we found out that we had been sold onto another trafficker, who was asking us to pay 20,000 dollars each and we found those two who left before us held. I cried and became so hopeless then... because I know my family couldn't pay a single cent more and they didn't have anything. So, I called my father's friend and told him what happened, and he told me that he has never seen such an amount of money in his entire life, a problem exacerbated by the fact that my sister was diagnosed with*

*cancer and she had to go to Khartoum for surgery. So when I was held there, there was this translator called R, but he wasn't required to beat us and all. We even planned on running away, and he didn't even tell on us. But that didn't work out. And after that I became the translator. I didn't hit anyone at first, I wasn't required to, just like R. So they took the group away from us and then I was left all by myself. My feet were tied, and I didn't hit anyone then. I remember then, those who were kidnapped used to ask me to translate and say that they've come here kidnapped and didn't set out to come this way from the beginning, and because of that they're unable to come up with the money for quite some time; I told the trafficker, and he said he didn't care... (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

As B becomes increasingly more desperate when his family is not available to help him:

*B: Yeah, that day my family told me to never call them again, and I tried calling you for a change. Then I was hit because, unbeknownst to me, there was this Egyptian guy who could understand Tigrinya, and he hit me bad. He first asked me what I was saying to you, and then I told him that I called some people regarding the ransom money. He called me liar, and hit me and addressed me in Tigrinya and hit me real bad. From that moment on, I lost all hope. (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

In the interview B admits to having carried out torture and rape on fellow prisoners:

*Estefanos: Is it true that you've tortured more than 150 people?*

*B: 150?*

*Estefanos: Uh huh.*

*B: Probably.*

*Estefanos: How about the accusation that you've murdered 4 people after you tortured them?*

*B: That's possible, but I didn't see anyone dying.*

*Estefanos: Dying not while in torture, but while in captivity as a result of the wounds you've inflicted.*

*B: ...That's true.*

*Estefanos: While you were working as a torturer/abuser lots of people said different things about you. I want to ask you, have you ever raped any of the women prisoners who were held with you?*

*B: They were asking us to fornicate for entertainment, as they watched. What do you think? There was a girl called A, I was forced to do it with her, but I haven't raped anyone willingly.*

*Estefanos: I've heard that you were one of the foremost enemies she had and you used to cause her so much pain. I've heard from different others that she was a mother figure, she was helping everyone. What can you say about her?*

*B: ...She was... she was only held with me, she couldn't pay... (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

B, who was in Tel Aviv at the time of the interview, appears remorseful and lonely and possibly very traumatised, trying to find a place for himself:

*B.: I cry every time when I hear that those who come out of the Sinai, have formed a group and meet each other and help each other, because I can't join them thanks to my actions. But what can I do? You may give them my number so that they can call me and talk to me, I'm willing to do that.*

The conversation ends with B asking for forgiveness for his wrongdoing. The trauma experienced as a result of having been placed in a such situation of violence is extreme and the exposure of minors to such violent situations in which they are left to protect themselves is unacceptable and extremely worrying.

## **The trauma of unaccompanied minors**

Trauma inflicted by the trafficking practices is hindering the functioning and growth of minors in their host countries and that most unaccompanied minors from Eritrea are preoccupied with thoughts of the need to help their family, paying the debts incurred during the trafficking (including ransoms), and being reunifying with their parents and other family members who are in Eritrea or in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia.

The psychological effect of human trafficking on the lives of the minors results in sleep irregularities, detachment, and high levels of anxiety and lack of trust. The psychological and physical impact of the experiences caused by human trafficking is enormous. Guardians and carers have expressed concern over the unaccompanied minors in their care. In an interview with the guardian of 16-year-old N in Belgium, he states his concern about the impact of the torture N has experienced: "The Eritrean boys always stick together, apart from N." The guardian went on to say: "He [N] was tortured on his way to Europe. He has psychological problems. He does not sleep at all and stares blankly at the walls all night" (Interview, Al-Qasim with Guardian of N, face-to-face, 15 October 2015).

The minors are often more concerned about the present and practical situations in Eritrea and elsewhere than their future. An interview with the guardian of 16-year-old R shared his observation that concerns with the problems of family members in difficult situations weigh heavily on the minds of the minors. This preoccupation with the situation of relatives and feeling responsible for it and a sense of duty can impact on the priorities set by the minors:

*He [16-year-old R] was very worried about his family so didn't go to school today. I tried to explain that not going to school would create problems for him. If he misses too much school, he might not be given his allowance. R didn't understand what was happening with his family in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. (Interview, Al-Quasim with Guardian of R, 15 October 2015)*

The guardians of Eritran refugee minors expressed concern about the future of these minors, which is jeopardised by immediate concerns rather than long-term goals:

*We are facing problems with how to deal with them [unaccompanied minors from Eritrea]. They are only thinking about the short term and not focusing enough on their future. If they do not focus more on their studies, this will create more problems later on. They have a lack of trust. (Interview, Al-Qasim with Guardians of N and R, face-to-face, 15 October 2015).*

The minors have difficulty concentrating on school. Their thoughts are occupied with the problems their families face. Their parent may be living in dire poverty, or in refugee reception centres in Ethiopia or Sudan, or they may be detained in Israel. The situation of 17-year-old O illustrates this:

*O: Hello, TA*

*TA: Hello, A. How are you?*

*O: I am fine but, kurub teshershere [roughly translated as "I am a bit distorted"].*

*O: What's wrong?*

*O: I called S [officer from family reunion unit] many times. I am really worried about my family reunion case.*

*TA: Why are you worried?*

*O: My family. They are in [a country in east Africa]<sup>28</sup>. They are waiting for me and they are in a bad situation, my mother and my siblings.*

*TA: I understand, but [the officer] has done everything that needs to be done. The issue is now with the immigration office and you have to wait until they send you their responses.*

*O: I also called the immigration office and they said the same. Before they used to talk to me but now they are hanging up the phone by saying, "We cannot hear you properly."*

*TA: Well, O, you cannot call the immigration office on your own. You have to do that together with your guardian or mentor? You know that right?*

*O: Yeah, but it is not easy. They are waiting for me. Also, one of my classmates, his family is here. You see, kemgele tekenea [you get jealous].*

*TA: Your time will come O.*

*O: Yeah, Amlak yemesgen entay ke kenbele [I praise God... there is nothing that can be said!]*

*TA: No worries. I know it is difficult to concentrate. Do not miss your classes and just continue what you are doing. Stay strong.*

*O: I will try. Thanks. (Interview, Al-Qasim with O, phone, 9 December 2016)*

The guardians, social workers and teachers of Eritrean refugee minors need to understand what they have been through to be able to empathise with their particular situation. It is important for them to understand the concern that these minors have for the situation of relatives in Eritrea and elsewhere and how these worries weigh on the minds of these children, even if such situations are not resolvable.

## **Conclusion**

Fear of being recruited into national service or the disappearance or imprisonment of parents or caregivers are main reasons for the flight of minors from Eritrea. On their migratory journeys, unaccompanied minors from Eritrea lack protection, which makes them vulnerable to abuse and extortion, especially if they do not receive any support from family members living abroad or from other support networks. Some unaccompanied minors from Eritrea fell victim to trafficking and some were tortured. Some minors were manipulated or forced into participating in torture, rape and worse.

Unaccompanied minors from Eritrea need support. Often they have difficulty concentrating on school work and other activities. They are worried about their families, particularly their parents, whom they have left behind in difficult circumstances. They feel the need to help their family and to repay the debts they incurred during their journey. They feel pressed to ensure family reunification, especially if their parents are still in Eritrea or in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia. These concerns are sources of stress.

Minors rarely seek psychological help fearing stigma and ostracism from their peers, despite often having survived harrowing situations. They may have learnt to be resourceful and creative in dealing with challenging situations. The concern they show for their families demonstrates responsibility and care. Social workers, guardians and teachers may need to recognise the particular circumstances of these young people to help prepare them for a future in their new country.

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<sup>27</sup> The research was guided by the legal standard of the 'best interests of the child'. The code of conduct involving minors and the principle of 'do no harm' were also applied. Particular attention was paid to the principle of mutual consent and understanding.

<sup>28</sup> Details removed for security reasons.

## Chapter 6

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# The Fragmentation of Families: Eritrean Women in Exile in Uganda

*Eyob Ghilazghy, Sacha Kuilman & Lena Reim*

*I have 3 kids. Now I don't know where they are. I don't know if they are still suffering under the regime or if they have left, or if they have died in the Sahara. Not knowing where my kids are really kills me.*  
(Interview, Anon., Africa Monitors, Uganda, 2015)

*Especially for single mothers it is very difficult, no one can protect them [...].*  
(Interview, Anon., Africa Monitors, Uganda, 2015)

## Introduction

Women's voices are largely neglected in the narrative of the Eritrean mass exodus, as their voices rarely travel as far as those of Eritrean men (Van Reisen, 2016). Their lack of physical strength, particular vulnerability to abduction and abuse (particularly sexual abuse), and child care responsibilities often prevent Eritrean women from continuing their forced migration journey's as far as Eritrean men. The result is gendered experiences of displacement and a neglect of women's different experiences in the literature.

Without minimising the plight of Eritrean men, this chapter zooms in on the specific experiences of female Eritrean refugees in order to create a better understanding of the ways in which they are affected by forced migration and displacement. The foundation of this chapter is provided by qualitative research conducted by Africa Monitors in 2015 and 2016 among 27 Eritrean women asylum seekers and refugees<sup>29</sup> living in Uganda.<sup>30</sup> These women were interviewed about their decision to flee their home country to Uganda and their experiences along the way, current challenges, and future plans.<sup>31</sup>

In order to contextualise the experiences of these women, this chapter draws on interviews and personal communications with another Eritrean woman, human rights activists and researchers, reports by Africa Monitors (2016) and the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) (2013), as well as the personal expertise of one of the authors of this chapter, Eyob Ghilazghy, who is head of Africa Monitors and a member of the Eritrean refugee community in Uganda.

It was not possible to interview Eritrean refugee women in all countries in the region or even in all countries of displacement. Further research should be conducted in other countries to expand our knowledge of the particular challenges of Eritrean women in different locations of displacement. That being said, the research conducted in Uganda provides an impression of common experiences of Eritrean refugee women.

During the interviews, Eritrean women reported facing many problems. In Eritrea, they suffered due to the mandatory and indefinite national service and from sexual abuse, imprisonment, torture, religious persecution and economic hardship. Due to the strict emigration policy in Eritrea (and the surrounding countries), most of the women interviewed crossed borders illegally and were forced to entrust themselves into the hands of smugglers. As irregular migrants, they risked encountering security forces or human traffickers on their long and dangerous journeys. Once in exile, most women interviewed were forced to reside in refugee camps and cities where provisions and support are limited and where there is little oversight, again making them more vulnerable to abuse than their male counterparts. In every situation, the risk of sexual violence was great.

The interviews reveal how the Eritrean mass exodus has resulted in the fragmentation of families and eroded traditional support networks, highlighting the particular effects that this has had for Eritrean women in exile. Most of the women fleeing Eritrea leave alone or in the company of their children and must, therefore, take on new roles as sole protectors, breadwinners and caretakers. Their husbands (and male family members) have often already left Eritrea; many have been killed, imprisoned or disappeared in Eritrea or along their migration journeys. In these situations, the women are particularly vulnerable to (sexual) abuse, mistreatment and economic hardship. They face great stress, worry and hopelessness, rooted in their separation from family members and the challenges they face in providing for themselves and their children. In this regard, it must also be understood that many Eritrean women become pregnant at a very young age, often so that they are exempt from national service or due to rape. Young women and girls, sometimes still children themselves and often severely traumatised, are thus forced to master the

combined challenges of motherhood, forced migration and a life in exile all on their own (Stop Slavery Campaign, 2016).

This chapter follows women's journeys from Eritrea, across the border and into exile in Uganda. It will also discuss their hopes and plans for the future.

## Conditions in Eritrea and reasons for flight

This section presents the findings of the research on the reasons why the Eritrean women refugees interviewed chose to leave Eritrea.

### *The political situation in general*

The general political situation in Eritrea, in which grave human rights violations are a daily reality and deprivation of basic freedoms persists, motivates many to view flight as the only way to find safety. Although the specific reasons for fleeing Eritrea given by the women interviewed in Uganda varied, at the core they are all related to the survival and safety of the women and their families. One of the women interviewed described the general fear and desperation of civilians in the country:

*[I left] [b]ecause of the general situation in Eritrea; there is no freedom of speech or freedom of religion and national service is unlimited. There are no human rights. [...] No one can speak out; if they do they will disappear. Everybody in Eritrea is scared of getting hurt. [...] you are not secure there. You don't trust anyone. Nothing was good at that time. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)<sup>32</sup>*

Another woman's explanation of why she fled the country highlights the political persecution that Eritreans face in their home country. When she refused to take part in a political course organised by the National Union of Eritrean Women, aimed at teaching her how to propagate the aims and achievements of the The Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), she faced severe repercussions:

*[...] They detained me in a prison [...]. I was kept in a [metal] container with a number of prisoners with no light or sanitation and not enough food. I was accused of being a member of opposition groups, although I had no idea about them. I was asked why I oppose the policy of the government [and] who is backing me to do so [and they demanded] that I give them the list of names of protesters, accept the accusations and give an apology. I was harassed and intimidated by the 'investigators' and mistreated by the prison guards. Finally, after four months, I was released with a strict warning to respect the laws of the government, [and] to [accept their accusations]. [A]fter I was released the situation became worse. I was suspected of being a spy and the police [...] used to come to my home at night to search [...] for documents. On top of this, my movement was limited and I was*

*always under heavy monitoring.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

These women's experiences reveal the lack of freedom in all areas of life that prevail in Eritrea and the fear of persecution for real or perceived dissidence.

### ***Mandatory national service***

Mandatory indefinite national service is one of the main problems Eritreans face within their home country. All Eritrean children are expected to do their last year of high school at the Sawa Military Training Centre. Afterwards, they may be forced to remain in national service for decades. National service is especially challenging for women, as they commonly experience extreme sexual exploitation by their male military superiors. The Eritrean Law Society reports on the severity of this problem with regard to the lack of agency of the abused women:

*One of the most pervasive problems in Eritrea is the issue of sexual violence that is committed with impunity by military commanders. [...] In the context of the government's sweeping militarization agenda, many women conscripts have been victimised by sexual violence committed with impunity by army commanders. The problem is complicated by the total breakdown of the rule of law. In Eritrea, the whims and actions of military commanders are above the law. This means, access to justice with regard to sexual violence is unthinkable. The victims of this form [of] injustice are estimated in thousands.* (Mekonnen, 2015, p. 3)

While many women flee the country to avoid national service, another common practice is to get married or pregnant, as this allows them to leave national service. As one informant explains:

*Women often get married or pregnant out of necessity to be able to leave national service, rather than because they want to get married to that specific person or because they had plans to have a child at that particular stage in their lives.* (Anon., personal communication, with Reim, Skype, 19 January 2017)

In some instances, families even ensure that their daughters are married by the age of 17 in order to avoid military training and national service (Van Reisen, personal communication, with Reim, Skype, 13 December 2016). Similarly, some mothers advise their daughters to become pregnant outside of marriage, despite the fact that this is strongly frowned upon in Eritrea and leads to serious repercussions (such as becoming ineligible for marriage) (*Ibid.*). The result of this trend is that some women get married and pregnant at a young age. When these young women choose to flee their country, they must master the combined challenges of

motherhood and forced migration, which makes them particularly vulnerable to various risks.

Yet, even when women are released from national service to focus on child care, they continue to be affected by national service through their children and husbands. Some women in Uganda report having fled to spare their children from participation in the national service programme. Furthermore, in several cases, it was the woman's husband who had fled national service. In these instances, the women reported leaving because they wanted to be reunited with their husband, because they could not provide for themselves, or because the government was persecuting them for their husband's flight. This last reason was also mentioned in relation to the flight of other family members. Persecution on behalf family members appears to be common state practice in Eritrea.

### ***Persecution on behalf of family members***

The Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda commonly reported that they were imprisoned and persecuted because their husband or another family member had evaded national service, fled the country, or disappeared. One woman reported:

*...One day [...] while my mother was in the village, two soldiers came to my home to ask about my father. I told them that my father was doing national service and was not with us. They told me that my father was not doing national service anymore. Then they took me to jail. [...] When my mother came back and found out that I was in jail, [...] she requested them to keep her in jail instead of me. They told her no and that they would not let me go unless she found my father and handed him over to them. That was one of the main reasons why I left Eritrea. [...] [In the prison] they slapped me and asked: "Where is your father?" But I did not know. They kept beating me, and one day they were beating me so hard that I fainted. [...] I was 16 and a student at the time. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

### ***Imprisonment and mistreatment of women and family members***

Arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and mistreatment are common practices of the Eritrean regime. Many women mentioned that they or their family members had been imprisoned; in several cases women said that they did not know the reason for the imprisonment or that they or their family members had been imprisoned on false charges. One woman, interviewed by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), expressed the helplessness that Eritreans feel when facing imprisonment:

*In Eritrea the authorities don't need to file charges to arrest you or to keep you in prison. That is the way the system works and no one complains in public; you can't rely on someone in the outside world*

*to take up your case. Some of the prisoners didn't even know why they were in jail. (SIHA, 2013, p. 26)*

Imprisonment commonly goes hand-in-hand with severe mistreatment and horrendous living conditions. About her imprisonment, one woman reported: “they started to beat me badly and I was about to die. Then they handed me over to my parents in law. [...] The doctor told me that I couldn't get pregnant anymore because of the damage they did to my womb” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

### ***Religious persecution***

Nine of the women interviewed in Uganda explained that they left Eritrea (among other reasons) due to religious persecution or lack of religious freedom, which had resulted in them or their family members being followed, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed. All of them followed a religion that was not accepted by the Eritrean government; the majority were members of the Pentecostal Church and one was a Jehovah's Witness. The following interview excerpt illustrates some of the problems that followers of a prohibited religion face in Eritrea.

*[I left] [b]ecause of my religion. I was suffering a lot and they took me to jail twice because I was a member of the Pentecostal Church. I was just a member, but they still took me to prison. The leader of the church has been in jail [for several years] [...]. [When I was first taken to jail], I had a baby and I found someone who could look after the baby while I was in jail. The second time [...] I was held in a metal container. I was held in this prison for one year [...]. They found me on my way back from nightly prayers with my bible and they took me to jail. When they released me, I was forced to sign a document saying that I would not follow my religion anymore. When I was released [...] I decided to flee Eritrea [...]. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Similarly, another woman explained:

*In Eritrea this new religion [Pentecostal] is banned. That is why I left. [...] We were praying in our homes and maybe somebody reported us that we were praying, they [the security forces] took us to prison and I spent three months in prison. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

## **Migration journeys**

This section presents the findings of the research on the risks faced by Eritrean women refugees during their migration journey to Uganda.

### ***Travelling without a husband***

Journeys across Eritrea's border and through the East African region are full of severe risks, especially for women without male company. Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda, had to cross two transit countries before reaching their current home. The Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda commonly travelled to the Eritrean border, crossed from there into Sudan, then into South Sudan and, eventually, into Uganda.

One woman narrated her protracted journey to Uganda as follows:

*I travelled from Keren to the Sudanese border by car, then to the Hafir Reception Centre, then to Shagarab refugee camp in Sudan. I stayed in Shagarab, where there is a great risk of kidnapping for ransom, for three weeks. I then travelled to Khartoum illegally – I walked to the river, crossed the river by boat, and then arrived in Khartoum by car. I stayed in Khartoum for three months. I applied for asylum in Shagarab, but did not complete the process. [...] I paid for the smuggling to Khartoum through my fiancée. I travelled to Kampala via Juba by bus, which my fiancée organised for me. The whole journey from Eritrea to Uganda took me four months and three weeks. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, only 6 managed to leave Eritrea legally or semi-legally, for instance, by bribing Eritrean officials to grant an exit visa. All other women left Eritrea illegally, thereby subjecting themselves to tremendous risks. Many had to take dangerous routes, risking interception and detention, abduction, rape, being taken hostage by human traffickers, and being shot (due to the Eritrean government's 'shoot to kill' policy at the border). One woman's narration of her journey refers to some of these risks:

*[My children and I] had so many problems! We were hiding under the car. We lost our way. We ended up on some mountains. It was a dangerous journey. We were lost. [...] Finally, we reached Tesseney. [...] [W]e spent the night and one day there and, when it was dark, we continued. From there we travelled to Khartoum. On the road from Kassala to Khartoum the journey was dangerous. Getting away from Kassala was difficult. It was at night and we had to run. We threw our belongings, such as clothes, in the water [because we could not carry them anymore]. I faced so many problems. Another woman, whom I didn't know, lost her son on the way – he died. He fell from the vehicle. While protecting my twin children, I also fell down and I was hit on the head. I was hurt on my head and back. I still have pain in my back. We did not bury the child who died. We just left his body and continued because they [the smugglers] would not stop. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*



When exploring their journeys, it is essential to consider that many women flee only with their children. Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, only 6 had fled with their husband. Some of the women's husbands had already left the country without them, were unable to leave due to national service, were imprisoned, had disappeared, or had died; other women were unmarried or divorced. Without a husband, the women were particularly vulnerable to abuse, while also being solely responsible for the safety of their children. Of the 27 women interviewed, 14 travelled together with 1–5 children and 9 of these 14 travelled without their husband. One of the unaccompanied woman interviewed was pregnant at the time she fled.

### ***Risks associated with smugglers***

The fact that many women must rely on the help of smugglers comes with additional risks. First, several women reported that smugglers demanded more and more money, above the originally agreed price, as the journey went on. One woman narrated:

*[...In] one village [...] they [the smugglers] locked us in a room and told us that we have to pay 20 pounds each. They said, 'if you don't pay we won't let you out'. So, I paid 20 pounds and they released me. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

This experience is confirmed by the stories of other women who reported being at risk of being left behind if they could not pay the additional fees demanded by the smugglers.

Several women described the horrendous conditions in which they and their children were transported by the smugglers. Their narrations reveal the complete control that the smugglers have over the women and children. One woman reported:

*On the way, I had no food and no water. I asked the smugglers to help me with some food but they only gave me bad milk. [...] [From Shagarab refugee camp to Khartoum] we only got one jerry can, which is 20 litres of water. That is what we were given and we had to share it with around 15 people. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Another woman, travelling with her three children, relayed the following:

*In one place called Hajer, they [the smugglers] took me [and others] to a house and locked [...us] in a room. I don't know where they went and I had no water. I had a small bag with a biscuit and a small bottle of water. Many people were hungry at that time. We stayed there from 12 in the afternoon to 5 o'clock [in the morning]. They locked me [and my children] there and took the key so*

*we could not get out, there was no light, we were not allowed to talk or cry. They came back at 5 o'clock in the morning the next day and let us out. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, 2 reported sexual abuse, or attempted sexual abuse, by the smugglers. While one woman was protected from the smugglers' advances by two Eritrean boys who happened to be travelling in the same truck, another one was not so fortunate:

*In Sudan, when I saw the conditions, I used the lorry. The drivers were smugglers. [...] it was really bad being in the hands of smugglers. And when you are in a place, like a forest, they can try to rape you and if you resist they will kill you. Many things happened to me, but in our culture if something happens to you, you don't talk to anybody about it. [...] horrible things have happened to me. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

It is important to understand that, in Eritrean culture, women do not usually talk about instances of (sexual) violence. For every woman who reported such violence, we cannot know how many remained silent. That the number of women experiencing rape along their journeys is great, is confirmed by multiple other sources. An unpublished report commissioned by Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA) explains:

*[During their migration journeys] women are asked for sexual favours in exchange for safety. [...] The only times that women are safe from rape threats of smugglers and traffickers is when somehow the band of people crossing with them won't give them up. But in other cases, women have been raped by people who were crossing the border with them. [...]*

*Women suffer the most on the journey crossing the border from Eritrea and beyond on the migration route. Many women carry protection or use contraceptive expecting the worst (Humphris, 2013). They try to lessen the effects of rape by limiting their chances of an HIV infection or pregnancy. But the fact that they ready themselves even before they begin their journeys means that the psychological damage done to women due to rape has reached all women regardless of having experienced it or not. (Gerrima, 2016)*

One woman, who shared her story with SIHA, narrated the following:

*I left with two of my husband's friends. We went to Tessenei [Tesseney, Eritrea], where I was handed over to a Sudanese man, an Eritrean man and two Adarob [a person from Eastern Sudan] who would take me and my daughter to Kassala. We paid them 30,000 Nakfa [ERN] [...]. We walked at night through the forests from Tessenei towards Kassala, until we reached Qulsa, a border village. The two Adarob left to find water and the Sudanese man went to bring a car, leaving me and my daughter with the Eritrean. This man raped me in the forest. I tried to fight him but he was*

*too strong. He blindfolded me with my scarf and didn't care about the screams of my terrified daughter. After he raped me he left. An hour later the Sudanese man returned with the car to find me crying, but I couldn't tell him what had happened.* (SIHA, 2013, p. 20)

As discussed in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#), it must be noted that smugglers may also reveal themselves as human traffickers or may at least cooperate with such. This makes reliance on smugglers an incredible dangerous undertaking. None of the Eritrean women in Uganda fell victim to human traffickers; if they had, they would likely not have been in the position to share their stories with us.

### ***Risks associated with human traffickers***

One of the most severe problems faced during Eritrean's forced migration journeys is the risk of abduction by human traffickers. Abduction for the sake of human trafficking may be facilitated by multiple actors, including alleged friends, border guards, the police, or smugglers. This makes the risk of falling victim to human trafficking omnipresent. Many women feared travelling through Sudan and especially staying in Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. One woman's narration illustrates this danger at several stages throughout her journey through Sudan:

*After four days, there was a plan to transfer me [and my three children from the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] Reception Centre to Shagarab refugee camp], but there were armed bandits there who wanted to kidnap people so they had to cancel the trip. After eight days we finally managed. [...] In Shagarab it was not safe. [...] There were Rashaida. Many kids were kidnapped; it was not a good place to be. [...] After 10 days I left Shagarab and moved to Khartoum. [...] First, I walked towards the dam with my kids – one on my back and the others I was holding [walking on foot]. I crossed the dam by canoe, it took us 45 minutes. You have to use smugglers to get to Khartoum because it is illegal to cross that dam [it is illegal to leave the camp]. To be smuggled you have to cross the dam at night. You have to start walking from 8 pm till 11 pm until you are at the dam. [...] At midnight we reached the other side of the dam. [...] While walking to the car, the Rashaida tried to snatch my daughter away, but I managed to hold her.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

The risks that Eritrean women face if they are abducted by human traffickers, is discussed in [Chapters 2](#), [4](#) and [7](#).

### ***Risks associated with security forces***

Another danger during forced migration journeys is that of passing police or security forces along the way. The first risk is to encounter Eritrean border guards while crossing the border. Due to the Eritrean governments' 'shoot to kill' policy,

many Eritreans, including relatives of the women interviewed, have lost their lives. When asked if any border guards had passed her during her flight, one woman explained: “...if they did they would have killed me” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Once, in Sudan, the women are afraid of Sudanese and Eritrean officials, as they have heard of arrests and deportation back to Eritrea. One woman explained: “Khartoum is not safe. At any time they can take you back to Eritrea. There are spies from our country there who will report you. They abduct you and take you back to Eritrea” (Interview, Africa Monitors, Uganda; see also [Chapter 3](#) on deportation back to Eritrea). Another reported: “There is a lot of secrecy [...] so we fled to Juba. You cannot trust anyone in Khartoum. You don’t even talk about your case; for instance, if you came illegally, you say you came by plane and that you have the exit visa” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Deportation is not the only risk from security forces. Other women mentioned rape, mistreatment, abduction, and the extortion of money. One woman’s husband explained: “I was more scared about their [my wife’s and children’s] safety and security in Sudan, because at that time it was worse there. The [Sudanese] security forces rape the women, abduct them, and arrest them” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Another woman’s experience illustrates this:

*[...] A Sudanese guy wanted to take me as his wife. It was evening at nine and he wanted to take me as his wife, but they [travelling companions] refused. [...] Then, when he moved to get his gun, we ran away. The whole night we ran till the morning. [...] He was with the Sudanese police. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

These stories are further supported by Africa Monitors, which reports of the severe sexual abuse that Eritrean women living in Sudan must face at the hands of Sudanese security personnel:

*Most of the aggravations confronted by the Eritrean refugees in Sudan came from Sudanese police or members of other security department to that country. Especially the sexual and physical harassments inflicted upon Eritrean women are unbearable. Most of it happens to them while returning home after attending family’s or friend’s wedding. Sudan’s police make an excuse out of the party dress they are wearing to make either financial or sexual requirements, sometime even both. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

Another Eritrean women, who sought safety in Nairobi, Kenya, explained to SIHA the powerlessness that many Eritrean refugee women feel when threatened by authorities:

*The walk home from work was always very difficult for me because I would usually get stopped at least two or three times by police who demanded money simply because I'm a refugee. If you say you don't have money they tell you to call someone to bring cash. If you say you don't know anyone to pay for you they say they'll throw you in jail. Once you're in jail it's even worse, because you'll need to pay higher officials a large sum of money to get out.*

*Even if you have official papers to live in the country as a refugee, or with a valid passport and visa, once you are in the hands of the police, none of that will help. Passports and refugee papers get torn up by the police so no one dares show or give their papers to them. Negotiating and paying the agreed amount of money is the only way out. (SIHA, 2013, p. 32)*

She further explains how the lack of trust in the police decreases her overall ability to protect herself from other risks:

*Many men who have money think that they can just buy a girl. I've faced many different kinds of abuse, all of which undermined my dignity.*

*He [my former boss] is a man; he's physically stronger than I am so I feared that, if he got the chance, he would come and attack me again. It makes me feel very insecure around other men as well. I stay home most of the time and avoid him as much as I can. I never answer his calls or talk to him; I try to keep myself safe.*

*Of course I can't go to the police about this; the police are the number one enemy of the refugee population. (Ibid., p. 31)*

Another woman, interviewed in Uganda, reported: "When we came to the South Sudanese border, the military found us and beat us, even the driver. Later he [the driver] paid money so we were allowed to cross" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Corruption within the police and security forces appears to be widespread. While this enabled many of the women interviewed to bribe their way through to Uganda, the price is high and cannot always be collected in time, as illustrated by the following:

*On the border between Sudan and South Sudan we crossed the Nile by boat. When we crossed the border, we were stopped by the police. The police told us that everybody has to pay USD 6,000. They said that if you cannot pay, you have to go back. We didn't have any money, so the police stopped us. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

However, the continuation of her journey gives an example of (South Sudanese) officials who were willing to help:

*[An] Eritrean man led us to the immigration office. We entered the office directly, but there were only policemen and immigration staff there and they demanded more money. They [unknown] asked what they can do to enter their country, they begged. I told my story and cried, and the people at the office felt sorry for me. So I got the papers without having to pay. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

### ***Risks associated with bandits***

Two women also reported that they were stopped and pressed for money by unknown bandits. One woman was detained by an unknown group until one of the other detainee's brother managed to pay for their release. She explained: "We don't know who they were, just that they stopped us and robbed us" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

## **Life in Uganda**

This section presents the findings of the research on life in Uganda for Eritrean women. Once in Uganda, the experiences of women who settled in Kampala and those who settled in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement were found to be different in some key aspects – such as their ability to receive refugee status and their level of security – creating different experiences for the women at each location. Thus, where relevant, the following section presents the main challenges of women in Kampala and Nakivale separately.

### ***Fragmentation of family and traditional support networks***

The data gathered during the research conducted in Uganda reveals that the impact of the exodus from Eritrea goes beyond emptying Eritrea of its population. The family, the very fundamental unit of society, has been broken and fragmented. While some women have been reunited with their husbands and families after fleeing Eritrea, many continue to be on their own (or only with their children), separated from their husbands and traditional support networks. A total of 17 of the 27 interviewed women live in Uganda without a husband, while 2 see their husbands only when they return from work in South Sudan. Of the 18 women who live with their children (or foster children), 12 are effectively single mothers. This forces them to take on new roles as sole protector, breadwinner, and caretaker of

themselves and their children. Apart from one, all women said that they felt lonely in Uganda.

The women interviewed in Uganda told disturbing stories of separation and family break up, with some family members killed by the Eritrean government, some taken hostage, some prevented from leaving the country and others dying while attempting to escape. One woman's husband disappeared in Eritrea, while her daughter died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea; another woman's husband was killed in a prison in Eritrea, her son was killed by border guards while trying to cross the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, and her daughter disappeared in Kampala. Almost every woman interviewed had lost someone in her life.

In many cases, women and children are also left behind by their husbands and fathers and can only join them after a long time, if at all. One woman was reunited with her husband after eight years, while another had lost her husband in the Mediterranean Sea. One woman said that she had not seen her husband since he left for Sweden via Libya. She explained that they both fled to Sudan, but that she could not follow him to Libya. "I have a daughter", she said, "it is too dangerous to bring her to Libya" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

In some cases, women reported leaving their children behind because of the dangers and difficulties involved in smuggling children out of Eritrea. One woman explained: "Children above five are not allowed to leave Eritrea. She [her daughter] stays with my mother [...] It's very hard [to smuggle a child out of Eritrea]. It is very hard to give your child to smugglers, especially for mothers" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Two of the women living in Nakivale, who still had children in Eritrea, said that they did not wish for their children to join them due to the horrible conditions in which they live in exile. One of them explained: "My [three youngest] children are living with some relatives because my parents are already deceased. They would prefer to join their mother, but I don't want them to come because I have seen what life is like here, there is no hope" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

All of the women interviewed still have some family in Eritrea and many said that they miss them and worry greatly about their safety and wellbeing. One woman shared the emotional pain that results from her separation from her children:

*I have 3 kids [all above 18] [...]. I left them in Eritrea when I fled. Now I don't know where they are. I am very worried. I don't know if they are still suffering under the regime or if they have left, or*

*if they have died in the Sahara. Not knowing where my kids are really kills me.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Most women find themselves in an entirely different situation once they flee Eritrea. They are not only coping with a new environment, but also with the loss of loved ones and the challenges that come with living without their traditional support networks.

### ***Access to asylum***

Access to asylum can vary greatly between different countries of displacement, but also between different locations within the same country. Additionally, policies may change over time. In Uganda, the women who were interviewed in the refugee settlement of Nakivale, as well as all women who had applied for asylum before 2010, reported having very few problems with the asylum procedure. In fact, all of them had acquired refugee status within a matter of months. However, those who came after 2010 and sought to apply for refugee status within the capital city Kampala faced considerable difficulties with the process. All but three women in Kampala continue to wait for full refugee status, even though all (except for one) have been in Kampala for at least one year.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the three women with refugee status in Kampala were identified with extra effort and interviewed for comparison purposes. This suggests that most Eritrean women who arrived after 2010 are waiting to receive refugee status, even after living in Kampala for several years.

Obtaining refugee status entails having to reapply for asylum seeker status or renewal every three months. Of the women who do not have refugee status, at least five have had their applications rejected, often without any clear explanation or feedback. One woman reported:

*I still don't have anything [refugee papers]. I have been here for three years. [...] I have applied, but they have rejected me and they keep asking me to reapply. They don't give me a full answer as to why I was rejected [...].* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

When their asylum applications are rejected, they have the right to review and appeal. If the appeal is again rejected, the only option is to appeal to the high court, which is a long process and requires assistance by a lawyer. Rejection of asylum applications comes with the risk of deportation to Eritrea, where they are likely to face detention, torture and even death at the hands of the Eritrean regime.

It appears that corruption and discrimination against Eritreans negatively affects the asylum process. Several interviewees reported that they have been asked to pay



bribes or ‘fees’ by the officers or translators working for the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Uganda’s refugee agency.<sup>34</sup> According to the women interviewed, if they are unable to pay, which is the case for many of these women, their applications are rejected or not processed. One woman reported: “They rejected me. Now they ask for money, but I don’t have money [crying]. You have to pay money to go further in the process” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Another supports this claim and sees corruption as the main challenge facing Eritrean women in their pursuit of asylum status:

*...I think the [Ugandan] government knows about the issue of corruption. They can do anything to stop it [the granting of asylum], especially to Eritreans. There is no one who gets it [asylum]; maybe one in thirty or forty people. So, the government knows why we are being rejected – corruption. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Similarly, another woman views these problems as specific to Eritreans:

*The problem for refugees in Kampala is only for Eritreans; Eritreans experience discrimination in the asylum process and [this] needs a special solution. For instance, Somali refugees know where to get courses and they get full refugee status immediately. They don’t ask them for bribes etc., but for Eritreans it is different. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

One woman sees part of the problem with the behaviour of the Eritrean community. She explained: “...Most of our community don’t get it [asylum]. Especially Eritreans, we don’t speak out. If they refuse us, we keep it to ourselves, wait and try again” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

In fact, it is the opinion of the authors, that Eritreans may have particular difficulties in the asylum procedures due to their general vulnerability to corruption and exploitation by others. The reasons for this vulnerability are discussed later in this chapter in the subsection on ‘Corruption and discrimination’.

Apart from the likelihood of rejection, the time it takes for Eritrean women to be granted full refugee status is a big issue. Usually, the asylum process in Kampala takes about one year. However, many have waited several years and, while they wait, their lives are on hold as they cannot legally work and have no access to public services such as education and health care.

### ***Security and safety***

Security and safety is one of the biggest problems for Eritrean women in Uganda. Of the 13 women interviewed in Kampala, 6 mentioned safety as one of

their biggest concerns and only 3 said that they felt comparatively safe in Kampala. The women interviewed in Kampala particularly feared theft and stabbing. As a result, many feared leaving their house at night. One woman reported:

*The biggest challenge facing [Eritrean] women in Uganda is robbers, which makes it impossible to move around out of fear – we don't have security. [...] I fear the Ugandan population in general; there are some people who are nice, but mostly I feel threatened.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Similarly, another woman reported:

*I am afraid. There are thieves; they can kill you. [...] They don't feel [mercy for] us. We even fear the boda-boda [motorcycle taxi] drivers at night. [...] They don't care about us. We prefer to stay where we are inside at night.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Another woman had a mixed assessment of the security situation in Kampala:

*[...] [Kampala is] good, it is peaceful. It is better than Khartoum and my home country. At least here you can talk, walk, and live freely. [...] But it is Africa. There are thieves; if they see you are a foreigner, they think you have money. I had a boda [motorcycle] accident and they also stole money from me, so it is not safe here.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Two women reported that theft sometimes goes hand-in-hand with rape. One explained: “sometimes the thieves rape you, even in front of the children” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). The other woman reported: “There are a lot of thieves and problems. Even at home you cannot sleep well at night, the thieves sometimes come and take things and rape” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

The lack of security and safety that many of the women experience could have a connection with the low level of acceptance that Eritrean women feel in Uganda. When asked if they feel accepted by the Ugandan population, most of them reported that they do not at all or that they only feel accepted by part of the population.

Although most felt accepted in Nakivale, only three said they felt safe and two said they felt safe only because they took the necessary precautions, such as rarely leaving the house. Four of them mentioned lack of safety as one of the main challenges for them (and Eritrean women in general). One woman explained:

*Safety is a big issue; that is why we keep a dog. We live close to the road and it is frequented by thieves. [...] Even the police cannot help you. They do not respond to a call for help. There are only a few of them [police personnel], three or four for the whole camp. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Indeed, theft, rape and burglary appear common in Nakivale. When asked whether she would like to add anything, one woman specifically felt the need to talk about the struggle of women: “We have been here a long time and the real victims are the women.”

From the interviews, it is evident that single mothers face the most severe challenges. It is difficult for them to work and take care of their children at the same time, and they are more prone to attacks. One single mother shared her personal experience:

*Security is a big problem for me; once somebody came and raped me here in my house. I don't even know who it was. [...] I had not yet built the fence so they just came in and raped me. [...] I don't feel safe here. Especially for single mothers it is very difficult, no one can protect them and they might get raped like I did. [...] The only solution is resettlement. I cannot see how to improve the security here. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

The general fear emanating from the risk of theft and rape causes some women to isolate themselves and their children. One woman explained: “Most of the time I stay at home, I am scared of getting raped [...] it is really insecure for women” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Evidently, fear of leaving the house constrains these women’s possibilities of participating in the community and taking care of themselves and their children.

Another big problem mentioned in this regard is the safety of daughters. The secondary school for children in Nakivale settlement is located far from the Eritrean community. Several women mentioned that they are too scared to send their daughters to secondary school, because of the likelihood of them being attacked and raped. Two of the women said that their daughters had been attacked by men when they were alone on the street. Both were traumatised by the incident. One of the girls left the camp to live with relatives in Kampala. The other girl remained in the camp because her mother cannot afford to leave. However, due to stigmatisation and bullying following the assault, she has stopped going to school and remains at home as much as possible.

Some of the women, also expressed fear of the presence of different and foreign communities within Nakivale. One woman explained:

*I don't feel safe. I am living with people from different communities: Ethiopians, Congolese, and Somalis. We don't know their behaviour and we don't know what they do. Our fence is not a fence; it is just grass and trees.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

### ***Livelihoods***

While the possibility of finding work is one of the advantages of living in urban areas, few of the women interviewed in Kampala were able to do so. Those without refugee status are particularly disadvantaged as they are not allowed to work. Yet, those in Kampala with refugee status also reported difficulties finding work. Only three of the women in Kampala had jobs or were in-and-out of jobs. Only one of those had refugee status and, thus, could work legally. One woman explained:

*Even if you have a work permit it is difficult to get a job because there is high unemployment. You have to compete with the locals for a job, but they always have an advantage. So, if you can make your own business or if you know people who can help you then it is easier [...].* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Some women explained that they could not start working because they cannot afford childcare. Of the three women who worked, none were living with their children. The interviews indicate a cyclical problem that prevents women refugees from finding stable jobs: the women are unable to earn money through official jobs because they do not have refugee status and they do not receive refugee status because they cannot afford to pay the bribes because they do not work. Even if the women are granted refugee status and could find a job, despite the high unemployment rate, they may still be prevented from taking the job, because they cannot afford to pay for childcare.

In the refugee camps, women have even fewer opportunities to generate income. Finding work is one of their main challenges. Although the women all have refugee status and are legally allowed to work, there are very few – if any – jobs available in Nakivale, as it is a refugee settlement. Three of the women said they had their own small shop or bakery and two mentioned that they or their children earn some money by doing chores (such as washing clothes and fetching water) for other refugees.

Due to the limited job opportunities in both Kampala and Nakivale, Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda are usually dependent on financial assistance from others. Most women relied on remittances from their husbands or family or friends abroad. However, a few reported having been assisted by individuals or families in Uganda. Some women, especially in the settlement, had no source of income at all,

but relied entirely on the provisions provided by UNHCR. When asked why the women in Nakivale live in the settlement rather than Kampala, all women interviewed replied that they did not have the financial means to live in Kampala. In Kampala, they would have to pay for food, rent, education, and basic medical services, while in Nakivale these things are at least (in theory) provided. Despite some sources of income, most women reported struggling financially, which increased their stress and decreased their quality of life. Due to their lack of economic opportunities, many view their current situation as only temporary and do not believe that they can build a life in Uganda.

### ***Access to goods and public services***

In Kampala, many of the women struggle to pay for house rent, medical expenses, and school fees for their children. A particular problem for Eritreans living in Uganda is the fact that only those with refugee status can access free public services, such as primary education and health care, thereby excluding the majority of Eritrean women interviewed in Kampala. This creates great sorrow among the women who cannot sufficiently provide for their children. One woman's narration of her life in Kampala illustrates some of the most pressing issues that the refugee women face:

*I need to help my daughter but how can I live here? I cannot do anything here, and I need assistance. But I don't have any assistance here. It is very difficult for me to stay here; I don't want to stay here. [...] Sometimes the landlord is making it difficult, asking for more money or adding to rent, wanting to get a three-month advance. It is very expensive to live here. Especially the house rent is very difficult for me to pay. Medical expenses, school fees, rent, and food are all expensive. My daughter started school this year, after being two years at home because I could not afford the school fees. Now I found some Eritreans in Uganda who pay her school fees. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)*

Lack of finances to send their children to school seems to be a common problem among Eritrean women in Uganda. One woman explained: “[S]ometimes I get money and then I send my kids to school, but if I don't get money I keep them at home. I cannot pay continuously. I sometimes pay for one term and then have to stop [crying]” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Even those who do have refugee status lack access to adequate public services. While those with refugee status have the same rights and entitlements as Ugandans to free primary education and health care, these services are of such poor quality that even Ugandans choose to be treated at private health care facilities and send their children to private schools. Moreover, refugees can only visit selected facilities,

leading to limited accessibility. Refugees often endure long waiting periods and have problems reaching the facilities, as Kampala has virtually no functioning public transportation system. Additionally, many Eritrean women were not aware that there are free services for those with minimal income.

The women and their children in the refugee settlement should all be provided with education, health care, housing, basic necessities and food. However, the interviewees reported many challenges. In particular, many complained that the monthly food supplies provided by UNHCR last only two weeks. After that, the camp inhabitants have to get food for themselves. One woman explained: “...One person gets 6 kg of maize, 0.45 litres of oil a month [...] it’s not enough. There is no special food for kids, no meat, etc. My biggest problem in Nakivale is food. Especially for [the] kids” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Another problem is housing. When a refugee arrives in Nakivale, they receive supplies from UNHCR, such as pots and pans, wood, blankets, and other common household items. However, apart from providing a plastic sheet that can be used for temporary shelter, the building of a shelter is left solely to the refugee. This requires them to raise funds – a minimum of 1 million Ugandan shillings (USD 277). While some women were able to build a shelter with the assistance of family and friends or move into one that was vacated by someone else, others continue to wait for their own shelter. In some instances, women are allowed to share a shelter with another family or group of refugees.

Most of the women interviewed complained about the quality of, and access to, health care in the refugee settlement. They also said that Eritreans were discriminated against in the hospital. Some of the women specifically mentioned health care as one of the main challenges they face in Nakivale. The hospital is not able to handle the number of refugees who need help and it is not unusual to have to wait in line a whole day before a doctor is available. In many cases, the hospital does not have the relevant medication, forcing refugees to buy it from a pharmacy or abstain from taking any. Although private clinics and hospitals exist, they are not free and many cannot afford their services. This being said, some women also spoke positively about the health care services and had specifically moved to Nakivale to be provided with medication that they could not afford in Kampala.

Concerning education, there appear to be two main issues. The first is the poor quality of education provided. One woman reported: “Even when I was in Eritrea we didn’t get basic education. And now with this very poor education, it is

becoming difficult for my daughter to follow [...]” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). One woman’s son explained:

*You cannot have a future studying here in Nakivale. If you know something from back home or if you get money and are able to leave Nakivale to learn [somewhere else], then it is okay, but if you stay here, you cannot learn anything.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

The second issue, already mentioned above, is the high risk that girls in the settlement face on the long walk to and from secondary school.

### ***Community support***

Most women in Kampala found community support only within the Eritrean diaspora community, and many said that they felt discriminated against and were not accepted by the Ugandan population. One woman explained, “You don’t feel confident, you don’t live confidently, you feel like a refugee [...] some of the people like us, but most of the people don’t like us” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). The main support system for Eritrean refugees comes from the Eritrean community in Kampala. All of the women interviewed in Kampala said that they know, and are in contact with, other Eritreans in the city. Their religion, and especially their churches, play an important role in their lives. Although the church itself does not assist them directly, most of the women mentioned that they go to church to pray and for emotional support. Everyone said that they felt lonely and have suffered from stress and worries. Even though many reported that they would like to receive therapy or professional counselling, they cannot afford such services. Instead, they receive emotional support, encouragement, and informal counselling from the Eritrean community and their local church.

When the women in Nakivale were asked whether they felt accepted by Ugandans as well as the refugee population, only two said that they did not feel accepted. Nonetheless, it appears that there is only a limited sense of community between Eritrean women and people of other nationalities. Two women reported receiving support from the Ethiopian community, as they share the same religious beliefs. One of the woman, underlined how difficult it is to intermingle with the other refugee groups:

*As you know, our culture – we come from the Horn of Africa – is not the same as the culture here and the Congolese, Burundians etc. they are one family. They are all black and have the same culture, food, etc. – they match. But for us, we are the odd man out. We are different from others.*

*For us it is a problem to stay here because of the language, the culture, the food – everything.*  
(Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Some mentioned receiving emotional support from other Eritreans in the settlement, but they also said that most are occupied with solving their own problems. When asked about community support among the Eritrean community in the settlement, one woman responded: “No, not really. Maybe emotionally, but we are all in the same situation. We cannot help each other. [...] We have no income, but we sit, talk and share. That makes me feel a bit better” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

### ***Integration programmes: Legal support, counselling, and training***

The great majority of Eritrean women interviewed for this study had not received any legal support, counselling or training from the Ugandan government or other non-profit organisations. In many cases, they were not even aware of such services. In Nakivale, where legal support is particularly necessary for those women who have not yet been granted asylum, none of the women interviewed had been approached with offers of such services. Only one woman took the personal initiative to seek legal advice. Furthermore, one woman was able to register for a tailoring course, although she had considerable difficulties:

*I used to go to church and someone there advised me that there are free courses for refugees. So, I went, but the Ugandan woman working there did not help me and told me that the courses are full/registration closed. But then a white woman helped me to get enrolled in the tailoring class.*  
(Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Apart from the two women mentioned above, none of the women interviewed in Uganda took part in any integration programme. Several women were either not aware of such offers or were misinformed. Some women in Kampala knew about the training courses, but did not know how to enrol, while some women in Nakivale believed that these courses were not for Eritreans, but for other refugees. One woman in Nakivale explained:

*We want to join the language courses or some other courses, but they [presumably those who organise the courses] don't allow us. The opportunities are for the other communities only, not for Eritreans. Yes, no one listens to Eritreans here.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

In fact, many courses are only offered in French or Swahili. While this caters to most refugees in the settlement, it excludes the Eritrean population. Several women



also explained that they would not be able to attend any courses because they had to take care of their children. One woman explained:

*I cannot do anything because of my child and baby. If I could get someone to take care of my baby I might be able to take the courses and I could do some things. If I was able to do a course in tailoring I could work from home.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

This links back to the same cyclical problem mentioned earlier that prevents many women from working in Kampala. While the free courses could help the women to improve their legal and financial situation, they are unable to attend because they cannot afford childcare.

Overall, the interviews clearly show that women are unable to attend courses that could improve their situation, due to a lack of (or wrong) information, as well as an inability to combine taking such courses with their parental responsibilities. Availability alone does not guarantee access and, thus, concerned authorities should do more to raise awareness about the services available and put in place steps and structures to make them easily accessible.

### ***Corruption and discrimination***

Corruption and discrimination are perceived to be a problem for the great majority of women and affect most aspects of their life in Uganda. The women in Kampala view this as the main reason why they cannot obtain refugee status and relate it to higher prices and greater overall insecurity. One woman reported:

*They [the Ugandans] charge you extra for everything. If they sell one [something] for 2,000 Ugandan shillings they tell us it is 5,000 Ugandan shillings, especially boda-boda [motor cycle taxi] men. If they get a chance they try to get more money. They don't care about you. [...] I cannot afford to pay for the baby to go to school. In Uganda, education is not free. [It is] 350,000 Ugandan shillings per term, which is around three months – that is the price for us, but the Ugandans pay around 130,000. They charge us more wherever we go.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

In Nakivale, the women reported unfair treatment regarding the provision of goods and services as well as resettlement (which will be discussed later in this chapter in the sub-section on 'Continuing migration journeys', in the section on 'Beyond Uganda'). While two women had concrete experiences with corruption, many said that corruption is increasing in Nakivale and is negatively affecting their access to goods and services. One woman reported how the house she had built was taken from her:

*At that time [when she arrived], if you had money to build a house you could get land easily. At that time, there was no corruption. Now they give your plot [of land]/house to other people. Take, for example, my case. I took in somebody here when I was going to Kampala [...]. I allowed him to stay in my house. While I was in Kampala, this guy met the commandment and falsely claimed that he is my shareholder. They transferred the property rights to him. [...] I protested but they told me that the house is his. I had built the house with my own money. When you go to the police you have to pay [a bribe]. They will help the person who pays the most. [...] Now he has rented my house to somebody else. I tried to get it back, but with no results. He even threatened me that the police and the OPM are under his control. He threatened to kill me. I have become a victim of my good deed [crying].* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Similarly, another woman complained:

*[...] Everything is corrupt. Even the people who are distributing the food, they don't give you what you are supposed to get. They might tell you: "today we don't have this", and they just take it for themselves. Even the police are highly corrupt. All this, especially this year, is becoming worse!* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

The women in Nakivale also felt that they, as Eritreans, were not listened to, especially in the hospitals. They felt that the Ugandan hospital staff favoured the Rwandese and Congolese refugees because they have a similar culture and 'colour', while they, as Eritreans, are different. "Having a lighter face, they discriminate against me", reported one woman (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Similarly, another complained:

*They don't listen to you or treat you, especially if you are Eritrean or Ethiopian. But for Congolese and Somalis and the others, they are fine, they get help. The black people they like each other, but not us Eritreans.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Whether perceived or not, these problems are salient for the women interviewed. While the concrete origins of different forms of discrimination and corruption are not known, it appears that these practices are compounded by the fact that Eritrean asylum seekers in Uganda are not organised to advocate for their rights. Instead, they tend to seek individual solutions to collective problems. Some women see their problems as related to lack of representation. One spoke of Eritreans as the 'forgotten refugees', another explained that no one speaks out for Eritreans (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Fear, mistrust, and lack of awareness and confidence among Eritrean asylum seekers, emanating from the Eritrean government's spying activities in Uganda and the oppression to which they have been subjected back home, are the main obstacles to collective action. On the one hand, most Eritrean asylum seekers fear that it

would be bad luck to challenge the authorities of their host country by standing up for their rights. They fear that they may antagonise and irritate the Ugandan authorities, causing them to act against them, with far reaching consequences such as deportation, detention, harassment, and abuse. On the other hand, continued surveillance and pressure through the long arm of Eritrea within Uganda, creates a reluctance to act publically (see more on the activities of the long arm of Eritrea in [Chapter 10](#)).

Indeed, the continuing influence of the Eritrean government in countries such as Uganda should not be overlooked. There is substantial evidence that Eritrean government operatives are active in Uganda, creating security concerns for Eritrean refugees. These operatives install fear and manipulate Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees, thereby controlling the diaspora community. The Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported in 2011 how the Eritrea external security and intelligence works in the greater region of the Horn and East Africa (UNSC, 2011). The report provided detailed accounts of their activities in the region including in Uganda. Furthermore, an anonymous person who claimed to have been working with the Eritrean national security has released a series of classified information on his Facebook page, including, among other things a classified list of the Eritrean regime's agents who spy on Eritrean communities around the world<sup>35</sup>. Among those listed, five were in Uganda.

## Beyond Uganda

### *Continuing migration journeys*

None of the women interviewed said that they want to stay in Uganda permanently, as they do not believe that they can build a sustainable future. They are not building their lives in Uganda, but merely surviving until they find a permanent solution. One woman explained:

*[...] I need resettlement so that I can work and start a new life. [...] We are trying to survive; we are just praying and hoping that things will change. [...] Yes, there is no hope for a future. [...] There is no hope for work or anything here, we need resettlement. This is transition country. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)*

Similarly, another woman explained:

*I want to be resettled so that I can get a good education for my children. [...] [My biggest problem is] resettlement! I want to work so that I can provide for my children. Here you only have stress, there is*

*nothing here. I am trying my best to do things. After all this sacrifice, I have no profit, nothing! I am just surviving.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

While the women in Nakivale hope for resettlement, most of the women in Kampala have no concrete plans. Some women in Kampala spoke of dreams of moving to countries such as Canada, Sweden and Australia, but few can hope for resettlement as they do not even have refugee status. In Nakivale, all women have either started the resettlement process or have plans to do so. However, despite the security risks that women face in the refugee settlement, resettlement is very difficult for Eritreans living in Nakivale<sup>36</sup>. Some of the women who were interviewed have been living in Nakivale since 2008, but are still in the very first stages of being resettled. Almost all Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda said that refugees from other nationalities are resettled far more often, and six mentioned that they think this is due to discrimination against Eritreans. One woman voiced her frustration over the process in the following manner:

*[We had progressed to] after the protection stage. We have asked them but they told us that our file is not there. Then we continue, open a new file again, then they tell us that the file is lost. [...] They don't care about Eritreans like they do about the other [nationalities]. After many years, only one [Eritrean] person has been resettled.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Similarly, another woman claims: “The Somalis are going by the thousands and the Congolese are the same. You see the posters: 1,000 Somalis, 900 Congolese, even Rwandese [...], but never Eritreans” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). While most view corruption as the main reason why Eritreans do not have a chance of resettlement, one woman views the situation differently:

*... Yes [Eritreans are resettled], but very few! They discriminate against us, but one of the reasons why so few of us are resettled is that the other communities are large. For instance, if you have 5 bags of maize and 1 bag of beans and you mix them, you get more maize than beans. It is the same with resettlement. But they also discriminate against us.* (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Whether real or perceived, the problems and discrimination that Eritreans face in the resettlement process leads some to view crossing the Mediterranean Sea as their only option. One woman explained why she will soon try to undertake this dangerous journey, revealing the desperation and hopelessness that some women in the settlement feel:

*There are almost no resettlement opportunities for Eritrean refugees. The Congolese are resettled in big numbers. I believe that there is no one who talks to the authorities about Eritreans' problems. Eritreans are ignored. We are forgotten refugees. Eritreans are perishing in Libya in the process of migrating [to Europe], because of the miserable situation. Even me, I am going to wait for the results of the resettlement for three or four months and then I am going to try my best to cross the desert to Libya and cross from there [to Europe]. This is a miserable life. I am in a stressful situation and even the kids are stressed. There is no work. The situation is desperate. Nobody gives you hope and support here. When the kids see me stressed, they ask "what happened to you". [...] I will go with these kids to cross the Mediterranean Sea. It is a do or die journey and I will do it. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)*

Without any realistic opportunities for work, financial problems, and poor education opportunities for their children, many of the women in Nakivale are just surviving until they are resettled. Similarly, most women in Kampala do not anticipate a future in Uganda, as they struggle to survive in a city where they can barely afford to meet their basic needs, while fearing for their safety.

Evidently, none of the women interviewed in Uganda had attempted to travel to Europe, yet this possibility came up in several interviews. While most Eritrean women seem to remain in the region, some take the decision that this incredibly risky journey is their only chance to find safety and a future. They must once again entrust themselves into the hands of smugglers, cross dangerous routes through the Saharan Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, and may fall prey to human traffickers and others who want to abuse and exploit them. In fact, many new dangers await them, some of which are explained in [Chapter 4](#).

### ***Returning to Eritrea***

Some of the women<sup>37</sup> interviewed were asked whether they would return to Eritrea if the general situation improved, the national service problem was resolved, and their safety could be guaranteed. Although almost all said that they miss their family in Eritrea, feel homesick, and wish they could go back to Eritrea, the majority expressed deep mistrust in the government and said that they could never return. Those who were asked were not optimistic that the situation in Eritrea will improve any time soon. One woman shared:

*Yes, I would go back. But I don't think that things will change and that there will be peace. The situation will not be safe for many years. I love my country. If it is safe, I will be the first one to go. I love how I was raised there. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)*

With no safe opportunity to return, nor to move on, most women are stuck in limbo in a country where many lack legal status, fear for their safety and that of their family, and have little opportunity to build sustainable lives.

## **Lifestory: Abrehet's journey to Uganda**

This section contains a story of a women called Abrehet.<sup>38</sup> The interview was carried out by one of the female monitors for Africa Monitors. It is copied in full here<sup>39</sup> as it describes the danger women face on their multiple journeys searching for a place of safety (Africa Monitors, 2017).

### ***The journey from Eritrea to Ethiopia***

*I was born and raised near Senafe in Eritrea. I was only 17 when I first migrated in 2010. I was alone when I started my journey and half way I met a smuggler, two men and a girl. And the smuggler asked me, "Where are you heading, little girl?" I was terrified and didn't reply. And he asked me again. And in fear I told him, "To Tigray". He continued with his questions, "Who brought you here?", "I came alone," I answered. "Join us, then. We have to be careful and move fast. There are Eritrean patrols here," he said. We all agreed and continued our journey. We followed his footsteps in fear through ridges and valleys. Along the way the smuggler would order us to lie down, they would and I did everything the others did. The other girl was a city-girl and I noted she was very tired. She was worried that the smuggler would abandon us. I was scared, my eyes hurt from trying hard to look at his every movement lest I miss his step and lose track of him. And I was worried for her for she kept crying. Then, the smuggler said, "We are very close [to the border]." He tried to encourage us. After resting for a brief moment, we continued our journey. After threading for a long time, he said, "We have reached Mereb River. There are a lot of patrols here. We will drink water and cross quickly." After drinking some water, we continued walking. We were terrified, hungry and thirsty.*

*The journey was too much for me. I was tired, afraid and my mouth was dry [dehydrated]. After about thirty minutes, the smuggler was very angry and accused us of slowing down the group. And he said that they will be caught because of us. He opened his bag and took out a water-sugar solution and gave us. I thanked God for this and felt stronger. After we crossed the river, he told us, "From now on you will travel alone and it is a long way. Don't worry the Ethiopian border patrols will find you, be brave." He left us alone there. Like he said we walked alone for long. And as he said, the Ethiopian border patrols found us and took us to their station. They gave us water and food.*

*From their station, they sent us to Mai Ayni refugee camp. After staying at the camp for six months, I heard a rumour of a safe route to Israel through Sudan and Egypt. I started asking people around and met someone after three days. When I planned about going, I was very distressed. But I decided to go anyway and I asked him what I needed for the journey. He told me I will need clothes and*

some food. And I went to my quarters. He came back after a week and told me that the journey was scheduled the next day. "What time?" I asked him. "Around 6 pm," he said. And he left.

We began our journey at the scheduled time even though there was a lot of security control at the camp. We managed to slip out through security controls. Five of us headed to Addis Ababa. After reaching Addis Ababa, we continued to Humera. And we reached Humera. In Humera, they [the smugglers] locked us in a small hut and warned us about patrols that roamed the area.

After sometime a man by the name Gebrezgabbier, aged around 35, forced us to pay some money without any explanation. And we did. A few moments later, a woman came carrying food and gave us food accompanied with a smile. This made me feel good and hopeful. And she advised me to wrap my money in a plastic bag and hid it in my panties which I later understood was part of a skim to rip me of my money. And she told me to leave my clothes with her and she will send them later to me. I agreed and did as she told me.

We started travelling by the riverside of Tekeze. The sound of the river was very loud and scary. How will I cross it? It was the question that crossed my mind. The smugglers have tied twenty plastic jars to hold on to and float across the river. One of the smugglers reminded us to never to let go. And right before we went into the river they ordered us to pay. We told them we didn't have any money. One of the smugglers looked straight at me and told me to give him the money. I told him I didn't have any money. He told me I have some hidden in my panties. And I remembered the woman who brought us food at the hut, she was their associate. I was afraid they might leave me there. And the other migrants said that I should give it to them if I had any money or else they could leave me there. So I gave him all the money I had. The other migrants were very nice to me and promised to help me if I needed any money. Though I was angry and afraid, this gave me strength and hope. The two smugglers were at the two ends of the floating jars and the migrants put me in the middle to keep me safe and from drowning.

All of a sudden, a dead body and a dead donkey came floating towards us. This added to everything I went through and the sound of the river's fast movement, I cried aloud in horror. I almost drowned and would have been lost like all the others who drowned in there. But God's hands saved me and I didn't let go of the rope and the plastic jars. I could easily have been like the dead person and the dead donkey. I was unconscious when we crossed the river. They performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation and resuscitated me. After an hour, we continued our journey and reached the Sudanese village of Hamdait.

### ***The journey from Sudan to Israel***

The Sudanese border patrols caught us and took our mobile phones. Everywhere we go problems present themselves in different forms. Then we started looking for vehicles to take us to Kassala. We met smugglers and agreed after they told us what it will cost us. We drove through endless desert and for what seemed like an endless time and reached Kassala. In Kassala, they locked us in a room, threatened us and told us to pay 1,400 USD if they are to take us to Egypt. They forced us to call our families and relatives. And I called my cousin in Israel. My cousin kept asking me, "When did

*you come to Kassala? Who said you can go [out of the country]?” He was very angry at me but he had no other choice except to wire the money.*

*Everyone was remitted the amount asked above. Mohammed [...] is the name of the man who received the money. After he received some of the migrants' amount he changed his cruel face and with a smile told us that we would begin our journey soon. And added, “Those of you who haven't paid, you will stay. Don't worry, we Sudanese are your brothers. If it were the Rashaida people, they would have sold you, take your women for their wives and made you pay a lot. However, we will sell you to the Rashaida people unless you pay quickly”.*

*I thought to myself, are we animals to be exchanged or sold? Through time the number of migrants in that room reached 17. And we were all horrified, worried and praying in our own ways. And I hated myself for everything. However, after two weeks, on July 20, 2010, we began the route to Egypt. The pickup cars we were loaded in accelerated at 180 km per hour and every one of us got sick. We were vomiting and hated ourselves for everything. When we rested, we tried to drink water but kerosene was put into the water. We couldn't drink it. We didn't have any other choice, we meant to quench our thirst but drunk so little. I later learned that one litre of kerosene was mixed with twenty litres of water. I was angry and mad at myself for that first day I left my home. Migration is horrible. I must have been cursed by my parents. These were some of the things that were coming into my mind throughout the journey.*

*After we drove like this for ten days we reached a border town in Egypt, Shelaton. We all looked like walking dead people and one wouldn't wonder why. It is a life and death road. There are gangs of thieves on this route. After three days, thank God, without any incident we took a train and reached Cairo. I was very tired and needed to lie down and rest for long. For the first time in weeks I felt safe and at ease.*

*We stayed in Cairo for a week and in that time we were looking for the Bedouin people. I was not a registered refugee and I didn't go out for once. After a week we found a Bedouin. Our transport was a land cruiser SUV with tinted glasses. The smugglers were Egyptian Bedouin and told us our movement would be with caution. They told us we would cross the Suez Canal in a boat. I was afraid but I had no choice. There was no other way.*

*I boarded the boat with fear and we started off. I was frightened by the water. Anyways, we reached land after a long time. Something unexpected happened once we reached land, four gunmen were waiting there. And they kidnapped us from the Bedouin smugglers. The smugglers tried to resist but to no avail because the Bedouin had no guns. The gunmen directly took us to the Sinai. Our situation worsened, we were horrified and my day turned into a nightmare. They held us hostage and commanded us to call our families. They told us to pay a ransom of 10,000 USD.*

*After few days they started torturing us and it was a time of crying and wailing. There were other things I have left out that happened to me. I was very disturbed and disturbed my family and relatives as well. It was an experience that scared my soul. My family and relatives paid the ransom. And my cousin from Israel paid for my release also. What I have suffered in the Sinai, you wouldn't even do to it your enemies. There are a lot of impediments in life, but there is nothing that matches*



to what I was subjected to and I cannot forget the trauma even now. After the ransom was paid, we left the Sinai and our kidnappers abandoned us at the Israeli border. Then, the Israeli troops caught us.

### ***Life in Israel***

*After we were caught by the Israeli troops, we were taken to Tel Aviv and were registered at the office of UNHCR. We were given a three-month residence permit and left to visit our respective families. I was sick and bedridden for three months. I was completely broken in the Sinai. I was hospitalized, taking medication and begun to show improvement in my health. In Israel, it wasn't as I expected it to be. We had to queue up from 3 am in the morning to 5 pm in the afternoon just to renew the three-month residence permit. It was very sad.*

*[To the question of what sort of things had happened to her in Israel she replied:] It is a lot. Some of these have scared me deep, I can't rid of the trauma easily. One time I was ill and went to a doctor who owns a large clinic and is well respected among the Eritrean refugees. He told me that I had infection in my colons. He prescribed seven days of injection for me. But I didn't get well or show any change. My legs were weak all the time. So I went to another doctor and he told me I was not ill and just my body is dehydrated. He told me to drink a lot of water. I took his advice, drank a lot of water every day and ate my daily meals regularly. And I started to show improvement.*

*After six months I saw my first doctor on TV, under arrest by the Israeli police. I didn't know what he was accused of because the news was in Hebrew. And I asked one Eritrean who speaks Hebrew as I was curious to know why he was under arrest. He told me, "He is cruel. He injected 17 Eritrean women with a medicine that made them sterile." I was taken aback by his reply and became horrified. I did a fertility test and the doctor told me I cannot bear a child. I lost all hope. I got married in Israel but I didn't bear a child. If God wills it I might someday.*

### ***Journey from Israel to Rwanda***

*I was given laissez passer, 3,500 US dollars [by the Israeli authorities] and boarded a plane to Rwanda. They [the Rwandese authorities] seized the laissez passer at the airport of Kigali and drove us in a land cruiser to a hotel. The accommodation at the hotel was nice and they gave us good food. We stayed at the hotel for three days. Then they drove us for ten hours in a small car to Uganda. It was arranged by the Rwandan government and we didn't have any say in it.*

*In Kampala, Uganda, we were taken into a hotel. They billed us for the trip and the hotel we were staying at. After this, the people who drove us said, "Our job is finished here. You can live as you like. You can either stay in this hotel or rent a private residence. But it is better to rent a house of your own. And to live here you need to seek for asylum and register [with the refugee authority]"*

*Near the hotel, there was a police station and there was a desk for asylum seekers at the police station where we registered. And they [the police] directed us to the Office of Prime Minister (OPM) which examines cases of asylum seekers. After two weeks the OPM gave us a document that refers to us as asylum seekers which is renewed every three months. I now live renewing this document every three*

*months and I have not been granted asylum up to now. I have rented a room and I am trying hard to lead a normal life now.*

## **Conclusion**

Eritrean women refugees are very vulnerable. They are subject to serious forms of sexual violence experienced at all stages of their displacement. During their flight, Eritrean women are at risk of being captured by security guards and abducted by human traffickers, and at risk of (sexual) abuse and mistreatment by various actors. These risks followed the Eritrean women into Sudan which motivated them to continue their journey to Uganda, despite the additional risks and costs involved. As refugees in Uganda, the women reported regularly experiencing theft and extortion, as well as extreme economic hardship. Single mothers seem to be the most vulnerable to all of these risks. This results in serious trauma, which can cause women to isolate themselves from their host communities.

The fragmentation of families and support networks exacerbates the situation of Eritrean women refugees, making them more vulnerable to abuse and forcing them to take on new roles as sole protectors, breadwinners, and caretakers. The Eritrean women in Uganda face great stress and worry, rooted in their separation from family members and their inability to care and provide for their children. This is compounded by a feeling of hopelessness about their situation. In such circumstances, the safety, health, and development opportunities of the Eritrean women refugees (and their children) are particularly at risk.

In most cases, the women's wellbeing cannot be viewed separately from the wellbeing of their children. Women often described the challenges they face and their plans only in respect to the situation of their children – their personal and individual challenges and plans were presented as secondary to their children's safety and prosperity.

In Uganda, the women generally felt safer from abduction and deportation than in other countries in the region, yet their lives continue to be on hold. They complained of vulnerability to theft and rape, as well as economic hardship. They also lack access to basic public services and programmes.

The problems experienced by Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda are often interlinked. For instance, especially in Nakivale settlement, some women reported that they and their daughters cannot engage in productive or educational activities for fear of being attacked or raped, which in turn negatively affects their current and future economic situation. Additionally, even if they would seek work or education,

as primary or single care givers without the financial means to afford childcare, many Eritrean women in Kampala and Nakivale are unable to combine these activities with their parental responsibilities. The resulting economic hardship has a direct effect upon these women's access to quality services, including education for their children.

Corruption and discrimination against Eritreans is viewed as a big problem, which the women living in exile in Uganda related to many of their challenges. Some related corruption and discrimination to a lack of representation of Eritrean problems in the public sphere. Women in Kampala complained that they are not granted refugee status, while the women in Nakivale complained that Eritreans are not granted resettlement.

Overall, most of the women interviewed are in a situation of limbo, unable to return to Eritrea, unable to continue their journey safely, and unable to create a sustainable and secure life in Uganda. They continue to survive with a low level of security and on few provisions, hoping for a day when opportunities may present themselves.

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<sup>29</sup> For the purpose of this study, ‘asylum seekers’ refers to those who have submitted an application for refugee status and ‘refugees’ are those who have had their applications for asylum granted. However, the term ‘refugees’ is also used generically to refer to women in both categories, acknowledging that a person “does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognized because he [or she] is a refugee” (UNHCR, 2011, para. 28).

<sup>30</sup> The qualitative survey was conducted by a team led by Eyob Ghilazghy in September, November and December 2015 and January 2016. The Eritrean women interviewed were aged 25–60 and living as asylum seekers or refugees in Kampala (N=13) and the refugee settlement of Nakivale (N=14) in Uganda. Sampling was done based on personal knowledge of those willing to be interviewed and using the snowball technique. Most of the interviewees in Kampala city were asylum seekers, however, some women with refugee status were included to compare the conditions of refugees and asylum seekers. The organisation and analysis of the resulting data was conducted by the head of Africa Monitors, Eyob Ghilazghy, and his intern, Sacha Kuilman. A copy of the survey questionnaire is available on request with lead author (email: [eyobtg2002@gmail.com](mailto:eyobtg2002@gmail.com)).

<sup>31</sup> To ensure the security of our sources, information has been anonymised where necessary. Interviews have also been edited for readability. Names, dates, and interview transcripts are held by the authors.

<sup>32</sup> To ensure that interviewees remain anonymous, dates, names (even pseudonyms) have been removed from the interview citations), leaving one generic citation.

<sup>33</sup> One woman did not mention when she arrived in Kampala.

<sup>34</sup> At the time of this research, informal sources suggested that corrupt officers usually demanded about USD 300 to grant Eritrean asylum seekers refugee status. Today, the average bribe is apparently even higher.

<sup>35</sup> While the Facebook page is now inactive, the information was saved and is held by the head author of this chapter.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted at this point that less than 1% of the overall refugee population under UNHCR’s protection receives resettlement (UNHCR, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Only the Eritrean women in Kampala were asked these questions.

<sup>38</sup> Name has been anonymised.

<sup>39</sup> The article has been edited lightly for readability.

## **Part 2: Severe Trauma**

## Chapter 7

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# The Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking

*Mirjam Van Reisen, Selam Kidane & Lena Reim*

*There is no sleep, I hardly sleep: when you lie in bed you first start thinking about everything that has happened to you. Your journey, the pain, the hardship, everything comes to you. [...] Then you start thinking about your family and friends who rescued you, how much debt they incurred, what hardship they are going through, how stressed they must be right now.*  
(Interview, Kidane with D, face-to-face, September 2015)

*I am one of the ones who suffered the most, but no one cares, no one wants to help me. My suffering continues, there is no end [...].*  
(Interview, Kidane with Z2, face-to-face, September 2015)

*You wish they'd beat you or starved you instead, anything is better than being raped by many men.*  
(Interview, Kidane with X, face-to-face, September 2015)

## Introduction

Human trafficking for ransom was first identified in the Sinai in 2008 (Physicians for Human Rights, 2010a; Carr, 2011; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). This new form of trafficking involved “forced begging under pressure of torture and threats of killing, in exchange for the release of the hostage” (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The origin and evolution of this phenomenon is described by Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) and Van Reisen and Rijken (*Ibid.*), referring to the work of Physicians for Human Rights, based in Tel Aviv, Israel, which first documented Sinai trafficking in 2010 (Physicians for Human Rights, 2010a), and Carr (2011).

The work of Physicians for Human Rights is important for several reasons. Based in Israel, the doctors from this organisation received and treated the first victims of Sinai trafficking. Their studies cover the extensive scope of the traumas endured by the victims of Sinai trafficking. In fact, the large volume of patients

presenting with severe trauma from torture and women requesting abortions alerted these medical doctors to the problem, prompting the first investigation into human trafficking in the Sinai (Agenzia Habeshia *et al.*, 2011, Physicians for Human Rights, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

An Eritrean volunteer Catholic nun, Sr Azezet Kidane, interviewed over 1,000 victims of Sinai trafficking and documented their stories, identifying the trauma they had experienced. She was honoured for her work in 2012 by the US State Department who presented her with the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Heroes Award (Physicians for Human Rights, 2012). The work of Sister Kidane and Physicians for Human Rights constitutes the first extensive description of the trauma of Sinai victims:

*Interviews and testimonies include chilling accounts of their journeys into Israel. By way of these interviews, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel has learned that 59% of new Clinic patients have been exposed to torture and/or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by smugglers in the Sinai Desert. 81% of Clinic patients report being chained or held captive in Sinai, while 39% report being exposed to torture or the death of another person on their way to Israel. 11% of our patients exhibit scars on their bodies, and approximately 178 of our patients have reported being shot at while crossing the Egypt-Israel border. (Physicians for Human Rights, 2012)*

The work of Physicians for Human Rights is also important because it was the first description of this new form of human trafficking. However, in the early work of Physicians for Human Rights, the connection to Eritrea was not made. Mekonnen and Estefanos (2012) and Humphris (2012) first linked Sinai trafficking to the serious human rights violations taking place in Eritrea, as a way of explaining the large proportion of Eritrean victims of human trafficking in the Sinai. This link was further explored by Van Reisen, Estefanos, and Rijken (2012, 2014) and Van Reisen and Rijken (2015). The connection between Eritrea and Sinai trafficking is discussed in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) of this book. The situation of human rights and ongoing crimes against humanity, as found by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea in its extensive reports of 2015 and 2016 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016), are discussed in [Chapter 9](#).

Van Reisen *et al.* (2017) describe the importance of new ICTs in the development of the modus operandi of human trafficking in the Sinai, which depended on mobile phones to extort ransoms and on mobile money to collect payments. Traffickers also depended on mobile communications for surveillance, for the organisation of the trade and to gather intelligence. ICTs add a specific element to the nature of human trafficking for ransom, in that they enable the

collective experience of the torture and extortion, thereby creating collective suffering during and after the experience. The collective nature of the suffering and its consequences for the victims and their wider communities is described by Van Reisen *et al.* (2017) and is explored in [Chapter 8](#) of this book.

Human trafficking for ransom is distinct from other forms of human trafficking:

*This has profound implications for a legal understanding of the problem in two ways; first the combination of trafficking practices already known, e.g., trafficking for the purpose of slavery, and new forms of trafficking, namely trafficking for forced begging and ransom. Second, the interconnection between various serious crimes, including smuggling, abduction, extortion, slavery, torture, systematic sexual violence and killing.* (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015, p. 118)

While Physicians for Human Rights (2010a) described the torture practices ex-post, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2012, 2014) interviewed victims of Sinai trafficking while they were being held by the traffickers.<sup>40</sup> Later research also included interviews with survivors of Sinai trafficking in Israel and in detention centres or prisons in Egypt, where the victims were held subsequently to their release (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Some interviews were conducted with victims who had returned to Eritrea, but no systematic survey has been carried out to identify the impact of Sinai trafficking and torture on victims (and the broader community).

While survivors of Sinai trafficking were severely tortured and were subjected to gruesome and horrific crimes, they were also forced to collect ransoms, of around USD 30,000 per person on average, with some paying less, but others required to pay more. These amounts were collected by families and communities around the world, adding to the collective trauma and material loss experienced by entire communities (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017).

It is estimated that 25,000–30,000 people were trafficked to the Sinai between 2009 and 2013 (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014, p. 66). The majority of these victims were violently abducted in eastern Sudan (see [Chapter 2](#)). It is further estimated that 5,000–10,000 people have died in the Sinai (*Ibid.*, p. 65), which leaves 15,000–2,5000 survivors. Those who died were either killed on purpose, or died as a result of torture that was not necessarily meant to kill them. Much work has been done to describe human trafficking in the Sinai and the *modus operandi* has been confirmed both in written text (Human Rights Watch, 2012, 2014; Amnesty International, 2013; OSCE, 2013; Van Reisen, *et al.* 2012, 2014) and in documentary films (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013; Deloget & Allegera, 2014), allowing victims of Sinai trafficking to tell their own story.



This chapter aims to analyse and describe the trauma suffered by victims of Sinai trafficking. It focuses on research carried out in camps in Ethiopia near the border of Eritrea. Many victims of Sinai trafficking were held in prisons in Egypt following their release, until they could collect money to pay for their own deportation to Eritrea or Ethiopia. Many victims of Sinai trafficking choose to be deported to Ethiopia, from where many continued to Sudan, Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. Others were resettled in Australia, Canada and the United States.

In the next section, the methodology and research setting is described, followed by the theoretical framework of the chapter. This is also followed by an inventory of the torture practices carried out in relation to Sinai trafficking for ransom between 2008 and 2014. In the next section, the results of the Impact of Events Scale Revised (IES-R) test are described, followed by a description of the torture practices carried out in the Sinai. Subsequently, this chapter will detail the findings of medical examinations carried out on Sinai victims to assess the extent of their physical trauma. In the final section, the interviews undertaken with victims of Sinai trafficking pertaining to trauma will be provided.

## **Methodology**

This chapter is based on several research visits by the authors, Van Reisen and Kidane, to Ethiopia and to the camps on the border with Eritrea. There are four main camps in the area: Shemelba, the oldest refugee camp on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, Mai Ayni, Adi Harish and Hitsats. Hitsats is the newest camp and has remained very much a transit camp. The camps have very different geographic locations and habitats (which will be described in the next section on study sites).

The interviews for this research were conducted in the four camps in 2015 and 2016. The names of interviewees have been anonymised and details about the place and time of the interview omitted to protect their identity. A first visit, in July 2015, aimed to establish contact and links in the various camps. The interviews were carried out during a follow-up visit in September 2015, at which time the IES-R test was also applied.

At the time that these interviews were conducted in 2015 we met about 40 Sinai survivors in Shemelba (including a large group of women), 3 in Adi Harish, 3 in Mai Ayni, and 8 in Hitsats. While Shemelba and Adi Harish had both men and women in the group, the survivors in Hitsats and Mai Ayni consisted only of men. The interviews were carried out in a conversational setting. The participants who

remained for the conversation agreed that the information could be used for advocacy purposes and the need for justice was high on their agenda.

The IES-R test was chosen because it is a well-validated instrument and measures the impact of events at a certain time. The test was applied to understand the remaining trauma of Sinai survivors, several years after the traumatic events had taken place. The test is a good instrument for severe trauma, because it does not require victims to re-narrate or relive the traumatic events, which is often very difficult and can lead to re-traumatisation.

The IES-R test measures the experience of the symptoms of trauma and, therefore, is a direct measure of the symptoms of the trauma experienced at the moment the test is taken. The test was translated from English into Tigrinya by one of the authors, Selam Kidane, and the translation piloted and improved with the aid of language resource persons. The tests were carried out by Kidane, who is a qualified therapist. The tests were administered one-on-one, face-to-face in the camps, as part of a slightly broader conversation, or interview, allowing the respondent to provide more information if he or she wished to do so. Participation was voluntary and on the condition of anonymity. The test results were recorded on paper and subsequently analysed in Excel. A total of 21 Sinai survivors from the camps in Ethiopia participated in the study. The findings are compared with test results of 14 Sinai survivors in Tel Aviv.

While preparing the request to participate in the test, the researchers carried out focus group discussions with the victims of Sinai trafficking. During these focus group discussions, the researchers met with 45 Sinai survivors in the different camps.<sup>41</sup>

The focus group discussions were organised by two leaders of the group of Sinai survivors who had volunteered to organise the survivors. In the discussions, the researchers explained the purpose of the discussion, which was to improve our understanding of the suffering of the victims and to determine what help they wanted. The researchers did not ask the survivors to re-narrate their experiences, although in subsequent conversations many survivors used the occasion to explain some details of their ordeal. These were recorded in writing by the researchers after the focus group discussions had ended. Relevant narrations are provided later in this chapter in the section containing the interviews. In addition to these interviews and focus group discussions, interviews were carried out with Sinai survivors and resource persons in locations other than Ethiopia (Asmara, Tel-Aviv and Kampala) to compare the experiences narrated by Sinai survivors in these locations.

An important outcome of the focus group discussions was the request to meet with an Eritrean Tigrinya-speaking medical doctor. The needs relayed by survivors were many and intertwined, including: psychological needs, advocacy needs, social support needs and medical needs. Such a visit by a doctor to the Shemelba refugee camp was subsequently arranged in September 2016. The doctor conducted physical examinations of 28 Sinai survivors. The consultations were held in the offices of the Ethiopian Administration for Refugees (ARRA) at Shemelba, where the doctor could privately consult with the patients. Although his consultations were also aimed at giving personal advice and treatment, the anonymised findings were used (with permission) to form the basis of an analysis of the impact of the torture on Sinai survivors. A debriefing of the medical doctor was held by researchers at a meeting in September 2016, soon after the physical examination.

Sinai survivors also expressed a need for assistance with resettlement procedures. Many reported not being able to move forward and that the deep trauma they experienced is holding them back. It is clear from the interviews and conversations with survivors that they believe it is important that their trauma is recorded. They crave recognition of their fate and for treatment to help them deal with the consequences of the torture and the many problems they still have as a result of this (both physical and mental). They also expressed a wish for the impact of human trafficking in the Sinai to be known and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

## **The camps where Sinai survivors live**

As noted above, the focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in four refugee camps: Shemelba, Mai Ayni, Adi Harish and Hitsats.

Shemelba is a green fertile area and, being the oldest camp in Ethiopia for Eritrean refugees, can almost be characterised as a settlement. Shemelba was established in 2004 and many of the refugees in Shemelba have been there for a long time. They mainly farm for a living and are part of a relatively settled community. The camp caters predominantly for members of the Kunama ethnic group from Eritrea (5,000) and there are around 1,000 Tigrinyaspeaking Eritrean refugees. The camp receives people with mental health problems. Compared to other refugee camps in Ethiopia, Shemelba provides better physical and mental health care services and has a closed unit for severe cases of mental illness. The idea behind placing Sinai victims in Shemelba, therefore, appears to be based on the potential to access these services. However, the victims of Sinai trafficking are afraid

that accessing these services will stigmatise them further and they dread the idea of being confined to the separate living quarters of the closed unit with other refugees with recognised and severe mental illness.

Originally there were some 120 Sinai survivors living in Shemelba, and Sinai survivors in Ethiopia (deportees from Israel and Egypt) were generally sent to this camp. By 2015, around 60 survivors had left, leaving an estimated 60 survivors still living in Shemelba. Among them, 11 were women; some of them have children. There is one couple who are both Sinai survivors. It is reported that Shemelba has a lot of problems due to unresolved trauma and alcohol abuse.

The other camps in Ethiopia are much newer. Mai Ayni is an established camp with shops, businesses and three churches. It has a primary school. It currently hosts about 10,000 refugees. Adi Harish is close to Mai Ayni and equally well established with businesses inside the camp; it also hosts about 10,000 refugees. Hitsats camp is set in extremely harsh terrain: it is very hot and dry, with little shade and water. This place was previously a grazing area for Eritrean farmers who came to Ethiopia with their cattle, and Eritrean and Ethiopian villages used to co-exist side by side. The camp is new and most shelters are made of aluminium sheets. Hitsats is not conducive to farming and it receives mostly young people, many of whom plan to transit through the camp in search of a better place. Hitsats is situated next to a traditional Ethiopian settlement with a small shopping centre serving the refugee camp.

Hitsats, which also has around 10,000 refugees, is very much a transit point. People with the means (mainly remittances) tend to leave, and the more money they have the quicker they go. All are highly traumatised. Hitsats has a large population of unaccompanied minors, as young as 6–7 years of age; if they arrive at the age of 12, they are considered the older ones. There are 1,000 unaccompanied minors registered in the camp, but the unofficial number is much higher. Those arriving unaccompanied are received in a closed camp with special protection. Other children arrive with adults, but are left behind in the camp. They are in a precarious situation. Churches arrange assistance for this group.

There are few facilities in the camp and many essential goods and services are lacking. Water shortages, insufficient shelter, limited basic health care facilities, and no possibilities for relaxation and entertainment characterise the camp. The connectivity in the camp is poor, making people feel very isolated. Young people in this camp sometimes wait 4–5 years, before realising that resettlement opportunities are hopeless. Then they move on to take their chances with smugglers and

traffickers. The funds available to support the camp have decreased each year, although the population has grown. “We need options”, say the young people.

There are not many Sinai survivors in Hitsats, but those who are there do not understand why they were moved to this camp as they are highly traumatised and have special needs. The very first returnees (who were deported to Ethiopia from Israel and Egypt) were allocated to Hitsats refugee camp, which was newly open at the time when these returns were taking place. Because the camp was new, there were barely any facilities and services at that time, such that residents stayed in makeshift tents in which groups of people were randomly allocated. The decision to send Sinai victims to Hitsats once they arrived in Ethiopia and completed their refugee screening process at Enda Bagunna Camp was based on pure logistics and took no account of the clearly visible signs of torture and trauma. Unable to cope with the prospect of years in a refugee camp without the means to work and pay their debts or be reunited with members of their family, many of those who were able bodied and able to endure a repeat of the traumatic journey, left the camps for Libya via Sudan, hoping for a better outcome this time around. Several of them made the crossing over the Mediterranean Sea and ended up in Europe. Many are still believed to be in Sudan and Libya.

By the summer of 2015 there were only about 15 Sinai victims at Hitsats (this was about half the original cohort sent to Hitsats from Enda Bagunna). The members of this group all presented with a range of physical and psychological scars, which were confirmed by the impact of events scale.

Mai Ayni is one of the older camps in Northern Ethiopia. There are very few Sinai survivors at Mai Ayni and those who are in the camp are isolated and unsupported. The camp has few facilities and no relevant mental health provision.

In Adi Harish there were around 500 Sinai survivors who went through the camp when they first started arriving in 2013. The administrative centre of the area where the camp is located is Shire, a small town that is only an hour’s drive from Axum, which is a larger town with touristic features and an old history. Axum also has an airport. The ARRA is located in Shire and grants permits to access the camp. ARRA is responsible for security in the camp.

## **Theoretical framework**

The term ‘trauma’ derives from the Greek word, meaning *wound*, referring to both physical and mental wounds. Increasingly, the term is being used to refer to mental trauma. However, the definition, even in this limited arena, is still evolving,

with much of current thinking placing more emphasis on the individual's perception of the trauma and particularly their level of perceived control over events. Spiegel (2008) describes the essence of trauma as the "loss of control over one's body" and, hence, the imprint that the loss has on parts of the brain – identity, memory and consciousness. Herman (1992) stated:

*Psychological trauma is an affiliation of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (Herman, 1992, p. 33)*

Levine (1997) emphasises perception as well as whether or not the impact remains unresolved (i.e., whether the person has regained control). Traumatic events are, therefore, described as "perceived life threatening or overwhelming experiences" in a situation of helplessness (Levine, 2005; Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996).

Human trafficking in the Sinai had both elements: it was a lifethreatening and overwhelming experience, coupled with physical and psychological helplessness. Victims of Sinai trafficking were tied or chained together and often blindfolded or kept in the dark for hours, if not days, weeks or months. They had no control over their movement and no say in where they were kept or under what conditions. They were deprived of food and were only allowed to go to the toilet if allowed by their captors. Moreover, they were forced to put unimaginable amounts of pressure on their families and loved ones to pay the ransom demanded. Women were raped in front of the other captives who were forced to watch them. Some were forced to have sexual intercourse with fellow captives making the loss of control absolute.

In this context of total loss of power, they were then hung, beaten, electrocuted, and their heads bashed against walls, causing physical wounds, disfiguration and disability, as well as emotional wounds, resulting in relationship problems, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, and lack of trust and confidence, among other things.

Scaer (2005) describes the hidden wounds caused by trauma on the brain as follows:

*In the brain of the trauma victim, the synapses, neurons, and neurochemicals have been substantially and indefinitely altered by the effects of a unique life experience. [...] The brain in trauma has lost its ability to distinguish past from present, and as a result it cannot adapt to the future. This confusion of time further immobilizes the trauma victim, who still remains immobilized by a thwarted freeze discharge. Procedural memory is bombarded by environmental and internal cues that represent old, unresolved threats. (Ibid., p. 58)*

This indicates that the physiological symptoms of trauma are actually underpinned by the impact on neurological processes, causing the kind of long-term responses that distinguish stress from post-traumatic stress. The fact that the victims of Sinai trafficking are reporting a whole range of symptoms some years after their experiences in the Sinai shows that the stress caused was indeed traumatic stress.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM IV) describes trauma as exposure to a traumatic event that involved either the threat of death or serious injury to the individual, or threat to the physical integrity of the self or others (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The person's response at the time of the traumatic event must have involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. This event is persistently re-experienced and avoidance of the stimuli associated with the trauma, numbing of general responsiveness and symptoms of increased arousal exist. In order to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) the duration of the symptoms has to be more than one month and the symptoms must cause stress or impairment in social or occupational functioning. In cases of delayed onset, the symptoms can appear at least six months to years after the traumatic event.

Victims of Sinai trafficking report all of the above symptoms, both in their extended interviews and also as measured on the IES-R scale (the scale and its score will be described later in this chapter). In fact, their experiences were so intense that many of them wished to die rather than face another day of torture, which was not just inflicted on them, but also on their families and friends, who were made to listen to their plight via mobile phones. Coming from impoverished families and communities, they knew that the ransom demand was unimaginably high and, hence, the prospects of it being paid low; yet as they had already been commoditised, there was no reprieve; so they helplessly went through the motions of making the phone calls to make the impossible plea to their kin.

Each of these people were fleeing Eritrea in search of a better life; many were fleeing political and religious repression or indefinite national service. Many had experienced direct or indirect persecution or had spent much of their life under an extremely authoritarian regime, which controls the population of Eritrea through

fear. Trauma research has indicated various predictors of PTSD, namely, previous traumatic experiences and poor parenting (Chappell, 2003). Childhood trauma is identified as the most important vulnerability indicator. The vulnerability of Eritrean victims in the Sinai may have been elevated by previous trauma in the form of previous imprisonment, experiences during the journey leading up to imprisonment in the Sinai, as well as a stressful upbringing as a result of the extreme stress that families are put under in Eritrea (which also damages their parenting capacity).

There is even a suggestion that major traumatic experiences by a previous generation could create a genetic memory that makes the current generation vulnerable to the effects of trauma (Levine, 1997). A case in point here is the situation of children of Holocaust survivors, who are said to be physiologically and biologically vulnerable to trauma (Yehuda *et al.*, 1997).

Previous trauma, childhood abuse and a family history of alcoholism and depression are other factors that increase vulnerability to post-traumatic stress (Yehuda *et al.*, 1997), indicating that the current situation in Eritrea and the potential impact on the parenting of the generation of Eritreans in flight may have contributed to the extremely-high levels and prevalence of trauma among victims of human trafficking in the Sinai.

During or in the immediate aftermath of trauma, victims show reactions such as being dazed, being unaware of serious injury, or experiencing the trauma as if it were in a dream or as though they were outside their own body (Spiegel, 2008). If the traumatic event is not resolved properly (e.g. due to lack of support or intervention), significant alteration of habits and outlooks, relationships and decision making could result. In addition, self-destructive behaviours such as addiction can also manifest (Levine, 2005). Traumatized people also tend to be hyper vigilant, with heightened emotional reactivity, leading them to overreact without assessing their response (Van der Kolk & Saporta, 1991). This has a wide range of implications for the sufferer, directly emanating from unresolved trauma, affecting personal, social and professional relationships and prospects. The fact that there has been little support for the victims of Sinai trafficking, in general, and a lack of therapeutic support, in particular, means that their trauma continues to be unresolved affecting all aspects of their life and making them vulnerable to additional trauma. The environment required for victims to resolve trauma (by integrating the memory of the experience and restoring the brain to its original function of completing the cycle from reaction to reasoning) is impossible to create in the insecure setting of a refugee camp as a stateless refugee. In the absence of the



opportunity to heal, victims continue to suffer traumatic stress and risk transmitting the traumatic memories inter-generationally.

## Overview of torture practices

This section gives an overview of the torture practices carried out in the Sinai as part of human trafficking for ransom. These practices have been collated from publications that describe the modus operandi of Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen *et al.* 2012, 2014) over the period 2008–2014.

Table 7.1 describes the different forms of trauma experienced during trafficking to the Sinai ‘torture houses’ (places where Sinai victims were held in captivity). Table 7.2 describes the forms of trauma experienced while in the torture houses, and Table 7.3 describes the forms of trauma experienced immediately after victims were released or escaped from the torture houses. All three tables are based on the traumas described in Van Reisen *et al.* (2012 & 2014). While Table 7.2 was already almost entirely provided in Van Reisen *et al.* (2014), Tables 7.1 and 7.3 were compiled by going through the texts to seek out the various forms of abuse and torture that victims experienced immediately before and after their time in the Sinai torture houses.

Table 7.1. Forms of trauma experienced during trafficking to the Sinai torture houses\*

Forms of trauma (on the way to the Sinai)	
•	Violent abduction
•	Threatening with weapons
•	Beating
•	Rape
•	Lack of access to food (and assumedly water)
Note: *This may involve various actors, including smugglers, Eritrean and Sudanese security personnel, human traffickers and guards in the refugee camps, Rashaida, and Bedouins.	

Table 7.2. Forms of trauma in the Sinai torture houses\*

<b>Forms of trauma (in the Sinai)</b>	
Beating (often part of a daily routine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beating with whips and sticks (three times a day, and sometimes four to five times a day)</li> <li>• Beating on iron ramps</li> <li>• Beating with heated iron bars</li> <li>• Beating of hands and legs with a hammer</li> <li>• Beating the soles of the feet while hanging</li> <li>• Breaking hands (by beating with a wooden axe handle against a wall)</li> <li>• Shattering bones</li> <li>• Breaking bones (legs) with sticks</li> <li>• Stepping on chests</li> <li>• Kicking pregnant women in the stomach</li> </ul>
Cutting (or threatening to cut) body parts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threatening to cut body parts (incrementally)</li> <li>• Cutting off fingers one by one</li> <li>• Cutting off limbs (person died)</li> <li>• Crushing and prying nails with pincers</li> </ul>
Hanging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hanging upside down for long periods of time with hands touching the ground (which may lead to paralysis or their hands being amputated)</li> <li>• Hanging with the corpses of dead hostages</li> <li>• Hanging right side up</li> <li>• Hanging upside down</li> <li>• Hanging by both feet with legs chained</li> <li>• Hanging by the hair</li> <li>• Hanging upside down with chains</li> </ul>
Electrocution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administering electric shocks and electrocution (which can lead to paralysis in parts of the body)</li> </ul>
Burning, setting on fire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using hot iron skewers to burn the feet</li> <li>• Setting on fire with kerosene</li> <li>• Rolling in blanket and setting on fire</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burning legs with fire and burning with cigarettes</li> <li>• Burning backside with fire</li> <li>• Placing burning wood on chest</li> </ul>
<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threatening to order other prisoners to rape hostage's daughter</li> <li>• Threatening that they will take hostage's kidneys and heart</li> <li>• Threatening that they will kill hostage</li> </ul>
<p>Pouring boiling water</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pouring boiling water on body of hostage's (causing burns to large areas)</li> </ul>
<p>Withholding food (for days)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withholding food for days</li> <li>• Giving only very small amounts of food (pregnant women and nursing mothers particularly affected)</li> </ul>
<p>Withholding (clean) water</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withholding drinking water</li> <li>• Withholding water for bathing and hygiene including lack of access to toilets and showers (leading to lice and unhygienic conditions)</li> <li>• Withholding of water for medical reasons, including to clean serious injuries and for women in labour</li> </ul>
<p>Smoking cannabis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forcing hostages to smoke cannabis and do silly things (such as to imitate the sounds of sheep or goats or to dance)</li> </ul>
<p>Sadist acts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inflicting acts of sadistic sexual violence and other sadistic violent acts, similar to those carried out for functional torture, but going beyond the 'function' of extorting ransom</li> </ul>
<p>Chains</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaining</li> <li>• Tying up by the hands and feet, blindfolded and chained</li> </ul>
<p>Isolation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding in isolation</li> </ul>
<p>Forced labour</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work related to the hostages specific skills (e.g. mechanic)</li> <li>• Digging graves and burying corpses</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation work or other activities that are functional in the context of the torture houses (in this way the hostages may gradually become part of the trafficking team)</li> </ul>
<p>Denial of access to medical treatment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial of access to medical treatment and facilities (the interviewees speak of serious injuries and those with injuries complained of maggots in their wounds; people are left to die of their injuries)</li> <li>• Denial of water and medical supplies to clean their wounds</li> </ul>
<p>Sexual violence and pregnancy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Toward men and young boys</li> <li>• Toward women and young girls</li> <li>• Rape and gang rape by traffickers, torturers and guards</li> <li>• Rape in front of father, husband, wives, daughter, sons, and other family members (there are several accounts of daughters, including very young girls, gang raped in front of parents or threats thereof)</li> <li>• Rape ordered between hostages while guards watch (including the rape of very young girls)</li> <li>• Other sadistic sexual acts</li> </ul>
<p>Forcing hostages to witness the harm done to others, especially family members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The torture of other hostages</li> <li>• The killing of other hostages</li> <li>• Leaving dead hostages' bodies in view</li> </ul>
<p>Note: *This list is largely copied from Van Reisen <i>et al.</i> (2014, pp. 74-75).</p>

Table 7.3. Forms of trauma experienced after being released from Sinai torture houses

Forms of trauma (after the Sinai)
<p>Leaving hostages to die (some miraculously survive)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Left to die in the desert</li> <li>• Buried alive</li> </ul>
<p>Refoulement of survivors at the Israeli border</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent push backs</li> <li>• Shot at by Egyptian military/border guards (shoot to kill policy)</li> <li>• Trapped at the border with no or little access to food or water, shelter and medical help</li> </ul>

### Imprisonment in Egypt

- Violence while being captured
- The criminalisation of survivors
- Detention (again robbed of their freedom)
- Lack of access to adequate food and water
- Lack of adequate medical treatment, despite their many severe injuries
- Absence of psychological support
- Deportation to Ethiopia/Eritrea where their vulnerability continues

The practices of torture listed here are used in combination. In the different torture houses different patterns of torture took place. A ‘geography’ of practices of torture houses could therefore be compiled, but is beyond the scope of this chapter. Some Sinai victims who were ‘on sold’ from one trafficking group to another (with new ransom collected) were held in consecutive places. From the interviews, it is known that different routines of torture were used in each place.

## **Impact of events scale and trauma in Sinai victims**

The core characteristic of PTSD is its oscillation between intrusion (nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts) and avoidance (deliberate efforts not to think or talk about the event, as well as deliberate efforts to avoid reminders). Avoidance can also be typified by the use of alcohol and drugs, as well as by becoming immersed in work as a strategy to divert attention and create a temporary reprieve from intrusion. It is this understanding that led Horowitz and colleagues (1979) to develop a simple, but powerful measure for assessing the magnitude of symptomatic responses to a specific traumatic life event – the Impact of Events Scale (Horowitz, Weilner & Alvarez, 1979; Weiss, 2007). Following the publication of the DSM IV, the scale was revised and became the Impact of Events Scale Revised (IES-R), which measures the full scale of PTSD symptoms within the diagnosis manual.

The main strengths of the scale are that it is short, quick and easy to administer and score, and may be used repeatedly to assess progress. This makes it ideal for use with a client group that is not used to psychometric testing, as well as by professionals who do not have extensive resources at their disposal.

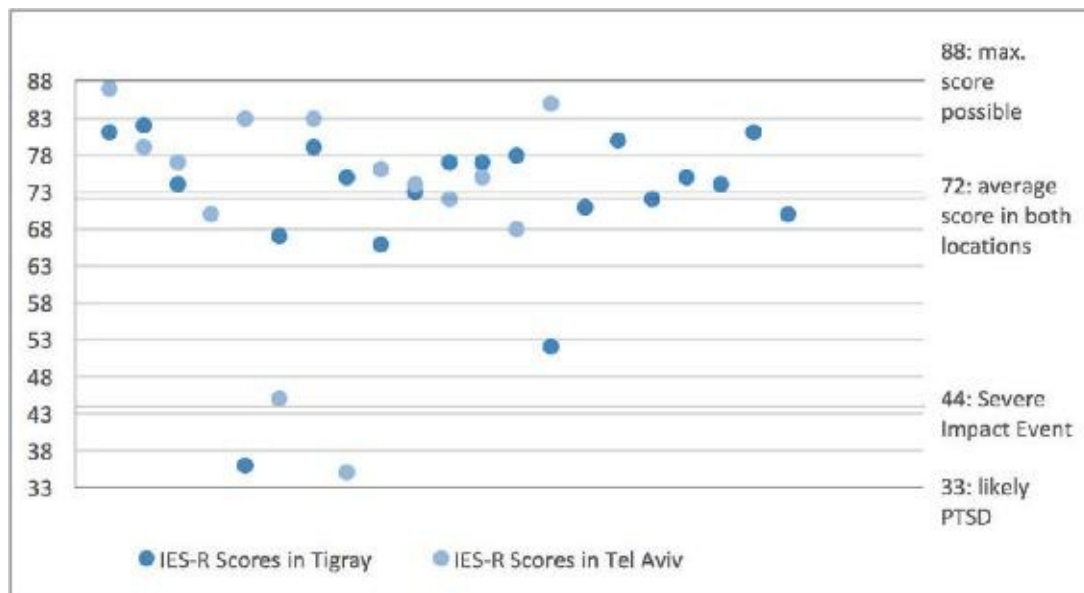
The maximum mean score on each of the three subscales is ‘4’, therefore the maximum total mean IES-R score is 12. Lower scores are better. A total IES-R score of 33 or over from a theoretical maximum of 88 signifies the likely presence of

PTSD. The following cut-off points have been suggested by various researchers (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4. IES-R cut-off points (scores and diagnostic indications)

Score	Diagnostic indications
24 or more	PTSD is a clinical concern. Those with scores this high who do not have full PTSD will have partial PTSD or at least some symptoms.
33 or more	This represents a good cut-off point for a probable diagnosis of PTSD (Creamer, Bell & Falilla, 2002).
37 or more	This is high enough to suppress your immune system's functioning (even 10 years after an impact event). On the original IES, a comparable score would be approximately 39 (Kawamura, Yoshiharu, & Nozomu, 2001)
44–75	Severe impact: capable of altering your ability to function

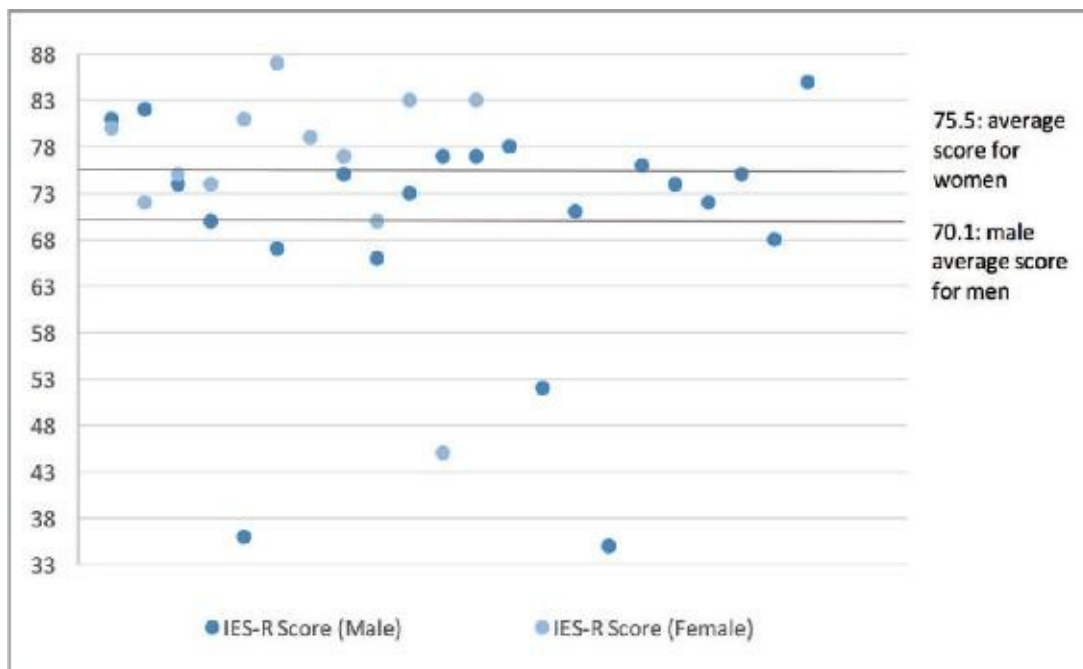
A survey of 35 Eritrean survivors of Sinai trafficking, who are now refugees in Tel Aviv (14) and Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray (21) was carried out to establish the impact of their experiences in the Sinai using the IES-R scale (see Graph 7.1). The survey was carried out between 2 and 6 years post the event using a Tigrinya translation of the scale.



Graph 7.1. IES-R scores of Eritrean survivors of Sinai trafficking in Tigray and Tel Aviv (n=35)

As can be seen in [Graph 7.1](#), all participants scored above the point considered as a 'good cut-off point' for probable PTSD. In fact, all but two (one in each group) scored well above the score considered to be high enough to impact on functioning even 10 years after an impact event. Many scores were at a severity level that is considered to have enough impact to alter functioning permanently.

When comparing the IES-R scores of male and female survivors of Sinai trafficking, it appears that women have a higher average score than men. Among the participants of this study, the average score for women is around 5 points higher than the average score for men. All women scored above the threshold for a Severe Impact Event (defined as capable of permanently altering one's ability to function). The higher average scores of women may be related to the extreme sexual violence that they must endure at the hands of traffickers.



*Graph 7.2. IES-R scores of female and male survivors of Sinai trafficking (n=35)*

## Physical examination

In addition to the interviews and the IES-R test, 28 victims of Sinai trafficking were also examined by a physician in Shemelba refugee camp, to establish their physical and emotional health. The following tables contain the results of the examinations, which established a wide range of mental and physical health

problems, which continue to pose significant challenges to all those who were examined.

Table 7.5 details the types of torture methods reported by victims interviewed in the refugee camps in Ethiopia (which may be slightly different to those listed in Table 7.2, which are drawn from the literature).

*Table 7.5. Forms of trauma reported by Sinai survivors in Ethiopian refugee camp*

<b>Form of torture</b>	<b>Happened often (n = 28)</b>	<b>Happened seldom (n = 28)</b>
Electrocution	22	1
Isolation	6	2
Food deprivation	28	0
Water deprivation	28	0
Beating	28	0
Burning	24	0
Banging head	28	0
Blindfolding	23*	1
Burnt with cigarette	22	2
Rape	13**	0
Burning of genitals	5	0
Penetration of vagina/anus with objects	4	0
Forced penetration of others	12	0
Hanging upside down	15	0
Hanging by the arms	21	1
Crushing	25	0
Forced use of drugs	8	1
Chaining	25	0
Beating on soles of feet	15	0



\*One person reported being blindfolded continuously for 7 months.

\*\*One person reported that her brother was forced to rape her.

All of the survivors reported having suffered food and water deprivation and having been beaten, including on their head. Many (23) said that they were often blindfolded during their stay in the Sinai; one person reported having been blindfolded for a period of seven month. Nearly all of the 28 people examined report having been electrocuted and burnt, including being burnt with cigarettes.

One of the most horrendous atrocities in the Sinai was the rape and sexual abuse of both men and women. During the medical examinations carried out by the physician, rape was mentioned by 13 out of 28 patients and was described as occurring 'often'. There were also 12 patients out of 28 who reported having been forced to penetrate others. Five patients mentioned 'burning of genitals' as occurring 'often'. Four patients mentioned that their vagina or anus had been penetrated with objects and that this also happened 'often'. These results are all the more remarkable given that only 2 out of the total of 28 patients were women. In total, 16 survivors out of 28 experienced sexual violence: 14 (out of 26) men and 2 (out of 2) women.

These findings confirm the hypotheses that sexual violence was systematic and widespread in Sinai trafficking, not only among the women, but also among the men. In earlier reports (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014), the sexual violence against women and girls was described as a general phenomenon, a fate that few, if any, women and girls escaped. This included gang rape, rape in front of parents and siblings, rape by the torturers, and forced rape by fellow hostages. Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) reported rape of girls as young as six years of age.

Other forms of horrendous torture reported by the survivors included being hung upside down or by the arms, suffered by 15 people and 21 people respectively. Nearly all survivors (25 out of 28) reported being chained often during their time in the torture camps.

Given the range of horrendous torture suffered by the group it is not surprising to find that many survivors continue to suffer from chronic pain related to their experiences in the Sinai. Back pain, pain in the extremities, pain in the head, pain in the teeth, gums, and jaw, and pain in the abdomen were widely reported. Permanent impairments such as partial sight and hearing losses were also reported by a few victims. [Table 7.6](#) details the full range of complaints disclosed to the physician.

Table 7.6. Chief complaints of Sinai survivors in Ethiopian refugee camp

Chief complaint(s)*	Number of patients (n = 28)
Back pain	11
Pain in extremities (1 also complained of weakness invarm)	8
Headaches & 'pain on the head'	6
Pain in teeth, jaws and/or gums	6
Chest pain & heartburn	4
Eye pain, itching or (one-sided) blindness	4
Abdominal pain	3
Dyspepsia	3
Anxiety	3
Pain on soles of feet	2
Sleeplessness	2
Dizziness	2
(Partial) hearing loss	2
Anal itching & worms in stool	2
Shoulder pain (and immobility)	2
Incontinence or urgent and frequent urination	2
Pain on nasal bridge	1
Pain over thigh	1
Nightmares	1
Rhinitis	1
Infertility	1
Vaginal bleeding & discharge	1
Discoloration of inner lip	1
Itching all over body	1
Haemorrhoids	1

\*While it is believed that the majority of these complaints are a consequence of torture, it cannot be determined with certainty which are and which are not a result of torture.

The physician also made some diagnoses (see [Tables 7.7](#) and [7.8](#)) and recommendations for further medical and psychiatric attention (see [Table 7.9](#)). Among these is the diagnosis of 26 cases of PTSD and 6 cases of psychosomatic pain resulting from PTSD ([Table 7.8](#)). These findings support the results of the IES-R scores, which uncovered extremely high levels of traumatic stress that could result in long-term impact lasting many years.

[Table 7.7](#) provides an overview of the medical diagnosis of Sinai survivors. Due to the complex nature of medicine, it is often difficult to declare with certainty the relationship between certain medical complaints and preceding exposure to torture. It should further be noted that some patients had several diagnosed medical conditions within different categories or the same category.

The medical diagnosis does not include physical scars. However, with regard to physical observations, the doctor mentioned (multiple) scars on the majority of patients (19 out of 28). Among other things, these include burn scars from hot irons and melted plastic, bullet wounds, and wounds from iron chains. Most patients had multiple and deep scars; one patient had around 30 scars on his body, while another had a scar of 20cm in length. Scars were found on various body parts, including the face, head and chest and may be related to their various medical complaints.

*Table 7.7. Medical diagnosis of Sinai survivors in Ethiopian refugee camp*

<b>Medical diagnosis</b>	<b>Number of patients (n = 28)</b>
<b>Injury</b>	<b>10</b>
Wound	2
Contusion, distortion, fracture	7
Bilateral ruptured ear drums	1
<b>Pain</b>	<b>18</b>
Somatic pain secondary to sustained trauma	6
Lingering pain due to sustained body trauma	1
Back pain	5
Other pain	1
<b>Urogenital problems</b>	<b>4</b>
Urinary tract infection	1
	1

Incontinence (possibly secondary to spinal cord injury)	
Secondary infertility (possibly due to torture)	1
Vaginal bleeding	1
<b>Dental problems</b>	<b>4</b>
Tooth cavities	1
Decayed tooth	1
Broken tooth/molars	1
Infected denture/gums	1
<b>Various other diseases</b>	<b>5</b>
Parasitic infection	2
One-sided blindness	1
Gastric ulcer	1
Anaemia	1
<b>Various other diseases (unlikely caused by torture)</b>	<b>7</b>
Aneurism of the left femoral artery	1
Haemorrhoids	1
Vitiligo	1
Allergic rhinitis	1
Allergic conjunctivitis	1
Short and thin leg secondary to polio during childhood	1
Benign bone tumour	1

*Table 7.8. Psychiatric diagnosis of Sinai survivors in Ethiopian refugee camp*

<b>Psychiatric diagnosis</b>	<b>Number of patients (n = 28)</b>
PTSD	26
Mild or moderate depression	2

The medical report of the physician makes various recommendations, including the psychiatric assessment and treatment of 27 out of the 28 people examined and some form of surgical treatment for 20 of the people examined (see [Table 7.9](#)). A few people were highlighted as needing neurological treatment and a range of other specialist assessments and treatments. None of these provisions are available in the camps, where the needs of these victims are not even recognised as a priority. The ongoing neglect of survivors' needs causes ongoing suffering and re-traumatisation. Many Sinai victims are far too severely traumatised to cope with everyday life, let alone the additional hardship and uncertainties of life in a refugee camp where even their most basic needs cannot be met.

*Table 7.9. Recommendation for further evaluation/treatment of Sinai survivors in Ethiopian refugee camp*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Number of patients (n = 28)</b>
Psychiatrist	27
Surgeon (including orthopaedic specialist)	20
Dentist	4
Ophthalmologist	2
Neurologist (1 needed x-ray)	2
Obstetrician and gynaecologist	1
Orthopaedist	1
Dermatologist	1
ENT specialist	1

## **Interviews**

Below are excerpts from the interviews showing the severity of the trauma experienced by survivors of human trafficking in the Sinai and the deep scars that it has left.

### ***Sexual violence: Men and women***

Of the eight female Sinai survivors interviewed in the camps, all reported having been raped. The conversations were very emotional and the respondents would break down to the point where it was not possible to continue. The stories were

narrated voluntarily: the interviews were entirely open and no questions were asked other than a request to tell us what they wanted us to know.

The life of female hostages revolved around trying to avoid rape and making beatings, food deprivation and other means of torture seem like a 'better' option to the torturers. One of the male Sinai victims explained:

*In all of the torture houses there was electrocution. They make you phone your parents. The minute you say hello, they electrocute you. We were with three girls and seven men. Three men died (they had not paid); some had paid USD 27,000 and now they had to make sure they would pay for the men that had died as well. They stripped everybody naked. We had to avert eye contact. Rape was normal. It was quite normal. That was not even the worst. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

This male Sinai survivor also saw the following:

*After the women were raped the torturers burnt their genitals and poured boiling water on them. That was at the house of Abu Shaher. We stayed there for eight months without washing and we had lice and insects all over us. The smell is very difficult to bear. We just wanted to die. But even death would not come. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The same story is told by another young Sinai survivor, in his early twenties, a former health worker:

*I have not spoken to anyone. I saw the women getting molten plastic burnt on their breasts and on their genitals. I saw rape. There was a married couple. They raped the wife in front of the husband every day. Asking for the money. (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Rape also includes forced penetration by other hostages:

*They forced the inmates to have sexual intercourse with the wife in front of the husband. It is very shameful. Especially for the women who are seen as a 'used' commodity. The husband and wife are no longer together. This was in Teame group. (Interview, Kidane with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

*I was in the torture house of Abu Omar. We were all tortured. Women were raped in front of us. They burnt their genitals. (Interview, Kidane with A, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The torturers often took drugs and this evoked sexual violence:

*They come in high on hashish [any drug] and you know you are going to be raped. There is nothing you can do about it. And yes, they do make you call your family even then. You wish they'd beat you*

*or starved you instead, anything is better than being raped by many men.* (Interview, Kidane with X, face-to-face, September 2015)

The women related the heinous practice of forcing hostages to have sexual intercourse with each other. It appears that this was done as a form of amusement for the traffickers. Y describes it as follows:

*Yes of course I was sexually abused. I was raped many times by many men. In fact it was worse than that; they made, I mean, they forced my own brother to have intercourse with me... he is the only relative I have here, we live together, but that is something we have gone through... our family paid USD 50,000 all together for the two of us and now we are here.* (Interview, Kidane with Y, face-to-face, September 2015)

In the interviews, some women spoke about hot liquid plastic being dripped on their genitals.

It is clear from the interviews that sexual violence involving men and boys is a big taboo and can hardly be discussed. In Hitsats, male Sinai survivors aged between 22 and 35 were interviewed (in 2015). It was clear from the conversations that these young men were concerned about their sexual health and reproductive capacity. From other conversations with Sinai survivors in Europe, we have understood that young men who had had their genitals burnt were no longer able to have an erection (Interview with U; anon., details with authors). This concern was expressed in an interview with a young male Sinai survivor who had been trained as a health worker; this man asked to see a medical doctor for an examination (Interview, Kidane with E, September 2015).

The Sinai survivors told us that talking about the Sinai and being identified as ‘Sinai victims’ was not something they welcomed. Being labelled as a Sinai survivor had many unfavourable consequences. Sinai women survivors were ostracised and their chance of finding a spouse greatly diminished. Talking about the issues also made them relive the events, which made them feel even more desperate. They said that they were talking to us because they wanted us to ‘understand their situation’ and the fact that they felt totally abandoned.

### ***Serious injuries***

Sinai survivors can be recognised by the severe scars on their backs and elsewhere (including their faces), which are caused by molten liquid plastic, cigarette burns and beatings. One of those interviewed (D) was held in several torture houses (he mentions the houses of Abu Omar, Khaled and Idris) before being sold to Yusuf where he was held with 10 people:

*His [Yusuf's] specialty is hanging. From the arms or the feet and they bang you against the wall. They banged my head against the wall. I still suffer from serious headaches. I was there for two months. I did not pay as I had no money. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Yusuf then sold him to Shaher:

*We were still ten people – the same ten people as with Yusuf – very poor people who could not pay. This is where they burnt the soles of my feet. They were swollen and burst. All eight months I never washed. In Shaher's camp you are blindfolded and he burns the soles of your feet. And we were chained. You go with everyone to the toilet. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

After Shaher's place, D was what he calls 'stolen': "The guy torturing us sold us to Abu Abdallah; he is a teenager who inherited his father's trafficking business. He hung us" (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015).

### ***Severe trauma***

Many of the Sinai survivors had physical and mental injuries, including broken and poorly-healed bones, deep scars, and broken teeth, among other things. In addition to these, many had sleeping and eating difficulties that troubled them. Many worried about their future health. A recurring theme was concern over their ability to have a relationship and children. It was as if they no longer understood or trusted their own bodies, particularly what might be in store for them as a consequence of the long-term impact of their traumatic experiences. One Sinai survivor, who believed he was treated more brutally than other hostages because he was punished for leaving Eritrea after refusing to follow orders from the hierarchy, explains one of the ways in which he was tortured:

*They broke my fingers and the palm of my hand. They hit me until I fainted. They used to ride a motorbike over my body from top to toe and vice versa. I could not feel my body, it was numb. (Interview Mirjam Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Fortunately, S2 received treatment. Others, like Z2, were left for dead in the Sinai:

*I was beaten. I knew no-one could pay. I thought I would die and that this would make it quicker. I knew I was going to die. I thought I would run and they would shoot me and then I would be dead. They caught me and they burnt me alive. They thought I was dead. My parents were told that I had*



*died. They left me for dead in the desert.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Z2, face-to-face, September 2015)

She was found and made it out of the Sinai to Ethiopia with the help of others, but still suffers severe difficulties as a result of her injuries.

Also of concern are the constant flashbacks and nightmares that torment Sinai survivors. Reminders of their traumatic experiences are literally everywhere. For P2 it is the sound of motorbikes. A few kilometres from Hitsats camp is the rural township of Hitsats, which has bustling shops, restaurants, cafes and bars. Many refugees spend part of their days there and there is a group of motorbike owners who taxi people back and forth from the camp to the town for a modest fee. For everyone else in the camp the engine noise reminds them of good times spent away from the dusty camp socialising, shopping or catching up with local and international news. For P2 the opposite is true:

*In the Sinai our captors used motorbikes a lot – to bring us the little food we got or when they came to torment us. The sound of an approaching motorbike was the sound of impending horror. The guys come in shouting at the top of their voices and kicking anything in front of them, sending anything – the chains we were tied in, any pots and plates from previous days, anything at all – clanging across the room. Then the first person to be kicked or slapped starts screaming and we are all tense. Even when they came to bring us food the routine was the same, so much so that I sometimes wished for no food so they didn't have an excuse to come. But they came, every day and always their arrival was preceded by the motorbike engine noise that told us what was coming and sent us all into a state of panic and anguish. And now every time I hear those retched motorbikes I go through all that. Particularly in the early mornings when I am in bed having finally fallen asleep and I wake up to that noise, disoriented and feeling that I have somehow ended up back in the Sinai.* (Interview, Kidane with P2, face-to-face, July 2015)

The other recurring theme was difficulty sleeping. Nearly every survivor interviewed said the night time, when everyone else in their room or tent was asleep, was the worst time for them. D talked about it this way:

*There is no sleep, I hardly sleep: when you lie in bed you first start thinking about everything that has happened to you. Your journey, the pain, the hardship, everything comes to you. Sometimes it is individual incidences, but often it is a mixture of things. Then you start thinking about your family and friends who rescued you, how much debt they incurred, what hardship they are going through, how stressed they must be right now. It is so exhausting you begin to fall asleep exhausted and then the dreams and nightmares begin and you wake up as a result. These are my nights. It is the time when I start to look at pictures on my phone [...].* (Interview, Kidane with D, face-to-face, September 2015)

Difficulties associated with food and eating are also common, and such difficulties are visible in the physique of the survivors. Many appear severely underweight and pale. Indeed, during our times together some did not even want to take the snacks and soft drinks on offer. D is one of those and perhaps one of the most visibly underweight. He struggles with the sight and smell of food. He explained this saying:

*...I was chained in the middle between two of my best friends. We travelled together and were mostly tortured together until they both died, but they never took their bodies away for many days. Maybe they weren't quite dead for some of the time, but their bodies were rotting and full of maggots. And when they were throwing our food at us (their way of food distribution), I had to pick some of it off their rotting body because I was so hungry. The sensation and smell will never leave me. If I eat or drink I find it very difficult to digest food and only get relieved if I vomit. The smell of food and the smell of rotting bodies go together for me. I can't eat. At night I worry that one day I will end it all and kill myself, but that is against my religion, it's the worst thing you can do in our faith. I once begged my friends to get rid of the rat poison we had as I was too scared I would take it in a desperate state. (Interview, Kidane with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

A similar sense of despair comes across in the story of X2 and P2, who were together throughout their ordeal from Kassala to the Sinai and now in the refugee camp:

*My feet are burnt and beaten up. There were maggots coming out of my feet and legs. What is there left about my life? I buried my brother in the sand. Everybody wants us to talk, but it comes at a great cost. Everyone with power and money has left and we are here with just nothing. We are asked to campaign against trafficking, but no-one does anything for us. (Interview, Van Reisen with X2 & P2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The severe trauma experienced by Sinai survivors can lead to a sense of deep desperation:

*There is no-one to support me. I can't do any work. I can't smell food. I was with dead bodies for five days. (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Several Sinai survivors explained in the interviews that they have severe problems sleeping (Interview, Van Reisen with FE, B, D, F, and M, face-to-face, September 2015) as a result of flashbacks, their injuries and nightmares. Another factor that aggravates their stress is the amount of debt incurred by their family in the payment of the ransom to free them:

*You think of the debts your parents have carried and you cannot sleep. After laying awake you get tired, but then you are kept awake because of the injuries, which still hurt. Even if after all that you fall asleep, then you wake up with nightmares and flashbacks. (Interview, Van Reisen with Z2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

Another Sinai survivor told:

*I have dreams – nightmares – sleep is very difficult. The heat does not help. Being alone is very difficult. You start to think and everything comes back. (Interview, Van Reisen with E, face-to-face, September 2015)*

There is also a clear understanding among survivors that what they need is support: “I need to get treatment. I don’t know what is wrong with me. I don’t trust myself. I have been away for six years. I don’t know what to do with my despair” (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015).

In a later follow up interview, D again expressed his frustration with the lack of support: “Time is running out for us. We are approaching our thirties. We need to get on with things” (Interview, Van Reisen with D, face-to-face, September 2015).

These concerns are aggravated by worries about family and future: “You worry about family. I wait for a better life. I could have made something of myself. I have to be patient” (Interview, Kidane with E, face-to-face, September 2015).

For Sinai survivors, support systems are often not available:

*There is the physical pain, my knee and head injuries. I have asked for assistance, but they only give pain killers. When it is warm, my head really hurts. You only get to see the medical assistants when you go to the ARRA clinic and they can refer you to MSF [Medecins Sans Frontieres]. You need to be referred. (Interview, Van Reisen with A, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The impact of the trafficking and the large debts incurred increase the pressure on the Sinai survivors. Some of them have not spoken to their families due to the embarrassment and desperation they feel. They feel powerless, as described by one survivor:

*The ransom I was asked to pay was USD 30,000 and my mother became a beggar on the street. Two of my sisters have died because of the pressure. I have not seen my mother since. My first priority is to get out of here (the refugee camp). My first objective is to help my mother. I want to compensate her. My two children (11 and 15-years old) remained behind in Asmara and are with my mother. I lost touch with my husband. (Interview, Van Reisen with S, face-to-face, September 2015)*

In one instance we were told that the desperation resulted in suicide; from conversations it would seem that there may be more incidences of suicide among Sinai survivors. In Ethiopia, the following story was told by other members of the community in the camp:

*One refugee came through the Sinai and she had a child there which she took through the Israeli borders. There she was shot and the child (K) was shot from the back. The child was severely wounded and stayed one year in hospital in Israel. Later in (X) it seemed that she was doing fine but then she committed suicide. The boy, sevenyears old, is now living with some relatives. The father is still in Israel. The child saw the mother hang herself. (Interview, Van Reisen with E2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The trauma suffered by these very young children is another reason for concern. Another similar incident of a child tortured at very young age is described in Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014.

### ***Abandonment***

The sense of being abandoned was not confined to the refugees in Shemelba. In fact, at least in Shemelba there is a sense of community, as there is a large number of Sinai survivors, as well as the knowledge that there are others who are worse off (the severely mentally ill).

One of the refugee camp is home to women who were badly tortured. One of them was dumped by the traffickers as they thought she was dead. Her parents were duly informed of her death, but then she recovered (after some weeks). Today she lives in the camp with all her physical and emotional scars. She is angry and disappointed that no one cares. Everyone has heard her story, but she feels no one cares enough to do something to help her settle or heal. She told us:

*Look at me, look at my scars, look at the soles of my feet! I have told my story so many times that I feel like everyone knows my story, but with the exception of a charitable Ethiopian man who took me to Mekele for some treatment, no one has done anything to help me. I am one of the ones who suffered the most, but no one cares, no one wants to help me. My suffering continues, there is no end [...]. (Interview, Kidane with Z2, face-to-face, September 2015)*

The scars and other visible marks borne by Sinai survivors have a huge impact on their confidence and sense of self-worth. This was particularly the case with a group of very young and extremely isolated survivors. One of the young men had a younger nephew with him in the Sinai who had died while being tortured. He had to bury his nephew there and is still traumatised by the loss. He feels responsible for

his nephew's death. The four young Sinai survivors we met live together at the edge of the camp away from everyone else. C2 told us: "The hyenas are our neighbours, no one else lives near where we do. We are awake most of the night and so we step outside and can hear them nearby" (Interview, Kidane with C2, face-to-face, September 2015).

They showed us all the scars, the disabilities and deformities they have; a badly mutilated right ear, a severely broken and deformed left wrist. Many deep scars on their feet, broken teeth, a missing finger – it was a long list of disfigurement. Aside from the physical pain and discomfort these injuries cause, they have also caused them to lose confidence and to isolate themselves from others. As they were showing us their scars, C2 added:

*We are very bad at looking after ourselves and we finish our rations so quickly because we can't cook properly, so sometimes it is days before we eat proper food. We could go to the restaurants in camp at least some of the time, but we don't think about that. We are only comfortable in each other's company.* (Interview, Kidane with C2, face-to-face, September 2015)

Another young man had severe hand injuries from being hanged and hearing loss caused by inner ear damage. He had undergone two hand operations in Addis Ababa, arranged by ARRA, which shows that in some instances ARRA does give meaningful support.

The Sinai survivors all complained about what is defined as 'vulnerable' by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), because somehow they are not included in that definition, despite the fact that they are in need of support and resettlement. Being exhausted from the trauma and the frustration, some of them give up. W2, who was almost dead when he arrived in Hitsats, according to his fellow Sinai survivors, narrates: "I have not asked for resettlement. I went but they did not have any compassion. I feel the psychological impact on my parents. I have destroyed them. I haven't spoken to anyone" (Interview, Van Reisen with W2, face-to-face, September 2015).

The feeling of abandonment is aggravated by the perception that the intake process in the camp does not recognise the experiences and trauma of Sinai survivors and that they are not recognised as a vulnerable group who are in need of special care, treatment and resettlement. One of the Sinai survivors found out that his file with UNHCR had gone missing, even after he had related his experience to the UNHCR officer. There is no proper intake for them as torture survivors and their invisible wounds are overlooked. The special status of Sinai survivors needs to be recognised and listed to ensure that they are eligible for resettlement.

## Conclusion

This chapter examines the trauma resulting from the torture associated with human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai in the period 2008–2015. The research was carried out with Sinai survivors residing in the Ethiopian refugee camps near the Eritrean border in 2015 and 2016. An inventory list was prepared of torture practices recorded in publications on Sinai trafficking and completed with new evidence collected for this chapter. During field visits to the refugee camps in Ethiopia in 2015, an IES-R test was administered to 35 Sinai survivors living in the camps. The test was carried out by Selam Kidane, a trained psycho-therapist, in Tigrinya. In four consecutive field visits in 2015 and 2016, interviews were carried out with the Sinai survivors and contact was maintained throughout the two years with contact persons. The interviews were analysed to further substantiate the areas of trauma examined for this chapter.

Finally, a medical doctor carried out medical examinations of Sinai survivors in Shemelba camp (ARRA office) in 2016. This was important to further establish the extent of the trauma experienced by survivors, both physical and mental. A format was created for the consultations, based on knowledge of the torture practices that had been inventorised previously. The consultations followed this systematic format. The doctor recorded his consultations with 28 Sinai survivors. Given the private nature of the consultations with the medical doctor, who was Tigrinya speaking, more testimonies of severe sexual violence came to light, including pertaining to male torture victims, and additional torture practices were inventorised. The victims were given some advice and prescriptions to help alleviate the worst of the symptoms.

Overall, the conclusion is that the extent of the torture in the Sinai has been underestimated. The extent of the impact of the torture on the survivors has not yet been given systematic attention. Given the number of Sinai survivors (estimated as 15,000–25,000 in 2013), a systematic approach is needed to trace these survivors, examine the level of their trauma and develop the necessary tools to help alleviate the impact of the torture.

The sense of abandonment among Sinai survivors is extensive. There is a sense that no justice has been done and that this is now largely a forgotten issue. For those who are Sinai survivors, this remains very much a present issue that dominates their lives and they are living daily with the consequences. This chapter is a first attempt to inventorise the torture practices that took place in Sinai and document the impact that they have had. It is hoped that this will serve to develop and improve

treatment for the Sinai survivors, who are now residing in many places in the world. It is also hoped that this help ensures that Sinai survivors are not forgotten and that justice is sought.

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<sup>40</sup> Extensive interviews were carried out by Meron Estefanos, a human rights activist, journalist and radio moderator, who has been interviewing trafficking victims for many years.

<sup>41</sup> A list of names and contact details is with the researchers.

## Chapter 8

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# Collective Trauma from Sinai Trafficking: A Blow to the Fabric of Eritrean Society

*Selam Kidane & Mirjam Van Reisen*

*I know my son is no longer there [in the Sinai torture camps], but the memory of those phone calls will never leave me.*

(Interview, Selam Kidane with the mother of EL, face-to-face, 5 April 2016)

*You see many families begging for money on the streets with pictures of their children and you wonder how long it will take to collect the ransom [...] but what else can a mother do? People try to help, but it is getting too much for everyone. There are collections everywhere: at churches, at work, at village gatherings, on the streets, everywhere. I pray for an end to all this, but what is a good end?*

(Interview, Selam Kidane with the mother of EL, face-to-face, 5 April 2016)

## Introduction

The impact of human trafficking in the Sinai on individual victims is catastrophic and particularly worrying given the limited opportunities for therapeutic intervention to allow victims to heal from their experiences (see [Chapter 7](#) of this book). This chapter identifies the collective expression of the trauma that results from human trafficking for ransom. It is argued that such events do not just affect individuals and their respective families, but whole communities, Eritrean society (including Eritreans in the diaspora), and even Eritrean culture.

The basis of this chapter is formed by interviews conducted by the authors in Kampala (Uganda), Asmara (Eritrea), Tigray (Ethiopia) and Tel Aviv (Israel). The main results of this research conducted with Sinai trafficking victims in Ethiopia and Israel were presented in [Chapter 7](#). This chapter presents the results of this research in Uganda and Eritrea to assess the impact of human trafficking in the Sinai on Eritreans who were not direct victims of Sinai trafficking, but who were

affected as family members, friends or general witnesses through social and traditional media. In this research, among other things, IES-R tests were administered in order to compare the levels of primary and secondary trauma. In addition, the authors conducted a literature review on Sinai trafficking for ransom, secondary and collective trauma, in order to provide the theoretical foundation of this chapter. The chapter also draws on an ICT study conducted by Selam Kidane in 2016 to determine the potential use of mobile phones and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support communication among youth refugees.

Trauma can be perceived as ‘collective’ or ‘cultural’ when people who have a sense of belonging to one another feel that they have been subjected to fearful and painful events that have left a mark on their collective consciousness and memory. Cultural trauma is a social construct with an impact not only on the past and present identity of subjects, but also on their future identity (Pastor, 2004).

Studies around the world on trauma from major disasters indicate that interventions and support at the individual level are not sufficient to address the impact of such trauma. Understanding and addressing the problem at the community level is key to supporting traumatised individuals in the event of wide-scale trauma. In addition, after disasters resulting in traumatic stress, the functioning of families and the wider community has to be restored for social, economic, and political rehabilitation (WHO, 2003).

Collective trauma is a devastating blow to the basic fabric of life; it damages the bond between people and impairs their sense of community (Erikson, 1994). Erikson (1976) distinguishes between individual and collective trauma as follows:

*By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal forces that one cannot react to it effectively. Collective trauma on the other hand is a blow to the basic tissue of societal life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. (Erikson, 1976, pp 153–154)*

Collective trauma works insidiously as a form of shock, with the gradual realisation that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has also disappeared. While people suffering from individual trauma usually have difficulty recovering if the community remains shattered (Erikson, 1976), collective trauma may occur even in the absence of individual symptoms (Scheinberg & Fraenkel, 2001).

This chapter looks at the devastating impact of human trafficking in the Sinai on Eritrean families, communities and the society as a whole. It examines the deliberate

traumatisation of victims' families and friends for the purpose of extorting ransom and the secondary trauma inflicted on family, friends and communities. It also looks at the pain caused by multiple losses, being ignored by the Eritrean government and the international community, and the feeling of injustice that ensues – all of which are impacting negatively on the narratives of Eritreans and their sense of identity. Finally, it looks at the impacts of collective trauma, an understanding of which is vital for the collective reflection and narration required for Eritreans to arrive at collective healing.

## **Deliberate traumatisation of friends and family networks**

Torture in the context of human trafficking in the Sinai was orchestrated almost exclusively for the purpose of extortion, with the whole process being transmitted to family and friends via mobile phones to convey the excruciating pain, helplessness and humiliation of their loved ones for money (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). Technology enabled the traffickers to traumatise the victim's entire network of family and friends, transcending space and even time, as some of the calls from the torture camps were played on social media and through satellite radio broadcasts from the diaspora, impacting on almost every Eritrean. This created a situation of mass trauma and enabled the extortion of unimaginable sums of ransom money (Van Reisen, *et al.*, 2017).

Mass trauma is defined as an event involving multiple persons, who simultaneously experience, witness or are confronted with actual death or threat thereof (Landau, Mittal & Wieling, 2008). The deliberate act of torturing thousands of Eritreans, many coming from the same region and even the same village (as groups of people who know and trust each other often flee together) has led to a classic situation of collective trauma, with enough impact to become a keystone in the group's narrative, set of beliefs and identity, both for the current generation and across generations. Many Eritrean families and communities, and the nation itself, have been blighted by the trauma ensuing from human trafficking in the Sinai.

## **Secondary trauma**

In addition to being primary or direct victims of trauma, many Eritreans are also secondary victims of human trafficking in the Sinai and, hence, may be suffering

from secondary traumatic stress. Primary victims included those trafficked and their family and friends who witnessed their torture by phone. Secondary trauma is trauma that occurs indirectly and is defined as: 'Learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM IV), classifications of what constitutes a traumatic event also suggests that knowledge of a traumatic event can be traumatising (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Over the years, researchers have started to elaborate on this and have identified that individuals can be traumatised without actually being physically harmed or threatened – by learning about the traumatic event (Figley, 1995; Steed & Bicknell, 2001). Some even argue that those indirectly exposed to trauma retain the same set of symptoms as direct victims (Figley, 1995). Secondary traumatic stress is defined as natural, consequent behaviour and emotions that results from knowledge about a traumatising event, including symptoms produced in response to exposure to details of traumatic events experienced by a significant other (Hensel, Ruiz, & Finney *et al.*, 2015).

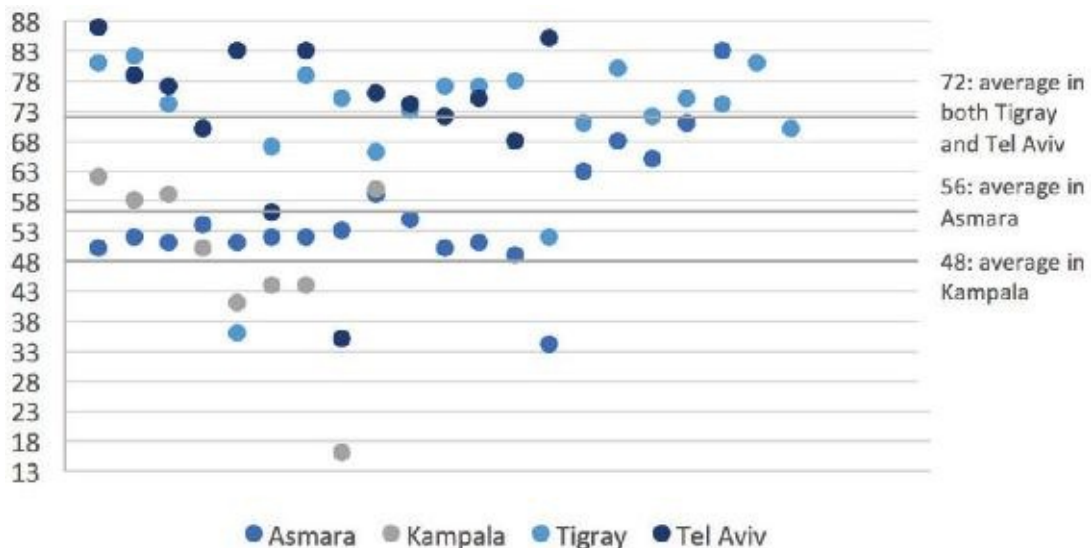
Desperate to raise the impossibly-high ransom demanded by the traffickers, friends and families of victims, and equally desperate activists trying to raise awareness using community radio and social media, have widened the number of those who were traumatised by the torture of the primary victims. The narrative of Eritreans as people who beat many odds to establish their nation through a bitter independence struggle has suffered great damage as a result of the collective trauma resulting from Sinai trafficking. An entire generation of Eritreans born and raised after Eritrea's independence has come to only ever see and hear of themselves as victims of atrocities and as unwanted refugees (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2016).

In the summer of 2015, a short survey was carried out, by the authors of this chapter, in Kampala (Uganda) and Asmara (Eritrea) asking people about the impact of human trafficking in the Sinai. Some of those interviewed had close friends and family members who had spent time in the Sinai as victims of human trafficking. The rest had followed events closely through social and traditional media.

Also taking part in survey were 35 Eritrean victims of Sinai trafficking, who are now refugees in Tel Aviv (14) and in refugee camps in Tigray Ethiopia (21) (see [Chapter 7](#)). The survey was carried out using a Tigrinya translation of the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) (Horowitz, Wilner & Alverez, 1979), designed to assess the magnitude of symptomatic responses to a specific traumatic life event (Weiss, 2007). On the scale, a total IES-R score of 33 or over (from a theoretical

maximum of 88) signifies the likely presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Of the 30 participants (in the Kampala and Asmara groups), only 1 participant in Kampala scored below the ‘cut-off’ point for PTSD (see [Graph 8.1](#)). Although these figures are lower than the scores obtained using the same scale from Sinai victims in Tel Aviv and refugee camps in Ethiopia (see [Graph 8.1](#)), they constitute levels of trauma consistent with PTSD, with some indicating severe impact with long-term impairment of functioning (Reed, 2007). These scores signify the fact that the traumatic impact of Sinai human trafficking is far wider spread than the primary victims who underwent the physical and psychological torment at the hands of traffickers and via the phone.



*Graph 8.1. IES-R scores in Asmara, Kampala, Tigray and Tel Aviv*

In the Asmara group, the person who scored the highest was the mother of a victim who took part in the survey from his home in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. EL was one of the many victims whose fellow victims thought he would not survive the ordeal. He was brutally beaten and severely malnourished when he arrived at the refugee camp in Ethiopia. His ordeal, which lasted many months, only ended when his family sold their home and begged and borrowed the remaining amount to rescue him. Unfortunately, EL was not able to make it to Israel or Europe as planned and now lives in Ethiopia with little prospect of resettlement elsewhere or of moving outside the camp. The researchers had an opportunity to do an extended interview with EL’s mother and below is an excerpt from that interview:

*My son left Eritrea fleeing national service. He was a bright boy and is the eldest of the six children we have. We are not a rich family, although we were relatively better off than most families in Eritrea. His intention was to get a good education and have a better life than he could have in Eritrea. To be honest, we were not party to his plan, but it was becoming normal for boys his age to leave the country. He called us from Sudan and then sometime later he called from the Sinai. At first we didn't understand, then we couldn't believe what was going on. He is our eldest, we had no other children who could help us out; we had no one we could ask.*

*I really find it difficult to describe what it is like to get those phone calls, everyone in the house including his small brothers and sisters used to get extremely anxious every time the phone rang. They still do, we all get startled and very agitated if the phone rings, even now. I was beside myself with worry, as was his father. I know my son is no longer there [in the Sinai torture camps], but the memory of those phone calls will never leave me.*

*We sold our house and borrowed more money and I sold my jewellery and most of the furniture from our house too. Now we live in two small rented rooms. His sister has also left the country and is in Sudan. She works there and sends us some money sometimes. I am always grateful that my son is alive and that keeps me going.*

*I never talk about it, not even with my husband or other family members, but I can't sleep at night. I stay awake until it is reasonable enough to get up and leave the house. I go to church and sit outside silently. There are others like me whose children are lost. Some don't even know what happened to them. We all know this about each other, but we never actually talk about any of it. This is partly because we find it very difficult to talk about, at least I find it difficult to talk about. It is also because I worry about such information getting into the wrong hands. My husband still works and I have the younger children to worry about.*

*We are not the only family that this has happened to. You see many families begging for money on the streets with pictures of their children and you wonder how long it will take to collect the ransom by collecting 10 and 20 nakfas [ERN] from passersby, but what else can a mother do? People try to help, but it is getting too much for everyone. There are collections everywhere: at churches, at work, at village gatherings, on the streets, everywhere. I pray for an end to all this but what is a good end? One son in a camp in Ethiopia and a daughter in Sudan and the young ones missing their siblings desperately and always worrying about what will happen to us all next. The life we wanted for our children is lost, this wasn't what we wanted and worked for [...]. (Interview, Kidane, face-to-face, 5 April 2016)*

The above example and the experiences of many other victims demonstrate the impact of trauma on the wider community and at the societal level. These impacts often lead victims to question their fundamental assumptions about themselves and their world. The world becomes an insecure place (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) and their trust in people around them can suffer greatly leading to alienation from former friends and neighbours.

From the above it can be concluded that Sinai trafficking, against the background of all the other violations occurring in Eritrea, has become a cause not just of trauma and PTSD at the individual level, but of collective trauma – an experience that could become a keystone in the narrative of Eritreans, affecting their set of beliefs and identity, for both current and future generations. Unlike individual trauma, which can be experienced by a small percentage of people with most recovering within a given period of time, collective trauma does not refer to symptoms of traumatic stress, but is an outcome that includes the response to the traumatic event, as well as the way it is constructed into the beliefs, decisions, behaviours and, ultimately, the narratives of the collective (Shami, 2015). Collective trauma has multiple implications for communities and society. This explains why some situations are constructed as collective trauma and others are not (Pastor, 2015). It is important to do a detailed assessment of the circumstances surrounding Sinai trafficking to fully understand the impact and potential consequences for Eritreans now and in the future.

## **Pain of multiple losses**

The nature of the pain caused by human trafficking in the Sinai is a central element to our assessment of the collective trauma caused. This relates to the type of loss resulting from the traumatic event. Many Eritreans have lost family members and loved ones, as well as unimaginable financial resources, to human trafficking in the Sinai. This loss is felt by whole communities due to the number of young people involved, as well as the need to mobilise resources right across the community to rescue victims.

According to the Conservation Resource Theory, the quality and quantity of resources lost in a traumatic event determine the ability to cope (or not) (Hobfoll, 2001). People strive to obtain, retain and protect that which they value and, hence, stress occurs when they lose their resources or when they are threatened with resource loss, particularly when they know they are unable to develop or enhance such resources again. Many victims said that they had to sell livestock, real estate, and jewellery and then borrow (including from loan sharks) to amass the ransom amount demanded. These ventures often involved mobilising whole communities to raise resources for ransom payments. This loss adversely impacts on wellbeing, creating a loss cycle, which often follows such a massive blow. Those with fewer resources to start off with are more deeply impacted, falling into a rapid and turbulent spiral of loss triggered by the massive loss of resources, resulting in



anxiety, reduced social involvement, diminished interest in life, and feelings of isolation and social exclusion. Without reversing the vicious loss cycle – by interrupting it and introducing a resource gain cycle – it becomes impossible for communities to recover (Saul, 2014).

In addition to resources, many lives have been tragically lost in the Sinai (some families paid the ransom in full, but never got their children back). Van Reisen *et al.* (2013) estimate that 25,000–30,000 people passed through the Sinai as victims of human trafficking between 2009 and 2013, and that 20–33% of these people died as a result of the trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). Those who died simply vanished into the desert, with no closure for their loved ones. The families left behind often do not even have confirmation of their death. Eritrean social media outlets are replete with posters of missing people and appeals for information. This type of loss is known as ‘ambiguous loss’, referring to the physical absence, yet psychological presence, of a person. In the aftermath of a disaster, communities are exposed to searches for missing people. These can last many months or even years. Such uncertainty is common in many communities facing collective trauma. The certainty of death (or loss) creates a space for mourning and closure, but in cases of ambiguous loss the mourning process becomes complex and can lead to symptoms of PTSD such as anxiety, guilt, intrusive memories, and difficulties in making decisions, particularly life choices (Boss, 1999). When a significant proportion of a community is affected by loss (including ambiguous loss) as a result of a disaster, the loss becomes a collective loss and evokes collective pain, collective anxiety, depression and guilt, which have implications for how the nation (the collective) copes with problems (Possick, Sadeh & Shamai, 2008).

But loss in the Sinai was not limited to life, dignity or property. It also included loss of belief and identity (both individual and collective identity). Eritreans felt deeply let down not just by their government, which at best did not do anything to prevent the loss and at worst was suspected of benefiting from the situation, but also by the international community, which did next to nothing about the heinous crimes being committed so openly. This is contrasted with the huge international media coverage of, and intervention in, other hostage incidences. The experiences of Serbs following the war in the former Yugoslavia, of Jewish children following the Holocaust, and of African Americans traumatised by the slave trade are clear illustrations of the impacts of losing identity and the implications of such loss as collective trauma (Shamai, 2016). This affirms that the concern is not just for present day Eritreans, but for the future, including the future of many Eritrean communities in the diaspora. Damaged identity can be expressed through anger

towards other collectives or subgroups within the collective; in many cases such damage remains in the subconscious and is often transmitted to subsequent generations (Brave Hart, Chase, Elkinks *et al.*, 2011).

Alternatively, damaged (and distorted) identity could also be expressed through some kind of need to make individual or collective 'reparation' or 'penance' for the 'badness'; however, this can increase the sense of guilt if individuals can not actually prove that they are not really 'bad', leading to anger towards those seen as putting obstacles in the way of reparation (Klein, 1946). Ultimately, this can lead to paranoia and the justification of actions taken for 'self-protection' – a prospect that is cause for concern in many post-conflict situations and possibly more problematic in Eritrea where the population size is small and blighted by a history of war and political repression going back several generations. Ultimately, traumatic events damage people's perceptions of themselves and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1985), with pain that can linger for years, impacting on cognition and behaviours, as well as their sense of collective and even national worth and trust in others, hampering the ability of the collective to bounce back.

## **Pain of being ignored**

Victims of collective trauma can include entire groups, regardless of age, gender, social standing or even closeness to the source of the traumatic event. However, there are social variables that define the status given to the calamity. For example, society might relate differently to children, women and the elderly than adult males. Similarly, the death or injury of combatants might be perceived differently to that of civilians. More worryingly, harm to privileged socioeconomic groups might receive more attention than harm to their lower socioeconomic counterparts (Gilbert, 1998).

Eritrean victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were faced with multi-layered ambivalence regarding their plight. The incomprehensibility of the whole phenomenon, the nonchalance of the rest of the world, and the sinister nature of the Government of Eritrea meant that the plight of Sinai victims was, and continues to be, a neglected disaster. The little regard given to the victims has resulted in their experiences being ignored. This sense of being ignored and misunderstood adds to their (and their communities') anger, depression, and sadness (Shamai, 2015).

## **Pain of injustice**

Many studies indicate that manmade trauma (such as accidents, technological failure, war and terrorist attacks) is more likely to result in collective trauma than natural disasters (Norris, Friedman, Watson, *et al.*, 2002a; Norris, Friedman, Watson, 2002b). A possible explanation could be the inevitability and, hence, relative acceptability of natural disasters. Human trafficking in the Sinai is a manmade disaster, perpetrated with great coordination and organisation against helpless refugees fleeing their country in search of safety and better prospects. The torture methods used, the barbarity of traumatising helpless families thousands of miles away, and the commoditisation of human beings makes the whole practice totally unacceptable and demeaning, not only for the individuals involved, but for every Eritrean who looked on helplessly as the whole situation spiralled out of control.

The other explanation that is given for the severity of collective trauma from manmade traumatic experiences is the sense of betrayal that often accompanies these events (Cairns & Wilson, 1984; Cairns & Wilson, 1991; Gampel, 1988; Solomon, 1995; Schuler, Stain, Jaycox, *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, as mentioned above, the total silence that the world met human trafficking in the Sinai with, particularly in the early years, made Eritreans feel abandoned and betrayed, not only by their government, which was pushing young people out of the country and then penalising their families, but also by the international community, which took no steps to rectify the situation or offer protection to refugees. The heart of the Sinai trafficking torture camps is located near the Israeli-Egyptian border and within earshot of two UN security points, yet thousands of people were bought and sold, tortured to death and buried right there.

The duration of a traumatic event is another variable affecting the severity of collective trauma. For instance, the slave trade, which lasted over two centuries, has had a deep-rooted impact on generations of African-Americans, who were uprooted from their homelands and suffered humiliation and mistreatment or who witnessed the humiliation and mistreatment of parents and grandparents. This has left them with collective, as well as individual, trauma (Shamai, 2015; Usher, 2007). The Holocaust, which lasted almost six years and resulted in the murder of six million Jews amid intense fear, hunger, torture and humiliation, has left its mark on the identity of Jews inducing a strong sense of mistrust, a constant search for security, and deep-seated sense of being abandoned by the rest of the world (Shamai, 2015). Although the magnitude of human trafficking in the Sinai may not be comparable to the above two extreme examples, the psychological processes involved in the

atrocities and humiliation and the deep-seated mark it leaves on identity are not very different.

Living with ongoing stress requires numerous adjustments and coping mechanisms for the whole community. Hyper alertness and suspicion become the norm as a consequence of the need to remain alert to danger. However, when the internal system of a human being is aroused excessively for a prolonged period it has implications for the quality of life. According to Fullilove (2004; 2013), collective trauma may lead to structural and individual violence. People lose their ability to react to patterns of threats and opportunities leading to poor decision making at all levels (including national policies and legislation). This can lead to cycles of fragmentation in society, exacerbating previous issues (e.g., racism and other forms of discrimination, social and economic inequalities and even previous or historical trauma). This is a concern for Eritrea, as the implications of collective trauma could increase tensions and even result in civil war along ethnic or religious lines, or it may reopen the traumatic impact of the war of independence, which also casts a long shadow over the nation's recent history.

## **Impacts of collective trauma**

When compared to our increasing understanding of trauma at the individual level, the understanding of collective trauma on society and culture is still very much rudimentary. Cultural trauma refers to the impact of collective trauma on a relatively large group of people who may not know each other, but who are connected by their shared system of knowledge, code of behaviours, beliefs, values and symbols passed down from one generation to the next (Shamai, 2015). Shamai (2015) attempts to overcome the gap in understanding the impact of trauma on cultures (and society) by comparing the phenomena with the 'cultural genocide' perpetrated against the American Indians (Legester, 1988) and the development of the welfare state in Britain, post-World War II (Titmuss, 1958).

The destruction of resources necessary for the continuation of American Indian life and the forced displacement and breakup of family and kinship bonds essential to the continuation of social structures destroyed the integrity and ongoing viability of the existence of Native Americans in accordance to their cultural values and norms. This destruction was made possible by fostering an attitude in the general population that resulted in American Indians being seen as 'savages' unable to raise their own children. As a result, children were institutionalised (in boarding schools) and raised in an atmosphere in which their culture was considered to be inferior.

The natural process of intergenerational transmission of culture was, thus, disrupted and the language, symbols and rituals of Native Americans were no longer an integral part of everyday life. Today American Indians are relegated to choosing disjointed elements of their culture and attempting to retain them.

On the other hand, in Britain, it is claimed that the dynamics of World War II forced governments to be more involved in the daily lives of their citizens (Titmuss, 1958). The war efforts mobilised the wider population, as opposed to the customary combatant groups. The damage, death and injury that resulted affected people right across the nation, compelling authorities to address 'civilian morale'. This shift resulted in cultural changes, including changes in the belief and knowledge systems in Britain, as well as attitudes regarding human rights and state responsibilities. These changes eventually became the basis of the 'culture of the welfare state', which has spread to other Western European countries.

The above examples illustrate how a national trauma can either destroy a culture or modify it as part of the process of coping with the trauma. In this sense, the most significant impact of collective trauma emanates from its introduction of a new set of knowledge, which may change (or maintain) the shared set of beliefs, attitudes, values and meanings of those who share the culture. The resulting change may cause 'cultural disorientation', where the known context of individual and social life loses its stability and coherence, making familiar beliefs, expectations and activities diversified and even polarised (Sztompka, 2002). It is still too early to make final conclusions about how current events in Eritrea are impacting on the culture, but the patterns emerging are indicative of seismic changes in the form of unprecedented mass migration and the fragmentation of Eritrean society.

In addition to helpful cultural adaptations, researchers have identified elements of core beliefs, such as religious beliefs, whose basic principles seem to be resistant to change as a result of traumatic events (Shamai, 2015). In fact, societies, communities, families and individuals going through collective traumatic events often turn to religion in times of distress (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). This is important for those concerned about potential damage to Eritrean society and culture from the impacts of collective trauma. Indeed, many observers note that there is increasing adherence to religious beliefs among the Eritrean diaspora, as well as inside Eritrea, despite severe religious persecution and pressure against some faith groups.

Finally, with such significant impact, collective trauma can play a crucial role in accelerating social change (Pastor, 2004). Many researchers claim that significant traumatic events on a national scale have played a catalytic role in various wider

changes in society (Sztompka, 2000, Picou, 2000). The Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in April 1986, for example, is said to have played a significant role in the political changes that led to the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Read, 1993). Similarly, the failure to manage the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City led to the collapse of a political regime that had been in power for over 85 years (Pastor, 2004). Although the nature of the trauma in Eritrea might be different, there is a possibility that it could lead to a movement for a wider social change to address the issues that are the root causes of the mass migration of Eritreans.

It is clear that Eritrean society is going through a traumatic period, both as a result of the atrocities occurring inside the country and the experiences of people who have fled and become refugees. Sinai trafficking is but one example of these traumas; Eritreans in Libya are experiencing similar situations and life in the Calais jungle comes with its own traumas. When a traumatic set of circumstances becomes endemic over a prolonged period of time, the adaptations and changes used to cope can damage national identity. A case in point is the situation in Northern Ireland, where a spiralling conflict impacted on society at various levels right across the spectrum, increasing hate and suspicion between the two warring groups and leading to heightened animosity between people in the same community, consequently impacting on their national identity. The resultant damage is evident in the ongoing interventions required so many years after the formal conclusion of the armed conflict. There are many other examples of how traumatic experiences at a national level can lead to the national identity being defined by conflict. It is, therefore, important to understand the patterns of identity redefinition in Eritrea and among Eritreans to ensure the cohesion and viability of the country and its people.

## **In search of healing**

Community resilience is the ability to absorb the turbulence created by traumatic experiences, recover effectively, and attain a higher level of functioning in doing so. An important aspect of community resilience is “the capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful. It is an active process of endurance, self-righting and growth in response to crisis and challenges” (Walsh, 2007). Understanding the concepts of collective trauma and community resilience will enable those who are concerned with the impacts of traumatic experiences on

the Eritrean society develop strategies for helping the community to heal and rebuild.

Walsh identified three key social processes that facilitated resilience:

- Belief systems: referring to a positive outlook, transcendence and spirituality, which enable a community to find meaning in traumatic loss experiences.
- Organisational patterns: referring to the availability of economic and institutional resources and the connectedness and flexibility of the community to engage the resources as appropriate.
- Communication and problem solving: referring to open emotional expression and collaborative problem solving.

As a society in crisis and faced with the challenges of mass migration, building resilience through building institutional capacity to enhance economic and institutional resources in Eritrea is difficult – and for Eritreans caught up in the migration crisis it is impossible. However, the communities that are constituting and reconstituting themselves in the aftermath of mass forced migration are resuscitating age-old spiritual practices as a response to the distress caused by their memories of migration and their experiences thereof. In an interview, a recent arrival to Europe disclosed the widespread use of exorcism as a response to what sounds like the dissociation that is one of the symptoms of PTSD. Exorcism is also used when a person exhibits the symptoms of a split personality (which are known as ‘Boeda’ and ‘Zaar’ forms of evil spirits in Eritrea) (Interview, Van Reisen with S, WhatsApp, 22 October 2016). These practices had become rare, but it appears that severe and widespread trauma is leading to the proliferation of these practices as a potential coping mechanism or solution to the impacts of traumatic stress. In an interview between Mirjam Van Reisen and Meron Estefanos (Eritrean radio presenter and human rights activist), the latter explains:

*To expel the devil or demon, physical violence is used to beat the invader out of the body. People who suffer from Zaar may not receive medical help, because it is believed that this would kill them.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Meron Estefanos, face-to-face, 14 October 2016)

As mentioned above these practices are not exactly alien to the culture, however, they had ceased to be practised widely, at least in urban areas and among those with a modern education. The interviewee continues: “I did not know it. I have first seen it in Sawa [during the national service]. It looked like an epileptic episode” (Interview, Van Reisen with S, WhatsApp, 22 October 2016)

This reliance on spiritual practices in the absence of religious leaders with experience and knowledge might expose vulnerable victims to further maladjustments. Another interview, this time with an experienced activist with vast knowledge of trafficking in the Sinai, relates this very phenomena clearly:

*SA is young minor girl who was very severely tortured and abused in Sinai, she keeps getting attacks where she falls. She has Buda. Possessed by a wicked spirit who can control other people. To take the Buda out [to exorcise] they beat you up. There are many incidents where girls are beaten up severely by other girls who try to drive the Buda out. There was an incident of one girl beaten up by four girls by a stick. (Interview, Van Reisen with Meron Estefanos, face-to-face, 15 October 2016)*

The interview also relates that although the notion of evil spirits, witchcraft and exorcisms are not new to the culture, many myths and legends that were no longer part of everyday life seem to be regaining momentum as a result of the need to deal with the impacts of trauma.

*SA is falling down [fainting or convulsing] in Sweden, her mother was practising Buda or was [possessed by] Buda. In the Sinai many women were experiencing Buda [attacks]...In the Orthodox Church they chain you or beat you [to exorcise the demons]. Aba Selama – the crooked priest will offer to take out the demons, it is a big cult which now has many followers all over the world. These are selfproclaimed prophets, SA follows him now. (Interview, Van Reisen with Meron Estefanos, face-to-face, 15 October 2015)*

The overreliance on spiritual practices is further complicated by the fear of the potential effects of psychiatric treatments, particularly drug treatments. Estefanos describes a particular case of a Sinai victim:

*After Lampedusa [a disaster that claimed over 300 Eritreans crossing the Mediterranean], she wanted to have psychiatric help, other people told her that they [psychiatrists] would give her pills she would become a zombie, the group pressure made her stop seeking for [psychiatric] help. F is 17, she left at the age of 14. She was kidnapped in Libya. She is a survivor from a ship accident. Her brothers aged 9 and 12 called from Ethiopia and her brother from Israel, they are asking her to send money. (Interview, Van Reisen with Meron Estefanos, face-to-face, 15 October 2015)*

In search of answers to what are overwhelming responses to extremely difficult experiences, many young people seem to be experimenting with spiritual practices that they are vaguely familiar with in their culture. Estefanos describes the following:

*Then there is Zaar, people have Zaar, they scream. If they smell perfume, the Zaar needs to have the bottle. They like green, it comes from the Middle East. People who have Zaar wear bright green or*



*bright red. The new generations have gone back to this.*

*They also spend a lot of time in church. MU's daughter who is 16 who can hardly stand because of the torture, goes to church from 4:00 am to 14:00 hours, she spends 10 hours in church. It gives some comfort and [many of] the young generation come from the rural areas where these things are still practised. (Interview, Van Reisen with Meron Estefanos, face-to-face, 15 October 2015)*

The traditional trauma creates a reliance on traditional priests to help those suffering from these symptoms to overcome them or be relieved from them.

## **Healing collective trauma**

The horrific crime of human trafficking in the Sinai was made possible by the communication of extremely traumatic material using mobile phones, and further transmission via the Internet on social media and through satellite radios. This led to the traumatising of not just the hostages, but also their families and friends, who were forced to listen to their torture, as well as many in the community at large.

The power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to remotely control and influence the emotions, attitudes and behaviours of people is enormous and unprecedented. The hostage takers have effectively exploited this element to their advantage. Family members, relatives and friends of the victims were made to communicate with the victims while they were being tortured. The crying and pleas for help over the phones emanating from those tortured emotionally traumatised those who heard them, transcending time and space (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017).

Modern technology has played a significant role in incubating collective trauma in scattered refugee communities. Somasundaram (2014) notes that:

*Modern technology keeps the collective trauma alive and present [in the lives of refugees and migrants from collectivistic communities]. They maintain close contact through mobile phones, keep abreast of current news through television, internet, other media and other travellers. In fact, they continue to live more within their home network, undergoing all the uncertainty, insecurity, terror, agony and trauma. (Ibid., p. 46)*

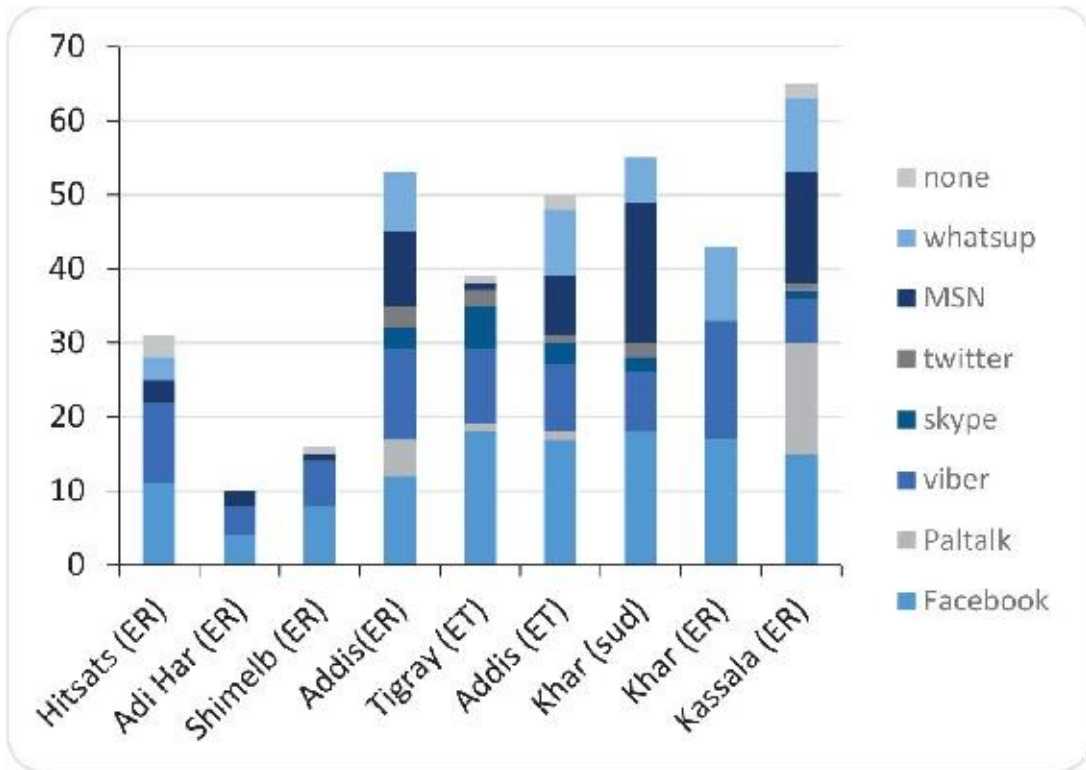
At the same time ICTs also presents an opportunity to challenge unhelpful rigidity allowing people to explore a multiplicity of views and perspectives (Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016) and, hence, enabling healing from the adverse impacts of collective trauma.

Various researchers have identified that the widespread problem of collective traumatisation is most cost effectively approached through community level interventions that reach a large section of the community, while simultaneously being a preventive/public mental health promotion initiative, for example, as was the case in post-conflict Rwanda (Scholte & Ager, 2014). A worldwide panel of trauma experts (Hobfoll & Watson *et al.*, 2007) have identified restoring connectedness, social support and a sense of collective efficacy as essential principles in interventions after mass trauma.

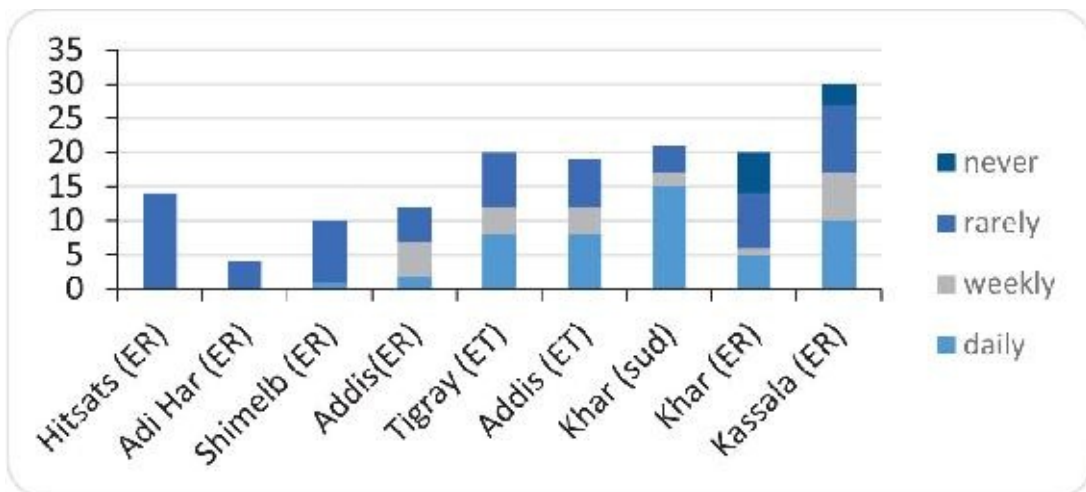
Therefore, taking the above together (i.e., the fact that mass traumatisation was caused by the utilisation of ICTs and the need for mass healing), it is not difficult to envisage the development of innovative approaches that enable social healing (Somasundaram, 2014). Public mental health information can be also provided in relevant languages and in keeping with the culture via radio and social media platforms.

A baseline study aimed at exploring the use of ICTs to promote community resilience has established that there is plenty of scope to utilise social media and information technology (IT) to enhance the quality of interaction among youth to promote community resilience and also prevent adverse situations (Kidane, 2016). This study, which was carried out in Eritrean refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, as well as among local youth from refugee hosting communities in Addis Ababa, Khartoum, Kassala and Shire, found that social media usage was extensive, with Facebook being the most popular medium followed by Viber and WhatsApp (Kidane, 2016; see [Graph 8.2](#)).

In addition to social media, local FM radios were also popular among youth. Despite the lack of connectivity in the camps in Ethiopia, hardly any respondents reported not listening to the radio. Many people would at least listen to the radio occasionally in the camps with many reporting to be listening weekly or daily where connectivity was available (see [Graph 8.3](#)).

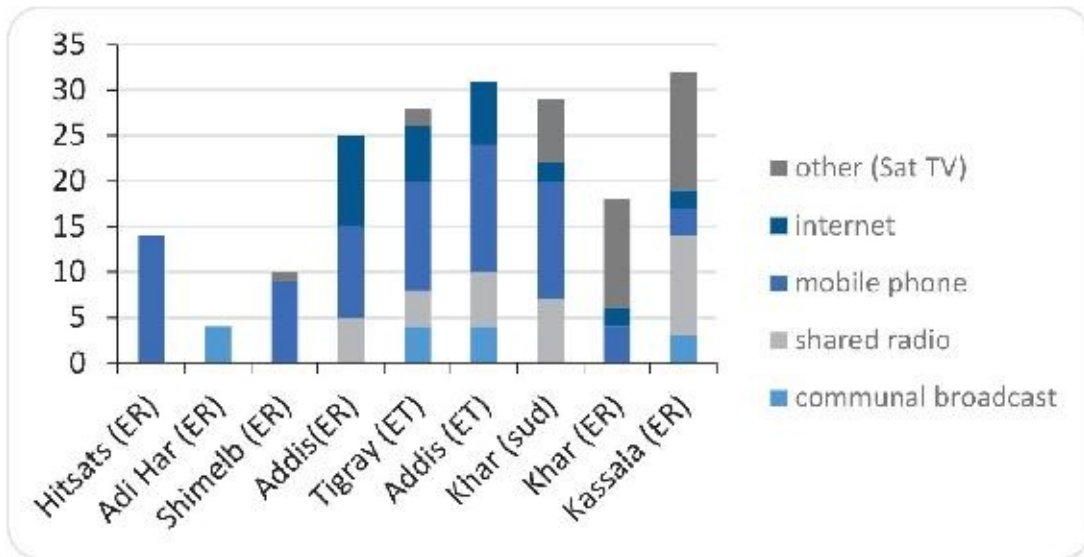


Graph 8.2. Use of social media in youth from refugee and host communities in Ethiopia and Sudan



Graph 8.3. Radio listening habits of refugee youth and their peers from the host community

Finally, the study also found that smart phones were in use by a great majority of young people in both the refugee and host communities, making it the ideal tool for a variety of communication platforms, including radio listening as well as accessing social media to remain in contact with friends and family across the world (see Graph 8.4).



Graph 8.4. Equipment used to listen to the radio

The popularity of local FM radio and the prevalence of the use of smart phones to access information, as well to listen to the radio through satellite TV, presents a lot of opportunities for using phones to support young refugees struggling to cope with their traumatic experiences. Smartphones can be used to connect young people with each other and with resources within their communities and culture. This would help communities to gradually regain their inherent resilience. It would not only enable members of the community to cope with traumatic experiences, but would lead to positive psychological changes or post-traumatic growth, which results from successfully struggling against adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2003).

## Conclusion

Severe trauma and loss is shared within the Eritrean community. Multiple and consecutive trauma is shared within families, communities and across different geographic locations. This can be attributed in part to the phenomenon of collective trauma, as has been described and defined in other circumstances of extremely traumatised communities. Studies identifying generational aspects of collective trauma are highly relevant for a nuanced understanding of the community impact of human trafficking for ransom on Eritreans.

In human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai (and elsewhere), ICTs add a new element, which enabled it to provoke collective trauma. The victims of this form of trafficking were forced to contact relatives by mobile phone for the collection of

ransom while being tortured, drawing these relatives into the experience. In this way, not only the actual ‘individual’ victim of the torture was traumatised, but also the relatives of the victim.

The ransom amounts demanded were so high that entire communities were drawn into the collection of the ransom. This further exacerbated the experience of collective trauma. The resulting material loss and poverty create further situations of new trauma. The mutual debts, the associated guilt, and the feeling of wrongdoing on the part of the victim and of the family members who were asked for help, caused further traumatisation.

The results of the Impact of Events Test carried out for the research on which this chapter is based saw severely elevated levels of trauma. These include people who were not actually trafficked, but who were associated with it as secondary victims (e.g. parents and other relatives). The interviews that were carried out further explain how and in which way the human trafficking for ransom has become deeply traumatising for the relatives associated with such situations. The increased use of ICTs to communicate such events, to collect the ransoms, to communicate the names of people who have disappeared or died, and to share events in general has created a context in which geographically dispersed Eritrean communities continue to share the horrific events that are happening.

In this chapter, it is suggested that such ICT connections may also be used to help relieve the symptoms of trauma, and it is important that such programmes are developed. The collective trauma negatively affects the ability of communities to take rational decisions and, therefore, it is all the more important that the symptoms of such trauma are addressed.

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## **Part 3: A Crisis of Accountability**

## Chapter 9

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# Crimes against Humanity: The Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea

*Susan Höfner & Zara Tewelde-Berhan*

*The commission finds that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that there is no accountability for them.*  
(UNHRC, 2015, p. 14)

## Introduction

In 2015 and 2016, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) investigated the human rights situation, including the possibility of crimes against humanity, in Eritrea. The reports received widespread attention in the Eritrean community and beyond, sparking fierce debate. Pro-government supporters denounced the reports, saying that they lacked credibility and were not based on substantive evidence. However, many Eritrean refugees and human rights campaigners applauded the reports as confirmation of the ongoing gross human rights violations being committed by the Eritrean regime. While the Eritrean diaspora was particularly involved in the debate through demonstrations and on social media, those inside the country were largely silent.

In this chapter, we present the findings of the two reports from the COIE in 2015 and 2016 and examine the methodology used by the COIE to gather information. We also explore how these reports were received by supporters and opponents of the regime in the diaspora and describe the many forms of activism used by both sides to mobilise support against and in favour of the reports. Finally, we look at the response from Eritreans inside Eritrea and their relative silence.

## First report: Systematic and widespread, gross human rights violations

In 2014, the COIE started investigating the human rights situation in Eritrea, pursuant to Resolution 26/24 of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (UN General Assembly, 2014). The first report came out on 8 June 2015 (UNHRC, 2015a) and concluded that “[...] systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that there is no accountability for them” (*Ibid.*, p 14). The human rights situation, which the UN Commission found created a climate of fear, was recognised as the predominant reason for Eritreans to flee the country.

In investigating the alleged human rights violations, the UN Commission found grave grievances in relation to all public freedoms, stating that “Eritreans are unable to move at will, to express themselves freely, to practice their religion without undue interference, to enjoy unrestricted access to information or to have the liberty to assemble and associate” (*Ibid.*, p. 15).

Freedom of movement is highly restricted by the regime as the following statement of one of the witnesses, a former clerk in charge of issuing travel permits, shows:

*You cannot move wherever you want in the country. Whether you are civil or military, you need to show your paper to all checkpoints. There are check points everywhere. [...] You have to put the place where the person is going, you need to have a link.* (UNHRC, 2015b, p. 103)

The shoot-to-kill policy on the border, implemented by the military, adds an additional threat to anyone attempting to cross the border, as described by another witness:

*I crossed the border at night. When I climbed the mountain I lost my direction and I came to the valley instead. When I tried again the next morning, they saw me from afar, they shot at me. It was a steep slope; I got shot. I fell. They told me: come back, we will finish you off. I was afraid. They captured me. I was bleeding... They beat me... I was exhausted. They moved a bit and started discussing how they should finish me off.* (UNHRC, 2015b, p. 319)

Furthermore, the report presents records of the arbitrary arrest of persons, who are routinely subjected to different forms of illtreatment, including torture, rape, and sexual abuse (of women and men):

*When I was going to visit my sister and a friend in Agordat, they thought I was trying to escape. I did not need permission for that travel because it was in our area within the same zoba. You need a special permission only if you go home... I was put in prison for six months. I got tortured and abused... After one month in Agordat, they transferred me to Hadas, where I stayed for one week. After that, I was detained for one month in Keren, and then another month in Adi Abeito. After this they give me back to the police division. (UNHRC, 2015b, p. 208)*

The COIE found that many of these abuses take place during mandatory and open-ended national service, which it terms as a “practice similar to slavery”, which “[...] involves the systematic violation of an array of human rights on a scope and scale seldom witnessed elsewhere in the world” (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

One of the witnesses described his experiences of the national service as following: “I was in the military for 12 years. We used to collect stones, collect firewood, build roads, etc. I was never in a battle, never guarded a border or a building” (UNHRC, 2015b, p. 410).

The testimony of a former conscript, forced to work at Wi’a military camp, demonstrates the living conditions that are commonly experienced during national service:

*It was very intensive work, the climate was harsh. We worked all day long, every day. There were no days off. The food was terrible. People started to die. I do not know the exact reasons. A lot of people had night blindness, swollen legs and knees. It was very common to see people paralysed. Diarrhoea was the main problem. There was no medical treatment. There was no sanitation. There was a river about one km away where we could wash our clothes and bodies on Sundays and get drinking water. (UNHRC, 2015b, p. 420)*

In its concluding remarks, the Commission states that “[...] the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service, and forced labour may constitute crimes against humanity” (*Ibid.*, p. 14).

## **Second report: Crimes against humanity**

The 2015 report was followed by an extension of the mandate of the COIE for one more year to enable it to further investigate the systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in Eritrea. The aim was to ensure full accountability, including the determination of whether or not there were violations constituting crimes against humanity. In its second report (UNHRC, 2016), the UN Commission took account of its critics who perceived the report as methodologically flawed, biased and without substantive evidence (Tsegay, 2016).

It referred to, and took into account, the response by the Eritrean government, which saw the Commission of Inquiry's report as a form of defamation and had sent a counter-report entitled: '*Commission of Inquiry report: Devoid of credibility and substance*' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).

As part of its investigation in 2015/2016, the Commission gathered further testimonies, which substantiated the findings reported in 2015. Those testimonies confirmed the existence of forced labour, arbitrary arrest for indefinite periods, torture and degrading treatment. The Commission reports the testimony of a former military trainer from the training camp in Sawa, who fled military service in 2012, speaking about his experience, he says:

*The trainers are very harsh. We were told if you don't apply pressure, they won't do what you say. We were not trained on how to treat people. They just instruct you to punish using 'military punishments'. In one incident a trainer named [...] tied up two people and left them in a tent. He tied them so tightly that we heard them screaming. Later, one was dead and the other's hands were crippled... If [the trainer does not] apply pressure to the trainees, [he] could end up in prison. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 54)*

Another witness described the situation of women, who are used as servants by military leaders and trainers in Sawa:

*We watched sexual abuses. Systematically, they forced girls to obey their instructions; to have a relationship with them. If she doesn't obey, they find any kind of military punishment. It is commonly the Division leaders, the highest ranks who would do that. All people would go back to their Division at the end of the day. The leaders select girls personally. After six months, he would change her, take a newly arrived. The 11th grade students...have to pass their last year's exam in Sawa. They take them. Once a woman is assigned to a General, they stay there [to] do office work, chores, etc. 'there is no rule, no law.' Sometimes when the girls see the car of the General approaching they hide. What if they become pregnant? [...] When it happens, they make abortion traditionally. The girl doesn't even want to let the colonel know. One of my best friends was a 'personnel' of the Colonel. He told me that the nick name used to get a girl is 'goat'. Sometimes when newcomers arrive they asked assistants to bring new ones. (Ibid. pp. 56–57)*

In total, 833 individuals in 13 countries<sup>42</sup> contributed to the two reports. Based on this evidence, the Commission concluded that there are “[...] reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Eritrea since 1991 [...]” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 83). Crimes such as enslavement, imprisonment, forced disappearance, torture and other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder, which were already mentioned in the previous report, were recognised as credible by the Commission in the second report. Furthermore, the Commission acknowledged

that political power is concentrated in the hands of the president and a small circle of military loyalists (*Ibid.*, p. 81) and went on to conclude that the toplevel officers of the National Security Office and military are responsible for most of the cases of gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity (*Ibid.*, p. 81).

## Methodology of the COIE

Despite the COIE's efforts to cooperate with the Eritrean government, they were denied access to the country and were not provided with information about the human rights situation, even after repeated requests. As the Commission could not enter Eritrea, it obtained first-hand testimonies in confidential interviews from more than 550 witnesses residing in third countries. In addition, it received 160 written submissions in response to a call made to relevant individuals, groups, and organisations in November 2014. These were included in its 2015 report (UNHRC, 2015b). In its second report, the Commission collected additional testimonies, bringing the total number of testimonies received to 833 (OHCHR, 2016). In addition, the criticisms (mostly mass petitions and letters) received following the 2015 report, were assessed, but when the signatories were contacted, many were found to be unaware that they had signed a petition or letter (*Ibid.*).

In both of the Commission's reports, the interviews were conducted in accordance with the methodology based on UN standards and best practices, and specific attention was given to gender-based violations, particularly violence against women and children, and the gendered impact of violence. The investigation covered the period from the end of the Ethiopian Eritrean War in 1991 until the present day and was limited to violations committed within the territory of Eritrea.

During its investigation, the COIE faced two major challenges. Firstly, although the Commission did the utmost to protect the identity of individuals who feared reprisals by Eritrean authorities, witnesses feared that they were being secretly monitored by Eritrean authorities and that their testimony would endanger their own safety or that of their family members back in Eritrea. Therefore, testimonies were treated as highly confidential and attention was paid to the protection of witnesses. In addition, the Commission undertook precautions to guarantee the unhindered access of individuals meeting with members of the Commission and reminded the host governments of their responsibility to ensure the protection of persons bearing witness (UNHRC, 2016).

Secondly, the Commission's investigation was impeded by the absence of reliable data concerning demographics, development, the economy and the legal system in

Eritrea. Due to the lack of cooperation with and coordination by the Eritrean government, reliable statistical information was not available (*Ibid.*).

## Response by Eritreans in the diaspora

### *Activism and campaigns*

The COIE report received widespread attention among Eritreans at home and abroad. This reaction resulted in activism in the diaspora among those who supported the report, as well as those who opposed it. Supporters of the report demanded accountability for the crimes against humanity committed by the Eritrean regime (OHCHR, 2016), while opponents called for the end of what they perceive to be hostility towards the Eritrean nation.

Campaigns were launched, reaching a peak as the COIE's presentation of the second report on human rights in Eritrea grew closer. The *Stop Slavery in Eritrea Campaign*, a campaign to end indefinite nation service in Eritrea, showed its support for the COIE's findings. In a press release, it welcomed the COIE's findings that 'crimes against humanity' have been committed by the Eritrean government (Asmarino Independent, 2016). An Eritrean activist in the diaspora who strongly supports the COIE findings expressed the general feeling among supporters: "The findings confirmed what we already knew. In fact, it does not document everything, but tries to give a general picture of the horrendous situation the country is in" (Anon., personal communication, 14 December 2016).

Similarly, opponents of the COIE findings also campaigned and produced an online petition with 3,195 signatures (Adal Voice, 2015). With the slogan 'Hands off Eritrea', pro-government supporters backed by the Eritrean government campaigned against the report, using websites and social media, calling it "politically motivated" (Berhane, 2016). A pro-government website heavily criticised the COIE findings and referred to it as "not dead", suggesting that further attempts to "undermine the country" were inevitable (Fitur, 2016). Such suspicious language adds to the suspicion of the international community some Eritreans in the diaspora feel.

After its first report came out in 2015, the Commission received 45,000 written submissions critical of the COIE's first report, the majority of which were group letters and petitions (OHCHR, 2016). In a press conference, COIE Chairman, Mike Smith, acknowledged that receipt of this number of submissions was "unprecedented" (UN Web TV, 2016). However, he also stated that many of those who had submitted letters, when contacted directly, said that they had not even

read the COIE report and were not aware that they had signed a petition or letter (*Ibid.*). Based on these findings, Smith stated:

*Our strong suspicion is this is a campaign that has been organised from Asmara and that their various supportive groups in the Diaspora around the world, youth and women's union etc. have been mobilised to get signatures to these sorts of petitions... in all of those 45,000 we only received 8 from inside Eritrea. (Ibid.)*

Leaked documents from the Eritrean government posted by a Facebook page called 'SACTISM' confirm that the petition was set up by the Eritrean government and revealed its strategy of mobilisation to denounce the COIE report and to gain support from the diaspora to campaign against it (SACTISM, 2016). The petition was addressed to Eritrean consulates, Eritrean representatives, and coordination officers abroad with the forceful request to fulfil an allocated country quota for signatures on the petition (Plaut, 2016c).

The leaked document stated a pre-defined target number of 500,000 signatures and included clear instructions for their collection by groups, organisations, and communities, which were assigned the responsibility to carry out this action. The petition was attached with a statement, denying the accusations of human rights violations, as listed in the COIE's two reports and praising the government's great development efforts and its support for social justice (*Ibid.*). Many of these statements turned out to neither have been written nor ever seen by the signatories, as the investigation by the COIE revealed in 2016 (UNHRC, 2016, p. 12).

The Eritrean government left many Eritreans living in diaspora with no choice but to sign the petition, as many feared that they would be denied services (such as obtaining official documents and assistance) from the Eritrean Embassy, as well as other repercussions. NRC, a major news outlet in the Netherlands reported that supporters of the PFDJ had gathered, including the ambassador of Eritrea in the Netherlands, and come up with the plan to go past doors to make people sign the petition. In the news article, Eritreans in the Netherlands indicated that they did not fully realise what they were signing, but that not signing would prevent you from using embassy services and/or have repercussions for any family member you may have in Eritrea. Thus, people were made to sign through the culture of fear (Chin-A-Fo, 2016). The leaked document of the Eritrean government is an indication that many of the signatures were involuntary and collected under pressure and/or threat (*Ibid.*). Moreover, it demonstrates the importance that the Eritrean government places on discrediting the COIE reports.



### ***Demonstrations***

Campaigning was used by both sides to mobilise support and encourage the diaspora to attend demonstrations in Geneva. The Eritrean community organised large demonstrations in Geneva and other locations in June 2015 and again in June 2016 in support of the COIE findings (Aljazeera, 2016). Most of the attendees were young Eritrean refugees who had fled Eritrea in recent years. It is thought that an estimated 16,000 Eritreans attended the demonstration held in Geneva in support of the second COIE report, which accuses the Eritrean government of committing crimes against humanity (Asmarino, 2016a). Encouraged by the COIE reports, protesters called for an end to impunity and demanded that the Eritrean government be held accountable for crimes against humanity. Demonstrations were also held in support of the COIE by thousands of refugees in Ethiopia (outside the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa and in refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia) and in Israel.

Although fewer in number, those who vigorously opposed the report also organised a demonstration in Geneva, accusing the report of being “sinister with the intention to destabilise the country in the name of human rights” (Berhane, 2016). This accusation was expressed by demonstrators who said that the report was hostile to the Eritrean state and threatened Eritrea’s sovereignty. One explanation for this support is that many of those in the diaspora who support the regime have lived in exile for decades and, therefore, have not experienced the Eritrean government’s oppression first hand.

### ***Social media***

Social media played a key role in mobilising Eritreans in the diaspora and as a source of information, especially for young people. Facebook, Twitter, and Paltalk, as well as popular Eritrean websites like Assenna, Asmarino, Awate, Erena, Eastafro, Tesfanews, and Shabait were frequently visited, allowing news relating to the COIE reports to circulate among the community. Hashtags on social media in reaction to the COIE findings, such as ‘End Impunity in Eritrea’ and ‘Hands off Eritrea’, reached a large audience. Facebook was particularly influential with live videos of young activists encouraging the diaspora to attend the 23 June 2016 demonstration in support of the second COIE report (e.g., Stop Slavery in Eritrea, 2016). Activists from both camps (supporting and opposing the COIE report) effectively used social media to maximise their support base. Videos of popular figures such as musicians and families of victims were circulated, encouraging the diaspora to participate in the 23 June demonstration supporting the COIE findings.

An Eritrean activist who participated in a video campaign that was widely shared on Facebook demanded “Enough of lawlessness, yes to full accountability” (Stop Slavery in Eritrea, 2016). In the Facebook comments section of a heated Aljazeera discussion between Sheila Keetharuth, the UN Special Rapporteur and member of the COIE, and three members of the Eritrean diaspora, one member of the diaspora wrote: “The report is a blessing. Eritrean voices are finally being heard” (Aljazeera, 2015). This view is in contrast to another commenter who stated, “This accusation is totally fabricated and politically motivated” (*Ibid.*). This highlights the strong divide within the diaspora community on the COIE findings. This loud reaction by the Eritrean diaspora is in stark contrast to the reaction inside the country, which was largely silent.

## **Response by people inside Eritrea: Silence**

While Eritreans in the diaspora vocalised their reaction to the COIE findings, the population inside Eritrea remained silent. Those in support of the COIE findings would argue that this silence reflects the lack of freedom of speech, which is emphasised in the COIE reports. Reporters Without Borders ranked Eritrea last out of 180 for the eighth consecutive year in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). Human Rights Watch, in its ‘World Report 2014’, confirms that the Eritrean government maintains a monopoly on domestic sources of information and that the Internet and telephone communications are monitored (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The absence of a free press inside the country, the slow Internet connection and the fear instilled in the people have made it incredibly difficult for people inside Eritrea to get information and freely express their opinion.

In October 2016, leaked video footage from activists from ‘Arbi Harnet’ (‘Freedom Friday’) – a movement with members both inside Eritrea and in the diaspora – showed a local Internet cafe with a list of details of Internet users (Asmarino, 2016b). The movement confirmed on social media that the government was tightening the controls on Internet users by asking providers to record details of their customers (Arbi Harnet, 2016a). Arbi Harnet claimed that their members inside Eritrea believe that the new measures have been put in place in response to a rise in political awareness among the population inside Eritrea (*Ibid.*). Arbi Harnet also made almost 4,000 ‘robo’ calls (an automated telephone call which delivers a recorded message inside the country) encouraging Eritreans

inside the country to show solidarity with the demonstrations in Geneva supporting the COIE findings (Arbi Harnet, 2016b).

Satellite radio is often listened to inside Eritrea, with Radio Erena and Assenna being the most popular. These radio programmes are independent and have covered the COIE's findings and response in the diaspora. This extensive coverage – particularly in the months leading up to the June 2016 demonstrations – has given Eritreans inside the country information on developments. An article published on Assenna's website analysed the COIE findings, creating greater awareness (Assenna.com,2016). An Eritrean activist with credible sources inside Eritrea highlighted the general mood of the public inside Eritrea: “A lot of people thought it was the beginning of the end for the regime after the COIE Report. They thought some kind of action was going to be taken against the regime” (Anon., personal communication, 14 December 2016).

## Ongoing 'shoot-to-kill' policy and national service

Fresh reports have provided new evidence that the concerns of the Commission of Inquiry about crimes against humanity are still valid. Reports were released that the shoot-to-kill policy was still in place, the most recent of such incidents reported by the opposition group Arbi Harnet and contained the following information:

*On 22nd of October a light pickup truck left the city of Asmara carrying 7 young people and 3 children. Each had paid \$5,500 to be smuggled across the Eritrea-Sudan border. Seven of those aboard the truck were absconding national service recruits (5 women and 2 men). The three children (accompanied by an uncle) were on their way to join their mother who had previously fled from the country. At the town of Hykota, a short distance from the border, they were ambushed. The truck was hit by a hail of bullets in a co-ordinated attack ordered by a senior divisional commander. Many were killed outright; others fatally wounded. Among the dead was a young woman, Yohana Kabsay. Just 26 years old, she had one of the three small children on her lap. Yohana was a member of the 26th round of national service recruits who had been conscripted into the army. She had served with the 74th mechanised division for over two years. Following the carnage the wounded were loaded back on a truck, while soldiers went to hunt down those who had fled for their lives. No attempt was made to try to care for the wounded. Residents of Hykota report that the soldiers even stopped at a local teashop on their way to the hospital, by which time everyone was pronounced dead. Families of the victims were not informed and they were hurriedly buried. It took each family weeks to piece together what had happened. (Arbi Harnet, 12 December 2016, reposted by Plaut, 2016b)*

In a visit to refugee camps on the Ethiopian side of the border in May 2016, incidents of reports of shoot-to-kill practices at the border were also obtained (Interviews, by Van Reisen and Kidane, May 2016).

With regards to promises by the Government of Eritrea to increase wages to national service recruits, information from Arbi Harnet reveals that the pay promised has not been realised. The government had promised that it would build houses for demobilised recruits, but there has not been such demobilisation, nor have the houses been built. Of more serious concern is the fact that national service remains indefinite. As well as military service, this is a system in which everyone is assigned jobs by the government (Arbi Harnet, personal communication, with Kidane, Facebook Messenger, September 2016). A respondent explains:

*[The use of the word 'job'] might suggest that there are paid jobs. A 'job' is assumed to be an occupation where people work to earn a living. In Eritrea, there has not been a vacancy or a job application for a government job for more than 18 years now. Most people spend years, sometimes more than a decade, trying to be able to get a release from work. In any case, if there were 'jobs', whether assigned or chosen, it would mean there is some degree of normalcy. But when you are assigned to work without pay, that is not a job, it is either national service or slavery. (Interview, Van Reisen with Z, Skype, 14 January 2017)*

The system of national service continues to keep the population in a system of slavery based on forced labour under dismal circumstances (Arbi Harnet, personal communication, with Kidane, Facebook Messenger, September 2016).

## **Response by the Government of Eritrea**

The Government of Eritrea has developed the argument that the methodology used by the Commission of Inquiry was inadequate, emphasising that the Commission did not visit Eritrea, although it had no permission to do so. The government has opened its doors to members of the diplomatic community and the media and a range of reports have been released as a result. A cable understood to have been sent by European diplomatic sources and reported by news agency FAZ on 6 January 2017 (FAZ, 2017) suggests that the Government of Eritrea has had some success in convincing governments to support it, citing geopolitical interests in the region.

As this book goes to print, Radio Erena is reporting that the Eritrean regime has arrested numerous film professionals accused of having worked with organisations outside Eritrea.

Serious drought was first reported in Ethiopia and Eritrea by the UN in June 2015. In addition, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2013), 60% of the Eritrean population was reported to be undernourished between 2011 and 2013. However, the Government of Eritrea has denied these reports as well as reports of a health crisis. Citing the Ministry of Information, which quoted the governments' statement that there was no need for extra measures and that the situation was normal, Martin Plaut, journalist specialising in the Horn of Africa, alleges that Eritrea is knowingly denying these realities (Plaut, 2016a). In a series of articles, Plaut demonstrated this based on evidence smuggled out of the country. In January 2017, UNICEF confirmed the situation described by Plaut (UNICEF, 2017).

In 2016, Arbi Harnet announced that there had been a cholera outbreak in Eritrea, based on evidence received from within the country. While the Ministry of Information acknowledged the outbreak, no health workers were deployed and no request for international assistance was made. Arbi Harnet distributed information via mobile phone on how to avoid infection. This information spread rapidly in Eritrea and, according to news reports, was the only information available to people inside the country (Asmarino, 2016a, 2016b).

People inside the country are not informed about the COIE and its conclusions from official media. They only hear about it through coverage of opposition media (Interview Kidane with Arbi Harnet activists inside Eritrea, 17 January 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Eritreans who are in opposition to the Eritrean government have long demanded accountability for the human rights abuses committed against the Eritrean people by the government. The COIE report has become a key tool for achieving this accountability. The COIE reports concluded that crimes against humanity and other human rights abuses are systematic and widespread in Eritrea, and are ongoing. It went on to state that crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, torture, persecution, rape and other inhumane acts have been committed and are still being committed in order to instil fear and control the population (OHCHR, 2016). The COIE reports have been a major factor in exposing the national service programme as a form of slavery. It also highlighted other major crimes against humanity, such as the ongoing shoot-to-kill policy at the Eritrean border.

The COIE presented several recommendations, including the referral of the report to the UN Security Council and subsequently to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. In addition, it is recommended that member states of UNHRC should offer protection to Eritreans fleeing and respect the principle of nonrefoulement. It also urged the Human Rights Council to keep the situation in Eritrea on its agenda and invited the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate further.

Following the COIE report and recommendations, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that recommended the report to be forwarded to all relevant UN organs, which includes the UN Security Council. The resolution also extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea in order to follow up on the COIE report recommendations. On 28 October 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur Sheila Keetharuth presented the findings of the COIE in the UN General Assembly. Following this, a resolution was tabled by both Djibouti and Somalia was presented on 28th October 2016, but did not receive enough support from both EU and African Member States in the General Assembly (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). What is clear is the seriousness of the allegations about crimes against humanity and the determination of Eritreans in their quest for accountability, freedom, and justice.

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<sup>42</sup> Interviews were conducted in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Djibouti, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

## Chapter 10

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# The Long Arm of the Eritrean Regime in the Netherlands

*Klara Smits, DSP-Group & Tilburg University*

*I don't want to have anything to do with politics. I know people are watching you. When you share a message on Facebook, your family could be in trouble. That is why I don't do it. You never know.*

(Interview, third migration wave, man)

*The blackmail is a problem. If anyone is still in the country, you really have a problem.*

(Interview, first migration wave, woman)

## Introduction

The Eritrean diaspora is under constant surveillance from the Eritrean regime, as reported by journalist Martin Plaut (2015). The Eritrean community outside Eritrea, especially opponents of the Eritrean regime, live under constant fear and pressure (consisting of threats, intimidation and even violence) from the long arm of the regime. In addition, Eritreans living in the diaspora have to pay a 'voluntary' 2% tax on all of their earnings, even those who are unemployed and receiving social benefit payments. Although referred to as 'voluntary', this tax is gathered with the use of pressure.

In the Netherlands, reports of such threats and intimidation began to spread after a major Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant*, published an article in January 2016 (Bolwijn & Modderkolk, 2016). The article reported on threats to the Eritrean community, but also to those outside, including the intimidation of Dutch Professor Mirjam Van Reisen and Sheila Keetharuth, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Eritrea. The news article and the follow-up in the Dutch media elicited reactions from the public and Dutch politicians, who stated that the intimidation should be thoroughly investigated (Voorn, 2016).

Additional attention was generated by several court cases started in the Netherlands by Meseret Bahlbi, ex-chair of the youth organisation of the Eritrean government in the Netherlands – the Young People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (YFPDJ) – and an activist friend (Bruyne, 2016). The first court case was held against Professor Mirjam Van Reisen, who had indicated in a radio interview that two of Bahlbi’s family members who were interpreters had ties to the Eritrean regime, therein referring to the YFPDJ as the centre of Eritrean intelligence in the Netherlands. Mr Bahlbi sued Professor Van Reisen for libel and slander. The judge ruled in favour of the Dutch Professor, stating in the ruling that the YFPDJ could indeed be referred to as the extended arm of the Eritrean regime. More court cases were started against various other parties, including Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, on account of an article published by the newspaper about the intimidation mentioned above. All of the cases thus far have been decided in favour of the defendants.

On 10 February 2016, the Dutch Parliament requested a letter from the minister of Foreign Affairs, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment, and the State Secretary for Security and Justice about Eritrea and the influence of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2016). This letter was sent in June 2016 and was followed by a debate between the Dutch Parliament and the two ministers and state secretary mentioned above. The Dutch Parliament called for strong action from the Dutch government and adopted several resolutions that called for, among other things, investigating the Eritrean Embassy for illegal practices, referring to the report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea submitted to the UN Security Council, and investigating the taxation and intimidation of Eritreans in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016).

In addition, the European Parliament also demanded firm action on Eritrea in its March 2016 debate and resolution on the situation in Eritrea (European Parliament, 2016). Besides its critical wording on the human rights situation in Eritrea, the resolution also addresses the long arm of the regime:

*16. Urges the EU Member States to investigate the role of the PFDJ and its various wings, including the youth wing, and to prohibit all forms of association and activity that directly support control and surveillance exercises in Europe, undermine democratic principles and the rule of law, and create patterns of intimidation and extortion; urges the Member States to act to end the diaspora tax [2% tax] and to investigate the financial transactions related to any other ‘contributions’ raised by Eritrean government-linked associations abroad, and to fully protect the asylum rights of all Eritrean refugees in Europe. (European Parliament, 2016, para.16)*

Following the debates and the resolution, the Dutch government commissioned a study on the Eritrean community in the Netherlands, Eritrean organisations, and the influence of the Eritrean regime. This research resulted in a report, titled '*Niets is wat het lijkt: Eritrese organisaties en integratie*' (translated as: 'Nothing is what it seems: Eritrean organisations and integration') (DSP-Groep Amsterdam & Tilburg Universiteit, 2016). The research was based on a document and literature review and a total of 110 interviews conducted with: 22 international experts, 21 Dutch professionals in policy, welfare and support organisations, 6 lawyers specialised in migration law and personally involved in cases for Eritreans, and 61 people from the Eritrean community, of which 20 were representatives from Eritrean organisations (including board members and former board members). A broad range of people from the Eritrean community were interviewed, with the goal of incorporating the views of a diverse array of people (considering age, gender, religion, politics and the timing of emigration to the Netherlands). Both supporters and opponents of the Eritrean regime were interviewed, including the Eritrean ambassador to the Netherlands and representatives of the embassy.

In the letter that accompanied the report, the research team stated that:

*...it does not happen often that we, as experienced researchers, encounter as much fear, mistrust, contradictions, trauma and profound misery as we have found in the accompanying research – based on thorough analysis of more than 100 interviews, literature/document analysis and focus group discussions – within the community of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. At the same time, we have encountered plenty of positive input in the interviews and the desire to face the future with a clean slate.* (DSP-Groep Amsterdam, 2016)

The report confirms that the Eritrean community, including Eritrean organisations, experience pressure, influence, and intimidation from the Eritrean regime or its extended arm, including the youth movement of the government party, the YPFDJ. According to the researchers, this leads to fear within the community and negatively influences the integration of Eritreans into Dutch society.

The report was accepted by the Dutch government on 15 December 2016 and was sent to the Dutch Parliament accompanied by a letter from the government listing the actions it plans to take (Ministerie van Social Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). The letter indicates that the Dutch government adopted a regulation in October 2016 prohibiting the 2% diaspora income tax when it is paired with intimidation, threats, extortion or other illegal activities, or when it is to be spent on specific military goals. This regulation refers to UN General Assembly resolution

2023, adopted in 2011, which specifically asked member states to take such actions. The Dutch government will also commission an investigation into the 2% tax in the Netherlands and other European member states. The letter also indicates that the police will do more to action reports filed by Eritreans complaining of threats and intimidation and will investigate the possibility of establishing a help desk specifically for members of the Eritrean community. The fear and mistrust in the Eritrean community, as well as the possible infiltration of organisations for asylum seekers by Eritrean government organisations such as the YPFDJ, is seen as a major issue by the Dutch government and the government deems it fundamental that Eritreans in the Netherlands are protected.

This chapter provides an English summary of the report ‘Nothing is what it seems: Eritrean organisations and integration’ and the letter that accompanied the report (DSP-Groep Amsterdam & Tilburg Universiteit, 2016). It presents the most important findings and conclusions of the report, especially in relation to the manifestation of the long arm of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands. Some information, such as this introduction, has been added to contextualise the information.

## Eritrean community in the Netherlands

It is estimated that 20,000 people with an Eritrean background currently live in the Netherlands. Most of those, an estimated 14,000, are recent refugees from 2010 until now. However, the exact number is hard to pinpoint, because people who were born in Eritrea before its independence in 1993 were officially born in Ethiopia and are often registered as Ethiopian. The refugees from Eritrea came to the Netherlands in roughly three waves. In [Table 10.1](#), the characteristics of these migration waves are summarised.

*Table 10.1. Characteristics of the three migration waves from Eritrea to the Netherlands*

Migration wave	Migration context
First wave (1980–1998) Approx. 1,500 refugees	A. 1980–1991 Fleeing the independence war (members of the Eritrean Liberation Front [ELF] and later the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front [EPLF]; the predecessor of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice [PFDJ]),

	the party of the current regime) B. 1991–1998 Fleeing during the reconstruction of Eritrea, for various reasons
Second wave (1998–2010) Approx. 6,000 refugees	Since the border conflict with Ethiopia Fleeing the current regime
Third wave (2010–present) Approx. 14,0000 refugees	Fleeing the current regime

The Eritrean community is diverse in its composition. There are various religious groups, differences between regions of origin (highlanders versus lowlanders, urban versus rural) and different views on the current regime. The impression is kaleidoscopic – due to the variety of people, but also because of the internal contradictions. While one respondent may emphasise opposing the regime in Eritrea and wanting to integrate in the Netherlands as quickly as possible, another may swear that the first respondent – or the organisation that they represent – is actually of an entirely different opinion. Or, it may be discovered that the respondent is in fact not representing the organisation that he or she claims to at all. The closer you look, the more it appears that, nothing is what it seems to be. What is clear is that the community is highly polarised: staying neutral or apolitical is difficult, if not impossible. A lot of mistrust exists among people and there is a lot of fear. Fear and mistrust form a toxic combination, which is hampering interactions within and outside the community.

The third wave of refugees, which has recently come to the Netherlands (since 2010), is creating changes in relations. A lot of movement can be seen within the community, partly as a result of the recent reports by the United Nations, the court cases in the Netherlands, and the recent coverage of Eritrea in the media.

There is a gap between the Eritrean culture and the Dutch culture: collectivistic versus individualistic. Refugees in all three migration waves encounter this gap. However, the gap is even more pronounced for refugees from the third wave. They often form an erroneous image of the Netherlands. Conversely, Dutch people often have trouble imagining what these refugees have been through.

In addition, a gap also exists between Eritrean refugees from the third migration wave and those from earlier waves. The refugees who are currently arriving in the Netherlands have a different culture, background and socio-economic status than

previous waves; they often come from rural areas, have had little education and have often been confronted with the horrors of military service, detention, and fear in Eritrea as well as outside. The refugees from the first wave have a much more idealistic picture of Eritrea. Those from the third wave of refugees have lived in a completely different reality in Eritrea. They do not recognise the image of Eritrea held by the older generation of Eritreans in the Netherlands. This can lead to incomprehension on both sides, which leads to tension between the different migration waves.

The description of the Eritrean community given in this report is only a snapshot – and a principally Dutch snapshot at that – while the Eritrean community is essentially a transnational community. Refugees from Eritrea have spread across Europe, America, Africa and the Middle East in the last few decennia. Families are divided between the diaspora and Eritrea. At the same time, the world has quickly diminished in size in the past few years. Social media has played an important role in maintaining contact between Eritreans, both informal and political (among supporters and opposition alike). The situation in the Netherlands cannot be seen as separate from the other diasporas, or from the situation in Eritrea.

The influence of the Eritrean regime not only affects citizens in Eritrea, but also Eritreans in the diaspora. The mass organisations of the Eritrean regime consist of the government party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and its sub-organisations, the YPFDJ, National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES), and National Union of Eritrean Youth (NUEY), which each have specific target groups. According to the former Deputy Minister of Finance of Eritrea, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, who received asylum in the Netherlands, meetings were commonly organised in Asmara in which the organisations reported to Yemane Gebreab. Yemane Gebreab is the political leader of the PFDJ. In the reporting by these mass organisations to the PFDJ, no distinction is made between organisations in Eritrea and in the diaspora. All activities of mass organisations of the regime are reported on, including those abroad.

In addition, the long arm of the Eritrean regime manifests itself in the churches in the diaspora, particularly the Eritrean Orthodox Church. These are often controlled directly from Asmara and play a role in establishing the Eritrean government's influence over the Eritrean diaspora abroad.

### ***PFDJ and YPFDJ***

Fear haunts the Eritrean community in the Netherlands. This fear is related to the awareness of surveillance and control. The PFDJ – the only political party in Eritrea with the president at its head – is operating in the Netherlands. According to many of the respondents, the Eritrean Embassy in the Netherlands is run by representatives of the PFDJ. Respondents explained that the Embassy functions under the direct control of the PFDJ, whose representatives are located in the Netherlands and in other European countries.

The PFDJ is the only party allowed in Eritrea. The refugees from the first migration wave are mainly supporters of this party. The Youth PFDJ (or YPFDJ) is the youth organisation of the government in the diaspora. The YPFDJ was founded in 2003 by the head of the PFDJ, Yemane Gebreab, and has divisions in many countries, including the Netherlands. The YPFDJ engages the second generation of Eritreans in the diaspora – the children of the refugees in the first migration wave. They do this by organising festivals, summer camps, and internships in Eritrea. The primary goal of the YPFDJ is to discourage animosity against the state of Eritrea. The members of the YPFDJ are expected to make the PFDJ an effective and efficient political organisation and to put youth in the centre of the PFDJ. The members must do this by knowing their enemies, as well as their strategies and instruments. Thus, the members of the YPFDJ are ordered to keep an eye on the enemies of the state and to report their activities to the PFDJ. This was also confirmed by multiple respondents in our interviews.

The experts interviewed by us, as well as the respondents who are former members of the YPFDJ, indicate that the members of the YPFDJ often join as adolescents and young adults, an age where social identity is formed. These youths are searching for who they are, are proud of their Eritrean identity, and some have been confronted with racism and exclusion. According to multiple respondents, racism and the ‘white’ versus ‘black’ discussions are important issues that are being capitalised on by the YPFDJ.

The members of the YPFDJ regularly come together in cities across the world, paid for and organised by the Eritrean regime. These meetings are held annually in the Netherlands and are invariably attended by the political representatives of the PFDJ, ministers, ambassadors and other dignitaries of the Eritrean state. YPFDJ Holland is the Dutch branch of the YPFDJ. The YPFDJ launched the Bidho Tours initiative (a music festival) in the Netherlands. The Eritrean vigilante group Eri-Blood is present at these meetings. Social media (Facebook, chat groups, Paltalk, Twitter, YouTube, websites such as Shabait) and the only TV channel in Eritrea, Eri-TV, are used for global coordination and news reporting.



### ***NUEW and NUEYS***

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the National Union of Eritrean Youth (NUEY), and the National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES) are mass movements that execute the policies of the PFDJ in Eritrea and outside, towards their specific target groups. They are organised up to local level and know everyone in their locale. The NUEY and NUES can be regarded as the youth movement of the PFDJ in Eritrea, while the YPFDJ is the youth movement outside of Eritrea. The NUEW was already founded in 1979 in Eritrea during the armed conflict for Eritrean independence. The headquarters of the NUEW is in Asmara and it has divisions over the entire globe. The organisation strives to unite all Eritrean women in Eritrea and abroad for the goals of justice, equality, peace and development, and to improve the societal, political and socioeconomic position of women, according to the board members of NUEW that were interviewed. The NUEW can be regarded as the women's movement of the PFDJ.

### ***Eritrean Orthodox Church***

The biggest religious organisation for Eritreans is the 'Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church'. The first Eritrean churches were founded in the Dutch cities of Rotterdam and Amstelveen. Besides the church in Amstelveen, the church in Rotterdam cooperates with the churches in Leiden, Alkmaar, Utrecht and Eindhoven (Nidos, 2016). Other locations are Assen, The Hague, Enschede, Kapelle, Leeuwarde, Nijmegen, Utrecht and Zwolle. Some of these establishments have existed for a long time, whereas others are relatively new and informal in character (*Ibid.*). These have not all been registered, as a Tabot<sup>43</sup> is needed in order to register as an official Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Multiple respondents from different migration waves particularly spoke out against the church of Rotterdam. They think the church is a part of the regime and spreads the propaganda of the regime: "I stopped going to the church in Rotterdam when I began to realise that it spreads propaganda about the Eritrean regime and has direct ties with the regime" (third migration wave, man). Dutch TV programme EenVandaag (2016) featured an Eritrean refugee (second migration wave) warning that highly religious minors were reportedly being brainwashed in the church of Rotterdam (EenVandaag, 2016).

The UN Commission of Inquiry (UN Human Rights Council, 2015) has pointed out the state control of religious institutions. The Patriarch, Abune Antonios, has been placed under house arrest and the Eritrean regime has appointed its own Patriarch, Abune Dioskoros, but his role as leader is contested. It seems

likely that the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the Netherlands is directly supervised by the PFDJ in Asmara. This was also reported in the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* (2 July 2014).

The highest authority lies with the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Rotterdam, according to the respondents, who say that this is the base from where authority is exercised over the other official Eritrean Orthodox Churches in Amstelveen, Leiden, Utrecht and Zwolle. New priests and counsellors were recently sent from among the PFDJ's loyal ranks to Zeist and Nijmegen, says one respondent. The priests, always men, are trained in the Eritrean church and are sent by Eritrea, according to multiple respondents. Respondents indicated that there are too many members in the official PFDJ-allied churches – more specifically the church in Rotterdam (which is too large) – and, therefore, no personal attention can be given. Mainly the members of the second generation (children of the first wave of refugees) indicate that the services inadequately respond to the needs of Eritreans living in the Netherlands. In addition, the services in Ge'ez (an old Semetic language) are not understood by members of the second generation: “As much as 500 people attend the service. That is too much. There is no attention for you” (third migration wave).

According to multiple respondents, the Eritrean Orthodox Church tries to exert influence on the refugees of the third wave. Socalled confessors visit reception locations and hold Bible studies and prayer services. The phenomenon of ‘boat priests’ and new priests is also ongoing in the third migration wave. The social workers interviewed said that they had noticed a lot of new priests in the groups of newcomers and that it is not always clear what their background or role is.

Multiple respondents indicate that there are tensions within the Eritrean Orthodox Church between the older generation from the first migration wave and the refugees from the third migration wave. Among the older generation are the supporters of the PFDJ, who view the ‘newcomers’ as traitors and would rather not have them in their church. Members of the older generation are in turn mistrusted by the third migration wave. Members of the third migration wave apply the rules of faith more strictly (too strictly according to some), say multiple respondents. Their attitude is strengthening the mistrust between members of the Eritrean diaspora.

In multiple cities, initiatives are taken to seek alternative locations for services and profession of faith. For example, in Rotterdam, a new church was started under the leadership of an excommunicated priest: “I am now going to the church of a priest that was sent away from the church at Rotterdam. There are much fewer

people and now we really receive attention. The focus is on the Bible and not on politics” (third migration wave, man).

These alternative initiatives are largely informal in nature and are often not officially registered (yet). Some are seeking to join the Ethiopian or Syrian Orthodox churches. Other respondents indicate that they go to Dutch churches (Christian or Catholic) or to ecumenical services. A recent example is the establishment of an ‘underground’ orthodox church that is loyal to Patriarch Abune Antonios, the Orthodox Tewahedo Saint Michael Church. This church gathers in Utrecht and has no permanent accommodation yet, but, according to respondents, many people attend. One highly traumatised respondent who visits this church said: “On Sundays, I go to the church in Utrecht. I do not like politics. I do not want anything to do with it” (third migration wave, man). Supporters of the regime spread a lot of negative information about this church and members are frightened.

## **Impact of the long arm on integration**

The interviews and documents point to a seemingly unavoidable conclusion: the organisations allied with the PFDJ, the YPFDJ, NUEW and others are reporting to the embassy and to the political head of the PFDJ in Asmara. The vigilante group Eri-Blood, operating in European countries, is seen at gatherings and festivals. In the interviews, respondents said that they fear that small groups of infiltrators are travelling along with groups of new refugees: infiltrators with assignments from the PFDJ in Asmara. Beside this, local organisations play a role in the surveillance.

The long arm of the Eritrean regime operates via the mass organisations described above, the embassy and the churches. Many members of the Eritrean community deem it of utmost importance to not be excluded by the Eritrean regime, in order to avoid issues (this will be elaborated on further in the next subheading on intimidation). The long arm of the Eritrean regime is also active through (local) organisations in the Netherlands.

### ***Informants***

The systems of informants in Eritrea and in the Netherlands are linked. In a statement to the Dutch court, a refugee who arrived in the Netherlands recently explained how the information system in Eritrea works. He stated this on the basis of his own experience as leader of a district. He explained how he received training with other YPFDJ members to collect information and provide it to superiors. If someone speaks badly of the leaders or political situation in Eritrea, this

information is communicated so that the person in question can be dealt with. He states that YPFDJ people go to Eritrea and that they know all the information from people in Europe, which they take back with them to Eritrea. Therefore, there is no political freedom among the diaspora in the Netherlands; everyone is being watched. Some of the interpreters at the asylum organisations in the Netherlands are also connected to the Eritrean intelligence. The information provided by the YPFDJ links directly to the intelligence system of the Eritrean regime in the diaspora. The information that is leaked back to Eritrea will affect the person's family. Anyone is a suspect, according to this statement.<sup>44</sup>

Eritreans in the Netherlands who have any business related to Eritrea are confronted with the authority of the PFDJ in the Netherlands. The first fear of many refugees revolves around information in the asylum procedure, which may end up reported back to the regime. Many do not trust interpreters, as they are often associated with attempts by regime supporters to get in contact with refugees. For this reason, Eritrean people in the Netherlands use the option of an interpreter's assistance less often, which hampers integration. There is a demand for a unified country-wide registration for Eritrean interpreters who work for the government and commercial translation services that can be used by public organisations and authorities. For this, it is useful to make a distinction between the different purposes for which the interpreters can be deployed (for example: commercially, as cultural mediators, etc.). Concerns expressed by refugees about interpreters reporting back to the PFDJ reached the authors who received messages from Eritrean refugees about problems with interpreters in Italy, Switzerland and Germany. Police investigations are regularly delayed because of the mistrust that victims have of interpreters. Informants and PFDJ supporters film demonstrations so that they can record exactly who was there. This, again, can result in repercussions for family members in Eritrea. The question of who is an informant leads to much mistrust among members of the Eritrean community.

### ***Eritrean organisations***

The Eritrean organisations in the diaspora are strongly divided along political and religious lines and there are hardly any organisations in which polarised groups overlap or meet. In the political sense, the members of the Eritrean community are divided between supporters and opponents of the regime. They are also strongly divided along religious and ethno-religious lines. Supporters of the Eritrean regime associate themselves with the Dutch branch of the PFDJ, the governing party of Eritrea, and with the YPFDJ. The various organisations do not cooperate together.

Cooperation is hampered by the strong mistrust within the community. People always fear possible affinity with the regime and potential infiltration of supporters.

The first local organisations were founded by refugees from the first migration wave, who asked for support for the independence struggle. After independence, these refugees stayed – especially in the beginning – loyal to the PFDJ and the current regime. The majority of local organisations officially claim to be neutral and apolitical, to be open to all Eritreans, to not take part in politics, and to not have contact with the embassy or the regime. However, many respondents strongly doubt these claims. The supporters of the regime are well organised within the diaspora and try to exert influence over local Eritrean communities. The (Y)PFDJ plays an important role in this. The supporters of the regime respond quickly, explicitly, and fiercely to any criticism and opposition.

The opposition is more fragmented in its organisation than the supporters of the regime. However, the various opposition movements do work together, for example, in the organisation of demonstrations. Recently, the opposition in the Netherlands has started to form a collective organisation in order to form a platform and a central contact point. Beyond its political goals, this platform wants to establish the opportunity for members of the opposition to meet through socio-cultural activities (as a counterpart to the gatherings of the YPFDJ) and to support newcomers. Individuals who form initiatives specifically aimed at supporting and providing assistance to the third migration wave, without a political message, experience disruption by strong politicisation.

There are strong indications that a large number of the local organisations have been infiltrated or taken over by the PFDJ in the past years. Many board members or active members of these organisations profile themselves as active PFDJ or YPFDJ members and/or openly pursue the goals of the PFDJ. The embassy and the PFDJ, which operates from within the embassy, play an important role in the monitoring and direct management of these organisations, according to many respondents. The embassy itself denies this and argues that it only offers support.

New organisations have all experienced, to a certain extent, warnings, threats, intimidation and attempts to infiltrate or take over these initiatives. In some organisations, these attempts have succeeded, while other organisations have ceased to exist or stayed neutral. Some have actively joined the opposition and broken all ties with the regime.

### *Divisions in the Eritrean diaspora community*

The entire network of Eritrean organisations is in constant motion. Refugees from the third migration wave have founded their own organisations, partly because they fear the influence of the regime within existing organisations. Within the Eritrean Orthodox Church, groups have split off to start their own churches, independent from the regime. Groups that fear interference by the regime are also reaching out to other churches within the Netherlands. Many of our respondents are under the impression that the influence of the PFDJ and YPFDJ is somewhat reduced by the large number of Eritrean refugees who have recently come to the Netherlands in the third migration wave. Nevertheless, the entire situation in the Eritrean community remains strongly politicised: 'neutral' does not exist. According to the regime and its supporters, neutral means 'against Eritrea' and according to the opposition, neutral means 'pro-PFDJ'. There is, however, a large silent group who are afraid, keep their mouths shut, and do not want to stand out. The refugees from the third migration wave often feel misunderstood by the refugees from the first wave. They often mistrust those from the first migration wave. Part of the third migration wave has the tendency, for various reasons, to withdraw within their own group. However, initiatives in which Dutch volunteers and care workers cooperate with refugees and with community counsellors who have lived in the Netherlands for a long time, such as cultural mediators, show positive developments.

### ***Concerns around integration***

All organisations and respondents view education and learning the Dutch language as a precondition for integration. Additionally, the supporters of the regime see maintaining good ties with Eritrea as important. As a refugee, you are responsible for contributing to Eritrea. This also explains why supporters are not involved much with newcomers (as newcomers are seen as traitors to Eritrea). Fear and mistrust negatively affect the integration of Eritreans into Dutch society. More on intimidation will be described below.

With regard to the first migration wave, the responses of the interviewees mainly point at concerns about women and the less educated, whose command of the Dutch language is often poor and who are often dependent on social welfare payments. The members of this group are sensitive to pressure and intimidation, and stay silent due to fear and mistrust.

The children of the first wave of refugees (the second generation) often do well in the area of integration. There is a group, however, who, despite good education, are experiencing problems on the job market and dealing with racism and

discrimination. These are the people who are receptive to recruitment by the YPFDJ.

The situation of the second migration wave is comparable to the first. It is the third migration wave that is the main source of concern for everyone. The main concerns relate to mistrust, the enormous cultural gap, the low level of education, and the immense trauma experienced by these refugees (trauma sustained in Eritrea, en route and related to family left behind). Furthermore, there is a lot of pressure from financial burdens borne by this group. There is also pressure from Dutch society, for example, to obtain the correct papers, but also financial pressure to somehow pay for one's own escape journey and/or those of others. This group has been confronted with human trafficking (of themselves or of near relatives, spouses and children), including the extortion that follows and the insecurity that these situations cause.

Severe forms of trauma (including sexual trauma) form a serious obstacle to integration and participation in Dutch society. The symptoms of trauma can manifest in many different ways. Sometimes, this can lead to the use of extremely traditional religious customs that are poorly understood and recognised in the Netherlands. The refugees have little faith in discussing trauma, due to, among other things, mistrust and the fact that such topics are usually not discussed in Eritrea. They, therefore, rely on the comfort offered by traditional structures such as the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

On the other hand, this group is also characterised by a strong motivation to learn the Dutch language and start working. This differs from the first migration wave, in which most refugees invested little time in integration and participation early on, as they assumed that they would be going back to Eritrea soon.

Learning the Dutch language alone is not enough to integrate into Dutch society. The entire manner of communication has to be adjusted. The manner of communication and learning to build a network are skills that require training. In the case of the third migration wave, the low level of education should be taken into account. Integration is not just about social variables, but also about spatial planning and housing: does an Eritrean person live in isolation with a group of other Eritreans at the edge of a city, or does an individual Eritrean live in a neighbourhood or village? In the latter situation integration is easier, according to research in Nijmegen conducted by Ezli Suitela. The explanation for this seems to be that contact with Dutch people and Dutch organisations is easier in such situations. Via informal contacts the refugees can improve their Dutch and build a network. Through coaching and support from a 'buddy', the gap can be closed as

quickly as possible, in the area of language as well as culture. Living in a neighbourhood or village also helps to reduce loneliness and timidity.

### *Asylum applications*

The policies of European member states with regard to documents needed for asylum applications for Eritrean refugees are considerably divergent. Several countries no longer accept documents issued by the Eritrean embassies, consulates and churches because of the impression that such documents are issued in an arbitrary way. Lawyers and social workers do not feel that there is a uniform policy approach in the Netherlands in relation to documents from the embassy and the church. As a result, some lawyers and social workers send their clients to the embassy or church to obtain documents, while others see this as undesirable (due to the possible repercussions or reprisals for family members in Eritrea) and unreliable or arbitrary in nature. Some feel forced to send clients to the embassy or the church despite the objections mentioned, due to lack of alternative procedures. There is a need for more clarity on the legal framework of the Dutch Integration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Lawyers and legal experts require a clear position stating that documents from the embassy are a negative indication for asylum procedures and family reunion procedures. Clear guidelines for alternative procedures are needed in order to legally demonstrate matters.

## **Forms of intimidation**

The interviews show that fear, and the resulting pressure, is occurring on a sliding scale from subtle and implicit to explicit to threats and violence. Members of the Eritrean community are afraid to 'overstep the mark' and cross the invisible red line drawn by the regime. When questioned what their fear is based on, it becomes apparent that people fear that threats will not be the end of it. In the interviews, several examples were mentioned which illustrate the manner in which fear is created within the Eritrean community. The examples demonstrate that fears seems justified in many cases, but whether this fear is founded or unfounded actually does not matter. As the Thomas theorem states: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". The pressure is not only determined by personal experiences, but also by the information circulating in the community about intimidation. Trust in the rule of law, as we know it in the Netherlands, is being undermined by fear of reprisals, even if one has not experienced such reprisals directly.



According to respondents, most of the members of the Eritrean community have encountered the forms of intimidation that will be described below, to a greater or lesser extent. The largest group of respondents reported having encountered implicit or subtle pressure. Only a small proportion of the active supporters of the regime indicated feeling no pressure.

The integration of members of the Eritrean community is hampered by a constant stream of information and rumours within the community with regard to matters such as safety and violence. A factor in this is the lack of trust in authorities and the government, partly due to their experiences with government institutions in Eritrea, as well as experiences during their migration journeys and with human smuggling and trafficking. This research shows that, despite the barriers caused by fear, notifications and reports of crimes are being filed. Notifications and police reports relate to: assault, rape, disappearances, (reported) suicide, extortion in relation to human smuggling and trafficking, extortion in relation to payment of the 2% tax and other 'voluntary' contributions, and intimidation.

Below, the varying ways of intimidation and exerting pressure are described, from subtle forms to grave threats.

### **'03' & '09'**

There are two mechanisms central to the way in which the Eritrean community is connected with Eritrea. These mechanisms form the basis of the fear that is created and the pressure experienced. Members of the Eritrean community all over the world know them by their code names: '03' ('bado seleste') and '09' ('bado tisha'ate'). '03' refers to the mechanism of 'being talked about', 'gossiped about', or 'slandered'; some refer to it as 'propaganda'. It means that you are being talked about by supporters of the regime. The manner in which you are spoken about gives an indication of what the regime (the PFDJ, the system) thinks about you: whether you are a loyal progovernment supporter, a 'real Eritrean', or have placed yourself outside the community. In the latter case, you will be warned and this causes insecurity and fear: "That is more the insecurity, fear – you do not know what is being said about you and by whom and what happens with it, it is called 03 and 09" (first migration wave, man).

'03' refers to the extent to which you are in favour. '09' refers to the entirety of financial transactions to the Eritrean regime, which are the foundation of all relations and which has its own set of rules. '03' and '09' are closely interrelated. Repercussions by the authorities fall under '03', '09' or both. These were some of

the number codes given to the various departments of the liberation movement during the liberation struggle.

### ***Implicit and subtle pressure***

The largest proportion of the community suffers from implicit pressure – ‘I will participate with everything, because what if something happens to my family if I do not?’ – and subtle forms of pressure, like being told that you are being watched. The group that deals with this makes sure that they do not stand out. These individuals form the ‘silent’ mass and ‘simply’ pay the 2% tax for Eritrea: “Most people pay the tax and go to gatherings: not because they are staunch supporters, but because they think ‘if I do not go, then my family may experience trouble’. Say I want to go to Eritrea for my sister’s funeral, if I do not go... they will gossip about me” (first migration wave, woman).

Some respondents say that the supporters of the PFDJ and YPFDJ experience pressure too: “They have much to lose. They probably have more to lose than I do. I am blacklisted so I cannot go to Eritrea anyway. They have more to be afraid of” (Interview, first migration wave, second generation, woman).

### ***Notification and warning***

The next step is receipt of a notification or warning, in which it is indicated that one has crossed the line (drawn by the regime). A respondent from the first migration wave explains what happened to her and how she responded:

*There was an Eritrean who did something at a Dutch organisation. He had invited me as guest speaker, I was considering this. Then I received a phone call from the party in the embassy and he asked me: ‘Have you seen the invitation, are you planning to go? You must think carefully; you often travel to Eritrea and your connection with these people is causing you to come under the special attention of the Eritrean government’. So I said – “I know that everything I do is transferred to the Eritrean government. I then decided not to do it. I certainly experienced it as pressure.”* (Interview, first migration wave, first generation, woman)

This statement got to the core of the matter: the suspicion or the knowledge that you are being watched and knowing or fearing that there are, or could be, consequences if you do not behave according to the guidelines of the authorities, the PFDJ, the embassy and the churches loyal to the PFDJ in the Netherlands. You could be discussed here or in Eritrea, with all the consequences this brings. This mechanism is referred to as ‘03’. Respondents say that there is an invisible line – including for Eritreans in the Netherlands – that was better not to cross.

*I have been pressured too at some points. I was invited for a lecture, by someone who was seen as pro-Ethiopian. After I had done this, a lot of animosity grew – and people spoke of treason. There is a red line. Because I do not have a clear political colour (I am not a member of the party but also not a member of the opposition), I am warned sometimes. But the key is the red line. The red line is, for example, if I attend a conference by the opposition and I give them recognition and I speak there; then I have crossed the red line. If I am on the list of invitations, then I come close to the red line.* (Interview, first generation, woman)

These consequences are of importance to the wellbeing and life in the Netherlands, but also for the situation of family members in Eritrea and the extent to which Eritreans can help them and take care of them: “My family in Eritrea received phone calls asking if they knew what I was doing. [Respondent took the initiative of forming an organisation]. They were being pressured to talk to me” (Interview, first migration wave, first generation, man).

Many feel it is of key importance not to be excluded from the goodwill of the regime. That is certainly the case for people from the first migration wave to the Netherlands. It is better to conform, to stay within the red lines and to pay the financial contributions asked for, including the 2% tax.

### ***Vilification***

Several respondents say that they or other people are vilified in the community, i.e., referred to in a negative way or excluded socially:

*I refused to pay [the tax] and openly criticised the regime. People gossiped about me. People were warned about me. They say that I am not a real Eritrean, but an Ethiopian – that is an insult for us. I say that I am [the] son of [names his family tree] from...[names place]. But sometimes it works. I am no longer welcome at some parties. I am no longer being invited by people from the community.* (Interview, second migration wave, man)

When family members or acquaintances are vilified, this causes fear too: “I hear all the stories. Things are being twisted. People will believe anything. I am afraid they will do something to him. I often say: watch out. People talk about you. Think of your children” (Interview, first migration wave, woman).

### ***Placing informants in the private sphere***

Another way of exerting pressure is to place informants in the private sphere. This is experienced as a great violation. In one statement to a Dutch judge, a human rights activist from Eritrea living in the United Kingdom said that a nanny who had taken care of her children for years turned out to be reporting to the Eritrean Embassy in London. We have not encountered any substantiated examples

in the Netherlands, but in the internationally connected Eritrean community, this example left an impression.

### ***Triggering divorce***

Some respondents indicated that family members were, or are, being approached. They are being pressured and misinformed. Some of the respondents who are openly in opposition to the regime indicated that their marriage had ended due to the consequences of interventions by pro-regime supporters: “They were telling my wife all kinds of things about me. They were not true. But finally, she could not stand the pressure. We got a divorce. She has taken the kids” (Interview, first migration wave, first generation, man).

### ***Intimidation***

Multiple respondents indicate that there are cases where physical action was taken. People are being threatened in phone calls and visits. There are examples of beatings, which are mostly executed – as far as known – by Eri-Blood. “I have been beaten on the streets by three men. Ever since then, I am cautious whenever I see a group of Eritrean men” (Interview, second migration wave, man). The media have already published on this topic (Freidel, 2016; Plaut, 2015). Sexual violence or threats of sexual violence may also occur, but not enough is known to determine this.

### ***Taking away privileges and services***

The vast majority of the open opposition members state that their privileges have been taken away and that they can certainly no longer use the services of the Eritrean Embassy or other institutions. They can no longer pay the 2% tax or make other contributions (unless expressing that they repent their decision and sign a written apology). They are no longer welcome at gatherings in the community (although exceptions have been mentioned). In general, it seems that those who do not toe the line are in danger of becoming a victim of social exclusion and isolation (weddings and funerals can form an exception, where one may be able to attend).

### ***Taking away privileges and services of family members and acquaintances***

According to respondents, there is a great fear that the privileges of family and friends will be taken away by the regime. This was often discussed by respondents. In this way, social pressure is orchestrated and attempts are made to turn the person in question ‘around’ by showing them what the consequences will be for those around them. Referring to the pressure as ‘blackmail’, one respondent said that the

pressure is especially problematic when you still have family in Eritrea, due to the possible repercussions for your family: “The blackmail is a problem. If anyone is still in the country, you really have a problem. It depends on the situation” (Interview, first migration wave, woman).

### ***Punishment of family and acquaintances***

The still greater fear is the possibility of family members or acquaintances in Eritrea being punished. Family left behind in Eritrea are often already in very difficult circumstances. Punishments can include fines, their food coupons being taken away, or imprisonment. Family members and acquaintances may also disappear without a word. These situations happen and these stories are known in the Eritrean community, so it is not only fear, but also a concrete experience that guides their behaviour. What makes the pressure particularly oppressive is the randomness of the rules, demands, fines and punishments in Eritrea. The lack of a justice system in Eritrea means that people are at the mercy of arbitrary circumstances:

*The son of my sister had epilepsy, and therefore she had a medical reason for why he could not go into the military service. But she did have to pay a deposit. We monitored the situation. When they came to pressure her, he went underground. She was told that if he would not come, she would get a fine of 15,000 nakfa [around 1,000 US dollars]. Then soldiers came and he suffered a heart attack because of the stress. A mourning ceremony followed and during that service, the rumour that he had not died but that he had gone underground was circulated and then my sister had to pay 15,000 nakfa anyway. You can't make that up! Everything is totally random, nobody can tell you who gave what orders. (Interview, first migration wave, man)*

The repercussions lead to a feeling of pressure. The randomness of the measures causes further tension. Fear of using social media also exists, because people are afraid of being spotted, as it can lead to repercussions for family members:

*I don't want to have anything to do with politics. I know people are watching you. When you share a message on Facebook, your family could be in trouble. That is why I don't do it. You never know. (Interview, third migration wave, man)*

*I follow everything on Facebook, but I never respond to anything. When I want to respond, I do so via a message. I know people follow everything. (Interview, third migration wave, woman)*

In another interview carried out for this research the respondent, who was imprisoned and tortured in Eritrea, stated: “When I escaped my wife was put in

prison. She was put in prison for two weeks when I escaped” (Interview, third migration wave, man). The wife later disappeared and he has not heard of her since.

### ***Deportation***

Eritrea operates in surrounding countries and there are stories about refugees (family members, acquaintances) being kidnapped and deported by the regime, after which they disappear in Eritrea, are sent to prison, or return to military service. The fear of being threatened with this or it actually happening is also a means of blackmail for Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands, as many of them have experienced this themselves and/or know people who have.

### ***Trolling, public media and death threats***

The interviews also found that people are being watched and vilified on social media. Instances of ‘trolling’ (where people are being watched and receive death threats) have been reported in the media:

*Mekonnen says the threats against him intensified when he openly called for the international criminal court to investigate the regime, led by president Isaias Afwerki.*

*A Twitter account called @HagerEritrea, meaning the ‘state of Eritrea’ in Tigrinya, denounced Mekonnen and called on him ‘to be hunted for justice’. A few days later he was called a ‘criminal’ who would ‘heave [sic] price for the crimes he committed against humanity.’ The account’s bio claims that ‘Eritrean policies are the best in Africa’. (Shearlaw, 2015)*

Obscene pictures are posted on social media of persons who are being watched. In a court case against the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, the way in which people are being followed and attacked on social media came up; it was reported that specific journalists and politicians had been targeted in order to cause a maximum amount of reputation loss for those involved.

### ***Targeted threats***

When a person is targeted, he or she usually hears about it, which creates a lot of distress and fear. Speaking about the way these threats are concretely executed, one respondent indicated that she feared for her life. Another respondent interviewed said that he has gone underground and uses pseudonyms due to attempts on his life. Other respondents who are actively being threatened choose to embrace publicity and accept the possible consequences for them and their family members.

The threats cut deeply into the lives of people. This respondent describes how the looming threats control her life completely:

*For example, me. I am always at home. When I go out the door, I always take care to be together with others. I know how much danger I am in. The problem with these people is, they don't do it out of conviction, but in order to please someone else. That makes it much more dangerous. [...] I won't go out the door without other people. I am one of those who is being searched for. At the embassy as well, there are some people who have been trained to kill people and those have now been placed back here – these kinds of people are specially trained. Intimidation is very much alive here in the Netherlands and in Europe. (Interview, first migration wave, woman)*

### ***Suicide***

Several respondents interviewed expressed their concerns about suicide, or deaths ruled as suicide but where the cause or circumstances of death are being questioned.

### ***Disappearances***

There is concern within the community about mysterious disappearances that were never solved. This concerns multiple disappearances in different locations in the Netherlands. The total number of these is unknown. It is unknown whether these disappearances are 'criminal liquidations' or have another background.

### ***Murder attempts***

Some respondents reported a number of murder attempts, including, among other things, physical threats and poisoning. It is assumed that the order for a murder attempt is not necessarily executed by members of the Eritrean community.

Intimidation starts with fear. The fear that is described above forms a real barrier to the participation and integration of Eritreans in the Netherlands.

## **The 2% tax**

Many of the refugees and Eritrean-Dutch citizens pay the 2% tax levied by the Eritrean government (which is 2% of their income, including for those who are unemployed and on social welfare benefits). An important task of the PFDJ (and the organisations, movements, and churches allied to the PFDJ) is the collection of revenue in the form of the 2% tax, donations, and other contributions. The 2% tax should not be seen in isolation, but is part of a system with all kinds of formal and informal contributions. The gathering of taxes and contributions is combined with the previously mentioned forms of intimidation. Although it is stated by the Eritrean government to be a voluntary contribution, very few people truly pay the 2% tax of their own volition. The main goal of paying the tax is to access privileges and services that are supposed to be separate from such payments – alongside the

goals of being left alone and protecting their family. Therefore, it is no wonder that Dutch authorities say that few police reports are filed in relation to this.

The collection of taxes and contributions is organised mainly through gatherings, large parties, festivals and concerts. Very large amounts are involved and the pressure to meet these large amounts has been increased substantially. A former Deputy Minister of Finance for Eritrea, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, and former leaders of the YPFDJ in Europe and the Netherlands assert that the collection of revenue is one of the most important goals of organisations in the diaspora. The sources of revenue include, in addition to contributions from members, subsidies received by the organisations in question. The management of the revenue of the YPFDJ is handled by the Eritrean Embassy, led by the head of the political department of the PFDJ in Eritrea.

The embassy describes the tax as a voluntary contribution of 2%, which is sought without any pressure or coercion in order to support the needs of the victims of the 30-year long struggle for independence (widows, orphans and war invalids). However, question marks surround the voluntary nature of this tax.

- Firstly, the tax must be paid if one wants to make use of consular services.
- Secondly, the payments must be made for a variety of reasons related to the affairs of family in Eritrea (for example, a funeral of close relatives).
- Thirdly, 'voluntary' is a relative term within a climate of fear, mistrust and intimidation.

The 2% tax and financial contributions seem to be part of the system of fear and intimidation. The question can also be asked if a 'voluntary' tax is not a contradiction. A 'tax' is per definition obligatory.

It is notable that the tax plays a lesser role for Eritrean refugees in the third migration wave in the Netherlands, because this group is usually not required to use the services of the Embassy for their asylum procedure in the Netherlands. However, many problems do arise in situations of family reunion, when the Embassy may be required to provide crucial information.

The following criteria may deserve further consideration regarding the 2% tax and other contributions:

- There may be abuse of power by way of extortion, because the provision of consular services is being made contingent on payment of the tax for other purposes; this is in contravention of the Vienna Convention on Consular



Relations.

- The purpose of the collection of revenue – even if it is marked as a voluntary contribution – may not be specific and the realisation of the goals is unknowable.
- Some collections may be aimed at specific services (e.g., one goal is to build houses, but there might be no indication that houses have been built with the money collected), and possibly the money is used for completely different unknown goals.
- There may be no information as to what extent the reconstruction of Eritrea is being achieved through the use of the collected money, due to the lack of public financial management in Eritrea (which has no budget, no treasury, and no independent central bank).

For these same reasons, it may not be known if, and how, these contributions are being used for possible military goals in the region, nor can the use of contributions for military goals be prevented. This conclusion was recently drawn by the UN Monitoring Group (UNSC, 2016) and is in contravention of the weapons embargo placed on Eritrea by the UN Security Council.

Further investigation of the contributions can show if – and under which circumstances – these contributions can be viewed as legal. The following aspects can be used as criteria for further investigation into the nature and scope of these financial contributions:

- Information on the reason behind the contribution (was sufficiently insightful and clear information available?)
- The manner of obtaining the contribution (was improper pressure used?)
- The extent of voluntariness or extortion (were the purposes improper?)
- The relationship between the stated objectives of the contributions and the delivery of these (have any false pretences been made?)
- The transparency of the spending of the contribution (is there any public information available about how the contribution has been spent?)
- The connection with illegal transactions (in which financial flow did the contribution end up and was this transaction legal?)

## **Conclusion**

Eritrean refugees from the different migration waves have specific characteristics that offer points of departure for integration and participation. This calls for customized solutions, especially at the level of local communities. Customization should be supported by the transfer of knowledge. This could, for example, take the shape of assistance for local government and welfare organisations in determining focus points for the support of Eritrean refugees from the different waves. Some examples of such focus points are the role of fear and intimidation in the community, differences in culture between the different waves (and with host communities), the recruitment and deployment of interpreters, the recruitment and selection of Eritrean volunteers, the 2% tax and other payments to the Eritrean government, and problems related to debts, trauma, sexuality and religion. In addition, a clearer image of which specific organisations are linked to the Eritrean regime would be of benefit at the local level.

The members of the third wave of refugees are young and highly motivated to quickly start working. Looking for a goal and fulfilment of a duty are important motivators for many of the refugees in the third wave. They are motivated to build future perspectives and they are of an age where integration can be very successful. Initiatives in the area of (elderly) care and wellbeing exist and have shown to be successful (see (DSP-Groep Amsterdam & Tilburg Universiteit, 2016).

However, the integration of Eritrean refugees in Dutch society is hampered by fear of the long arm of the Eritrean regime, which manifests itself in the Netherlands in various ways. The mass organisations under the authority of the PFDJ, mainly the YPFDJ, the Eritrean Embassy and some of the Eritrean Orthodox Churches, play the role of executing PFDJ policies in the diaspora. The same system of collecting information about people that exists in Eritrea is linked directly with the system in the diaspora. The fear of being watched leads to suspicion and divisions in the Eritrean community in the diaspora.

For Eritrean organisations, staying neutral is difficult in the highly politicised diaspora society. New organisations are under threat of being pressured or taken over by government supporters. When people in the Eritrean diaspora do not cooperate with the Eritrean government or speak out against it, intimidation and threats follow. These range from subtle and implicit to explicit and violent threats and deeds. Those with family in Eritrea fear repercussions against them.

Pressure and intimidation by the Eritrean regime are considered a proven and established fact by the researchers of the report. The report concludes that this pressure leads to serious integration issues for Eritreans in the Netherlands. This is compounded by (i) in combination with normal migration and integration issues

(different language, culture, climate, surroundings), (ii) the grave nature of trauma experienced by many (if not most) migrants from the third wave, (iii) the lack of understanding and mistrust between the Eritrean members of different migration waves and (iv) between generations of Eritreans, and the level of intimidation.

Overt intimidation and humiliation contribute to the fear. The research shows that despite these obstacles, members from the Eritrean community in the Netherlands file police reports. A thorough analysis of the existing police reports can give a better overview of the problems and underlying patterns of intimidation.

In order to guarantee good integration of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands, it is essential that the fundamental values of the rule of law are protected and that all citizens know that they are protected from fear, intimidation or worse. Fear of violence and intimidation contributes to a climate of isolation and mistrust. Specialised investigation work and specialised judicial work from the Public Prosecutor is required in order to investigate these matters thoroughly. European cooperation in this area is recommended.

The Dutch government has already undertaken steps to prohibit the 2% tax on the diaspora in the Netherlands, based on the UN Security Council Resolution 2023, when this is collected by use of threat, intimidation or fraud, or when the tax is used for military goals in contravention with the weapons embargo (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). In addition, the Dutch government has promised to investigate the tax in other European Union member states and to investigate and promote police reports by Eritreans in the Netherlands. Other issues relate to the deep divisions in the Eritrean community, which negatively influence integration.

The problems for women and girls among the refugees of the third wave require special attention. Many of them have been, and are being, abused. The situation of women and girls is often experienced as uncomfortable – with feelings of unease, lack of selfconfidence and guilt. The intimacy of the matters, the need for protection and the possibility of extortion can further increase the vulnerability of these women and girls. The researchers received reports of prostitution, which is reportedly happening on a large scale (including among minors). Therefore, there is a need for female counsellors within the Dutch organisations supporting asylum seekers and for efforts to help women and girls to make decisions around sexuality and relations in order to build trust and aid integration in the Netherlands. The first step is enabling caretakers to speak about this with their pupils. The help desk that was mentioned earlier can play an important role in the issues of possible abuse and prostitution of female minors.

Due to the particular situation of Eritrea and Eritrean refugees, and the high apprehension of authorities, the report recommends a low-threshold help desk where members of the Eritrean community can speak about their concerns. In particular, a thorough understanding of the issues is crucial to win the trust of the community. Such a help desk could pick up signals from the Eritrean community about problems that occur, such as pressure and intimidation, as well as other issues that form barriers to integration. This would ensure that problems and misconduct are identified and communicated in a timely fashion to the institutions involved.

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<sup>43</sup> A Tabot is a sacred altar plate, made of wood or stone, which symbolizes the Ark of the Covenant (within it the Ten Commandments) and represents the presence of God in each Eritrean Tewahedo Orthodox Church.

<sup>44</sup> The full statement can be read in English in the report, p. 80 (DSP-Groep & Tilburg Universiteit, 2016).

## Chapter 11

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### Atlantic Council: The Eritrean Regime's US Spin Doctors?45

*François Christophe*

*When Eritreans leave, they do it for economic opportunities. In order to get a green card, they have to say that they're oppressed.*

(Deputy Director, Africa Center of the Atlantic Council, Bruton, 2015).

*Eritrean officials have engaged in a persistent, widespread and systematic attack against the country's civilian population since 1991. They have committed, and continue to commit, the crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder.*

(Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, UNHRC, 2015, p. 18).

## Introduction

Contrary to classic dictatorships, the totalitarian state does not simply target political opponents, but society as a whole. It methodically destroys all forms of human solidarity that are not directly under its control, from religious congregations and civil society organisations down to the family unit, in order to exert absolute rule over a population of atomized and defenceless individuals. Whereas those who do not actively oppose the government are usually safe in an 'ordinary' dictatorship – they can choose to stay away from politics and seek refuge in the private sphere – a totalitarian state requires that each and every one of its citizens to be entirely dedicated to its leader and official ideology. Eritrea is one of the world's few totalitarian states, although you would never know it from the reports of the Atlantic Council – a think tank on international affairs with its headquarters in Washington. This chapter examines the peculiar bias in the Atlantic Council's coverage of Eritrea.

## What we know about the human rights situation in Eritrea

Reputed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), among many others, paint a bleak picture of the human rights situation in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016; UNHRC, 2016). In June 2014, UNHRC established a special UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (COIE) to document the situation. The COIE concluded that the Eritrean government engages in “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” and that “it is not the law that rules Eritreans, but fear” (UNHRC, 2015, p. 1 & p. 8). Despite “the facade of calm and normality that is apparent to the occasional visitor”, human rights violations by the authorities include “enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, reprisals and other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder” (UNHRC, 2016, p.5 and p.18). The scale of the abuse largely explains why Eritrea, which according to the World Bank only had 4.8 million people in 2011, sent more refugees to Europe than any other country in Africa in 2015: more than 5% of the total population fled between 2003 and 2013 (Jeangène Vilmer & Gouéry, 2015, p. 209). In one incident, on 3 April 2016, “as military/national service conscripts were being transported through the centre of Asmara, several conscripts jumped from the trucks on which they were traveling. Soldiers fired into the crowd, killing and injuring an unconfirmed number of conscripts and bystanders” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 9).

Yosief Ghebrehiwet, one of the most perceptive analysts of Eritrean politics, describes contemporary Eritrea as a large-scale, multi-layered penitentiary system comprising several prisons, in the manner of a Russian doll (Ghebrehiwet, as cited in Jeangène Vilmer, &Gouéry, 2015, p. 142):

- The tens of thousands of prisoners populating Eritrea’s jails make up the narrowest circle, the “prison within a prison within a prison”.
- A broader, middle circle includes the hundreds of thousands of military conscripts whom the government uses as forced labourers.
- Finally, the outer circle encompasses the entire population, who lives in fear of arrest and is forbidden from leaving the country, hence the depiction of Eritrea as a “prison state.”

An essential layer of Eritrea’s repressive system is its mandatory military service, which is indefinite in duration. Although national service is officially justified by the threat posed by foreign enemies such as Ethiopia, it provides the government with a constant supply of virtually free labour and allows it to “maintain control over the



Eritrean population” (UNHRC, 2016, p.12). Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International note that *agelglots* (‘conscripts’ in Tigrinya) “serve indefinitely, many for over a decade” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2) and “up to twenty years” (Amnesty International, 2016), despite the fact that national service is officially limited to 18 months. “Children as young as 15 are sometimes conscripted” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2), and all conscripts are forced to work “for government-owned construction firms, farms, or manufacturers” (*Ibid.*, p. 2), for little or no pay. According to the COIE, “the use of forced labor, including domestic servitude” primarily serves “private, PFDJ [People’s Front for Democracy and Justice]-controlled and [s]tate-owned interests” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 12). Individual army generals, for instance, use forced *agelglot* labour to build new homes for themselves (unpublished report, 2015).<sup>46</sup> During national service, “perceived infractions result in incarceration and physical abuse often amounting to torture. Military commanders and jailers have absolute discretion to determine the length of incarceration and severity of physical abuse” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2). Female conscripts are often raped by commanders, a crime that goes unpunished. In the words of a leading expert on Eritrea:

*...[national service] progressively sank into a nightmarish quagmire of exploitation resulting in quasi-slavery. Many of the young women are routinely raped, work conditions are miserable, with monthly ‘salaries’ of 450 nakfa [USD 9], no proper place to sleep, no health care, very poor food, no home leave allowed for months, and at times for years, ‘deserters’ hunted down by the army and sentenced to several months in jail followed by indefinite work periods, dangerous digging or construction jobs performed without proper security equipment and resulting in workers frequently being injured or killed on the job. (Anon., personal communication [unpublished report], 2015)*

Outside of national service, Eritreans live in fear of arbitrary arrest, in the complete absence of any rule of law. Prisoners are rarely told the reason for the arrest, and “most are detained without any form of judicial proceeding whatsoever” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 8). Detainees are held in “shipping containers, with no space to lie down, little or no light, oppressive heat or cold, and vermin” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 3). According to the COIE, torture is “systematic” (UNHRC, 2016, p.8), a “clear indicator of a deliberate policy” to “instill fear among the population and silence opposition” (in Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 3). The security services also resort to enforced disappearances, about which the “friends and family of disappeared persons [are] never able to obtain information officially” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 13). Plain-clothed informants abound, as part of the country’s “complex and militarised system of surveillance” (in Human Rights Watch, 2016,

p. 3). Religious minorities, such as evangelicals, are specifically targeted and their members imprisoned.

As anyone can be denounced to the authorities with little justification, mistrust corrodes friendships and family relations. In addition, relatives can be fined, deprived of government services or even jailed as a punishment for the actions of their family member – a form of guilt by association. Fear of reprisals against loved ones is used to coerce Eritrean refugees abroad into paying a special 2% government tax (see [Chapter 10](#) for more on the 2% tax and other voluntary contributions), despite the fact that they no longer reside in Eritrea. This also explains why those in the diaspora who take part in demonstrations denouncing the rule of President Isaias Afwerki sometimes choose to wear masks to remain anonymous. As leaving the country is forbidden, escapees risk being shot at the border, although authorities have enabled a lucrative smuggling business, turning the Eritrean exodus into a significant source of revenue, particularly for the military (Jeangène Vilmer & Gouéry, 2015; see also [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) of this book).

Politically, Eritrea has not held elections since it became officially independent from Ethiopia in 1993. A constitution was adopted in 1996, but never implemented. “Power [...] is concentrated in the hands of the President and of a small and amorphous circle of military and political loyalists” (UNHRC, 2016, p.16). There is no independent media as the country’s newspapers, TV and radio channels are all government-owned and operated, prompting Reporters Without Borders to rank Eritrea at the very bottom of its international index of press freedom since 2008 (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). “All of the independent print media were arrested” in September 2001, not long after opposition members “who had dared to publish an open letter [...] calling on the government to implement the (1996) constitution and hold elections” were also jailed (Reporters Without Borders, 2016; see also [Chapter 3](#) of this book). The men were never tried, but put in solitary confinement in a remote detention centre, where most of them have likely died. In 2009, Isaias Afwerki responded to Sweden’s requests to free Dawit Isaak – one of the imprisoned journalists and a Swedish national – by publicly declaring: “We will not have any trial and we will not free him. We know how to handle his kind. [...] To me, Sweden is irrelevant” (Free Dawit Isaac, 2016).

## **[The Atlantic Council’s stance](#)**

Unfortunately, you would not know any of this from reading the Atlantic Council’s analysis of Eritrea. Indeed, it is as if the Atlantic Council has made it its

mission to obscure what is known of the country, most notably by systematically questioning and minimising the extent of the regime's human rights violations. In a series of articles and interviews, the Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, Bronwyn Bruton, has maintained this line with remarkable persistence.

Astonishingly, the Atlantic Council has authored several articles (detailed in the following), the sole purpose of which is to undermine the credibility of the COIE's detailed investigation into human rights abuses in Eritrea. Knowing full well that the Commission was denied entry by the Eritrean government, Bruton nevertheless accuses the COIE of being "uninterested" in visiting Eritrea as "its conclusions were already drawn" (in Sen, 2016a). She bizarrely accuses the Commission members of having failed to read "the relevant academic literature", in another unsubtle effort to cast doubt on the Commission's seriousness (Bruton, 2016a). In a June 23 article in the *New York Times*, comically titled "It's Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad", Bruton blames the COIE for relying mostly on the testimonies of hundreds of Eritrean exiles, while simultaneously lamenting the alleged exclusion of PFDJ supporters in the diaspora (Bruton, 2016a) – the very people who, throughout the COIE's investigation, relentlessly intimidated exiles to keep them from testifying, sometimes going as far as physically preventing them from reaching the Commission's offices (Le Monde, 2016). In her view, the victims were clearly over-represented by the Commission, whereas their tormentors should have been given more of a say.

On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that the Atlantic Council would attack the COIE's investigation, as it has long denied the scale and seriousness of the abuses perpetrated by Isaias Afwerki's regime. Astonishingly, the think tank suggests that the massive exodus of Eritrean youth has little to do with human rights or the mandatory military service; instead, Bruton declared (in an interview on Voice of America): "When Eritreans leave, they do it for economic opportunities. In order to get a green card, they have to say that they're oppressed" (Bruton, 2015). This statement suggests that she has never asked recently exiled Eritrean why they fled.

In another instance, Bruton compares Eritrea with Puerto Rico, on the grounds that Puerto Rico experiences strong emigration to the United States (in Sen, 2016a). Perhaps Bruton is not aware that Puerto Rico is actually part of the United States. In any case, she would have been better advised to compare Eritrea with Ethiopia, which, despite suffering from poverty and having over 80 million people (compared to Eritrea's 4.8 million), produces far fewer refugees than Eritrea. In fact, Ethiopia itself is home to tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees (Prandi, 2016). The

Atlantic Council even questions the scale of Eritrea's emigration problem, alleging that refugees from neighbouring countries claim to be Eritreans to "take advantage of Europe's asylum policies" (Bruton, 2015).

The Atlantic Council minimises the ordeal of those who attempt to flee Eritrea, by casting doubt on the COIE's findings with regard to the 'shoot-to-kill' policy at the border: Bruton claims that she has "never heard of any meaningful example that would support that claim" (in Sen, 2016a), discarding the testimonies not only of Eritrean refugees who reported being shot at, but also that of former soldiers who were tortured after refusing to shoot their countrymen attempting to cross the border.

Some of the claims made by the Atlantic Council go against well-established facts, which suggests that their author either knows little about her subject, or engages in willful disinformation. For instance, Bruton does not hesitate to state that "charges of forced labor would be very hard to substantiate" (in Sen, 2016a), despite the widespread availability of evidence that the national service has long been turned into a forced labour programme (UNHRC, 2016; Jeangène Vilmer & Gouéry, 2015). She even speaks of "national service volunteers" (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016<sup>47</sup>) to describe the many thousands who have been forcibly and indefinitely enrolled in the military. In the same vein, at a Subcommittee Hearing at the United States House of Representatives on 14 September 2016, which she was invited to address, Bruton denied any food crisis in Eritrea (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). Having lived in Asmara, I have personally witnessed hunger in the capital, where some families send their children to beg for food from their neighbours, and humanitarian workers agree that the situation is far worse in the countryside. In January 2009, I watched Isaias Afwerki deliver a seven-hour long New Years' speech to the nation on the official channel ERI-TV: Isaias Afwerki recommended that no adult eats more than 1,200–1,500 daily calories, an amount usually recommended for children of two to four years of age.

One of the most bizarre and troubling aspects of the Atlantic Council's analysis of Eritrea is the idea that human rights violations may not in fact reflect a deliberate government policy, but rather the bad behaviour of third parties over whom authorities have little control. In a particularly egregious example of disinformation, Bruton suggested to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Eritrea's totalitarian government was in fact so weak that it had little control over anything (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016):

Representative Karen Bass: *So, what's the human rights situation from your vantage point, from your viewpoint? What are the human rights abuses?* Bronwyn Bruton: *I think all the human rights abuses that have been described are absolutely real. I think that the question is, and the reason that I asked the question earlier from the intelligence officer who asked, "is there a government in Eritrea?" Are these abuses systemic? Are they the result of deliberate government policy or how much are they the result of poverty, the "no-peace-no-war", bad behavior by people outside of Asmara that the government has poor grip on, what is the relationship between the political side of the government and the military? We have virtually no knowledge of that. I have no doubt that the military are bad actors, but to which extent is their behavior condoned by the government? I don't really know. I've talked to people, senior people, in the government, in Asmara and I may be super naive, but sometimes I think they believe human rights abuses don't really exist, and if they do, they are very few and far between [...].*

The statement is deceptive: while stating that "all the human rights abuses" are "absolutely real", it also echoes the suggestion by Eritrean officials that they are "few and far between", if they exist at all. Here, Bruton parodies herself: in her imaginary Eritrea, human rights abuses could only be the work of "people outside of Asmara", while the government remains clueless as to what is happening. This fantasy would certainly be even more amusing if it did not have the potential to cause doubt and confusion among people unfamiliar with Eritrea's current predicament, especially given the Atlantic Council's profile. Father Habtu Ghebre-Ab, who was also invited to testify at the hearing, along with Dr Khaled Beshir, rightly saw in Bruton's statements "an effort to make the human rights situation look so much better than it really is" (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). In an earlier interview with Voice of America, Bruton reported what Isaias Afwerki had told her on human rights, apparently failing to detect the cynical nature of his statement: "He [the President] reaffirmed his attachment to equality and human rights. He says those are the fundamental qualities upon which he governs" (Bruton, 2015).

Through Bruton, the Atlantic Council has denounced the allegedly 'disproportionate' focus on Eritrea's human rights situation (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016), declaring: "In terms of repression, Eritrea is on a par with Ethiopia and Djibouti" (*Ibid.*). To be sure, Eritrea is not the only country in the Horn of Africa with a less-than-stellar record on human rights abuses and political repression. In Ethiopia, where a state of emergency has recently been declared, security forces have cracked down on protesters in the Oromo and Amhara regions, killing hundreds of peaceful protesters (Horne, 2016). In a country where the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its allies control all of the 547 seats in parliament, Obama's statement during his

July 2015 visit to Addis Ababa that the Ethiopian government had been “democratically elected” (New York Times, 2015) is ludicrous.

However, contrary to the Atlantic Council’s stance, Eritrea’s human rights record is objectively much worse than that of both Ethiopia and Djibouti. While governments in those countries repress their political opponents mercilessly, Isaias Afwerki’s paranoid, highly-militarized regime represses its entire population, forcing many into exile not unlike a parasite slowly killing its host. In that sense, the Eritrean state has more in common with totalitarian regimes like Turkmenistan or North Korea than with its authoritarian neighbours. In contemporary Eritrea, one does not need to be a political opponent to end up in jail or at a labour camp. In rural areas, families are forced to depend on their children to work in the fields when older relatives are forced into the national service. To ensure their family’s subsistence, teenagers have no other choice than to drop out of school and take on farming, but doing so leaves them at risk of arrest for dropping out of school. In this situation, mothers face a bleak choice between the family’s starvation and the arrest of their children.

Bruton would have United States policymakers believe that Eritrea’s unique ordeal is commonplace in the region, yet no other country in East Africa has forced generations of people into indefinite, unpaid labour; banned travel and sealed the borders; banned public gatherings of even a handful of people; locked up entire religious congregations; or taken entire families into custody if one member manages to leave the country. No other regime in East Africa has done so much to split families apart and prevent individuals from being loyal to anything other than the party-state.

In some instances the Atlantic Council’s analysis sounds plain naive rather than manipulative, as it seems to take Isaias Afwerki’s empty promises at face value. In April 2015, Bruton enthusiastically announced:

*There is a process of change going on in Eritrea. Officials said that they have stopped the indefinite conscription policy. [...] They say that only 5% of the conscripts have been there for more than 18 months at this point. I suspect that the release of those people may be one of the things that’s driving the outflow of refugees from that country. (Bruton, 2015)*

Although high-ranking Eritrean officials regularly promise to end indefinite conscription and limit it to its legal duration of 18 months – a promise made to convince the Europeans to contribute EUR 200 million to Eritrea’s development between 2016 and 2020 – such commitments have all come to naught. The government has yet to send the slightest signal that this will actually happen and, in

June 2016, Eritrea's Foreign Minister admitted that conscription would continue to last over 18 months, as it was necessary "to defend the country" against perceived threats from Ethiopia (Radio France International, 2016). Bruton has also proven quite eager to appropriate the government's narrative of social and economic progress, as if it could somehow compensate for the repression and lack of freedom, declaring: "The education system, the health care... It's amazing how much Eritrea has managed to accomplish in spite of its isolation. I have to say, I was astonished" (Bruton, 2015).

In spite of these accomplishments, Bruton is concerned that the UN-imposed sanctions against Eritrea's government are "hurting" Eritrea, although they consist of little more than an arms embargo, as well as a travel ban and asset freeze targeting high-ranking officials (Bruton, 2015). Finally, when it comes to policy recommendations, the Atlantic Council is contradictory in its statements. It rightly blames the United States for putting strategic considerations above human rights in its dealings with Ethiopia, yet forcefully argues in favour of doing just that in Eritrea: urging United States policymakers not to be misled by "the narrative of crushing government repression" and to mend its ties with the authorities in Asmara, as it would be "in the interest of both nations" (Bruton in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

The Atlantic Council's motives for consistently painting a totalitarian regime in a favourable light are a matter of speculation. Bruton herself is primarily a Somalia expert, who only started to focus on Eritrea in 2014–2015. It is likely that, in contrast to Somalia's chaos, she found Eritrea's totalitarian orderliness somewhat refreshing. As puzzling as it sounds for a think tank whose mission includes providing policymakers with objective analysis, it is entirely possible that the Atlantic Council's openly unapologetic bias toward Isaias Afwerki's government is grounded in genuine conviction. It is clear that Bruton was impressed by her meeting with the Eritrean president in the spring of 2015. In the interview she gave to Voice of America upon her return, her admiration is unmistakable; in fact, her tone is not that different from that of a teenage girl describing her latest crush:

*[Isaias Afwerki] was very impressive. We sat with the President for almost three hours. He was very, very sharp. I was very impressed. He was so astute, he was so articulate in English. Frankly, he looks 50, and he's a lot older than that.* (Bruton, 2015)

Let us pause for a moment to remember just who Bruton is talking about here: a guerrilla leader who eliminated his guerrilla companions and, once he became president, locked up journalists in shipping containers, sent his country's youth to

be killed in the trenches, and replaced universities with military training camps, and who lets his army generals sexually assault young female conscripts – the list goes on.

Beyond personal admiration, Bruton's articles and statements suggest another reason for her consistent support for the PFDJ's regime: she revels in deconstructing what she scornfully calls the usual 'narrative' on Eritrea, which according to her revolves around a disproportionate concern for the country's human rights situation. Bruton badly wants to be the smartest person in the room, which predisposes her to embrace a contrarian stance. As she warns her audience against a supposed anti-Eritrean bias, she exudes a sense of superiority, not unlike that of conspiracy theorists, who derive great pride from being the only ones who understand what is happening, the only ones who 'get it'.

Alas, far from any intellectual heights, Bruton's points are not exactly ground breaking or new, as most of them come straight out of the PFDJ's instruction guide to its supporters worldwide. In the introduction to its 2016 report, UNHRC lists the objections it has received from regime supporters in the diaspora (UNHRC, 2016, p. 5). Strikingly, almost all the key critiques identified by the COIE have been expressed in one form or another by Bruton herself. In other words, a lot of the Atlantic Council's work on Eritrea really amounts to a simple rewriting of PFDJ talking points in an unsuccessful effort to give them a more legitimate, more academic, and less partisan appearance. The UNHRC notes the "common themes" it found in the correspondence of its critics:

*The commission was able to identify a number of common themes in the correspondence, including the commission's failure to visit Eritrea; [1] the detrimental impact of United Nations sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Eritrea; [2] that there was no rape in Eritrea; [3] the failure of the commission to ensure implementation of the decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission on Badme; [4] that indefinite military conscription in Eritrea was justified by the threat from Ethiopia; [5] that there was no discrimination against women; the history of inter-ethnic and interreligious harmony in Eritrea; [6] that there was no shoot-to-kill policy at Eritrean borders; that education and health care were free in Eritrea, unlike in other States; [7] and that Eritrea had made progress on the Millennium Development Goals. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 5)*

And here are the corresponding points, as expressed by Bruton:

- (1) *[...] continually adding stress to the current regime in Asmara, for example through sanctions and indictments, is likely to simply make Eritreans more miserable without producing any real change. (in Sen, 2016a)*



- (2) *[The UN's Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea report] extrapolates from anecdotal examples — like instances of rape by military forces — to allege systemic abuses and blame them on state policy. [Here Bruton does not deny that army generals have committed sexual violence against female conscripts, but brushes off such cases 'anecdotal']. (Bruton, 2016a)*
- (3) *[...] for the past 15 years, Ethiopian troops have been permitted by a silent international consensus to flout the treaty and illegally occupy Eritrean territory. [Bruton is factually right here]. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (4) *The presence of Ethiopian troops on Eritrean soil has done crippling harm to the Eritrean people. [...] The presence of this 'army at the gates' has of course undermined Eritrea's political development. The over-militarization of the country as a justified means of defending the country has had severe consequences for political and civil space. [In reality, the border dispute with Ethiopia does not explain why Eritrea's entire population is still kept on a war footing today, deprived of its civil and political rights]. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (5) *Despite the virulent tribal and ethnic conflicts plaguing the rest of the region, the Eritrean government appears to have been exceptionally successful in its own nation-building project. Eritreans seem largely unified across tribal and religious categories. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (6) *The UNCOIE's claim that Eritrea maintains a 'shoot to kill' policy on the border is an especially egregious example – I've never heard of any meaningful evidence that would support that claim, except perhaps in a few, highly militarized spaces along the border, where Eritrea is actively in conflict with its neighbours. (in Sen, 2016a)*
- (7) *The United Nations Development Program gives Eritrea high marks for its progress on several Millennium Development Goals. (Bruton, 2016a)*

Naturally, given its tendency to stick to the PFDJ party line, regime supporters in the diaspora have fallen in love with the Atlantic Council's analysis of Eritrea. Bruton herself has become a favourite of the regime's army of online supporters, who all happen to be based in the West and frequently team up to launch coordinated, targeted attacks against anyone who dares to criticise the Eritrean government on social media. The United States-based Tesfanews, which repackages official propaganda for consumption by Eritrean expatriates, praises Bruton and shares her articles in full (Fraser, 2015; Sen, 2016b). Bruton herself does not seem to mind the attention from the PFDJ crowd. On the contrary, in August 2015, she addressed the annual conference of the YPFDJ, the Eritrean party-state's youth organisation, in Las Vegas. No researcher with even a modicum of concern for apparent bias would do the same.

At a time when Eritrea appears to have embarked on a public relations effort to improve its image in the West, the Atlantic Council's activism is a godsend. Although evidence is hard to come by, several consulting firms may already be enlisted in this effort in the United States, where a leaked memo dated January 2015 revealed that former United States Ambassador Herman Cohen had been engaged by the Eritrean Embassy to lobby on behalf of Asmara and "disseminate truthful information" (Awate, 2015). Eritrean embassies in the West have also attempted to enlist reporters, with mixed success. On 28 June, journalist Pierre Monegier revealed that he was offered EUR 15,000 and a free trip to either New York or Tokyo in exchange for painting a rosy picture of Eritrea in his news report for the French public television. After he refused, Eritrea's Embassy to France set up a conference with the help of mysterious consultants armed with fake Twitter accounts to discredit Monegier's work (Bannani, 2016).

## **The Nevsun case**

In 2015, the Atlantic Council's favourable view of the Eritrean government earned it the generous financial backing of a Canadian mining firm, Nevsun, which operates exclusively in Eritrea, providing the government with much of its foreign exchange income. The company has a high stake in improving the country's image. Based on figures disclosed by the Atlantic Council itself, the company's donation to the Eritrean government was between USD 100,000 and 249,000 (Atlantic Council, 2015). Contacted by French journalist, Leonard Vincent, a Nevsun representative made the following statement in an email: "Nevsun made a contribution to the Atlantic Council last year because we were impressed by their ongoing constructive work on Eritrea" (Anon., personal communication [email], 24 June 2016).

Nevsun's statement makes no mystery of the fact that its donation is directly related to the Atlantic Council's singularly positive outlook on Eritrea. And, although Bruton stated before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that she had "no direct relationship with Nevsun" (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016), she spoke alongside Nevsun, Vice President, Todd Romaine at the Las Vegas YPFDJ conference, as evidenced by a photograph of her with Mr Romain (see: <http://www.photonatu.com/home/pictures-11th-annual-north-america-ypfdj-conference-las-vegas-nv>).

To anyone familiar with Nevsun, a company which, according to a mounting body of evidence, relied on slave labour to build and operate its Bisha Gold Mine

(McVeigh, 2016), it is quite puzzling that the Atlantic Council was even willing to potentially damage its own reputation by being associated with such a problematic donor. On 6 October 2016, the Supreme Court of British Columbia ruled that a case against Nevsun brought forth by former mine workers would proceed in a Canadian court as there was sufficient evidence to establish a case to answer (McVeigh, 2016). However, a lot has already been established about the company's practices, contrary to Bruton's claim that past allegations against Nevsun were dismissed (Bruton in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

One of the world's leading experts on Africa is the author of a 2015 report on Nevsun and the working conditions at the Bisha Mine. Although the report has not been made public, its author, who is familiar with the Atlantic Council's writings on Eritrea, gave me permission to quote from it. The information on working conditions at the Bisha Mine comes both from former national conscripts who were assigned to work at the mine, and subsequently managed to flee the country, and from foreign contractors – such as Mike Goosen of the South African construction management firm Senet – who have testified, confirming former conscripts' accounts. The conscripts were not directly employed by Nevsun, but by a state-controlled intermediary, Segen. However, for at least several years Nevsun used those conscripts to build its mine. In the words of the aforementioned expert:

*Nevsun has said that it does not employ national service conscripts, which is true if by 'employ' we mean 'hire as a salaried member of work force'. However, Nevsun [relied on] the Segen Construction Company [...], a government-owned company which does 'employ' conscripts under terrible conditions. Nevsun knew it [...].* (unpublished report, 2015)

The conditions described by former Segen workers include sleeping on the ground in a malaria-infested area, while surviving only on lentil soup and bread during the day. The workers who built the mine were “continuously hungry” (unpublished report, 2015). At one point, Mike Goosen arranged for cooks at Nevsun's main camp to set food aside for the conscripts, but Segen managers promptly put an end to this. Several workers reportedly died of heat stroke in the scorching heat of the western Gash-Barka Region of Eritrea, where temperatures often exceed 35 degrees Celsius.

By 2012, Nevsun, realising that the use of forced labour by Segen constituted a threat to its own reputation, started to require that the workers it directly employed were “free of national service obligations” (unpublished report, 2015). All of them were, which is unsurprising as those workers employed directly by Nevsun were not forcibly enlisted; in fact, Nevsun jobs were probably quite coveted due to the

comparatively high pay and the protection from the abuse routinely inflicted on army conscripts at Segen (*Ibid.*). One chilling case makes it clear that female conscripts at the mine were routinely exposed to sexual violence, like their national service peers elsewhere. The report says: “[A female Nevsun employee] was raped by soldiers who believed her to be a conscript. When the soldiers searched her belongings and found a card identifying her as a Nevsun employee, they stopped molesting her, released her and even apologized” (*Ibid.*).

As former conscripts succeeded in fleeing Eritrea and seeking asylum in the West, further testimonies of forced labour at the Bisha mine have emerged. An upcoming lawsuit against Nevsun in Canada will give former national service conscripts the opportunity to tell the story of how they were forcibly enrolled to work on the mine. In the Netherlands, an Eritrean refugee interviewed by Dutch academic Mirjam van Reisen testified that his work at the Bisha mine abruptly ended when he was arrested for unknown reasons, and detained for a year and a half in overcrowded, underground prisons, first in Barentu, then in Keren, where prisoners had both legs and hands chained, and torture was commonplace (Interview, Van Reisen, 17 October 2016).

To this day, it remains unclear whether Nevsun has ended its collaboration with Segen. From the start, it was the Eritrean government that demanded that Nevsun use Segen as its primary contractor for the construction of the mine. In a video posted on its website, Nevsun claims that: “[...] in Eritrea, it is illegal to use national service workers in the mining sector, so all perspective employees are screened before they are hired” and “contractors are also prohibited from using national service workers” (Nevsun Resources, 2016).

*This clearly does not apply to the company’s primary contractor, Segen. Moreover, Nevsun’s defence should be considered with all the more scepticism as its company representatives have a record of making inaccurate statements, as highlighted in the report: “When asked about the median age of the Nevsun workforce, the answer was ‘60’, a most unlikely figure for a mining workforce, and one which can be disproved by a simple glance at Nevsun’s own website, which displays only young and fit workers”. (unpublished report, 2015)*

Despite that fact that Eritrea has no independent justice system, Nevsun’s lawyers have long argued without irony that only an Eritrean court was qualified to examine the former workers’ accusations. Fortunately, a court in British Columbia ruled against Nevsun on 6 October 2016, declaring that the Canadian justice system was, in fact, competent in this matter, paving the way for a lawsuit against Nevsun in Canada. The company has already had its share of lawsuits in Canada: In

2012, it was forced to pay “\$12.8 million, in compensation for having overvalued the mine’s reserves in order to boost the share price before off-loading massive amounts of stock at an exaggerated price” (*Ibid.*)

## **Blurring the line between policy research and lobbying**

The Atlantic Council’s whitewashing of Isaias Afwerki’s horrendous human rights record comes at a time when a number of Washington, DC-based think tanks have come under increased scrutiny for agreements with donors. In recent years, foreign governments have donated tens of millions of dollars to a handful of private institutions officially dedicated to policy research. Foreign donors have come to rely on think tanks in addition to lobbying firms to push for specific changes in United States policy. This is somehow more insidious than traditional lobbying, as think tanks benefit from an overall reputation for objectivity and independence, and are not expected to serve as vehicles for foreign influence in the way that a lobbying firm might.

As think tanks are not registered as representatives of donor countries, United States policymakers are not necessarily aware of their foreign ties. Indeed, undisclosed agreements between research groups and foreign governments could potentially amount to a violation of federal law, which forces advocates of foreign interests to register. Yet when the Atlantic Council hired Miguel Silva in 2015, it chose not to disclose his role as a direct advisor to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos. Silva then used his Atlantic Council fellowship to actively promote his government’s policy and make contacts with top United States policymakers. In the words of Lia Fowler, the Atlantic Council’s role in this “seems more in keeping with the work of a lobbying firm than a think tank” (Fowler, 2016).

More generally, it is hard not to see how generous donations from foreign sponsors might endanger the independence and integrity of policy research. Already, researchers less eager than Bruton to push asides human rights issues have been faced with unenviable dilemmas: alter their position to satisfy donors, or risk losing their job. Michele Dunne, former director of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, left the Council after a member of the Hariri family called to complain about her criticism of the 2013 military coup in Egypt (Lipton, Williams, & Confessore, 2014). Although the Atlantic Council’s leadership says that her departure had little to do with her opinions, she was replaced by someone likely to be more sympathetic to the new Egyptian authorities, a former United States ambassador to Egypt known for his alleged deference to

Egypt's former ruler. Such conflicts are obviously not exclusive to the Atlantic Council: Saleem Ali, a former visiting fellow at Brookings' Doha Center, said that he was explicitly told during his job interview that he should refrain from criticising the Qatari government in his research (Lipton, Williams, & Confessore, 2014).

## Conclusion

In light of the available information and the pending Canadian trial, why would the Atlantic Council risk being financially and politically associated with a company like Nevsun? Perhaps this is not surprising for a think tank whose leading Eritrea expert believes that things are 'not that bad' in the country. Perhaps, having already lost any pretense at objectivity on this topic, the Atlantic Council literally has nothing left to lose by accepting Nevsun's money. And, to be sure, in the months following the donation, Bruton only carried on her "constructive work on Eritrea", in the words of the company itself (Nevsun representative, personal communication, with Léonard Vincent, email, 2016). This could be part of a troubling trend for the Atlantic Council. Foreign Policy recently reported that the think tank had intended to offer its Global Citizens Award to Gabon's President, Ali Bongo (Halvorsen & Gladstein, 2016), even as the latter was suspected of resorting to fraud to ensure his 27 August re-election (the country's post-election crisis eventually forced Bongo to miss the award reception in New York). Yet, as unsavoury as Bongo's regime may be, Eritrea's is far worse, and the Atlantic Council's artful spin amounts to nothing less than revisionism.

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<sup>45</sup> This chapter is adapted from the article by François Christophe published on the blog of Martin Plaut published on 12 December 2016 at <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2016/12/09/forget-objectivity-for-the-atlantic-council-eritrea-prison-state-isnt-that-bad-2/>



<sup>46</sup> This was the case even before national service became indefinite following the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia. For instance, as early as 1997–1998, *ageglots* built luxurious houses for high-ranking army officers near Kagneu (unpublished report, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> See also Bruton’s written testimony (Bruton, 2016b).

## Chapter 12

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### The Policy Agenda in Europe and Africa

*Zara Tewolde-Berhan, Martin Plaut, & Klara Smits*

#### Introduction

At the time of writing, the number of displaced people globally was at a peak. In 2015, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – UNHCR), over 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced (UNCHR, 2016b). Eritrea is ranked as the ninth greatest source of refugees, with 35,500 people fleeing its borders in 2015. UNHCR estimates that a cumulative total of 411,300 refugees have originated from Eritrea up to the end of 2015, many of whom are unaccompanied minors (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

The exodus of Eritreans poses serious questions for policymakers around the world. These Eritreans are fleeing ongoing human rights violations in their country, which the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea concluded amount to crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2016). These men and women arrive in many countries around the world, from Australia to the USA, frequently after traumatic journeys, which can last several years. On route, they are vulnerable to human traffickers and smugglers, who become rich by exploiting them. Knowing how to deal with refugees, while at the same time maintaining a welcoming environment among national populations, is proving to be a challenge for receiving countries.

This chapter takes a look at how the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have attempted to deal with the situation of refugees and human rights violations. Firstly, it examines the EU's mishandling of Eritrea, after which, the relationship between Eritrea and AU/IGAD is described, as well as attempts by these organisations to manage the refugee situation and deal with human trafficking, followed by a short conclusion.

## The European Union

### *Post-independence*

Since Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, relations between Eritrea and the European Union have been complex, with some attempts by the EU to have a more constructive dialogue, but with limited success. The EU's response to Eritrea has developed over many years. It should not be forgotten that the EU supported the Eritrean people well before Eritrea's de facto independence in 1991 when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) captured Asmara, particularly during the famine of 1984/85 (Keneally, 1987). At this time, cross-border operations led by European countries fed hundreds of thousands of refugees who would otherwise have starved.

Since Eritrea's independence was ratified by the United Nations in 1993, following the Eritrean independence referendum, Europe has attempted to build a relationship with the Eritrean government, despite its repression of its people and its human rights violations. This has not proved easy. These issues were perhaps most starkly highlighted during the 2001 clampdown on all forms of opposition to the government, with the imprisonment of senior politicians, journalists, and editors. Among those who have been held ever since is Dawit Isaak, a Swedish-Eritrean journalist (Pen International, 2015). Due to his status as a Swedish citizen, the EU has repeatedly called for his release and EU representatives have taken up his case (European Parliament, 2015).

When the arrests took place in 2001, the Italian Ambassador to Eritrea, Antonio Bandini, presented a letter of protest to the Eritrean authorities. He was promptly expelled from the country. Other European ambassadors were withdrawn in protest. The EU presidency said that relations between the EU and Eritrea had been "seriously undermined" by the expulsions (Politico, 2001). At first, the EU demanded that Eritrea improve its human rights record before normal relations could be resumed. President Isaias Afwerki did nothing of the sort, assuming that he could outlast the EU's anger. He was right: in the end it was the EU that buckled.

An internal EU document dated October 2008 explained just how poorly the EU responded to the situation (Caprile, 2008). The report said that it had been decided at the time that European ambassadors would be: "...conditioning their return on the willingness of President Isaias to engage on human rights dialogue. This request was never satisfied, but EU Ambassadors nevertheless returned to Eritrea, in a non-coordinated way" (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

As time passed, the EU re-assessed its relationship with Asmara. Although there had been no sign of movement on human rights by the Eritrean regime, it was decided to attempt to try to have a ‘new beginning’ with Eritrea. In May 2007, President Isaias Afwerki was invited to visit Brussels and warmly welcomed by Development Commissioner, Louis Michel, despite the fact that Dawit Isaak and others remained in prison (Kidane, 2010). In the light of the talks held, the European Commission (EC) altered its stance towards Eritrea, as reflected in an internal report:

*In June 2007 the European Commission changed its strategy and initiated a process of political re-engagement with Eritrea. The main reason for Commissioner Louis Michel’s change of approach was his determination to ignite a positive regional agenda for the Horn of Africa, where Eritrea has a major role to play in view of its presence in the conflicts in Sudan and Somalia. (Caprile, 2008, p. 22)*

The document concluded that for this “political re-engagement” to work, both sides need to show that they are approaching it seriously, of which concrete evidence is required:

*Both sides need political dialogue to bring some results: the European Commission needs a visible sign of cooperation from Eritrea in order to continue to justify its soft diplomacy, while the increasingly isolated Eritrean regime might need to keep a credible interlocutor and a generous donor. The liberation of Dawit Isaak based on humanitarian grounds could be such a sign but, although welcome, it would only be a drop in the ocean. (Ibid., p. 22)*

However, instead of making improvements to human rights, the Eritrean government refused to accommodate the EU’s concerns in any way. Although no real progress had been made, fresh aid was promised to Eritrea. Even after the EU provided the aid, there was no softening of President Isaias Afwerki’s stance. Despite this resistance to accommodating the EU’s concerns, the Europeans pressed ahead with their ‘renewed engagement’ strategy. It seems that Brussels had learnt nothing from the mistakes made following the withdrawal of its ambassadors. Asmara, on the other hand, had learnt that if it remained obdurate, European politicians and civil servants would, in time, give in to its demands. President Isaias Afwerki was setting the agenda.

On 2 September 2009, the EU and Eritrea signed the ‘Country Strategy for 2009–2013’ (European Commission, 2009). This document acknowledged the impact of Eritrea’s 2001 crackdown on dissent, albeit diplomatically: “From 2001 to 2003, there was a slowdown in EU-Eritrea development cooperation, and the

Political Dialogue process witnessed the emergence of substantially divergent views on developments in Eritrea and the Region” (*Ibid.*, p. 21). The strategy talked about limited political dialogue, but said that regular meetings were planned.

A fact-finding mission to the Horn of Africa by the Development Committee of the European Parliament in late 2008 painted a gloomier, but more accurate, picture (European Union, 2008). The Mission found that:

*Since the interruption of the democratisation process in 2001, EC cooperation with Eritrea has been confronted with major political and technical difficulties. Cooperation was frozen for several years in reaction to the expulsion of the Italian Ambassador, which led to a certain backlog with the 9<sup>th</sup> EDF funds. (Ibid.)* At the same time, the delegation maintained that the situation had improved in recent years and funds had begun to flow once more.

### ***The first ‘re-engagement’***

Hopeful that progress could be made, Development Commissioner, Louis Michel, opened fresh talks with Eritrea. By August 2009 he was sufficiently encouraged to visit Asmara, after receiving assurances from an Eritrean diplomat that Dawit Isaak would be released into his care (Mekonnen, 2009). Having booked a ticket for Dawit to return with him to Europe, Louis Michel left for Asmara. However, after meeting President Isaias Afwerki, it became apparent that the President had no intention of allowing Dawit to go free. Indeed, Michel was not even permitted to visit the prisoner and had to return home empty handed.

Despite these setbacks, the EU has remained wedded to the idea of improving its relationship with Eritrea. In October 2009, despite the fiasco of Michel’s visit, European foreign ministries were prepared to take a considerably softer line towards Eritrea than their American counterparts. A US diplomatic cable released via WikiLeaks reported how one European representative after another called for restraint, while opposing extending sanctions against Isaias Afwerki’s regime:

*Italy described Eritrea as governed by a ‘brutal dictator’, and noted that Italy had not gotten results from its efforts at engagement. He cautioned, however, against ‘creating another Afghanistan’ by applying Eritrea-focused sanctions. The Italian representative questioned whether the sanctions should be focused on spoilers in general and include others beyond Eritrea. The French said that while engagement was ‘useless’, France would continue on this track as there was no other option. (The Telegraph, 2011, para. 10)*

Speaking at the same day-long meeting, British official Jonathan Allen said: “London has already made clear to Asmara that the UK was aware Eritrea was supporting anti-Western groups that threatened British security” (*Ibid.*). In reply,

the American senior representative, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Karl Wycoff, pointed out what he described as:

*...the inconsistency between the private acknowledgement that Asmara was not only playing a spoiler role with regard to Somalia but also supporting violent, anti-West elements and the provision by some countries of assistance packages to Asmara. He also noted that strong actions, including sanctions, were needed to have a chance of changing Isaias's behaviour. (Ibid.)*

Despite the United State's concerns, the EU pressed ahead with its strategy: a strategy in which it had little faith and which its own representatives described as "useless" (The Telegraph, 2011).

The situation was reviewed once more in 2011, when the EU drew up a 'Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa' (European Union, 2011). This framework laid out Europe's relationship with the region as a whole: "The EU is heavily engaged in the region, with involvement focused around five main areas: the development partnership, the political dialogue, the response to crises, the management of crises and the trade relationship" (*Ibid.*, p. 5). The document then elaborates on how these aims will be achieved. Once again, human rights are an integral part of the strategy:

*The development of democratic processes and institutions that contribute to human security and empowerment will be supported through:*

- *promoting respect for constitutional norms, the rule of law, human rights, and gender equality through cooperation and dialogue with Horn partners;*
- *support to security sector reform and the establishment of civilian oversight bodies for accountable security institutions in the Horn countries;*
- *implementing the EU human rights policy in the region. (Ibid., p. 9)*

In line with this framework, the EU decided to provide Eritrea with aid worth EUR 122 million between 2009 and 2013.

Since the Strategic Framework document was drawn up, the situation inside Eritrea has shown no sign of improvement. Although the EU has continued to raise the issue of human rights, there has been no progress on the release of political prisoners, the implementation of the Constitution, or freedom of expression (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2015). The country remains a one-party state, locked in permanent repression. The human rights violations continue to drive 4,000–5,000 Eritreans across its borders every month. Many arrive on European shores. In the first 10 months of 2014, for example, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe nearly tripled in comparison to the previous year, according to

the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2014). In 2015, a total of 38,791 Eritreans crossed the central Mediterranean Sea, arriving mostly in Italy, according to Frontex – the EU agency monitoring the situation (Frontex, 2016). Eritrea has remained one of the top ten source countries for irregular arrivals.

### *The second ‘new engagement’*

The refugee question has become a toxic issue in Europe. Politicians are under considerable pressure to end irregular migration from all sources. Borders have been closed, fences erected and passport controls reinstated. While the situation of Eritrean refugees is very different from that of Iraqi or Syrian refugees, they have been caught up in the rising tide of opposition to foreigners of all kinds. A number of European states have responded to this and have, once again, attempted a ‘new engagement’ with Asmara. In 2014, the Danish government sent officials to Eritrea to investigate the situation. They then wrote a report, which was published by the Danish Immigration Service. This report concluded that: “the human rights situation in Eritrea may not be as bad as rumoured” (Danish Immigration Service, 2014).

The Danish Report was not well received (The Local, 2014). It was inaccurate and it misquoted the key academic source that it relied on. Professor Gaim Kibreab, whose work featured heavily in the Danish Report, said that he felt “betrayed” by the way in which it was used: “I was shocked and very surprised. They quote me out of context. They include me in a context with their anonymous sources in order to strengthen their viewpoints. They have completely ignored facts and just hand-plucked certain information” (*Ibid.*). Despite this, the report continues to have considerable currency. It has been picked up by a number of European nations, including the United Kingdom.

The British sent their own officials to Asmara, who returned with similar conclusions. In March 2015, the UK’s position on the country suddenly changed after the Home Office published updated country guidance that suggested a marked improvement in Eritrea’s human rights situation (United Kingdom: Home Office, 2015). The acceptance rate of Eritrean refugees promptly plummeted from 84% in 2014 to 44% in 2015 (*Ibid.*). However, the British judiciary did not share this view. Data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act shows that, from March 2015 (when the changes were introduced) to September 2015, 1,006 out of 1,179 Eritreans who had been rejected by the Home Office decided to appeal (Kleinfield, 2016). Of the 118 cases in progress during the same time period, 106 were allowed – an appeal success rate of 92%, which is considerably above average for appeals.

However, 173 Eritreans decided not to lodge appeals, 9 were rejected on appeal and 17 were returned to Eritrea by force.

The idea that Eritrea is ‘improving’ gained credence and it was only a matter of time before there would be yet another attempt to launch a ‘new engagement’ with the Eritrean government. This was reflected in a publication by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, in 2014, in which Jason Mosely wrote:

*The creation of the position of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Horn of Africa in 2012 offers the possibility of a new kind of engagement between the EU and both Eritrea and Ethiopia. In terms of engagement with Eritrea, in particular, the EU is hampered on two fronts. First, as a guarantor of the Algiers Agreement, its influence in Eritrea has suffered from its perceived failure to enforce compliance by Ethiopia. Second, the EU also has a diplomatic stance rooted in a human-rights based approach to foreign policy, although it is not the only actor in the region in this regard. Neither of these factors leaves it well placed to act as an ‘honest broker’ from Asmara’s perspective.*

*However, the EUSR, Alex Rondos, has managed to cultivate a functional relationship with Eritrea. With the goal of improving overall regional stability in mind, and thus consistent with his mandate, it is possible that his office could play an important role in improving relations between Eritrea and the EU and its member states. (Mosley, 2014, p. 10)*

The somewhat dismissive reference to human rights suggests that these rights are regarded as an inconvenient adjunct to foreign policy – an encumbrance that might be disposed of. However, the statement accurately reflects the mood within the EU Council of Ministers.

In 2014, Italy’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lapo Pistelli, made an official visit to Asmara (Farnesia, 2014). He was fulsome in his praise for his hosts, saying that he found them “well informed and keen to engage”. The enthusiasm with which he greeted this “new beginning” was reflected in the official communiqué from the Italian government. “It’s time for a new start”, Pistelli declared. “I am here today to bear witness to our determination to revitalise our bilateral relations and try to foster Eritrea’s full reinstatement as a responsible actor and key member of the international community in the stabilisation of this region”, he continued. It was almost as if the setbacks of the past had never taken place.

Since then, the EU has attempted to deal with Eritrea as part of a wider African initiative to try to end the exodus across the Mediterranean Sea. In October 2014, senior European officials met with their African counterparts in Khartoum, including representatives from Eritrea. During this meeting, Eritrea’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Osman Saleh, told the gathering that:



*Eritrea values its partnership with the European Union and is determined to work with the EU and all European countries to tackle irregular migration and human trafficking and to address their root causes. **We call for an urgent review of European migration policies towards Eritreans**, as they are, to say the least, based on incorrect information, something that is being increasingly acknowledged.* (Eriswiss.com, 2014, emphasis in the original)

The Khartoum meeting came up with a series of rather vaguelyworded suggestions aimed at reducing smuggling and human trafficking. This has become known as the ‘Khartoum Process’ and was endorsed by the EU in December 2014 (European Commission, 2015a).

A year later, a much higher profile meeting was held in the Maltese capital of Valetta. The Valetta Summit, which again included Eritrea, brought together African leaders and their European counterparts (European Council, 2015). Designed to deal with the refugee crisis, the political communiqué released contained little that was controversial. It concluded that:

*We recognise the high degree of interdependence between Africa and Europe as we face common challenges that have an impact on migration: promoting democracy, human rights, eradicating poverty, supporting socio-economic development, including rural development, mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change.* (*Ibid.*, p. 2)

However, buried in the action plan that accompanied it were a series of more serious recommendations. They included recognition that African states bear the greatest burden of refugees, only a minority of whom actually make the journey to Europe. There was also an understanding that the African refugee camps, in which so many languish, need to be upgraded. Security in the camps must be improved and education and entertainment provided so that young men and women are not simply left to rot. There were even suggestions that some – a tiny, educated minority – might be allowed to travel to European destinations legally.

Paragraph 4 of the document provided more worrying suggestions. Here were details of how European institutions would cooperate with their African partners to fight “irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and trafficking in human beings” (*Ibid.*, pp. 12–13). This aim is laudable enough, until one considers it through the eyes of a young refugee struggling to get past Eritrea’s border force, which has strict instructions to shoot to kill. Europe was offering training to African “law enforcement and judicial authorities” in new methods of investigation and assistance “in setting up specialised anti-trafficking and smuggling police units”. The European Union’s police force (Europol) and its border force (Frontex) would

in the future assist African security police in countering the “production of forged and fraudulent documents” (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

On 11 December 2015, this was followed by the announcement of EUR 200 million worth of EU aid for Eritrea (European Commission, 2015b). Most of this was allocated to the energy sector and what was described as strengthening the country’s ability to “better manage public finances”. Announcing the programme, EU Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, said:

*The EU provides development aid where it is most needed to reduce poverty and support people. In Eritrea, we have agreed to promote activities with concrete results for the population, such as the creation of job opportunities and the improvement of living conditions. At the same time, we are insisting on the full respect of human rights as part of our ongoing political dialogue with Eritrea.* (European Commission, 2015b)

The idea that Eritrea would accept the EU’s conditions on human rights suggests that the European Union has not learnt any lessons from the past. There is no evidence that the Eritrean government has ever been willing to accept any conditionality on aid. Any attempt to ensure conditionality is tantamount to a dialogue with the deaf, with President Isaias Afwerki likely to ignore all European Union demands, secure in the knowledge that the EU has little option but to deal with Eritrea on his terms.

In the meantime, a consensus has developed among European officials that human rights organisations have exaggerated how serious the situation in Eritrea is. It looks as if it will only be a matter of time before Eritreans claiming asylum across Europe will have their refugee claims rejected and be put on an aircraft home. This has been strengthened by suggestions – from Eritrean diplomats and officials – that soon, all National Service conscripts in Eritrea will only be required to serve 18 months. In February 2016, Reuters news agency carried a report quoting EU diplomats. Speaking on conditions of anonymity, these diplomats “accused Eritrea of backtracking on privately made commitments by some officials last year to fix national service at 18 months, a term stipulated four years after Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia in 1991” (Blair, 2016, para. 7). President Isaias Afwerki had done what he has done so often in the past. He allowed his officials to give assurances to gain a deal with an international partner, only to pull the rug out from under these assurances later.

What is extraordinary is just how easily the diplomatic community is fooled. The same Reuters report quoted the same unnamed source as saying: “They [the

Eritreans] are engaging more’, [...] ‘You have to build their confidence. They don’t move quickly’” (*Ibid.*). Even the language is re-cycled. The only aspect that remains unchanging is President Isaias Afwerki’s intransigence and the European Union’s attempts to re-engage with the regime, despite acknowledging that this is “useless” (The Telegraph, 2011).

### ***Europe’s shame***

European leaders are well aware that this re-engagement with Eritrea infringes on the EU’s founding principles in relation to human rights. Much of the planning is now undertaken covertly, with an explicit attempt made to keep the public in the dark about what is being planned. This was revealed by two German media outlets, Der Spiegel (Dahlkamp, 2013) and the television programme Report Mainz (Tagesschau, 2014). The aim is to curtail the exodus of African refugees, whose arrival in Europe has become such a toxic political question. Der Spiegel reports that Germany is leading this work, but that the European Commission has warned that “under no circumstances” should the public learn what was said during the talks held on 23 March 2016.

A staff member working for Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, warned that Europe’s reputation could be at stake. The EU is fully aware of just how dangerous these proposals really are. Under the heading: ‘Risks and assumptions’ the document states:

*Provision of equipment and trainings [sic] to sensitive national authorities (such as security services or border management) diverted for repressive aims; criticism by NGOs and civil society for engaging with repressive governments on migration (particularly in Eritrea and Sudan). (The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Stability, 2016)*

Eritrea has been promised training for the judiciary and what is described as “Assistance to develop or implement human trafficking regulations”. As Eritrean border patrols have orders to shoot to kill any refugee attempting to flee across the border, there is a real risk that EU funding will aid this objective. These developments come despite clear calls from the European Parliament for an explicit human rights requirement attached to any aid for Eritrea (European Parliament, 2016).

## **The African Union and IGAD**

The African Union is an international organisation of 54 African countries established in May 2001 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It replaced the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and represents the African continent. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is an eight-country organisation in the Horn of Africa whose goals were first development orientated, but now slot into the system of regional organisations within the AU. In the context of human trafficking, IGAD says it aims to create interstate cooperation against trafficking and smuggling, which are dominated by highly-organised criminal networks. The AU and IGAD have established a number of policies and processes to address migration and human trafficking, but with limited success. This chapter describes Eritrea's rocky relationship with both institutions, as well as attempts by these organisations to manage the refugee situation and deal with human trafficking.

### ***AU and IGAD – relations with Eritrea***

As is the case with the European Union, neither IGAD nor the AU have been successful in their dealings with the Eritrean government. Eritrea suspended its membership of IGAD in 2007 after a row with Ethiopia over Somalia (Reuters, 2007). IGAD has also been unable to normalise the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea following the Ethiopia-Eritrea border war of 1998–2000. Ethiopia refuses to respect the border between the two countries, as demarcated by the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (The Hague Justice Portal, 2007). Eritrea argues that Ethiopia's refusal has left it with no option but to maintain a large number of troops along the border. This has left the country with a system of indefinite national service, which is the principal reason given by many Eritrean refugees for fleeing Eritrea (Daldorph, 2016). In addition, Eritrea blames the AU and other international organisations for not pushing Ethiopia to implement the legally-binding decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission on the border and for not urging it to withdraw from occupied territories. The Eritrean government also criticises what it regards as an unfair arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council (UN, 2016; IRIN, 2003).

Eritrea was a member of the AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), after the country gained official independence from Ethiopia in 1993, and joined the African Union when it was established in 2001. However, relations between the AU and Eritrea have been stormy. The headquarters of the AU is situated in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which explains the troubled relationship. Although the AU claims that Ethiopia is just its host and that it does not take sides in the tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Eritrean government has accused

the AU of being biased in favour of Ethiopia. In 2003, Eritrea withdrew its ambassador from the AU, citing the “failure [of the AU] to adhere to its own charter and enforce its own treaties” (IRIN, 2003, para. 2). Eritrea argued that the AU should put pressure on Ethiopia for violating the undertaking it gave to adhere to the Boundary Commission’s ruling on the border when it signed the Algiers Peace Accord, which ended the border war between the two nations. Eritrea’s withdrawal from the AU was a mark of its growing frustration with the international community for failing to act on this matter.

In 2009, the Eritrean government again clashed with the AU. The Peace and Security Council of the AU had called on the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on Eritrea for its alleged support of Somali Islamic insurgents. As Eritrea had no ambassador to the AU at that time, the task of denouncing the position of the AU fell to the Eritrean Ambassador to the US, who stated that it was based on “fabricated lies mainly concocted by the Ethiopian regime and the U.S. administration” (Chhor, 2009, para. 3). Earlier that year, IGAD had also sought sanctions against the Eritrean regime. The Eritrean government was accused of supplying weapons to Somali insurgents, including Al-Shabaab, and of attacking another IGAD member state: Djibouti. Eritrea has since refused to cooperate with the investigation. The sanctions are still in place, although there is no evidence that Eritrea has supplied weapons to Al-Shabaab in recent years (United Nations, 2016).

In 2011, after years of absence, the Eritrean ambassador to the AU was reinstated (Tekle, 2011). However, the tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have remained unchanged. Currently, Eritrea remains a member of the AU, but its relations with other African nations have been difficult. Eritrea’s President, Isaias Afwerki, is a controversial figure, declaring many other countries “crippled” for relying on aid from the EU and the US (Berhane, 2010).

### ***IGAD relations with Eritrea***

Eritrea’s relations with IGAD have been overshadowed by its relations with both Ethiopia and Djibouti. In 2007, tensions reached a peak when Eritrea temporarily suspended its membership over IGAD’s decision to support Ethiopia’s military intervention in Somalia. It attempted to re-activate its membership in 2011, but is still not allowed to be a full participant (Andemariam, 2015).

The IGAD-Regional Consultative Process (IGAD-RCP) on migration was established in 2008 to promote the position of IGAD member states and the AU, as framed by the AU’s Migration Policy Framework. It aims to provide a regional dialogue and cooperation in migration management among IGAD member states

(IOM, 2008). By suspending its IGAD membership, Eritrea missed out on an opportunity to engage in coordinated policies that tackled the migration issues before the steep rise in Eritrean refugees.

In February 2016, the IGAD Security Sector programme launched a study report on human smuggling and trafficking. Highlighting the criminal networks in the Horn of Africa, it identified Eritrea as producing the highest number of refugees in the region and Eritrean nationals as being the “Kingpins” of the criminal networks (IGAD & Sahan, 2016). Eritrea’s failure to attend such meetings ultimately hinders the chances of developing policies that combat human trafficking by ensuring regional security and identifying the source of migration that allows human trafficking to thrive.

Consequently, Eritrea as one of the largest refugee-producing countries in Africa has had a continuously difficult relationship with the organisations that could help to solve such issues. In the next section of this chapter, the policies and approaches of the AU and IGAD will be looked at.

### ***The refugee crisis in the Horn of Africa***

At the end of 2015, UNHCR estimated that East Africa and the Horn of Africa together hold 2,739,400 refugees (UNHCR, 2016b). The number of displaced people in the Horn of Africa, including the internally displaced, is estimated to be around 8.7 million (World Bank Group & UNHCR, 2015). In reality, the actual numbers may be even higher, because, according to the UNHCR itself, “refugees who are living outside camps, sometimes unlawfully, are more difficult to track and are underrepresented in UNHCR’s statistics” (UNHCR, 2013, heading 4). Ethiopia (which hosted 736,100 refugees as at the end of 2015) and Kenya (which hosted 553,912 refugees as at the end of 2015) are the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa. Most of the refugees from Eritrea are hosted by Sudan and Ethiopia (*Ibid.*).

The high number of refugees and displaced people is a big challenge for African governments and African societies. Human traffickers and smugglers not only financially exploit people on their way to Europe, but first and foremost in the camps in Africa. The exploitation includes asking high payments for smuggling, but also trafficking for ransom with severe torture practices and other abuse (Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; see also [Chapter 2](#) of this book). The rise in migration in the region has allowed human trafficking to thrive. Other abuses along the routes are also prevalent. According to research by Italian organisation MEDU which collected 1,000 testimonies, as much as 90% of surveyed migrants who arrive in

Italy have been victims of torture, extreme violence and degrading treatment along their migration routes or in their countries of origin. The abuses that are mentioned in the testimonies include, but are not limited to, deprivation of food and water, beatings, being burnt, sexual violence and deprivation of medical care (MEDU, n.d.).

In recent years, the number of migrants entering Europe via the Mediterranean Sea has risen dramatically. In 2015, Eritreans were the largest group to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, at 39,162 (IOM, 2016). However, this is still significantly lower than the number of Eritrean refugees in the Horn of Africa: there are, for example, 159,842 Eritreans currently residing in refugee camps in Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2016a).

The Lampedusa tragedy in 2013 – when a boat carrying mainly Eritreans accidentally caught fire and capsized, drowning 360 people of those on board – marked a turning point (BBC, 2013). This took place within sight of the inhabitants of Lampedusa. The tragedy renewed debates around Europe’s migration and border policies and is one of the reasons why the EU has formed closer ties with the AU to reduce migration. With the continuous flow of migrants from Africa and instability in Libya, human trafficking has thrived. It has received considerable attention from the AU and IGAD, with conferences and initiatives designed to combat human trafficking. The Khartoum Process with the EU, mentioned above, includes work with Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

## **The African Union’s response to trafficking**

### ***Constitutive Act of AU and conventions on refugees***

The Constitutive Act of the African Union explicitly calls for its member states to work on behalf of its people (African Union, 2000). It declares that the AU will “promote and protect human and peoples’ rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and other relevant human rights instruments” (p. 5). Critics have pointed out that the mere transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union in 2001 does not guarantee that member states will abide by their declared obligations. As one author put it, “...the leopard cannot, on its own, change its spots” (Udombana, 2002, p. 1259). Over time, however, the AU has attempted to put in place a range of policies to assist citizens of member states who are forced to flee from their homes, but these have been less than successful. As a cautious and sympathetic observer noted:

*The adoption of the AU's Constitutive Act raised the prospect of creating a dedicated continental refugee protection body, or at the very least the opportunity of designating a body with supervisory authority over the 1969 Convention [Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa]. Neither of these opportunities were seized. Instead, in the years after its establishment, the AU developed a number of bodies responsible for refugee issues, thereby replicating the somewhat fragmented approach to refugee protection of its predecessor. (Sharpe, 2011, p. 28)*

The AU (when it was still called the OAU) adopted the Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa in 1969, which entered into force in 1974. The Convention was meant to supplement the 1951 Refugee Convention. Among other things, it places an obligation on states that ratify this Convention to receive refugees, provide them with travel documents, and cooperate with UNHCR. A total of 46 African states have ratified the Convention. Although Eritrea signed the Convention in 2012, it has not ratified it (African Union, 2016). In addition, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which came into effect in 1986, elaborates on the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Africa (Bekker, 2013). The African Commission oversees the implementation of this Charter.

In reality, refugees have often been treated harshly by African governments, with a history of little support and the refoulement of refugees. For example, Kenya has been accused of viewing refugees as a security problem, failing to follow refugee conventions, and turning a blind eye when Ethiopian refugees were harassed and killed during the 1990s (Campbell, 2009). More recently, Sudan has been urged many times by the UNHCR to stop the forced return of Eritrean refugees to Eritrea (UN News Centre, 2014).

With the increasing pressure exerted by the rising number of refugees in the African continent, the UN has expressed great concern over the ever-deteriorating living conditions in refugee camps, as well as the vulnerability of camp inhabitants to trafficking (among other things) (UNGA, 2015). The large number of refugees in the camps, combined with a weak judicial and police force, has allowed human trafficking to thrive in the region, and new forms of trafficking to emerge, including 'Sinai trafficking' (which is trafficking for ransom combined with severe torture practices and extortion). The response of African countries to this phenomenon has been described as weak, as the countries of origin, transit and destination lack the legal frameworks to deal with this new form of trafficking (Berhane, 2015).

Eritrean and Sudanese officials have been accused of involvement in human smuggling, most notably Eritrean General Teklai Kifle (aka 'Manjus') and Sudanese Mabrouk Mubarak Salim. The latter is known to have links with Eritrean and



Sudanese intelligence services and often hosts Eritrean officials when they are visiting Sudan (*Ibid.*, p. 50). In April 2012, a senior Eritrean official of the ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) was seen with a human smuggler who was later arrested by the Italian authorities (IGAD & Sahan, 2016). This (and other evidence, see [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#)) strongly suggests the existence of links between the Eritrean authorities and the human smuggling and trafficking networks.

Besides the conventions dealing with refugees, the AU has established a number of policies and frameworks aimed directly at dealing with migration, as well as more specifically with human trafficking, aimed at the national, regional and intercontinental level.

### ***African Union Migration Policy Framework***

The Assembly of Heads of State and Government decided in 2001 to create a framework for migration policy for the African Union (Klavert, 2011). This finally resulted in the Migration Policy Framework in 2006. This framework contains recommendations directed towards member states to prevent human trafficking. It encourages states to develop common regional countermeasures based on solidarity among states, with a focus on protecting the human rights of trafficked victims, strengthening borders, ensuring cooperation between state security agencies, enhancing efforts to dismantle international organised syndicates, signing bilateral and multilateral agreements, and prosecuting traffickers (African Union, 2006).

Although this policy framework addresses the need for coordinated and regional efforts to end human trafficking, assist victims and prosecute traffickers, it does not address the need for policies that could discourage migration, which fuels human trafficking. In addition, the framework lacks an adequate follow-up mechanism and is not legally binding, therefore, states cannot be held accountable. It was reported that earlier versions of the framework were rejected with open hostility by some African states, leaving the final version weak and without mechanisms for enforcement (Klavert, 2011).

### ***Ouagadougou Action Plan***

The Ouagadougou Action Plan was adopted by the Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development, which took place in Tripoli in November 2006, and is designed to combat human trafficking, especially in women and children (European Commission, 2006). The Action Plan was adopted by African states and the EU with a commitment to international conventions that promote human

rights. In a detailed plan, it outlines areas on which states should focus to tackle human trafficking, including prevention and awareness raising, victim protection and assistance, the legislative framework, policy development and law enforcement, and cooperation and coordination between relevant bodies (*Ibid.*).

Although the African Union Migration Policy Framework and the Ouagadougou Action Plan create an open platform for influencing policy on human trafficking, the political will and sense of urgency needed to prevent human trafficking on a large scale remain weak. A decade after they were adopted, the rise in the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Europe has brought much attention to migration. Agreements such as the Khartoum Process are a reaction to this increase in the number of migrants seeking to reach Europe.

While the Ouagadougou Action Plan highlights the key areas that need policy change, it has not resulted in states implementing measures to prevent human trafficking. Although human trafficking has continued on a large scale, the Action Plan has encouraged the African Union to recognise the significance of human trafficking on an international level, leading to a campaign dubbed “AU.COMMIT”.

### ***AU.COMMIT Campaign***

The AU.COMMIT Campaign was launched in 2010 to raise awareness of the Ouagadougou Action Plan to combat human trafficking, particularly of women and children. It was jointly organised by IGAD, the African Union Commission’s (AUC’s) Department for Social Affairs, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the East African Community (EAC) (The Africa-EU Partnership, 2010). According to the Director for Social Affairs for the AUC, Olawale Maiyegun, the campaign is aimed at “galvanizing activities undertaken by the AUC, including global, regional and national initiatives towards more synergized and coordinated actions to combat trafficking in persons in Africa” (*Ibid.*).

Similar to the African Union Migration Policy Framework for Africa and the Ouagadougou Action Plan, the AU.COMMIT Campaign aims to prevent trafficking, protect victims and prosecute the traffickers. It is designed to raise awareness and provide a platform for regional dialogue on combating human trafficking and to influence policy. It calls on states to undertake socioeconomic development and raise awareness to prevent vulnerable groups from falling victim to human trafficking. However, the link between human trafficking and migration is not sufficiently addressed by the strategy, which can be criticised for using a

symptomatic approach to the refugee and migration problem in Eritrea. Human trafficking thrives on migration, particularly irregular migration; therefore, the causes of migration need to be tackled to counter human trafficking. While the campaign urges interventions at the regional and state level to address the root causes of human trafficking (on both the demand and supply sides) (*Ibid.*), this is unlikely to stop human trafficking, as it is the causes of migration that leave many migrants vulnerable to traffickers – and these are not addressed.

While socioeconomic development and awareness raising may discourage some migrants from fleeing, migration is difficult to stop completely, as the reasons for migrating differ according to the circumstances of each person fleeing. In the case of Eritrea, the lack of human rights is prompting many to flee (Keetharuth, 2015), leaving them vulnerable to human trafficking. There is also no indication of the mechanism to be used by the AU to monitor the campaign, let alone enforce its policies. While efforts by the AU to launch a campaign to raise awareness and pressure governments to adopt measures that tackle human trafficking are commendable and should be supported, their shortcomings need to be addressed.

### ***Khartoum Process***

The Khartoum Process, which was briefly mentioned above in relation to the EU, was the result of a meeting between African and European officials in Khartoum in 2014, aimed at developing a process to reduce smuggling and human trafficking. The meeting produced a short declaration, outlining ten broad ‘key areas of cooperation’ (EU-HOAI, 2014). However, it has since been the subject of controversy. The Khartoum Process is led by a steering committee comprised of Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Malta (on behalf of the EU), and Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sudan (on behalf of the Horn of Africa) (European Commission, 2015a).

The Khartoum Process has a narrow, security-based focus based on the European Union’s drive to keep the ‘burden of migration’ in countries of origin and in the region. The main premise is that the European Union will fund projects on border security and the handling of smuggling and trafficking networks in the Horn of Africa; consequently, the process has been accused of ‘shifting the burden’ of border control to African countries (Grinstead, 2016). Furthermore, the EU has not shied away from cooperating with regimes such as Sudan’s (whose president is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes) and Eritrea’s (which is accused of crimes against humanity) and their security forces. In fact, it can be argued that the Khartoum Process strengthens the abusive actions of such regimes, as, for example,

it indirectly supports Eritrea's 'shoot-to-kill' policy at its borders (Plaut, 2016). In its growing desperation to stop migration, the EU wants to make even its development aid conditional on curbing migration, stating that countries that cooperate will receive "certain treatment", whereas those that are incapable or unwilling to cooperate will receive "different treatment" related to development and trade policies (Guarascio, 2016).

The Khartoum process has also emboldened the Sudanese border-control forces and its Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a militia referred to as "men with no mercy" in a 2015 Human Rights Watch report (Human Rights Watch, 2015). According to a source, the RSF receives direct commands from the Sudanese president, but is paid through the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) (Anon., personal communication, with Reim, email, 26 December 2016). Until 2016, the RSF was mainly involved in fighting armed rebel groups in Sudan's conflict-ridden Darfur and the two southern areas of internal conflict, the Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan. However, in 2016, as the EU promised funds to curtail smuggling and trafficking, pro-government newspapers reported activities by the RSF on the Sudan-Libya border, including allegedly arresting groups of refugees trying to make the journey to Libya.

The RSF's involvement in migration control is no coincidence. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the border patrol forces, and a number of governors of states in northern and western Sudan have been making press statements about the urgent need to stop illegal migration from Sudan to Europe (Anon., personal communication, with Reim, email, 26 December 2016). Along with the border patrol forces, the RSF has been the centre of such operations. The RSF has become an asset to the Sudanese government as major defenders in times of protest or conflict (the RSF were heavily involved in curbing the deadly 2013 protests known as the September protests). For this reason, this militia has been at the forefront of the fight against migration through arresting, or as stated in government-owned newspapers, "liberating victims of human trafficking" (Africa Monitors, 2016).

In July 2016, the leader of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan (commonly known as 'Hemeidty') told the press that his troops are protecting the Sudanese-Libyan borders from gangs and bandits. Two months later, he also told the press that they lost 150 vehicles as they were patrolling the Sudanese-Libyan borders in an attempt to protect Europe's borders, calling on the EU to appreciate their efforts (Sudan Tribune, 2016). In September 2016, out of sheer embarrassment, the EU had to come forward and deny providing any support to the RSF (Sudan Tribune, 2016). However, as the Khartoum process is underway, the EU will have little influence as

to how EU funds channelled to Sudanese government institutions are used and could also be under pressure to turn a blind eye if the RSF or other oppressive mechanisms prove to be efficient.

## **Addressing the causes of migration**

Policies designed to combat human trafficking alone will not prevent it, as long as the causes of migration are not addressed. The AU and IGAD are under pressure from the EU (among others) to reduce the number of migrants. However a long-term strategy needs to be developed. Holding regional conferences and designing solutions to human trafficking are steps towards preventing it. However, if human trafficking is really to be tackled, greater emphasis must be placed on analysing the various root causes of migration for different groups and on putting policies in place to tackle these. Addressing criminal activity, strengthening the effectiveness of the rule of law and increasing employment opportunities may prevent human trafficking and reduce migration to a certain degree.

In the case of Eritrea, the systematic human rights abuses, openend military service, and lack of confidence in the government have encouraged thousands of citizens to flee, with all the additional risks that this flight brings. Therefore, the AU and IGAD should pressure the Eritrean government to address the root causes of this mass migration of Eritreans and to adopt policies that prevent it. For this strategy to succeed it is vital that the AU and IGAD address Eritrea's legitimate concerns over its border with Ethiopia and take action to reduce the underlying tensions between the two countries.

Since 2002, the AU has shown greater willingness to pass resolutions than take resolute action. These resolutions need to be effectively implemented. As one observer concluded: "The AU's legal foundations permit high expectations in the field of refugee protection and the scale of the refugee problem in Africa demands them. It is time for the AU to focus on the quality of initiatives over their quantity, and for rhetoric to give way to reality" (Sharpe, 2011, p. 37). However, this will only happen when the AU's member states act in accordance with the resolutions that they adopt.

## **Conclusion**

Eritrea's population, among whom there are many young people, continue to flee the country due to human rights abuses and the indefinite military service. In the camps and en route, they are vulnerable to human trafficking and other abuses. The policies of the EU, AU and IGAD have done little to address the root causes of migration from Eritrea, nor have they done much to protect refugees in the Horn of Africa and en route to Europe. For instance, the European Union's mishandling of its relationship with Eritrea has done nothing to improve the situation for its people. The European Union has shown itself unwilling to learn from the past; instead, it opted to develop the view that human rights abuses in Eritrea have been exaggerated. The new tactic for re-engagement, involving EUR 200 million in development aid, is unlikely to bring about any change, as the Eritrean regime has refused to change.

The Horn of Africa, meanwhile, bears the brunt of the refugees fleeing from Eritrea. The AU and IGAD have both experienced rocky relationships with Eritrea, which has been in and out of these organisations. Neither have taken any action regarding the tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which Eritrea has continuously interpreted as the AU and IGAD siding with the Ethiopian government. This is complicated by the fact that the headquarters of the AU is situated in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The AU and IGAD have developed policies and processes to address trafficking and migration, but with limited success. They do not provide sustainable lasting solutions that address the root causes of migration in Eritrea. Meanwhile, the EU continues to shift the burden of border protection to Africa, through policies such as the Khartoum Process. This could leave regimes such as Eritrea's strengthened and human rights relegated to an afterthought – if considered at all.

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## Chapter 13

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# Prosecuting Sinai Trafficking: An Overview of Options

*Daniel Mekonnen & Wegi Sereke*

*It is in fact a system that is prepared as if it was a loophole, for whoever who wishes to use it. It is like leaving money on the street without telling the people to take it. It is a system that is purposely left without administrative control, thereby inviting the military and others to exploit it.*  
(Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016)

*There are reasonable grounds to believe that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of enslavement, a crime against humanity, in a persistent, widespread and systematic manner since no later than 2002.*  
(UNHRC, 2016, para. 68)

## Introduction

Human trafficking, particularly the phenomenon that has come to be known as ‘Sinai trafficking’, is a heinous violation of international law (Shelly, 2010; Gallagher, 2010; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). This new form of trafficking, which emerged at the end of 2008, is challenging academics and researchers to adopt a new definition of trafficking that takes into account the peculiar characteristics of human trafficking in the Sinai (Abdel Aziz, Monzini & Pastore, 2015; Berhane, 2015; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015), namely, the commodification of human beings who are sold and on sold in the process of trafficking for ransom while “money is extorted from the relatives of hostages (initially migrants and refugees) by traffickers using mobile phones while hostages are tortured to pressure relatives into paying the ransom amounts” (Van Reisen & Rijken 2016, p. 117). Sinai trafficking has been defined as: an identified pattern of “abduction and displacement, captivity, torture, sexual violence, humiliation, forced begging, extortion, commoditisation of people by selling, serial selling and killing”

(Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014, p. 23). This phenomenon stretches from the Greater Horn of Africa region to the Sinai Desert and beyond.

Although no new cases of Sinai trafficking have been reported since 2015<sup>48</sup>, its root causes have not been addressed and its perpetrators remain at large. As this chapter will reveal, the human rights situation in Eritrea, which drove the migration that fed the smuggling and trafficking networks, remains unchanged. Among the alleged perpetrators are high-ranking military officials, who have not been brought to justice. Therefore, the people of Eritrea are still fleeing Eritrea in large numbers and are still at risk of exploitation. Until those responsible for human trafficking in the Sinai are brought to justice, the Eritrean people will not be safe and cannot heal from what will be argued in this chapter are ‘atrocities crimes’.

This chapter looks at the options for prosecuting Sinai trafficking, to hold those responsible accountable. By distilling the most pragmatic options for prosecutorial accountability, at the international level, this chapter aims to provide a cursory overview of the existing legal framework in this regard, followed by some practical recommendations towards the prosecution of human trafficking. It starts by looking at prosecution (as an essential element of combating human trafficking) and the international legal framework, followed by Eritrea’s central role in the trafficking cycle. It then examines state responsibility and individual responsibility as the two main practical avenues for prosecution, as well as the different legal forums for prosecution. Finally, it looks at the responsibility of the international community to respond more broadly to the situation in Eritrea through the doctrine of the responsibility to protect (R2P). Without undermining the role of the other two components, this chapter examines the most effective available prosecutorial options, conceived under international and regional legal frameworks, for ensuring accountability for the transnational crime of human trafficking, in particular, Sinai trafficking.

## **Prosecution: Essential in combating human trafficking**

Prosecution is one of the three elements of combating human trafficking, also known the ‘3P paradigm’, the other two being: prevention and protection (United States Department of State, 2011; Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2011). It emphasises the need to prosecute human traffickers and those who aid and abet in the perpetration of this grotesque violation of international law, which is akin to modern day slavery.

The prosecution of human traffickers is not an easy endeavour, mainly due to the fact that the crime is highly clandestine and, as a result, the great majority of human trafficking cases go unreported. Due to its transnational nature, it involves a wide range of actors, including international criminal organisations, spanning a global network (Rijken, 2003; Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2011; Van Reisen, *et al.*, 2014). The lucrative nature of the business means that members of local law enforcement agencies, diplomats, and others may at times even collaborate with criminal syndicates, making prosecution extremely difficult. Moreover, the victims of human trafficking, the most important sources of information and evidence for criminal prosecution, are often unwilling to testify against traffickers, for various reasons, including fear of reprisals and reticence to speak about the trauma they experienced.

In countries that are severely affected by the crisis of human trafficking (e.g., countries in the Horn of Africa), the most critical challenge is the unwillingness and/or inability of the governments of these countries to take effective prosecutorial measures against traffickers. This is also the case in relation to other atrocity crimes, such as: genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (Scheffer, 2008, p. 320; Murungu & Biegon, 2011; Abass, 2013; Garcia, 2013, p. 57). In a world order still dominated by elastic concerns related to the preservation of the old-age prerogatives of national sovereignty, the prosecution of the transnational crime of trafficking is indeed a daunting task. While these are some of the typical challenges that may be faced at the implementation level, there is a need to clearly understand the legal framework for prosecution at the international and regional levels, with a particular focus on what can be done by African Union and European Union policymakers.

## **The international legal framework**

There is a wide range of regional and international legal frameworks that provide a basis for defining the parameters of human trafficking and that impose obligations on various actors. Some of the most important legal instruments and consensus documents aimed at defining and combating human trafficking include:

- The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2000)
- The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005)

- The EU Directive on prevention and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (Directive 2011/36/EU)
- The Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons (2010)
- ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2015)
- Inter-American Convention on International Traffic in Minors (1994)
- The Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children (2006)

Perhaps the most cited international legal definition of human trafficking is the one provided by Article 3(a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children of 2000 (the ‘Trafficking Protocol’) which states:

*Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (United Nations, 2002, §3a)*

Without questioning the validity of this definition, a point of clarification is in order here with regard to the specific phenomenon of human trafficking in the Sinai, also known as ‘Sinai trafficking’, which begs for a re-consideration of the definition provided by the Trafficking Protocol. In this regard, guidance is provided by Van Reisen and Rijken, who argue that Sinai trafficking has unique characteristics, including abduction, torture, sexual violence, killing, the sale and re-sale of victims or hostages, and, most of all, brutal methods of extortion accompanied by torture and well-orchestrated phone calls to relatives of victims (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

One important question that comes into play at this juncture is the extent to which Sinai trafficking can be considered a sub-category of atrocity crimes. As will be elaborated on in the next section, any form of trafficking, let alone Sinai trafficking, which is possibly the most malignant form, can meet the threshold of an ‘atrocity crime’ when there is widespread and systematic perpetration of enslavement, thus marking it as a crime against humanity, as defined by Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Moran, 2014; van der Wilt, 2014).



In this regard, it is important to determine the relevance (if any) of Article 7 of the Rome Statute to prosecutorial efforts targeting the crime of human trafficking (Moran, 2014; van der Wilt, 2014). As most of the violations discussed in this publication took place in the Greater Horn of Africa region, extending up to the Sinai Desert, Africa-centred challenges related specifically to ICC prosecutorial initiatives also need to be addressed. Such challenges emanate mainly from the deep-seated crisis of legitimacy that the ICC is suffering from by reason of the growing hostility of African countries towards the ICC and, in particular, the threat of collective renunciation by some African countries (spearheaded by Kenya and Zimbabwe and followed by other countries, such as South Africa, Burundi and Gambia). This existential threat that is hovering over the ICC (Mbeki & Mamdani, 2014) may result in the en mass withdrawal by African countries from the Rome Statute of the ICC (Mekonnen, 2017; Tiba, 2013; Maru, 2013; Dersso, 2013).

Moreover, as will be seen later, with a view to mapping out the responsibility of states, not only in prosecuting perpetrators of human trafficking, but also in protecting vulnerable groups from the danger of human trafficking, it is important to ask if states have any obligation emanating from the doctrine of R2P, and, if not, whether it would be helpful to include human trafficking in the realm of R2P (Farrugia, 2012).

The discussion in this chapter will be articulated using the theoretical and methodological framework of international criminal law and accountability for atrocity crimes. This is premised on the understanding that, when committed in a widespread and systematic manner, human trafficking can also be categorized as a crime against humanity (as defined by Article 7 of the Rome Statute).

Thus, mixing normative and empirical dimensions, the methodology applied in this chapter has a strong bias towards a doctrinal approach relying predominantly on the relevant legal framework or international legislation on human trafficking and atrocity crimes in general. The methodology aspires to extract credible findings with a view to reaching meaningful, practical conclusions regarding the transnational crime of human trafficking, especially as affecting tens of thousands of victims originating from countries in the Horn of Africa. More importantly, the discussion will pay particular attention to Eritrea, on two grounds, as described in the next section.

## **Eritrea at the centre of Sinai trafficking**

Eritrea occupies a central place in the Sinai trafficking phenomenon, for at least two major reasons. First, the vast majority (95%) of victims of Sinai trafficking are Eritrean (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015, p. 114). Thus, Eritrea, as a major source country of victims, is a very important case study. Second, there are widespread allegations of the direct involvement of high-ranking Eritrean government officials, especially from the military, in the cycle of violence that constitutes Sinai trafficking (United Nations Security Council, 2012, 2013). Thus, there is a *prima facie* identifiable link between what is happening in the Sinai and what is happening in Eritrea (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015), making a focus on Eritrea imperative.

Accordingly, it is important to look more deeply into Eritrea's role in Sinai trafficking. This requires a methodological inquiry into the prevailing situation of gross human rights violations in Eritrea, which, according to the most authoritative report on this issue, namely, the second report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016), reaches the threshold of crimes against humanity. In addition to the detailed findings of the two COIE reports, there is a plethora of academic and non-academic literature chronicling the grave violations of human rights and international law that have been taking place in Eritrea since 1991 (Kibreab, 2009; Mekonnen, 2006; Mekonnen, 2009; Mekonnen & Pretorius, 2008; Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014; Amnesty International, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Since 1991, the Eritrean government has committed a long list of international crimes that fall within the definition of crimes against humanity, as codified by Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the ICC (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016). In the words of the COIE, these crimes include: "enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder" (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 1 and paras. 59–95). In addition to these internal actions, the Government of Eritrea has been busy destabilizing peace and security in the Horn of Africa to ensure its own narrow political objective of regime preservation (United Nations Security Council, 2012, 2013).

## **Trafficking and the crime of enslavement**

Trafficking, although a grave violation in its own right, may only trigger international concern when it becomes a crime against humanity. In this chapter it is argued that Sinai trafficking qualifies as a crime against humanity. This is based on the definition of 'enslavement' provided by Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the

ICC, in which trafficking is mentioned. Article 7(2)(c) defines enslavement, when committed as a crime against humanity, as: “the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person and includes the exercise of such power in the course of trafficking in persons, in particular women and children”.

This crime of enslavement has been committed in Eritrea in the context of the country’s controversial programme of national service. Years before the establishment of the COIE, Human Rights Watch (2013) described this practice as a form of forced labour and a collective method of punishment by the Eritrean people against a considerable proportion of the Eritrean people (see also, Kibreab, 2009; Mekonnen, 2009). In elaborating on enslavement in Eritrea, the COIE cites a long list of case law from the International Criminal Court, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 64). Remarkably, the COIE links the crime of enslavement committed by the Eritrean regime to that of the crimes committed by Germany during the Second World War, Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, and the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. In the words of the COIE, although the “victims of the military/national service schemes in Eritrea are not [necessarily] bought and sold on an open market [...] the powers attaching to the right of ownership” are evidenced by:

*(a) the uncertain legal basis for the national service programmes; (b) the arbitrary and open-ended duration of conscription, routinely for years beyond the 18 months provided for by the decree of 1995; (c) the involuntary nature of service beyond the 18 months provided for by law; (d) the use of forced labour, including domestic servitude, to benefit private, PFDJ-controlled and State-owned interests; (e) the limitations on freedom of movement; (f) the inhumane conditions, and the use of torture and sexual violence; (g) extreme coercive measures to deter escape; (h) punishment for alleged attempts to desert military service, without an administrative or judicial proceeding; (i) the limitations on all forms of religious observance; and (j) the catastrophic impact of lengthy conscription and conditions on freedom of religion, choice, association and family life. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 65)*

The COIE, therefore, concludes, that in this context its military/national service programme, Eritrean officials exercise powers attached to the right of ownership over Eritrean citizens. In light of this, the national service programme of Eritrea is no longer being used for its intended purpose, as defined by the relevant Eritrean legislation. Instead, it is being abused with the primary objective of furthering the economic interests of state-endorsed enterprises and individuals and to maintain control over the population “in a manner inconsistent with international law”

(United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 68). Based on this, the COIE states that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of enslavement, a crime against humanity, in a persistent, widespread and systematic manner since no later than 2002” (*Ibid.*).

Hence, it is clear that the main cause of the flow of victims to traffickers in the Sinai was the unbearable political situation brought about by the enslavement of the Eritrean people (under the guise of military service) in Eritrea. It is argued that this is sufficient to establish the existence of a *prima facie* link between Sinai trafficking and the human rights situation in Eritrea. Sinai trafficking also fulfils at least one aspect of the definition of crimes against humanity, namely, that of widespread abuse, as 25,000–30,000 people are estimated to have been the victims of Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014).

The next section looks at the involvement of high-ranking government officials in the ongoing human rights violations committed within the national borders of Eritrea and outside Eritrea, particularly their involvement in Sinai trafficking.

## **Involvement of Eritrean officials**

Most of the Eritrean victims of human trafficking in the Sinai are former national service conscripts, which is tantamount to enslavement, constituting a crime against humanity, as discussed in the previous section. In their effort to escape from this abuse, which is systematic and widespread in Eritrea, the victims find themselves trapped in another instance of pervasive abuse (Sinai trafficking), which also qualifies as a crime against humanity. There is also a clearly identifiable link between Sinai trafficking and the overall situation of gross human rights violations in Eritrea.

Despite this link, Sinai trafficking is not addressed in the two reports of the COIE. This is due to the narrow interpretation of its mandate adopted by the COIE in its first report (Mekonnen, 2017, in press). In particular, with regard to the interpretation of the geographic scope of its mandate (*ratione loci*), the COIE was indeed very conservative, limiting its investigations to violations committed within the national territory of Eritrea. However, following the report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014, para. 8), with which the first COIE report shares remarkable similarities, it would have been much better if the COIE had investigated extraterritorial actions originating from the State of Eritrea.

As is widely known, the Eritrean government has an “extensive spying and surveillance system targeting individuals within the country and in the diaspora” (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, para. 27) implemented via the so-called “long” or “extended arm of the State”, as established by the Court of Amsterdam in the recent case of *Bahlbi vs. Van Reisen* (2015). Moreover, other violations of human rights, such as Sinai trafficking, can be broadly regarded as violations that are causally enabled by, or the immediate consequence of, violations committed in the State of Eritrea. Thus, it is contended that these violations should have been rigorously investigated by the COIE. Failure of the COIE to address such issues stands as one of its major shortcomings. However, some tentative observations can be made in this regard based on other investigations and findings on Sinai trafficking, particularly on the suspected collusion of some high-ranking Eritrean government officials with Sinai trafficking.

The most important starting point is the alleged involvement of high-ranking Eritrean government officials in Sinai trafficking, as verified by UN experts in the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (United Nations, 2012, 2014). Since 2009, the Eritrean government has been subjected to sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, on account of the government’s foreign policy in the Horn of Africa, which entails grave breaches of established norms related to international peace and security. In relation to these sanctions, the behaviour of the Eritrean government is under constant watch by the Monitoring Group, which was appointed by the UN Security Council with the objective of monitoring the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on the Eritrean government in 2009, which are still in force.

In relation to this mandate, the Monitoring Group has published detailed accounts of the direct involvement of high-ranking Eritrean government officials in Sinai trafficking. This needs to be seen in the context of the mass exodus of Eritreans, which is considered by some high-ranking Eritrean government officials as a blessing in disguise (Mekonnen, 2016a). Indeed, this mass exodus has dual benefits for the Eritrean regime. First, it is seen as “a social safety valve for frustrated youthful constituencies” (International Crisis Group, 2014, pp. 9–10). Second, it has become “a lucrative side-business” for high-ranking Eritrean government officials, who are said to be colluding in the business of smuggling and trafficking people to neighbouring Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt (*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10).

More concretely, the Monitoring Group reports that a wellknown and high-ranking Eritrean army commander, General Teklai Kifle (also known as ‘Manjus’) is involved in human and weapons trafficking operations ranging from eastern

Sudan all the way to the Sinai Desert (United Nations Security Council, 2013, paras. 70, 141; United Nations Security Council, 2012, paras. 59, 77, 80, 82, 86). Given that this individual is a high-ranking military officer, it is difficult to think of his actions as not representing those of the Eritrean government, or as something committed without the knowledge or acquiescence of the Eritrean state.

## Trafficking as a lucrative business

In explaining how high-ranking Eritrean officials are involved in the lucrative side-business of trafficking without any measures taken by the state, the former Head of the Eritrean National Treasury, Mr Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, states that:

*It is in fact a system that is prepared as if it was a loophole, for whoever who wishes to use it. It is like leaving money on the street without telling the people to take it. It is a system that is purposely left without administrative control, thereby inviting the military and others to exploit it. (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016)*

The Eritrean regime, embodied in the totalitarian behaviour of its President, Isaias Afwerki, is primarily concerned with its own preservation. The most effective way of ensuring this is by ‘buying’ the loyalty of high-ranking military officials – who are indispensable if the regime is to survive – for the simple reason that the military happens to be among the most important government agencies in which real power (the barrel of the gun) rests, the other important branch being the secret police.

It is a well-known fact that since the political crisis of September 2001 (Awate.com, 2013; Connell, 2005), President Isaias Afwerki is ruling the country by a system of impunity deliberately designed to proliferate illegal methods of economic exploitation by which army commanders enrich themselves exponentially, without any legal consequences, in exchange for the utmost level of loyalty towards the President. In this context, a disturbing informal economy and trade has thrived, in which generating income through all forms of illegal activities has become the norm rather than the exception, mainly for high-ranking army commanders (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016).

Looking at the history of other African dictators, Isaias Afwerki is repeating the same tactic of ruling by political patronage, perhaps with a more sophisticated method, which includes acquiescence or complicity in the trafficking business. His behaviour is explained by an Eritrean scholar as follows:

*A one-time liberation hero but widely and deeply despised today, Isaias [Afwerki] runs the tiny nation as his personal fiefdom with a degree of fear that earned him the infamous appellation of eti diablos (Tigrinya for the “devil”). He rules not only by brute force but also through a Mobutu-style breeding of ceaseless instability and power struggles among his subordinates blended with Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s art of buying legitimacy by granting privileged access and clientelistic distribution of state resources to the tegadelti (former freedom fighters) and a few civilian supporters. Isaias mercilessly punishes disloyalty by liquidation and temporary “freezing” – dishonourable dismissal of officials from active duty. (Nur, 2015, p. 99)*

In Eritrea, no one is allowed to create wealth outside the informal money-generating system, which President Isaias Afwerki has deliberately created by killing the formal economy and through his tailor-made informal method of generating wealth, including the notorious coupon economy in the country (Welde Giorgis, 2014, p. 233; Ogbazghi, 2011). In this way, he distributes wealth to anyone who is willing to serve the ultimate objective of regime preservation and turns a blind eye to those who are involved in the most despised business of trafficking, as long as they do so without affecting their loyalty to him.

The most important evidence connecting Sinai trafficking with high-ranking Eritrean government officials is the fact that many of the people who later fall into the hands of traffickers in Sinai are actually smuggled out of Eritrea using government-owned station wagons or SUV vehicles (Interview, Van Reisen with KD Hosabay, Skype, 30 November 2016). Once in Sudan, they are handed over to other smugglers, facilitators or traffickers who promise to assist them in crossing the Mediterranean Sea. However, instead, the abusers hand the victims over to the main trafficking ring in the Sinai. The cycle continues like this. Moreover, it is important to remember that on a number of occasions, ransom money to secure the freedom of victims held hostage in Sinai has been paid to people inside Eritrea (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). Looking closely at the circumstances of this whole story, there is plausible evidence pointing to the fact that this whole activity is taking place either with the knowledge, acquiescence or complicity of high-ranking government officials or the state in general. The next section discusses the legal basis for state responsibility pertaining to Sinai trafficking.

## **State responsibility**

However, does the involvement of high-ranking Eritrean government officials in Sinai trafficking equate to state responsibility for this crime? In this section, it is argued that it does. To establish responsibility on the part of Eritrea, it is important

to examine the existing body of international law on state responsibility. The starting point is Article 2 of the Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts ('the Draft Articles'), which defines an internationally wrongful act as follows:

*There is an internationally wrongful act of a State when conduct consisting of an action or omission:*  
*(a) is attributable to the State under international law; and*  
*(b) constitutes a breach of an international obligation of the State.* (International Law Commission, 2001)

In the case of Eritrea, it is clear that, although the core element of Sinai trafficking is taking place in a distant geographic location, there is a clear connection with high-ranking government officials in Eritrea. Article 7 of the Draft Articles envisages a scenario in which a government official (such as General Teklai Kifle) may have acted in excess of his authority or contrary to instructions, but where such an act is still considered an act of the state (International Law Commission, 2001, p. 45). The government may claim that the person in question was acting in a personal capacity, prompted by personal financial gain. By way of explaining a scenario like this, the International Law Commission states that "a State may be responsible for the effects of the conduct of private parties, if it failed to take necessary measures to prevent those effects" (International Law Commission, 2001, p. 39). As the Eritrean government is not taking any measures (at least at the official level) against high-ranking officials who are suspected of involvement in human trafficking in the Sinai, these acts can clearly be attributed to the state. Moreover, as asserted throughout this chapter, the trafficking issue cannot be seen in isolation from the overall human rights crisis in the country, which is driving migration that is fuelling trafficking and about which the government is not doing anything – constituting another angle from which it may be held responsible for Sinai trafficking. It follows that, as trafficking is a well-known breach of international law (according to several international treaties, including Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the ICC), based on Articles 2 and 7 of the Draft Articles, it can be concluded that the Eritrean State is indeed responsible for the internationally wrongful act of Sinai trafficking.

Having established the culpability or responsibility of the Eritrean State, the next question to be addressed is that of remedy or accountability. The Draft Articles envisage a number of accountability options, which include the duty of cessation and nonrepetition (Article 30) and the duty to make reparations (Article 33), among other things. The enforcement of these accountability options against the



Eritrean government is a far-fetched reality until such time as Eritrea establishes a democratic system of governance and law. Meanwhile, the most pragmatic thing to do is to focus on the other accountability option envisaged under Article 48 of the Draft Articles. Under Article 48, if “the obligation breached is owed to the international community as a whole,” what is known as obligation *erga omnes*, then the international community as a whole (acting through the UN Security Council) has an obligation to taking appropriate measures against the Eritrean State.

At this point, again, we need to look at the trafficking in the context of the prevailing situation of crimes against humanity in Eritrea, a situation which should in its own right trigger universal concern and which is encompassed in the concept of obligations *erga omnes* (Bassiouni, 1997). Following this argument, it is clear that the international community is duty bound to adopt appropriate accountability measures to address the dire human rights situation in Eritrea. The human trafficking crisis cannot, and should not, be seen in isolation from this.

The need to adopt appropriate accountability measures becomes more urgent when other additional factors are taken into consideration. In addition to the human rights situation inside the country and the trafficking crisis in the Sinai, the Eritrean government has been frequently accused of perpetrating other grave violations of international law, including: state sponsored terrorism (in the context of its alleged involvement in Somalia, which included alleged financial, military and logistical support provided to Al-Shabab, an entity designated by the UN as a terrorist group) and violent interference in the domestic affairs of almost all neighbouring countries (by training and arming the rebel groups from these countries) (Mekonnen, 2009, pp. 113–117).

None of these violations of international law, which should have attracted international concern, are addressed by the two COIE reports (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016), mainly because of the narrow interpretation of its mandate, as noted above. However, there seems to be a sound legal basis, premised on customary international law, for the international community to adopt effective accountability measures.

In addition to the limited accountability options discussed in the context of the Draft Articles (focusing on state responsibility), the discourse on accountability can be taken one step further by focusing on the individual criminal responsibility of high-ranking government officials. In this regard, the salient observations made in 1946 by the International Military Tribunal (IMT) are pertinent: that “[c]rimes against international law are committed by men, not by abstract entities, and only by punishing individuals who commit such crimes can the provisions of

international law be enforced” (IMT, 1946, p. 221). In the next section, we will examine the most important options and accountability mechanisms based on the individual criminal responsibility of high-ranking government officials.

## **Individual criminal responsibility**

International crimes of universal concern, in particular crimes against humanity, are taking place in Eritrea with impunity. Sinai trafficking, which has a clearly identifiable link with the human rights situation in Eritrea, can be seen as part and parcel of this crisis.

There are three important factors in the prosecution of offenders, who might be held accountable for the commission of grave violations of international law, including a version of trafficking in the form of enslavement (as provided by Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the ICC). The first is to clarify the legal basis for individual criminal responsibility. This issue will be dealt with here briefly, leaving further details to a previous work on this particular topic (Mekonnen, 2009, Chapter 5). Thus, building on the well-established principle of international criminal law espoused by the IMT, it follows that grave violations of international law entail serious legal consequences for individuals who are reasonably suspected of involvement in the perpetration of such violations (International Military Tribunal, 1946, p. 221). In more concrete terms, it can be said that individual criminal responsibility arises when an individual commits a violation, such as the criminal act of enslavement, as defined by Article 7 of the Rome Statute, or when such an individual aids or abets in the commission of trafficking (for example, by handing over victims to traffickers).

The second important factor is identification of the most responsible individuals. Based on a legal methodology used by the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur (United Nations Security Council, 2005, para. 15), a 2008 study by one of the current authors provided a tentative list of the most responsible individuals for the crimes against humanity taking place in Eritrea (Mekonnen, 2009, p. 164). A more persuasive list was published by the first COIE report in June 2015. The relevant paragraph reads as follows:

*The commission finds that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Patterns of systematic human rights violations have been identified, taking into account several factors. They include the high frequency of occurrence of the human rights violations documented and corroborated during the investigation, the number of victims and the replication of the violation during a certain period of*

*time; the type of rights violated; and the systemic nature of these violations, meaning that they cannot be the result of random or isolated acts of the authorities. The main perpetrators of these violations are the Eritrean Defence Forces, in particular the Eritrean Army; the National Security Office; the Eritrean Police Forces; the Ministry of Information; the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Defence; the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ); the Office of the President; and the President. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, para. 23)*

From the statement of the IMT that “crimes against international law are committed by men, not by abstract entities” (International Military Tribunal, 1946, p. 221), it can be argued that some or all government officials running the above listed state institutions are among the most responsible individuals for the ongoing situation of human rights violations in Eritrea. The next question is: how can these individuals be held to account? This is related to the third important factor, which is identification of a prosecutorial forum. This is discussed in the next section.

## **Prosecutorial forums**

With the complete non-availability of domestic legal remedies in Eritrea, international criminal justice, as applied by foreign courts, regional or international judicial bodies, is the only viable legal regime under which accountability mechanisms can be considered for the ongoing crimes against humanity taking place in the country and for Sinai trafficking. Each option is discussed separately in this section.

### ***Prosecution by the ICC***

Given that the situation of human rights in Eritrea (including that of Sinai trafficking) has reached the threshold of crimes against humanity, the ICC provides the most important means of prosecuting these crimes. According to Article 13 of the Rome Statute of the ICC, there are three jurisdictional trigger mechanisms for a case to be tried by the ICC:

- A case can be referred to the prosecutor of the ICC by a state party to the ICC Statute.
- A case can be referred to the prosecutor by the UN Security Council acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.
- The prosecutor can also commence investigation on her/his own initiative (*proprio motu*).

The most likely scenario in this case is referral of the situation to the prosecutor of the ICC by the UN Security Council, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Given the high level of animosity between Africa at large and the ICC, and the diminished interest on the part of the Security Council in referring a new African country to the ICC, the chances of this happening are slim (Mekonnen, 2017).

### ***Prosecution by foreign national courts***

Given the current political situation in Eritrea and the limitations of prosecution by the ICC, prosecution by foreign national courts is perhaps the most important available option, with fewer obstacles (compared to the challenges involved in ICC prosecution). Embedded in the concept of ‘universal jurisdiction’, there is a wellknown principle of international law that enables states to claim jurisdiction over persons whose alleged crimes are considered crimes of universal concern (Bassiouni, 1997). States can accordingly act against any offender regardless of the nationality of the offender or victim and irrespective of where the offence was committed.

However, there are certain challenges to the exercise of universal jurisdiction by foreign municipal courts. The ruling of the International Court of Justice in the Arrest Warrant case (2000, paras. 51–55) clearly demonstrates that there are certain immunities attached to incumbent high-ranking government officials, such as the head of state, diplomatic agents and senior members of cabinet (Du Plessis & Coutsooudis, 2005). Such immunities will continue to trump the possibility of prosecution for international crimes in foreign municipal courts (Cassese, 2003, p. 271). However, with regard to other government officials who do not fall under the protection of diplomatic immunity, such as army commanders and ruling party officials, there is a possibility of prosecuting these individuals, if they are to be found physically in the jurisdiction of other states. The most prominent of such individuals, subject to the establishment of reliable evidence of individual criminal responsibility, is the Presidential Advisor, Mr Yemane Gebreab, who frequently travels to Europe and North America.

### ***The passive personality principle***

A very important aspect of universal jurisdiction is the principle of passive personality – also discussed in the context of extraterritorial jurisdiction (see the case of *United States v. Yunis*, 1991; Echle, 2013). This principle enables a third country to exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed in another country, provided

the victim of the violation in question happens to be a citizen of the country wishing to exercise jurisdiction. With regard to the transnational crime of Sinai trafficking, it remains to be seen if there are victims of foreign nationality who can claim that the violation they have suffered while in Sinai was committed against them at the instigation of Eritrean government officials. There is an apparent research gap in this regard.

With regard to human rights violations taking place in Eritrea, the general understanding is that these violations are perpetrated primarily against Eritrean citizens, most especially government officials. There are, however, at least two well-known cases of crimes committed in Eritrea against a foreign national. The first is that of Eritrean-Swedish journalist, Dawit Isaak, who remains in detention without trial and in a state of enforced disappearance since September 2001. As a person with dual nationality (Eritrean and Swedish), the case of Dawit Isaak may not be the best example. Although the Swedish authorities could invoke the principle of passive personality to establish criminal accountability for the violations suffered by Dawit Isaak, the experience of the last 15 years indicates lack of interest on the part of Swedish authorities, presumably for fear of worsening the plight of the victim, whose whereabouts remain unknown.

The second example is that of six British nationals who were held in detention without trial and without consular access in Eritrea for about six months in 2010/11, under circumstances the full details of which still remain unknown (The Independent, 2011). If any of these victims are interested in instituting a legal action against Eritrean government officials, the passive personality principle may be an avenue.

Relatively speaking, Europe as a continental block has the most advanced prosecutorial infrastructure for holding perpetrators of international crimes to account. For obvious reasons, European governments are expected to play a lead role in this regard – in terms of implementing effective prosecutorial strategies, focusing mainly on individuals suspected of involvement in Sinai trafficking.

Related to persecution by foreign national courts or the exercise of extra-territorial jurisdiction by foreign courts, is the possibility of adoption of alternative accountability measures by the most important regional organisation, the African Union (AU). This option is clearly indicated in the recommendations of the second COIE report (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 133). What shape and form such an alternative accountability mechanism will take is yet to be seen.

### ***Other interim measures***

Pending the implementation of a prosecutorial mechanism by national or international judicial organs, the international community, via its global and regional institutions, could also adopt interim measures aimed at ending the pervasive culture of impunity in Eritrea. Such measures include, but are not limited to, the imposition of sanctions, such as travel bans and the freezing of assets of those who are deemed the most responsible for perpetrating serious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law.

As a start, the imposition of the recommended interim measures can focus on the list of individuals discussed in the previous section as the most responsible. In this regard, pertinent lessons are to be gleaned from Security Council Resolutions 1907 (2009) and 2023 (2011a), which already impose stringent sanctions against the Eritrean regime and which were both prompted primarily by the Eritrean government's aggressive foreign policy in the Horn of Africa. The assumption underlying such measures is that the individuals in question are believed to be responsible for promoting or carrying out acts amounting to threats to peace or crimes against humanity and trafficking, which are also in their own rights threats to international peace and order.

The adoption of sanctions is not a measure that would be expected only on the part of the UN Security Council. Other regional bodies, such as the AU and EU also bear the same responsibility. With regard to the EU, there is a precedent pertaining to the Zimbabwean president, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, who remained the subject of stringent EU sanctions for many years on account of the dire situation of human rights in the country (European Common, 2002). With regard to the AU, the idea was proposed some years back by an Eritrean scholar, Weldehaimanot (2010), who argued that, by the standards of the African Constitutive Act, the situation in Eritrea amounts to a threat to regional peace and order. Thus, based on Article 4 of its Constitutive Act, the AU could also take measures aimed at reversing the sad state of affairs in Eritrea, with the objective of rescuing the Eritrean population from the impending risk of a humanitarian crisis.

Speaking of regional actors that can play a role in alleviating the suffering of the Eritrean people, one cannot forget about the EU, which is the leading partner for development of cooperation with the Eritrean government. As noted on a number of occasions, the EU's approach towards Eritrea is not the best of all available examples. While the crimes against humanity being perpetrated in Eritrea are well-documented, the EU still entertains an alternative approach of gradual and constructive engagement, as if it had no clue of the severity of the crimes

committed. The next issue that will be addressed is the obligation of the international community at large, framed in the context of the responsibility to protect (R2P). This will be discussed in the next section.

## **Obligation of international community: R2P**

There are some underlying facts about Eritrea that cannot be denied by anyone who has an objective understanding of the challenges Eritrea faces. However, some seem to be impressed by the misleading ideological mind-set of the Eritrean regime, which is painted as being great for resisting the West at all cost. The sad part of the story is that buried under this hubris, Eritrea, as a new concept of a proud and unbowed state on the African continent, is dying so fast, and while still in its infancy, mainly due to the government's irresponsible actions of the last 15 years since the political crisis of September 2001.

What Eritrea has now is a brutal reality, something many want to hide from, but which keeps popping up in the form of a dead body of a refugee in the Sahara Desert; a victim of Sinai trafficking; or the cries of an Eritrean mother, who gave birth while drowning in the sea (Daily Mail, 2013; The Local, 2013). Although there is no commonly agreed legal definition of the term 'humanitarian disaster' or 'humanitarian crisis', all factors considered, Eritrea is unmistakably going through a humanitarian disaster or crisis, akin to those experienced in armed conflicts, internal disturbances, or natural disasters (Mekonnen, 2016a; Mekonnen, 2015) of the highest magnitude.

Perhaps the most authoritative account on the unfolding humanitarian disaster in Eritrea is that given in 2014 by four Catholic Bishops of Eritrea. Agitated by the frightening level of the mass exodus of the Eritrean population and societal ills, the bishops warned: "It is not just the continuous outflow, and hence the depletion, of the people on its own that is worrying us, but the fact that we are heading towards extinction [tsanta] as a result..." (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2014).

This is where R2P, as an evolving doctrine of international law and relations, becomes relevant to the situation in Eritrea (International Commission on Intervention and State Responsibility, 2001). As argued throughout this chapter, there is an ongoing situation of crimes against humanity in Eritrea and the Eritrean government is unwilling and unable to address the pervasive culture of impunity surrounding these crimes against humanity. The government will not act, simply because doing so is diametrically opposed to its aim of regime self-preservation.

Crimes against humanity are one major category of atrocity crimes (the other two being genocide and war crimes), which can trigger application of the doctrine of R2P against the Eritrean government. In light of this, and the looming humanitarian crisis in Eritrea, it becomes imperative for the international community to invoke the doctrine of R2P, with the sole objective of rescuing the Eritrean people from the continued perpetration of crimes against humanity by the Eritrean regime, including the unbearable humanitarian situation. In essence, the most important concept of R2P is captured in the first principle contained in the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Responsibility, which reads as follows:

*(1) Basic Principles*

*A. State sovereignty implies responsibility, and the primary responsibility for the protection of its people lies with the state itself.*

*B. Where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect. (International Commission on Intervention and State Responsibility, 2001)*

The international community invoked the doctrine of R2P for the first time in relation to Libya, when it authorised international intervention to protect the people of Libya from the repression of the former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi (United Nations Security Council, 2011b). Without forgetting the shortcomings that were experienced in the Libyan context, there is a need for the international community to address the situation in Eritrea by invoking the doctrine of R2P or other alternative measures.

## **Conclusion**

The crisis of Sinai trafficking is too complicated to be resolved by a single formula or panacea. Focusing on prosecution as one of the four essential elements of combating human trafficking, this chapter attempted to identify the most pragmatic options for prosecutorial accountability under international law. The discussion focused on Eritrea for two important reasons: first, Eritrea is a major source country for the overwhelming majority of Sinai trafficking victims and, second, there is a clearly identifiable connection between some high-ranking Eritrean officials and Sinai trafficking.



Furthermore, it is impossible to discuss Sinai trafficking in isolation from the situation of crimes against humanity in Eritrea, on which there is already an authoritative account by a United Nations fact-finding mission, the COIE. This makes Eritrea the only African country in which there is an ongoing situation of crimes against humanity, officially verified by a UN Commission of Inquiry.

Over and above the major arguments articulated in the previous sections of this chapter, the following observation by a Belgian politician shall provide additional impetus to our concluding remarks. In August 2014, at a European Parliamentary hearing, a Belgian member of the Parliament said that Eritrea as a state “is organised like a military detention centre under the absolute rule of Isaias Afwerki,” who was described by the parliamentarian as “a bloody despot” (Tarabella, 2014). Indeed, Eritrea has become unmistakably “The African Garrison State” (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014). Tarabella (2014) adds that the country is led by a ruler who behaves as if the country were still at war. In the context of an increasing level of political repression, the government perpetuates its grip on power by fabricating stories about a CIA plot. In the meantime, the country is “steadily collapsing and its population dwindling” (*ibid.*), a situation also squarely captured by the 2014 seminal pastoral letter of four Catholic Bishops (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2014).

All of the above observations point towards a looming humanitarian disaster in Eritrea, which can be halted by invoking the doctrine of R2P or other options at the disposal of the international community. This responsibility is equally applicable to all regional and international actors, ranging from the UN Security Council in New York, to the relevant organs of the EU and the AU. Pending such measures, it is also important to seek meaningful accountability measures through the available prosecutorial options discussed in this chapter, particularly the principle of universal jurisdiction. As in the case of crimes against humanity inside Eritrea, which have been established by the COIE, it appears that some high-ranking Eritrean government officials are also reasonably suspected of involvement in Sinai trafficking and should be held accountable for their crimes.

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<sup>48</sup> Reports have been provided reporting hostages being trafficked or killed in Sinai in 2015 and 2016 by Van Reisen (informal document, unpublished, anon, January 2017).