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





### 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, Zecarias Gerrima, 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 disrespectable 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' habaa. 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 deducted 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*

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

*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 Dekembare. 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 cross-border 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 Kijfle 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 Kijfle 'Manjus', commander of the Western military zone and border units, and reportedly*

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<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

*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

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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)).



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:

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<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=09TELAIVIV952&q=hamas%20iran%20sudan%20weapons>

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

*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*

*Asbrin; which is also a refugee camp. [...] There are two high ranking Eritrean soldiers involved in this, I know them well. Their names are Berbane and YosiefH [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.

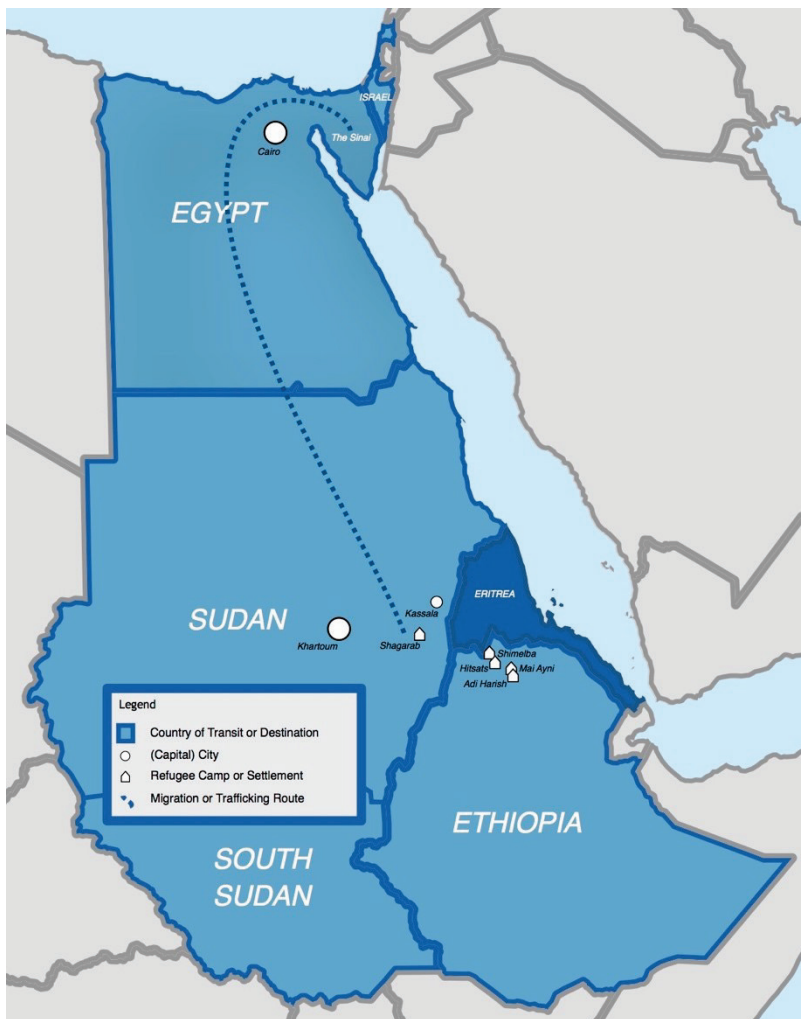


Figure 2.1. Trafficking route to the Sinai (Source: Lena Reim, 2016 – partially reproduced from Amnesty International, 2013, borders may not be exact representations)

### *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

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

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] Tesseny. 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 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 Abdellab is the leader. Abu Salem is the brother of Abu Abdellab. 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 Abdellab. Abu Salem is the security brother to Abu Abdellab. When Abdellab 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 Abdellab 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 ammunitions [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:

*Tekelebrhan: 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 Tesseny [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



Abdellah 1 (the old one), Abu Marek and Abu Sultan. Other names mentioned are Abu Salem, Abu Shaher, Abu Mussa, Abu Abdellah 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 alledgedly 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 Qesbi [...], 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 Abdellah 2, a teenager (who is not the same person as the old Abu Abdellah 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 Asber, where I had been before. Abu Abdellah 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 Abdellah 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 Abdellah 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 Abdellah 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 Abdellah 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 Abdellah 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 Berbe, 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 [...] bombarded. [...] 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:

*I 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

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<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).

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>:

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<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>.

*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 Sabaronim 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>*

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<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

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:

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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).



*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 aunts 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 Rasbaida 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 vain, 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 refoiled 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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