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

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



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### The Exodus from Eritrea and Who is Benefiting

*Mirjam Van Reisen & Meron Estefanos*

*In addition I would like to say that the vested interest of the PFDJ is in the disintegration of the youth.*

(Interview, Van Reisen with X, face-to-face, 19 January 2017)

#### Introduction

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

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

This chapter draws on information provided by journalist Zecarias Gerrima to Mirjam Van Reisen in a personal communication, as well as two unpublished documents by Mussie Hadgu, a former aid worker in Eritrea, which describe in great detail how the cross-border trafficking in human beings evolved (Hadgu, 2009, 2011).<sup>14</sup> Information collected by Africa Monitors since the beginning of 2016 is also used, including interviews with refugees

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 Excerpts from these unpublished reports have been lightly edited where necessary for comprehension and may vary from other published forms.



with regard to their experiences as they crossed the borders and tried to reach safety in Ethiopia or Sudan. The chapter makes further use of conversations between Eritrean refugees and the authors through Skype, Facebook Messenger and in face-to-face conversations. Some interviews were conducted particularly for this chapter. In other instances, interviews and conversations recorded previously were re-examined to understand certain aspects in more detail.<sup>15</sup>

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

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

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

*The trafficking of Eritreans has even been globalised up to the point where extensive networks of traffickers have been involved in the trafficking process of Eritrean refugees to Europe and the USA and demand huge amounts of money (USD*

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

10,000–20,000) under life threatening conditions and low rates of success. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 1)

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

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

Human trafficking for ransom in the North African region has been recognised as predominantly associated with Eritrean hostages (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The terms ‘smuggling’ and ‘human trafficking’ are often used interchangeably by the victims of this crime as they experience smuggling and trafficking as part of a continuum: while the refugee may actively seek assistance to flee the country (smuggling), those facilitating their journeys may be part of an (informal) organisation that systematically seeks to gain from the smuggling through exploitative practices (human trafficking). It is contended that the conditions in Eritrea are causing this crisis. Knowingly, “hundreds of thousands of Eritrean migrants go through a series of suicidal journeys to escape the suffering at home” (Africa Monitors, 2016d).

Chapter 2 looked at the dangerous journeys undertaken by Eritrean refugees, many of which start as smuggling and end up as human trafficking. This chapter delves more into the background against which these smuggling and human trafficking practices have developed. The first section investigates the reasons for the systematic exodus of Eritreans (mainly youth) from Eritrea. This is followed by an examination of the policy of detention in the country, its connection with indefinite national service, and how this has instilled a culture of fear among the people. The chapter considers

the Eritrean government's economic and financial policies and argues that these create incentives for the mass smuggling and human trafficking of Eritrean citizens. The cross-border engagement of the Eritrean military is explored in the next section, as well as its role in illicit trade, including human trafficking. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and the reasons why they engage in journeys of smuggling or human trafficking from Ethiopia. Finally, the situation in Sudan is reviewed, as well as the recent forced deportation of refugees back to Eritrea. The role of the Eritrean government and other state parties is considered throughout the chapter.

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

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

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

The creation of this situation of rampant smuggling and human trafficking can be traced back to the Eritrea-Ethiopia war of 1998–

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

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

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

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

This situation did not improve after the end of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In fact, it deteriorated in 2001 when the Eritrean government arrested members of the government (including cabinet ministers), journalists, and any opponents to the regime. These people are referred to as the 'G-15' and 11 members of this

group are still in prison today (Wikipedia, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2002). In addition to these high-level arrests, which received international attention, what is much less known is that the crackdown also specifically targeted youth, especially those at Asmara University. In 2001, government forces took 5,000 university students to Wi'a and Gelaalo, two notorious military prisons:

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

The G-15 were arrested after having issued an open letter criticising President Isaias Afwerki's actions, calling them 'illegal and unconstitutional.' They were arrested in the second week of September 2001, days after the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001. The IDP research 'summer camp' programme took place prior to these arrests.<sup>17</sup> However, the tension in the country was already rising and the G-15 had been 'frozen' by the government, which means that

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

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

they were no longer able to carry out their public functions and it was publicly known that they were being targeted.

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

Zecarias Gerrima describes how the students were rounded up:

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

The campaign is also narrated in an online testimony:

*Nonetheless, the president of the University of Asmara explained that the campaign envisioned that the students' task would be to conduct census, research and outreach to the people and that the compensation would be 800 Nakfa, meaning 26 Nakfa per day (USD 1.30 [per day]). The students' committee explained that the amount would not even suffice to cover meal and lodging expenses and asked for their rights in a legal and orderly manner. (Awate, 2014)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*They took them, to destination unknown, past the outskirts of Asmara city towards Massawa. We had no idea where. But after a few days, all students would follow*

*them, and would see them with their own eyes. This was when every student was taken to Wi'A. (Awate, 2014)*

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

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

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

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

A similar account was given by Gerrima:

*When they wanted to return us to Asmara, they made us fill out a small questionnaire:*

*Do you think it is wrong that you have disrupted work that was planned by*



*the people and Government of Eritrea?*

*A – It was wrong*

*B – It was right*

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

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

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

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

Alongside these events, the Government of Eritrea arranged for around 600 students to be taken to South Africa for ‘exchange visits’

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

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

Mekonnen and Abraha, who were among those who participated in the student 'exchange' programme, describe how students were refused visas in South Africa and harassed due to what they believe were instructions from the Eritrean Ambassador in South Africa. Some students had their Eritrean passports cancelled and became effectively stateless. Some students felt that they were subjected to surveillance and punished for activities they engaged in after they arrived in South Africa (Mekonnen & Abraha, 2009). At the same time, students were deported back to Eritrea, also allegedly upon the

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Such random general roundups still happen to create a continuous feeling of unease. I always had papers, but I hated being stopped every 10 to 15 minutes. You can't walk with your family or friends with dignity when any random soldier in the streets calls you up disrespectfully and checks your papers over an unnecessary period of five*

*minutes. This means every sign around us told us to go, everything whispered 'run away before you drown'. I still hate seeing people in uniform. There is always that involuntary jolt of fear when I first notice police.* (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 26 December 2016)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Understand it this way: 1) youth are used as slaves or as sources of free labour, 2) youth are terrorised and marginalised so that they do not participate in the political, civic, socioeconomic life of the country, and 3) youth are used as a source of income through revenue generated from human smuggling and trafficking. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 26 December 2016)*

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

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

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

## **Mass detentions of 2001**

The reports of the students who were detained during the 2001 mass arrests give a rare insight into the detention practices in Eritrea.

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

The students were detained under corrugated iron sheets in extreme temperatures. P describes how they were detained and the situation in the detention camp:

*First they took us to Wi'a, which is located at sea level with an average temperature of 38 degrees centigrade. After a day they took us to a stream to cool off, but two of the students got ill from the sudden change in body temperature. This is because the water is very cold, as it flows from the highlands. Later, both of them died. After a week with nothing to eat except canned food, most of us were transferred to Gelaalo. (Interview, Van Reisen with P, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Aderser prison, most of the prisoners had been arrested in Gash Barka while arranging to flee to Sudan (Hadgu, 2009). Hadgu tells that those who tried to escape were shot immediately to discourage fellow prisoners from attempting to do so. Hadgu described his fellow prisoners in 2001 as:

*... civilians, mainly alleged [accused] of plotting to cross to Sudan. [...] With the exception of few cases such as mine, the majority of the prisoners were arrested at Tesseney roadblock while entering Tesseney. The people were on a trip to Tesseney unaware of the new measures introduced by the military – i.e. the new measure that requires every traveller to the area around Tesseney to hold a movement permit that is specific to the area. At the time of my detention, this measure was shortly [recently]*



*introduced and the public were not informed by any means about the new measures. Before this measure was introduced, if one had a movement permit, he/she could travel unrestricted all over the country. The prisoners in this category were composed of students, workers and traders and the age group ranged from 18–40 years. (Hadgu, 2009, p. 4)*

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

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

The torture included collective punishment and sadistic, denigrating treatment:

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

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

1. Each army division and sub-unit has its own prison i.e. division, brigade, and battalion-level prisons. 2. Each town has various police stations with detention/interrogation facilities i.e. 1st and 2nd police station in Massawa, and stations 1 to 5 (at least) in Asmara. (Human Rights Watch, 2008; see also: Amnesty International, 2013; CSW & HRCE, 2009; UN Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tronvoll (2009) lists and describes six different torture methods ('the helicopter', 'otto', 'Jesus Christ', 'ferro', 'torch' and 'almaz'). Tronvoll cites the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (2007)<sup>21</sup>, in which Eritrea was ranked among the top-ten "torture victim producing" countries in the world (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 84–85).

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

*In 2000, [X][...] was one of the few organisations remaining in Eritrea, when others were expelled. The reason it was left behind was that the Eritrean government was openly supporting and arming several groups including the Sudan People's*

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

*Liberation Front (SPLF) in eastern Sudan, directly under command of Teklai Manjus. This [Manjus] was the Border Surveillance Unit looking at the border security [between Eritrea and] in Sudan. So by that time [...] Eritrea was arming Sudanese rebel groups under direct command to attack eastern Sudan. [...] [My aid organisation] was given the privilege to remain in Eritrea to support the Sudanese opposition group. They were directly asked by Yemane Gebreab [Head of the PFDJ] to stay. (Interview, Van Reisen with Mussie Hadgu, Skype, 26 December 2016)<sup>22</sup>*

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

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

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

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

Hadgu was arrested in 2001. The vehicle that came for his arrest was the vehicle provided to him by the aid organisation. It was being used by the intelligence officer of the border surveillance unit, who had been instructed by the head of the eastern Sudanese office of the Beja Relief Organisation (BRO) (Hadgu, 2009, p. 3). The following points emerge from the evidence on detention in Eritrea:

- The targeting of youth for detention

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The period [2003–2007] can generally be viewed as the intensification, over a period of time, of PFDJ's control tactics. People begun seeing beyond the idea of a*

*failed government to a government dedicated to creating suffering. So it was the strengthening of the hold on power that came after 2001, and the ground laying for the situation that followed after 2008. (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016)*

By 2008, all international organisations had left the country (Kibreab, 2009), foreign aid was suspended and, in December 2009, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution imposing sanctions on Eritrea based on the financial support of Eritrea and the PFDJ to the rebel group Al Shabab and rebel groups in Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan (UN Security Council Resolution 1907). Independent researchers no longer felt safe carrying out research in the country.

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

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

### ***The 'business' of leaving***

Eritrea's National Service programme has stripped Eritrea of its main workforce, leaving women at home to look after children and the elderly. With the able-bodied workforce conscripted, there is no one left to run and staff private businesses. The leadership assigns individuals to military or civil administrative positions. The wage received by conscripts in the military is too low to live on, creating a situation of impoverishment, in which a black market economy has emerged. This black market is encouraged and controlled by the regime. Trafficking and smuggling form an integral part of this black

market, as an increasingly large number of people are willing to pay for the chance to escape (see Chapter 2 for more on the black market and illicit cross-border trade).

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

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

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

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<sup>23</sup> “The activities associated with smuggling have also become a source of income for the military and the entire society. Impoverished military officers in command of national service recruits engage in smuggling to extract financial gains. Local

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

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

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

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civilian administrative offices are also in on the business of selling eligibility to leave the country. In many cases, even those who are legally eligible to leave are forced to offer some amount of cash in order for their papers to be processed smoothly. As more and more people become dependent on the military and government ministries to broker mobility, it has grown into a multi-million dollar business. Army commanders and staff, decision makers and staff of local administrations, officials and staff at government ministries, brokers, and forgers make up the thousands of people who engage in the business of selling mobility to anyone who can pay.” (Zecarias Gerrima, 2016).



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*In the face of growing desertions, Manjus allegedly sub-contracted border policing to remnants of the Rashaida paramilitary groups active in eastern Sudan that were*

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

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

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

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

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

*[The money goes to] Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Dubai. [...] it's big, big game. They used this money to buy weapons, they have militia, they have an army of people to protect them and their business and they got political support. That is in Egypt,*

*Sudan and Eritrea too.* (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

value of the currency, which is USD 1 = ERN 100–120. This means that the average cost of an item that is valued at 1 USD would be ERN 100–120 in the market place.

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

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

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

When the PFDJ collects foreign currency and transfers it to family and friends of refugees using the black market rate (USD 1 = ERN 55), recipients receive only half the market value (USD 1 = 100–120). Therefore, the Red Sea Corporation is in effect levying a hidden tax of at least 50% on all remittances to Eritrea. The Red Sea Corporation then uses the hard currency to buy supplies and sell it in Eritrea for the real market value of the USD against the ERN. This means that while recipients of remittances might get ERN 55 for

every ERN 100–120 sent to them, an item that costs 1 USD is not sold for ERN 55, as the exchange rate would suggest, but for ERN 100–120 (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 17 January 2017). Thus, the Red Sea Corporation is making money twice off this uneven exchange rate (*Ibid.*).

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

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

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

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

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

A clue to how this system operates was exposed by SwissLeaks, which revealed HSBC Bank account details, showing that Eritrean individuals (not the country) were among the richest bank account



holders with hundred millions of US dollars. The journalist Marie Maurisse, who specialises in Eritrea, explains the systems in an article in L'Hebdo as follows:

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

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

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

The transfer of payments is arranged as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other sources of revenue for the regime include the fines extorted from families whose relatives are presumed to have fled the country without prior authorisation. The fine, which is around

“50,000 nakfa per individual” (Hadgu, 2010), is collected by the government and the military. The fine is impossible to pay with the wages provided by national service (around 440 nakfa in ‘pocket money’). If the fine is not paid, the relatives may be arrested (Interview, Van Reisen with S2, face-to-face, September 2015).

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

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

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

### ***Ethiopia***

Since colonial times, Eritreans have lived and worked in Ethiopia and Sudan and have been a very influential part of both societies. Ethiopia has been receiving Eritrean refugees since 2000 and the first refugee camp, Shemelba, was created in 2004. The five large camps on the border house an estimated 45,000 Eritreans (authors’ estimate based on interviews). Ethiopia is regarded as the safest destination for Eritrean refugees – especially the highlanders, who are ethnically

related to the Tigray population in Ethiopia. However, Eritrean refugees are vulnerable to being trafficked. This is largely due to their tenuous financial situation.

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

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

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

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

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

### *Eastern Sudan*

Sudan has traditionally been one of the main refugee destinations for Eritreans. For decades, Eritreans have coexisted with Sudanese communities. In fact, two major ethnic groups in eastern Sudan live on both sides of the border, making it common for Sudanese families in eastern Sudan to have family members from Eritrea. Sudan has hosted Eritrean refugees since the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict began in 1968 making Shagarab refugee camp (the largest refugee camp in eastern Sudan) one of the oldest refugee camps in Africa (Interview, Van Reisen with Zecarias Gerrima, Skype, 27 December 2016). Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have been integrated into Sudanese society. Eritreans enjoyed Sudanese hospitality in the 1980s and the country gave both refugees and the armed forces a safe haven during difficult times.

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

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

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

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

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

The camps in eastern Sudan are not considered safe. Rashaida traffickers randomly kidnap refugees from the camps. Women are taken by armed Rashaida groups and raped, often multiple times and by different groups; many of them give birth while still in the camps. The US State Department describes this situation in its Trafficking in Persons report (2016):

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

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

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

Women are particularly vulnerable:

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

*price from the other gang. [...] She called to her family and her little sister picked [up].* (Africa Monitors, 2016b)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Surveillance and deportation**

### *From Ethiopia*

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

All of the landlords in Addis Ababa are now required to submit copies of their national identity cards and those of their tenants. Areas of Addis Ababa in which Eritreans live, work, or gather now

have a heavy police and security presence (Anon., confidential unpublished report, August 2016, held by author).

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

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

Some refugees report surveillance by Ethiopia Telecommunications:

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

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

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

### ***From Sudan***

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

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

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

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

*The Eritreans fall prey to the Eritrean act of exploitation whenever they apply for immigration services such as holding passport, Identity card [...]. What is worse is*

*that all of the names of those applying for ID cards or passports are checked against the data bases they have in Khartoum and Asmara. Based on this checking, those that are on a blacklist are denied the right to the services. Not only that, this checking also serves as intelligence tool to identify the whereabouts of these people. The blacklist includes officers (including junior officers in the army) and people of specific profession such the Navy and the air force. (Hadgu, 2011, p. 4)*

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

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

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

The consequences for deported refugees who have been blacklisted by the Eritrean authorities are particularly grave. Refugees

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

In 2016, the Eritrean authorities blacklisted five exiled journalists who sought asylum in Sudan after three of their colleagues disappeared in mid-May 2016 after going into hiding. There is no information as to what might have happened to their colleagues, but the journalists believe they could have been rounded up by the Sudanese authorities and handed over to the Eritrean authorities or abducted by the Eritrean security forces, which operate freely in Sudan (Anon. personal communication, [email from anon. 6 July 2016], shared with Van Reisen by Gerrima, 31 December 2016).

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

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



*come with money.* (N, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, 9 October 2016)

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

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

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

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

*It did not take long for ‘the help’ to come. It came in the form of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which is a new and advanced form of the Janjaweed force that wreaked havoc on Darfur, mostly in the early days of the conflict [...] [T]his new force came into full-force in 2014 as a paramilitary force to support the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) counter[-]insurgency in Darfur and also to suppress the conflicts in the two areas, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan. The RSF have an awkward position, they are not integrated in the SAF and they receive their funds from the National*

*Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), but are directly managed by the president himself as stated in a recent presidential decree. (Africa Monitors, 2016c)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Abdullah Tesfay [...] [name changed], an Eritrean refugee living in Khartoum, was in touch with his friend, a young woman refugee and her child, hours before they were deported to Eritrea in late May 2016. [...] “They were arrested in Omdurman, she was with over 400 Eritreans who were going to make the same journey, they took them to Al-Huda prison in Omdurman then to another prison in Kassala,” said Tesfay in an interview. (Africa Monitors, 2016a)*

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

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

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

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

*released after paying USD 500 each in bribes, but they were given to Eritrean agents to be taken back to Eritrea. (Erimedrek, 2016)*

## **Conclusion**

This chapter looks at the reasons for the mass exodus of Eritreans from Eritrea and their situation as refugees in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan. It looks at the conditions following the Ethiopia-Eritrea War of 1998–2000 and identifies the period from 2003–2007 as when the Eritrean leadership consolidated power. During this period, the functioning of democratic institutions effectively ended and youth were targeted with mass detentions, including of 5,000 university students in 2001. Some of Eritrea’s brightest students were sent to South Africa under a World Bank programme, where they were subjected to control and surveillance by the Eritrean Embassy. Some were deported back to Eritrea (after their passports were allegedly cancelled by the Eritrean Ambassador to South Africa). Asmara University stopped enrolling students in 2002. The impact of these attacks on Eritrea students were designed to break them and neutralised them as a potential threat to the regime. These, and other harassment, have effectively pushed youth out of the country, often into the arms of traffickers and others seeking to exploit them.

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

dependent on the PFDJ for survival. In order to supplement their inadequate income and purchase necessary goods, dependency on illicit trade grew, involving society at large.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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