

Eritrea

From Liberation to Oppression





Brot
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EKD
Evangelische Kirche
in Deutschland

Eritrea

From Liberation to Oppression

Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland

Cover photo:

Eritrean migrant in the „Baobab Migration Centre“ next to the Tiburtina train station in Rome on June 15, 2015. Hundreds of migrants mainly from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, who arrived during the recent months on boats sailing from Libya where brought to Italy after being rescued at sea.

(Photo by Antonio Masiello/NurPhoto/Getty Images)

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An Almost Impossible Issue

The genesis of a book is actually nothing over which an editor should lose many words. The search for authors for this book however was akin to an odyssey. And that had directly to do with the subject matter of the book – Eritrea.

For foreigners the little land on the Horn of Africa is a hard nut to crack. No other country makes one's access so difficult as Eritrea, both literally and figuratively. Whoever wishes to know more about the country finds very little on the internet, and in the German book market so good as nothing which is current – apart from the books in which Eritrean asylum-seekers relate their personal odyssey to Europe.

Eritrea is not a land which appears in the headlines of the international media. At the same time there is enough material over which the international community should be concerned. Who though would be able to provide information about the persistent human rights violations or the mood of the society? Since 2001 there has no longer been any independent media in the country. All the journalists the regime is uncomfortable with have been sitting in jail for years, most of them in solitary confinement, without charge and with no contact to their relatives. Many have already succumbed to the harsh prison conditions.

Even the option to go down there ourselves and on the ground to form our own picture of the situation was not one open to us when we started working on the German edition of this book. At that time (spring 2014) the German Embassy in Asmara was more than clear in its travel advisory for Eritrea. "Generally, non-essential travel to Eritrea is not advised", it says on its homepage. This sentence has been removed two years later. But the general security information is still the same that in problematic cases consular assistance is not at all possible. „The Eritrean authorities do not notify foreign diplomatic and consular missions about the arrest of their respective nationals, and deny access to detained or imprisoned foreigners“, the diplomats note (*26th August 2016*). And who reads further knows, that since 1 June 2006 every foreigner requires a permit if he wishes to leave the capital and travel in another region of the country. „Even the staff of the German Embassy in Asmara need a travel permit to leave the capital, which has to be applied for one or two days. The embassy could give as good as no assistance to travellers who end up in acute trouble outside Asmara.“ By now it should be clear to all: foreigners are not really welcome in Eritrea.

The first and up to now only President of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki, takes care at all costs that nothing negative about Eritrea leaks outside – and that no one from outside influences the development of the country. “Independence” is the great keyword, around which all policy since the foundation of the state in 1993 circles. For thirty long years the Eritreans had fought for their independence from Ethiopia. With victory over the Ethiopian army, not only did their dream come true; at the head of the new state sat a man who for half his life had fought against the oversized occupying forces.

Indeed after the long war the land lay in shards. Rebuilding, according to Afewerki’s blueprint, should be accomplished by the Eritreans however exactly the way that independence was achieved: single-handedly. In the beginning he still allowed in one bit or the other of foreign aid. Yet soon any involvement in the reconstruction of Eritrea became seen as meddling in internal affairs. Today there are virtually no foreign companies any more in the small country. Most of the international organizations were thrown out as well. No surprise then there, that no author who lives in Eritrea has contributed to this book.

Outside the country there are certainly also supporters and admirers of Isaias Afewerki’s policies. They see in Eritrea the brilliant example of a state, which, independent of the great powers like the USA and finance institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, goes its own way. These friends of Eritrea had often, and with enthusiasm, tracked the courageous independence fight of the Eritreans. They refuse to see that the brave freedom fighters of before have metamorphosed into a power-hungry political squad. To them, the open-ended National Service to which all Eritreans from 18 years old are conscripted, and in which most of the working-age population is de facto enslaved in the interests of the regime, is a necessary measure in a historic building up project. They willingly shrug off information about human rights violations as propaganda controlled by the USA or other big powers.

Were Eritrea really an aspiring land, that offered good prospects for its people, an estimated 5,000 Eritrean women and men would hardly be leaving the country every month, and at huge risk. According to official data, a total of nearly 444,000 refugees from Eritrea were registered with UNHCR by mid-year 2015. With an estimated total population count of around six million, that makes more than seven per cent.

For years now, Eritreans comprise one of the largest groups among the refugees who cross the Mediterranean to Europe. Between 2012 and 2014 the number of asylum-seekers from Eritrea in Germany alone grew more than twenty-fold

from 650 to just under 14,000. On their voyage to Europe via politically unstable abutting or third countries they are easy victims for unscrupulous human traffickers, whose business blooms.

German refugee policy requires that asylum-seekers have to state the reasons for their flight. This is particularly complicated for Eritrean refugees. There is no civil war going on in their homeland, nor does the land find itself at war with another country. Furthermore, Eritrea has not been hit by any acute famine. The suspicion quickly arises that the refugees have only left their land in order to earn a few euro or dollars more elsewhere. Such an allegation is plainly cynical, since the risks of human trafficking, torture or drowning, to which refugees are exposed on their route to Europe, are very well known in Eritrea.

European authorities give little credence to the information of asylum-seekers from Eritrea. At the end of 2014 Denmark had conducted a study on the situation in Eritrea, and sent experts on site. The regime in Asmara must have pulled out all the stops; the experts returned with a positive picture. Their report nevertheless sparked a debate. The main independent informant publicly criticized it saying that he had been deceived; his information had been torn out of its context. In the end his information was removed from the report; the report itself however was not retracted. Denmark is now actually considering expelling Eritrean asylum-seekers and repatriating them back to their allegedly safe homeland. The policy of sending back refugees will however not result in any success. The situation in Eritrea has not changed fundamentally. The reasons for fleeing continue to exist. It is cynical to deport asylum seekers to a country which exhibits the worst negative record in the area of human rights worldwide. Such a policy violates international refugee rights and shakes the very foundations, legal and ethical, of the European Union.

The book at hand wishes to counter somewhat this approach to refugees. We wish not only to fill a hole in the German-speaking book market, and present a small, unknown land on the Horn of Africa. Rather, we would like to create an awareness about the situation of the Eritrean refugees among us.

We are thankful to all those who helped us, so that this book could be published at all. They have contributed, with their expertise and their personal stories, to a wider public learning about the machinations of a power-hungry regime, and the interconnection between the European closed-doors policy and the unscrupulous business of human traffickers.

Katja Dorothea Buck and Mirjam van Reisen
Translation: Roxana Kawall

Word by the Publisher

In 2013 and 2014, the number of refugees coming from Eritrea to Germany increased. Many parishes and other groups supported the newcomers – but there was little information on the country. Then EMW decided to publish this book.

The response to the German edition was overwhelming. Shortly after the release in April 2015, we received hundreds of orders. Even immigration authorities requested an issue, because it was (and remains) the only publication on the political, social, economic and religious situation in Eritrea, which is available in Germany. The feedback of those who read the book, was almost entirely positive.

Only some allegations were raised that the authors would draw a far too negative and one-sided picture of Eritrea. The critical reports of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and of all human rights organizations were unfounded political slander. We have examined all of these allegations for the English Edition, but still consider the assessment of our authors correct.

This was also confirmed by the new report of the UN Commission of June 2016. Mike Smith, Chairperson of the Commission of Inquiry, summarized this report in his presentation to the United Nations Human Rights Council as follows: “So long as there is no constitution, so long as there is no parliament where you can debate national questions, so long as there is an abusive national service which is unending, so long as there is no free press, so long as there are no civil society organisations apart from government-appointed ones, so long as people are living in fear and controlled by the State, there will be no full enjoyment of all human rights and no real progress for the Eritrean people.”

The perception of the Eritrean Government and the judgment of renowned international organisations remain incompatible. It is high time to overcome this blockade in the interest of the Eritrean people and the international community.

Martin Keiper
Editor-in-chief, EMW Publications

A Regime Enslaves its Population

Hopes were high, when Eritrea finally became a state of its own in 1993, after 30 years of war with Ethiopia. Today despair prevails within the small country situated on the Red Sea. A despotic and unpredictable regime exploits its own people.

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), alone in the past ten years, more than 440,000 Eritreans have fled their land. That is more than seven per cent of the entire population of Eritrea, which is estimated to be around six million inhabitants. If approximated to Germany's population, that would make almost six million persons. An unimaginable exodus!

Once upon a time, on 24 May 1993, there was great euphoria in the streets of the capital Asmara. On this day Eritrea had gained state sovereignty, through a referendum in which independence from Ethiopia was endorsed by an overwhelm-

Alexander Joe/AFP/Getty Images



1993: Exultation in the streets of port city of Massawa. The referendum watched by UN gave an almost one-hundred-percent agreement to the detachment of Ethiopia – the happy ending of a thirty-year bloody struggle.

ing majority. Up until 1941, Eritrea had been under Italian colonial rule for fifty years. In 1952, it was recognized under a UN resolution as an autonomous part of the Ethiopian Federation. The armed resistance in the land on the Red Sea began as Ethiopia more and more played out the role of an occupying power, breached Eritrea's rights to autonomy through a policy of assimilation, and finally illegally annexed the land in 1962. For almost thirty years the Eritrean liberation movement fought bitterly against the Ethiopian occupying forces, until finally in 1991 it succeeded in gaining the decisive victory.



Reinhard Dietrich

2011: Military scrap from war against Ethiopia rusting away in Asmara.

That price was high, which Eritrea had to pay for its victory over Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie, and, after his fall in 1974, against the communist Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The war of attrition had ravaged wide regions of the country. 60,000 dead were being mourned on the Eritrean side. Thousands of war widows and orphans had to be cared for. An entire generation of young men and women, who had joined the armed struggle, now lacked a proper education and vocational training, which was urgently needed for the building up of the young state.

An estimated 750,000 persons, out of fear of the fighting or from fear of the old and the new rulers, had already sought refuge abroad. Many of them have up to today not returned from the USA and Europe, Sudan or Saudi Arabia.

Dictatorship and permanent state of emergency

Whoever concerns him- or herself with Eritrea, cannot bypass one person: Isaias Afewerki. The chief of state, often described as “paranoid”, has made Eritrea into one of the most repressive dictatorships worldwide.

He was born in 1946 in Asmara. He studied engineering for a year in Addis Ababa, before he entirely devoted himself to the Eritrean independence fight. He received a part of his military training in China in 1967. Afewerki was one of the founders of the EPLF in 1970, the marxist Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which had taken up the cause of the struggle against Ethiopian domination.

Afewerki soon became the ideological head of the EPLF. As its General Secretary, he succeeded in forming an alliance between his Eritrean liberation movement and the Ethiopian Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the common fight against the Mengistu regime. This alliance of convenience with the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi (1955 – 2012), however broke up shortly after the victory over their common enemy, and the former combatant, who from 1995 until his death reigned as Prime Minister of Ethiopia, was transformed into personal enemy Number One of the Eritrean Head of State.

Since the day of independence, Isaias Afewerki has been President and leader of the so-called transitional government of Eritrea for more than 23 continuous years now. He dictates the policies of his People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which originated from the EPLF as a single political movement. As a marxist collective movement, it is the only non-prohibited political organization/movement in Eritrea. Isaias Afewerki has made Eritrea into a “presidential one-party state”. The ruling Afewerki, with his full dictatorial powers, along with his party apparatus, disregard stately separation of powers and fundamental constitutional principles. The political state of emergency has been a permanent fixture since the country's independence.

Indeed, in 1997 a Constituent Assembly was established, in order to discuss and ratify the draft constitution of the young country. However, up to today, the constitution has never been put into effect. Eritrea, with its nine ethnic groups, is therefore one of the very few countries in the world without a valid constitution. Free parliament and presidential elections have repeatedly been announced by the so-called interim government under Afewerki since the

founding of the state, but never carried out, the last such occasion being in 2001. Afewerki has thus reigned since the state's establishment as head of state and of government.

On the basis on this never-enacted constitution, since May 1997 there has been a so-called Transitional National Assembly. It consisted initially of 150 members, half of them delegated by the Central Committee of the Unity Party PFDJ, 60 representatives from the Constituent Assembly, and 15 representatives of the overseas Eritreans, who by means of this were to be politically drawn in and moved to return home. The Transitional National Assembly as a legislature was actually to have been dissolved immediately after the first election, which was to take place promptly. Because of arrests of undesirable party members, the number of PFDJ parliamentarians has decreased to about 60, up to today. Nonetheless the composition of the parliament de facto plays no role, because in any case it only meets on the orders of the President of the State. That last happened in 2001.

As leader of government, Afewerki appoints the 16 members of his cabinet. As the Executive, the government, at the behest of Afewerki, adopts his laws and ordinances, and bypasses the inactive parliament. In fact, the draft constitution envisages an independent judiciary, alongside the executive and legislative branches. Yet starting from the highest court right down to the small village magistrate, justice is controlled by Afewerki and his party machinery. All doors are therefore open for the perversion of justice.

Aggressor and instability factor in the region

The Afewerki regime counts as one of the most aggressive worldwide, and is a military destabilizing factor in the region around the Horn of Africa. Only two years after independence, Eritrean troops occupied islands of the Hanish Archipelago in the Red Sea, which during the Italian colonial period was Eritrea's, but since then belonged to Yemen. An international arbitration decision in 1998 awarded the islands to Yemen, except for a few smaller ones which now belong to Eritrea.

In 1997 there were attacks by the Eritrean military at the border with Sudan. The UN condemned Eritrea as the aggressor, after there was fighting between Djiboutian and Eritrean troops at their common border in June 2008. On the basis of its aggressive foreign policy and indications that Eritrea supports armed

and fundamental opposition and underground groups in neighbouring countries within the entire region, the UN Security Council laid several military and economic sanctions on the country in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

The continued tension after independence with Ethiopia erupted in 1998 in various differences over the line of demarcation between both countries in the Tigray mountains, and led to a high-casualty border war. How it could come to this shedding of blood over a piece of barren rocky landscape, at the end of which more than 100,000 dead on both sides were mourned, remains a puzzle to outsiders. Around 1.3 million people on both sides of the border were forced into flight.

The two-year border war ended in the year 2000 with the peace accord of Algiers. A 25-kilometre wide demilitarized border zone on the Eritrean side was secured by 2,300 UN soldiers. The line of demarcation fixed by an independent border commission in April 2003 was not recognized by Ethiopia. The UN troops were pulled out in 2008, after their work was more and more hindered by Eritrea. The International Court in The Hague had previously declared Eritrea as the aggressor, which had contravened against international law when it attacked Ethiopia in 1998.

Since 2000, a fragile peace has reigned between the two countries. The border is shut; travelling between the two countries is not possible. At one of the most unsecure borders in the world, military snipers on the Eritrean side have the standing order, "Shoot to kill!" Nonetheless more than 4,000 Eritreans choose to take upon themselves this possibly lethal risk, and cross the border to Sudan or Ethiopia, among them in recent years also increasingly more elderly people as well as unaccompanied children and youth. Refugee organizations interpret that as an indication of how very much the situation in Eritrea has deteriorated. In his often ambiguous military rhetoric, Afewerki depicts the situation in the land and the relationship to Ethiopia as "not war and not peace".

Militarization of the society

Since the border war, the militarization of the Eritrean society has increased shockingly. The bitterly poor land showed the highest level of militarization in the world each time in the years between 1998 and 2006, according to information from the Bonn International Centre for Conversion. That means that no other country, in terms of gross domestic product, gave out so much for the

military as Eritrea. Estimates suggest that Eritrea also at present expends even more than 20 per cent of its gross domestic product on its troops, yet however, for example, only a modest 3.7 per cent on its health system. Concurrently, the funds are lacking for the import of vital medicines. With perhaps only a total of 40 medical specialists still, medical care in the country is abysmal.

In 1994, National Service for one and a half years was decreed, by which all 18- to 40-year old men and unmarried women between 18 and 27 years were bound to six months military training, and a subsequent work service in a state construction or agricultural enterprise. In the wake of the border war with Ethiopia, this was lengthened to an indefinite time by government diktat. That means that since 1998, hardly anyone has been let out of the National Service. Eritrea has in this way completely transformed itself into a garrison state. Despair at no future prospects is infecting those concerned and their families. They are losing all hope of having an independent, self-determined life.

The women and men in the National Service are compelled to do forced labour not only in state projects, but also in the private enterprises of military and party elites. They live in primitive housing at their deployment location, which they are not allowed to leave. The monthly remuneration of about 25 euros is by far not enough to maintain themselves plus scratch the living of their families at home. Bad food, poor hygienic conditions, and a high work burden in heat and in rain lead regularly to diarrhoea, undernourishment, exhaustion, and not seldom to death.

Instead of the commencement of demobilization after the border war, the recruitment measures have since then even increased. A type of militia or civilian army is evidently being built up thereby. Human Rights organizations report that since summer 2012, even 50-, 60- and 70-year old men are obliged to perform military tasks such as weapons- and defence practice, and regular sentry and patrol services.

The state's influence on schoolchildren has also increased exponentially. Girls and boys have to go to the central military training camp at Sawa for their final year of Secondary School, where they also take their final exam. From there they go straight to the National Service. "Sawa" has therefore become a synonym for hopelessness among the youth. The attempt to exert political influence is sought through methods of indoctrination and brain-washing. Violations of regulations or even only undesired questions are punished severely with beatings, torture

and prolonged detention. Girls are exposed, as has been reported, to sexual violence and rape by officer ranks. In the schools in the meanwhile, where the military regularly carries out recruitment, a majority of the older girls and boys are absent. They are “in Sawa”, as it is called, or, out of fear of the military and endless National Service, gone into hiding or fled abroad.

Failed economic policies

Since its independence, Eritrea has been confronted with many economic problems, caused among other reasons by the lack of mineral wealth and raw materials, as well as chronic periods of drought, which are additionally exacerbated by the state’s restrictive economic policy. The Eritrean government publishes no budget, and no report on the state’s finances are presented. The economic situation in the country has been heading downhill for years.

A young workforce is lacking, especially in the area of manual skills and agriculture, because the youth are bound to the army and National Service. The lack of young manual labour at private construction sites is conspicuous, and can only be inadequately covered through older workers. People starve – not only during the great drought of 2011 on the Horn of Africa, but also in normal harvest years. Eritrea can itself, even with a good harvest, only produce 60 per cent of the foodstuff which the land needs for the adequate nourishment of

Screenshot: EMW



The state leadership achieved a commercial success by a joint venture with the Canadian mining company Nevsun. In 2011 the project started in Bisha. The incidences contain gold, silver, copper and zinc. Nevsun advertises on its website a high dividend. Human Rights Watch accuses the company in Bisha of having committed forced laborer of the “National Service”.



Jedny Vaughan/AFP/Getty Images

Eritrean textiles in Italian Design: The Italian company Zambaiti-Eritrea produces under the label "Dolce Vita" for the international market, for example for Armani and Pierre Cardin.

its population. The domestic income of very small farming businesses, which offer a meagre subsistence livelihood to more than 80 per cent of the population, has continuously been decreasing in the past years. Very many people in Eritrea can therefore only survive through the contributions of family members abroad. With the declaration that Eritrea can feed on its own, the government refuses repeatedly to accept foreign humanitarian aid. The implementation of external aid measures can only be done with the greatest difficulty, because the Eritrean government often denies access to staff of international aid agencies to the needy region, and supplies them with no usable information.

The entire economy is controlled by state enterprises, which prevent the free movement of goods, and jack up the prices for goods like steel and cement in the import-dependent construction sector sky-high. Practically all processed goods have to be imported, with high customs duties. Eritrea does not possess much mineral wealth. With the help of a few foreign consortiums, the mining of gold, copper and potash/potassium carbonate seems to have developed somewhat in the last years. Eritrea maintains – like many other African countries as well – the best economic relations with China.

Water, electricity and energy shortages have been chronic in Eritrea for many years. Especially outside the capital the pumps at the petrol stations are fre-

quently out of service. Fuel is rationed. The state lacks the foreign currency necessary for this expensive import. The sole oil-fuelled electricity station in the country, at Massawa on the Red Sea, therefore constantly generates too little power. Even in the capital therefore, every evening entire city neighbourhoods are without electricity.

The education campaign initiated after independence has failed. The country's only university at Asmara, which was in operation for a short time, was closed in 2006. The colleges and secondary schools are poorly equipped with teaching material, their teachers insufficiently educated. The educational crisis in the country is huge, and is additionally exacerbated by the fact that studying abroad is denied to young people, because of the rigid policy on leaving the country. And so on the intellectual and academic levels the land is bleeding out.

Eritrea – a prison and torture centre

The Afewerki regime belongs among the worst suppressors of human rights worldwide. Human Rights organizations and religious bodies have been drawing attention to this for many years. For example, there exists no right to conscientious objection in Eritrea. Whoever evades military service, is threatened with humiliating prison sentences. Jehovah's Witnesses for instance, who refuse to do military service on religious grounds, have been sitting in detention for years without the possibility of contact to the outside world. There have been reports of secret torture of imprisoned conscientious objectors and deserters, and, many times over, of subterranean prisons. Women in prison are exposed to rape and sexual assault. It has been reported that the hands and feet of prisoners are tied behind their backs, and they are put out naked or hardly clothed, face-down on the ground, to be exposed for days on end to the scorching sun and the nightly cold. Parents, who either cannot give or do not want to give any information about the whereabouts of their children who are in hiding, are subjected to embarrassing interrogation, or even themselves taken into imprisonment in the camps indefinitely. Also, it is said that the relatives of army absconders, draft dodgers or National Service deserters are given heavy fines, which can be up to six times as high as the average annual income in Eritrea, which lies at 560 US dollars. Eritrean families frequently also come under pressure from the authorities, when their relatives in exile overseas do not transfer the obligatory foreign income tax of two per cent of their income or the national defence fees to the Eritrean state. These "taxes" are often extracted from their compatriots via extortionist methods by the Eritrean Embassy staff overseas.

Freedom of association and of assembly do not exist in Eritrea. The “National Confederation of Eritrean Workers” (NCEW) is, as the single unified trade union, the only one allowed. Other political associations or interest groups are forbidden.

To express one’s opinion publicly is dangerous in Eritrea. One speaks softly in Eritrea, and behind closed doors; in the streets mostly not at all, and often only in hints. Telephone, e-mail and internet are monitored by the state, even if relatively little filtered. One can be sure that no postal privacy is respected by the authorities in Eritrea. In the year 2014, the regime simply discontinued the postal traffic overseas for several months. Many, even Eritreans in exile, attach importance to not being named in interviews and reports about their homeland, out of fear of state reprisals.

Thousands of political prisoners or prisoners of conscience are kept arbitrarily for years in jail, without legal counsel and without having been granted due process. These include not only opposition members, but also politicians from the PFDJ who have fallen from grace, who have been held in solitary confinement for more than ten years. Often even family members do not know anything about their exact whereabouts. It has been reported that many prisoners are penned up together in metal shipping containers in the desert, exposed to heat and cold, without light, full of vermin, and without enough food, water or medical care. Through blows and torture, forced confessions are common, as refugees from Eritrea report.

Freedom of the press is in Eritrea totally curtailed. Since 2001 Eritrea has been the only sub-Saharan country without a free press and media environment. All independent newspapers were closed in 2001 for “endangering national security”; 16 journalists have been sitting since then without a court trial in secret prisons – some of them have apparently died in the meantime in prison.

The journalists, just like some high-ranking members of the government party, had after the border war come out strongly in favor of democratic reform, and because of that have been incarcerated since then. Even journalists from the government organs are not safe from arbitrary arrest. Foreign journalists are virtually hardly issued an entry visa. The last accredited foreign correspondent was expelled in 2008. On the World Press Freedom Index, the organization, Reporters Without Borders, have placed the country for years now behind North Korea in last place.

Entry visas for Eritrea are frequently denied. Even the UN Special Rapporteur appointed in 2012 to Eritrea has up to now received no entry permit from the Eritrean government. Travelling in Eritrea is made difficult by the authorities. Foreigners require special permits to travel outside the capital – with precise destination, route and purpose. Who does not stick to this, runs the danger of being arrested.

Even foreign embassy staff may not travel within the country outside the capital without an authorization from the Eritrean authorities. Therefore, consular services for any citizens from their country is in no way assured in Eritrea. Since the intensification of the National Service, the freedom to travel has been even more circumscribed for Eritreans also. Virtually no overseas travel for citizens under 40 years will be approved by the government authorities.

Religious freedom does not exist in Eritrea. Only Sunni Islam, the Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as well as the Lutheran and Catholic churches are officially recognized in Eritrea as religious bodies. All other religious communities have up to now been denied official state recognition and the freedom to practice their religion. Their houses of assembly have been shut down, and services even in private homes disbanded. Especially since 2002, regular arrests of believers from other confessions have been reported, as well as imprisonment and physical assaults. Even privately reading the Koran or the Bible in colleges or in the “National Service” can lead to arrest. In 2013, three cases of the deaths of prisoners held on account of their faith were reported, but the real numbers will be much higher.

Muslim groups, who oppose the government-appointed Islamic Mufti, are hindered from exercising their religion, and hundreds of them are supposed to have spent several years in investigative custody. The pressure on the official churches has likewise increased more and more in recent years. At the end of 2007 therefore, 14 foreign employees of the Catholic Church, who over many years had worked for the improvement of living conditions, had to leave the country on an expulsion order from the government. Africa's only one-party state has increasingly managed to also gain control over the regionally-based Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which goes back to the fourth century, and to which the majority of the Christians there belong. Under pressure from the government, in 2005 the Patriarch, Abune Antonios, who had been critical of the government, was deposed. The in the meantime almost 90-year old, critically ill man has been under house arrest since 2006, and isolated from the outside world.

Eritrea – quo vadis!?

The political interest of the international community in change in Eritrea is perceptibly low. Since the satellite age, the loss in importance of the Suez Canal, and the end of the cold war, the land on the Red Sea has lost its strategic geopolitical importance for the major powers. Some simply also infer that foreign policy interest in a change of the devastating conditions in Eritrea is so low because the poor land possesses hardly any significant mineral wealth.

The political opposition in the country is practically annihilated. Signs of a military revolt were last seen in January 2013, as a group of soldiers occupied the Ministry of Information for a short time, and demanded that a statement be read on state television, which concerned the release of political prisoners and the instituting of the 1997 constitution. The transmission was however interrupted after a couple of sentences, and the rebels since then have been in prison or were murdered. The opposition politicians abroad and dissidents in exile are too weak and splintered, to bring about a change in their homeland.

How can a state continue, whose citizens in masses and in great danger turn their backs on it, in order to escape dictatorship and build a new existence for themselves abroad? It would seem that flight out of the land is the only way out for a growing number of people, because they have no more hope of a political change and a bettering of the situation.

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The Need to End a Pervasive Culture of Impunity

In its short post-independence history, which is only about two and half decades, counting from de facto independence in 1991, Eritrea has rapidly degenerated into one of the most inhospitable places on the earth. Much of this has to do with the alarming level of human rights violations in the country.

In the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia human rights violations took a different scale. Excessive level of militarisation is also part and parcel of the human rights crisis in the country, earning Eritrea the designation of an “African Garrison State,” as noted in a recent academic contribution on this topic.¹ Without discounting the role of excessive militarisation on the overall political crisis in Eritrea, this contribution will focus mainly on how the international community has thus far responded to the crisis of human rights in Eritrea, and what more should be done in order to halt the pervasive culture of impunity and ensure full accountability.

From special rapporteur to commission of inquiry

With the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) on 27 June 2014, Eritrea has now become the first African country to be a subject of investigations by a COI specifically mandated for that purpose by the UN Human Rights Council (the Council). According to the Council’s practice on the appointment of fact-finding missions (FFMs), COIs are established only after other efforts of special procedures’ mandate holders, such as independent experts or special rapporteurs, do not lead to a desired change of behaviour on the part of the government which is the subject of investigations.

In order to understand this, one needs to have a brief look at a specific process of the Council, known as the “Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council.”² According to this process, the Council thus far established nine country-specific special procedures’ mandate holders, some of which are FFMs. They can be disaggregated into five independent experts and four special rapporteurs. Included in the first category are Sudan (2009), Côte d’Ivoire (2011 and 2014), Mali (2013), and Central African Republic (2013). The second category includes



Jenny Vaughan/AFP/Getty Images

"Welcome to the Free Eritrea" - a patriotic poster in Asmara. Perhaps this was true in 1993. Today, the human rights situation is as bad as in hardly any other country.

Iran (2011), Syria (2011), Belarus (2012), and Eritrea (2012). The Council established a COI only in one African instance, which is on Eritrea. Prior to this, the Council has established two other COIs, which are on Syria (2011) and North Korea (2013). Another COI, on Gaza, was established one month after the establishment of the COI on Eritrea.

The fact that Eritrea has now become the only African country to be a subject of investigations by a COI tells volumes about the dire state of human rights in the country. It is important to remember that the Council established the COI on Eritrea only two years after the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea in July 2012. Compared to other experiences, for example that of North Korea, the time between the appointment of the Special Rapporteur and the establishment of the COI on Eritrea was fast-paced, denoting the extremely dire state of human rights in Eritrea.

In addition to its cardinal importance to the fight against impunity, the above development is also demonstrative of the international indignation Eritrea has

suffered as a result of its government's despicable record both in the area of human rights protection and in international diplomacy. In the latter case, one only needs to recall how the 2009 UN sanctions regime was imposed on Eritrea. The sanctions were adopted by the UN Security Council after explicit recommendation to that effect by the African Union (AU), which in turn acted upon similar recommendation emanating from the regional political body, Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD). Effectively, the Eritrean government became the first African government to be condemned to UN sanctions upon explicit recommendation of the AU. The only other time when the AU (via its predecessor, OAU) has done so was in the experience of South Africa during the apartheid era. The combined effect of all these developments is the emergence of Eritrea as a pariah state with no reliable regional and international allies, except those who show some sort of "solidarity" for a brief period and on dubious grounds (such as Sudan).

The problem of extrapolation

One of the most difficult tasks in the Eritrean human rights discourse is the inability to provide nearly-accurate, if not precise, figures of the total number of victims of human rights violations in the country. This problem is mainly attributable to the fact that Eritrea is inaccessible to independent observers or FFMs, as highlighted repeatedly by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea (Sheila Kheetharuth).³ However, tentative conclusions can be made based on estimations given by some credible sources. One such source is a 2013 report by Amnesty International, which says there at least 10,000 *prisoners of conscience* and *political prisoners* in Eritrea.⁴

The figure cited above may serve as a starting point for an extrapolative exercise on an estimated total number of victims of human rights violations in the country. In this sense, victims should be understood not just *prisoners of conscience* and *political prisoners* as noted above but also victims of other categories of grave violations, such as extrajudicial killing, torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence and other violations categorically condemned by international law. As noted by this author in another contribution, if all other violations perpetrated by the Eritrean government since 1991 are to be counted, the total estimated number of victims of grave human rights violations may go up to or beyond 20,000.⁵ This is a figure that should not be tolerated by an international community that has vowed "never again" to such kind of atrocities.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the situation of human rights violations in Eritrea was for the first time described by the international community as constituting a “widespread and systematic” practice of violations. This was evident from the wording of the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council, adopted on 6 July 2012, in which the Council “strongly condemns the continued *widespread* and *systematic* violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms committed by the Eritrean authorities.”⁶ The phraseology of the Council, particularly the twin words of “widespread and systematic” are reminiscent of the literature on crimes against humanity. These words indeed make part and parcel of the trademark phraseology on crimes against humanity, thus creating strong resonance with the language used by the international community in describing similar other situations that constitute a situation of crimes against humanity.

No doubt that the Council has not used the term “crimes against humanity” explicitly in the case of Eritrea. However, the above phraseology, seen in conjunction with the first report of the Special Rapporteur (Sheila Kheetharuth), is



Minasse Wondimu Hailu/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Eritrean refugees stage a demonstration in front of the African Union headquarters against Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki on June 26, 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

indicative of the existence of a situation akin to that of crimes against humanity. In her first report, the Special Rapporteur uses similar, if not the same, language in depicting the overall situation of human rights in Eritrea. For example, in paragraph 103 of the report, she notes that “human rights violations are *widespread* and *pervasive* and affect all components of Eritrean society.”⁷ In paragraphs 48 and 51 of the report, she notes that “the number of people arrested and detained without charge or due process amounts to thousands.” In paragraph 42, the Special Rapporteur cites “widespread torture” as one of the various categories of violations that corroborate identifiable pattern.

Although international law has never sought to quantify a minimum threshold necessary to constitute a situation of crimes against humanity, plausible estimates of victims, such as those given by Amnesty International, indicate that human rights violations are indeed perpetrated in a widespread and systematic manner, thus constituting a situation akin to that of crimes against humanity. However, due to the strong connotation of armed conflict attached to the notion of crimes against humanity, and the fact that there is no active armed conflict in Eritrea at this moment, seems to be sending all the wrong messages to the international community about the gravity of the matter on the ground.

What is missed in this equation is the following factor: If a country, which is not experiencing any sort of armed conflict, is producing such high levels of human suffering, there is truly something wrong in that country. The situation in Eritrea requires much more attention of the international community.

The excuse of “no war no peace”

In spite of the alarming nature of human rights violations, the Eritrean government categorically denies this. At its best, the government tries to justify the prevailing political situation by referring to the so called “no war no peace” situation in the country, a problem that is attributed to some unresolved residual matters emanating from the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. One of the latest of such excuses was given on 17 October 2014 by the Eritrean Ambassador to France, Mrs Hana Simon, who said “we are in situation of no war no peace,”⁸ defending her government’s policy of indefinite military conscription which is part and parcel of the dire state of human rights in the country.

In international law, the closest concept that comes to the government’s incessant claim of “no war no peace” situation is the concept of state of emergency.

As matter of *de facto* situation, it is true that the country has been ruled under unofficial or undeclared “state of emergency” since the advent of the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. As a matter of legal reasoning, the government’s incessant recourse to the “no war no peace” situation (by implication of state of emergency) is fundamentally flawed. It is so in particular when such an excuse is used to suffocate the entire nature through the perpetration of horrendous human rights violations with few comparisons in the world. Moreover, as articulated in a number of previous studies,⁹ including the first report of the Special Rapporteur, there is no political situation in Eritrea that amounts to a situation of state of emergency, thus justifying the pervasive culture of impunity in the country.

The way forward

One remarkable feature of Eritrea was its emergence as an independent state at the end of the twentieth century. The country was in an extraordinary position to benefit from the successes and failures of other African countries. Conversely, Eritrea proved to be, in a number of ways, worse than the prototype post-colonial African state. Its crisis of human rights is comparable with none in the African continent, given that this particular crisis has persisted in its worst form in the last thirteen years when there are no major instances of armed conflicts or civil war in the country.

All factors considered Eritrea is drifting rapidly into becoming another failed state in the Horn of Africa. While there are some promising developments on the part of the international community, such as the establishment of the COI by the UN Human Rights Council, which try to address the pervasive challenge of human rights in the country, a more robust and coordinated international action is required more than ever to salvage the nation from an impending humanitarian disaster that looms over its future like the sword of Damocles.

What is to be done is the final question that needs to be answered here. In an ideal situation Eritrea should have benefited from a peaceful political transition that should paved the way for a democratic system of governance, ensuring at the same time full accountability measures for crimes of the past (not necessary criminal accountability measures). Experience shows that a recalcitrant regime, such as the Eritrean government, would never heed towards facilitating a peaceful political transition unless the government is meaningfully pressurised to do so. Thus far, there is no viable Eritrean political force that can do

this in a way which compels the Eritrean government to sit on the negotiating table. As is known generally, the anatomy of exile Eritrean political forces is so fragmented that one cannot reliably count on them until they come up in the form of a formidable political option. Although there are some latest and promising developments in this regard, the task of salvaging Eritrea cannot be solely accomplished by such Eritrean political forces. It requires a concerted effort of Eritrean and non-Eritrean actors who have the best interest of the country at heart. Timely planning and implementation is of a paramount importance in this regard.

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- 1 Kejetil Tronoll and Daniel R. Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2014).
- 2 More information available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Introduction.aspx>.
- 3 OHCHR press release, 'Eritrea human rights: UN expert to interview Eritrean diaspora in Italy,' available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15050&LangID=E>, accessed 18 September 2014.
- 4 Amnesty International, *Eritrea: 20 years of independence but still no freedom*, Index: AFR 04/001/2013, p. 14.
- 5 Daniel R. Mekonnen, *Transitional Justice: Framing a Model for Eritrea* (Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing, 2009), pp. 119–121.
- 6 UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 20/20, UN.Doc.A/HRC/20/L.19/Rev.1, 6 July 2014 [emphasis added].
- 7 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, UN.Doc. A/HRC/23/53, 28 May 2013 [emphasis added].
- 8 "L'ambassadrice d'Erythrée: 'nous sommes dans une situation de ni-guerre ni-paix,'" available at <http://parlements.com/lambassadrice-derythree-nous-sommes-dans-une-situation-de-ni-guerre-ni-paix/>, accessed 17 October 2014. The Ambassador gave the comment in a public event that marked the official launch of a French documentary film, featuring the plight of Eritrean victims of human trafficking in the Sinai Desert and the work of Eritrean activist Meron Estefanos. The title of the documentary is *voyage en Barbarie* (Barbaric Journey), produced by French journalists Cécile Allegra and Delphine Deloget: http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/visuel/2014/10/13/voyage-en-barbarie-dans-le-desert-du-sinai_4501271_3212.html.
- 9 See, for example, Tronvoll and Mekonnen 2014, pp. 172–178.

Amnesty International Report on Eritrea 2015/2016

Thousands continued to leave the country to flee the indefinite National Service, a nationwide system amounting to forced labour. During the summer, Eritreans constituted the third largest group crossing the Mediterranean, after Syrians and Afghans, and a majority of those who lost their lives in the journey. Rule of law remained non-existent; political opposition was still banned; and independent media or universities were not allowed to operate. Restrictions on freedoms of religion and movement remained. Arbitrary detention without charge or trial continued to be the norm for thousands of prisoners of conscience.

Background

In May [2015], new Civil and Penal Codes, as well as Civil and Penal Procedure Codes, were promulgated to replace the transitional Codes in place since the country's independence. In September, a joint venture formed of Sunridge Gold Corp, a Canadian company, and the Eritrean National Mining Corporation (ENAMCO) signed an agreement with the Ministry of Energy and Mines for gold, copper and zinc mining operations. Nevsun Resources, a Canadian mining company, faced a lawsuit in Canada over the alleged use of conscripted labour by its sub-contractor, the Eritrean state-owned Segen Construction, at the Bisha mine – also a joint venture with ENAMCO.

Forced labour – National Service

Mandatory National Service continued to be extended indefinitely in a system that amounts to forced labour. A significant proportion of the population was in open-



ended conscription, in some cases for up to 20 years. Conscripts were paid low wages that did not enable them to cover their families' basic needs, and had limited and arbitrarily granted leave allowances which in many cases disrupted their family life. Conscripts served in the defence forces and were assigned to agriculture, construction, teaching, civil service and other roles. There was no provision for conscientious objection.

Children continued to be conscripted into military training under the requirement that all children undergo grade 12 of secondary school at the Sawa National Service training camp. There they faced harsh living conditions, military-style discipline and weapons training. Some children dropped out of school early to avoid this fate. Children were also conscripted into training in round-ups conducted by the military, in search of people evading National Service.

Thousands of people tried to avoid this system, including by attempting to flee the country. Those caught trying to do so, including children, were arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, often in harsh conditions, and lacked access to a lawyer or family members.

A "shoot-to-kill" policy remained in place for anyone evading capture and attempting to cross the border into Ethiopia.

Older people continued to be conscripted into the “People’s Army”, where they were given a weapon and assigned duties under threat of punitive repercussions. Men of up to 67 years of age were conscripted.

Prisoners of conscience

Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, including former politicians, journalists and practitioners of unauthorized religions, continued to be detained without charge or trial, and lacked access to a lawyer or family members. Many had been detained for well over a decade.

The government denied it was detaining many of these prisoners and refused to provide families with information on their whereabouts and health, or to confirm any reports of deaths in custody.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Detainees, including children, were held in harsh conditions, often in underground cells and shipping containers, with inadequate food, water, bedding, access to sanitation facilities or natural light. In some cases, these conditions amounted to torture. Children were sometimes detained with adults.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Eritreans fleeing the country faced multiple dangers on routes through Sudan, Libya and the Mediterranean to reach Europe, including hostage-taking for ransom by armed groups and people smugglers. Refugees arriving in Europe reported having paid smugglers, many of whom were Eritre-

ans themselves, for each stage of the journey. There were allegations of members of the army being involved in smuggling people out of Eritrea.

High numbers of children left Eritrea alone to avoid conscription, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. Smugglers reportedly offered to take children to Europe for free, holding them hostage once they reached Libya and demanding money from their parents in Eritrea to free them. In response to the increasing numbers of refugees, some European countries such as the UK tightened their guidance on asylum cases of Eritrean nationals, making untenable claims of improvements in the country of origin as a basis on which to reject cases.

International scrutiny

In June, the UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea presented its first report, documenting numerous cases and patterns of human rights violations since the country’s independence and stating that the government may be responsible for crimes against humanity.

The Amnesty International Report 2015/16 documents the state of the world’s human rights during 2015. While every attempt is made to ensure accuracy, information may be subject to change without notice. First published in 2016 by Amnesty International, London, United Kingdom

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The Exodus of Eritrean Youth

It is an irony of Eritrean history that a country that fought one of the most costly wars, in terms of loss of lives, destruction of property and forgone opportunities, in modern Africa, still produces large numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees. Today the main reason to leave the country is the open-ended Eritrean National Service.

During the thirty-year war (1961-1991) of independence, nearly three-quarter of a million of Eritreans fled the country in search of international protection. Although nearly all fled to Sudan first, a substantial proportion emigrated to the Gulf States, Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand using the Sudan as a stepping-stone. In the 1980s, the US Government had a resettlement programme for Eritreans and Ethiopians and a considerable number were relocated to the US through the programme. Most Eritreans and observers hoped that independence would stem the flow and encourage those who were already in exile to “vote with their feet” homewards in response to the realisation of one of the goals of the liberation struggle: independence. In May 1991, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) and the Eritrean people inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Ethiopian military and threw out Ethiopian rule from the country. After an interim period of two years, a national referendum was held in which over 99.9 percent of the Eritrean people, including in the diaspora voted in favour of independence and in May 1993, Eritrea became an independent member of the United Nations.

Although many of the Eritrean refugees in Sudan organised their own return to the country, the Provisional Government of Eritrea's relationship with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, donor governments and non-governmental agencies was marked with serious misunderstanding which stifled any collaborative effort that could facilitate the return of the hundreds of thousands of Eritrean refugees who were languishing in the bleak refugee camps and towns in eastern Sudan. Given the devastation the Eritrean economy and infrastructure suffered during the thirty-year war, a return of hundreds of thousands of refugees in the absence of concerted international action would have destabilised the economy and society of the country. The refugees who monitored developments in the country realised that a return under such conditions would be unsustainable. As people living dangerously close to the subsistence margin, the overwhelming majority of the refugees were risk averse and opted for the meagre existence in the Sudan rather than venturing into the unknown by returning home.

The failure of large numbers of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan to return in response to the political changes that took place in the country discouraged many Eritreans throughout the world from returning. They stayed put in countries of asylum. It was not only the decision of many of the pre-independence refugees to stay put in countries of asylum, including in the Sudan that was the only disincentive, but also contrary to any rationale expectation, tens of thousands of young Eritrean men and women also began fleeing the independent state of Eritrea. This caught many Eritreans and international observers by surprise. Most Eritreans hoped that Eritrean independence, which was achieved by defeating sub-Saharan Africa's biggest military force¹ and at the expense of enormous prices paid in terms of lives, property and forgone economic, social and cultural opportunities would relegate the factors that prompt displacement to the dustbin of history once and for all. This was not to be the case as tens of thousands and later; hundreds of thousands of Eritrean youth fled the country haemorrhaging the single most important resource-labour (see Table 1)

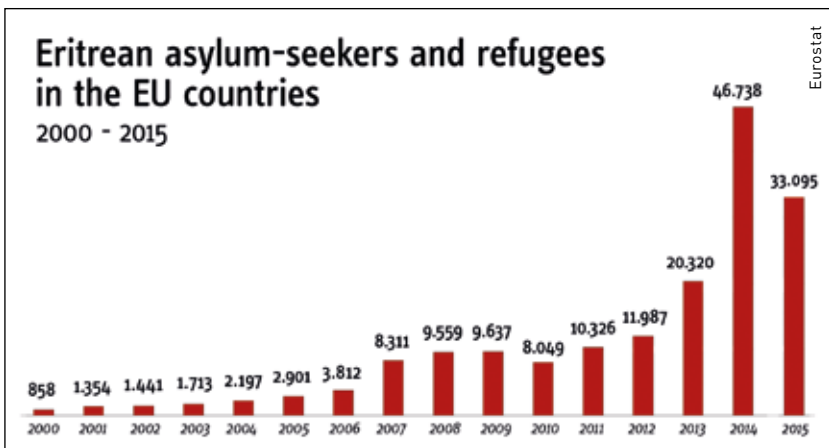
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Sweden	25	75	125	150	0	640	395	425	885	1,035	1,465	1,705	2,405	4,880	11,530	25,740
Switzerland	88	74	221	253	197	181	1,207	1,661	2,849	1,747	1,799	3,356	4,407	2,570	6,923	27,533
Germany	265	280	250	300	380	555	455	365	280	380	660	650	670	3,640	13,255	22,385
Norway	0	60	50	130	270	200	110	175	1,800	2,665	1,710	1,255	1,185	3,250	2,880	15,740
U.K.	345	565	505	620	1,315	1,070	1,265	1,900	n.a.	1,470	815	865	785	1,460	3,280	16,260
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,170	2,935	865	180	530	735	2,110	480	9,005
Netherlands	135	270	260	215	0	125	150	205	250	485	410	500	480	920	3,910	8,315
France	0	0	0	0	0	20	30	55	120	425	730	935	495	430	725	3,965
Denmark	0	0	10	5	0	5	20	10	15	35	25	20	55	85	2,275	1,560
Malta	0	0	0	0	0	30	100	255	175	270	15	315	435	475	60	2,130
Belgium	0	30	0	0	5	10	25	25	40	75	110	70	80	70	820	1,360
Greece	0	0	0	0	15	30	10	15	45	45	60	35	140	155	260	810
Austria	0	0	0	10	5	10	10	5	20	20	15	25	15	60	110	305
Hungary	0	0	10	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	90	120	240
Ireland	0	0	0	0	5	20	30	40	80	45	15	10	5	0	5	255
Spain	0	0	5	10	5	5	0	5	45	35	10	10	20	5	10	165
Luxembourg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	10	10	15	10	5	40	100
Slovakia	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	30	10	75
Finland	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	10	15	5	5	0	10	55
Bulgaria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	10	40
Portugal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	20	0	0	0	30	10	65
Poland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	5	5	10	30
Croatia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	5	25
Romania	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	0	25
Czech Rep.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	10
Slovenia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	0	0	10
Estonia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cyprus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Latvia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lithuania	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	858	1,354	1,441	1,713	2,197	2,901	3,812	8,311	9,559	9,637	8,049	10,326	11,987	20,320	46,738	137,203

Source: Compiled by the EASO, Valletta, Malta, on behalf of the author. Part of the EASO statistics for Switzerland were inaccurate. The correct data are obtained from <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/de/home/publiservice/statistik/asylstatistik.html>

As the data in Table 1 show the number of Eritrean asylum-seekers and refugees in the EU countries has been steadily rising from 2000 onwards. The increase was dramatic in 2013 and. The apex was reached in 2014, i.e. during the year, 46,738 Eritreans applied for asylum in the EU. In November 2014, the UNHCR reported: “During the first ten months of 2014, the number of asylum-seekers in Europe from Eritrea has nearly tripled.

In Ethiopia and Sudan, neighbouring Eritrea, the number of Eritrean refugees has also increased sharply. So far this year, nearly 37,000 Eritreans have sought refuge in Europe, compared to almost 13,000 during the same period last year. Most asylum requests have been lodged in Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland, with the vast majority of the Eritreans having arrived by boat across the Mediterranean. Our office in Italy reports that 22 percent of the people arriving by boat are Eritrean, a total of nearly 34,000 people this year. This makes Eritreans the second largest group to arrive in Italy by boat, after Syrians.”²

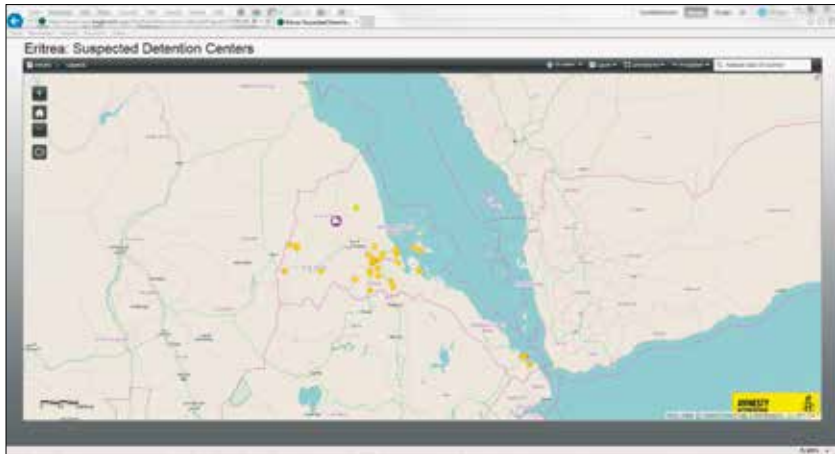
In 2015, the total number of first applications in seven EU countries were 32,035.³ Their distribution in the respective countries were in Switzerland 9,860, Netherlands 7,390, Sweden 6,515, United Kingdom 3,735, Denmark 1,705 and Malta 45.⁴ The data for 2015 show that the number of Eritrean asylum-seekers reaching the shores of the EU had declined not because less people were leaving Eritrea,⁵ but due to other obstacles in the transit countries and also inability to raise the exorbitant amount required to meet the cost. The chaos and violence in Libya also discourages some from leaving the Sudan.



The number of Eritreans arriving into the shores of the EU has continued unabated throughout the first half of 2016. The question that arises in connection to the continued flow of asylum-seekers from Eritrea is: Why are so many fleeing their country despite the imminent risks of death and torture likely to be faced at the hands of ruthless traffickers, smugglers, corrupt government officials and military officers in the country of origin, transit countries, the Sinai and the Sahara deserts, as well as the Mediterranean Sea? “Since Europe closed its borders in 2006, thousands of Eritreans try to flee their repressive country to Israel by crossing the Sinai desert. But there, many are kidnapped by Bedouins and taken to one of the hidden camps where their families are then extorted for ransom.”⁶ Haaretz wrote and continues: “When Dat (not his real name), a 29-year-old victim of human trafficking, tries to talk about the torture he suffered in the Sinai desert, his thin body cringes, his eyes cloud over and he says: ‘I still can’t talk about what happened to me while I was in captivity. Not even today.’ After a short silence, he shows the marks of his torture, burned into his body. He spreads out his hands in embarrassment, showing a few stumps where his fingers had been viciously cut off, rolls up his shirt to show his back, filled with signs of serious burns, then turning his neck to expose some deep scars which still haven’t healed.”⁷ It is further stated: “Most women and girls were gang raped daily by Bedouin traffickers; many men raped as well.”⁸

Although forced migration is multi-causal, in post-independence Eritrea, the open-ended national service and its multi-faceted detrimental consequences which like a cancerous growth have been eating into the Eritrean polity are the most important drivers of forced migration.⁹ This is, *inter alia*, evidenced by the fact that among the Eritreans who sought asylum in the EU countries in October 2014, about 90 per cent are between 18 to 24 years old.¹⁰

In the course of researching my forthcoming book “The Eritrean National Service: Servitude for the common good & Youth Exodus” I have interviewed 228 deserters in UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, South Africa and Sudan and when I asked them why they fled taking huge risks to their lives, the common answer they gave, among other things, was given the enslavement of the national service and the merciless punishment regime that permeate it, they said that there was no alternative, but to take the risk where the possible outcome is either to be consumed by a shark or if one makes it to Italy to eat pizza. The common metaphor they used was: “Wey asa wey pizza” (either to be eaten by sharks or to eat pizza).



Screenshot: EMW

On its website, Amnesty International has listed all the camps of the "National Service". They are spread all over the country.

This clearly indicates that they are acutely aware of the dangers that await them, but the situation in Eritrea is so bleak that it is worth taking the risk of being killed by sharks because if they make it, they may be able to lead a decent life. The United Nations Commission of Enquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea attributed the mass exodus of the youth to gross violation of human rights. The report stated, 'Faced with a seemingly hopeless situation they feel powerless to change, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans are fleeing their country.' The main focus of this article is to examine the main drivers of forced migration in post-independence Eritrea. I argue that the single most important driver of forced migration in Eritrea is the open-ended national service and its detrimental consequences on livelihoods and the social fabric of Eritrean society.

Degeneration of the Eritrean National Service into Forced Labour

Although the duration of the Eritrean National Service (ENS) is stipulated to be 18 months and the government strictly abided with this limitation prior to the 1998-2000 border war and consequently four cohorts were demobilised at the end of 18 months; when the border war broke out in May 1998, the cohorts that were demobilised were re-mobilised and all those who joined the national service after May 1998 have never been demobilised on the alleged grounds that war may break out at any time. This pretext or fear was reinforced by the

fact that the Ethiopian government refused to accept the decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) notwithstanding the fact that it was agreed to be final and binding. The agreement was signed by the two heads of state and witnessed by the African Union, European Union, the US Government and Government of Algeria. Ethiopia has also been occupying sovereign Eritrean territories and some places which were awarded to Eritrea, such as the insignificant, but symbolically important village of Badme, which the EEBC said that it belongs to Eritrea.

A study conducted by the author in different European and several African countries among deserters from the ENS shows that, on average, the respondents had served 6 years before they fled the country. A considerable proportion had served up to 18 years before they fled. Their cohorts who stayed in Eritrea are still in the national service working for the government and the ruling party without remuneration.

In May 2002, the government introduced the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), which required that those who were in the ENS and those who join the service subsequently to carry on serving indefinitely. The main reason the ENS has ostensibly become open-ended is because of the alleged state of “no war no peace” permeating the relationship between the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments. Within the WYDC, the majority of conscripts are assigned to the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) and others are regimented into different units and participate in productive activities as groups and/or individuals, such as urban housing development, construction of dams, roads, bridges, clinics, health centres, hospitals, schools, etc. They work in state and PFDJ owned banks, commercial farms, construction sites and others. They also work in farms and construction sites of senior military officers. Regardless of the specific assignments, conscripts are allocated to; they are all within the purview of the ENS no matter how long the assignment lasts. The Ministry of Defence also hires out conscripts to private firms in which the latter transfer their wages/salaries to its bank accounts.

Conscripts whether they are assigned to the defence forces, ministries, departments, PFDJ firms, state or private firms are paid pittance of pocket money. In most cases, conscripts with low level or no education and vocational qualifications are assigned to serve in the army in which they are forced to engage in manual labour. Those with academic, professional and vocational qualifications are often assigned to work for the ministries, departments, regional govern-

ments, banks, modern farms owned by the state and/or the ruling party, the PFDJ, within the framework of the national service. After the border war and the introduction of the WYDC, not only has the Eritrean national service become open-ended, but it has also degenerated into forced labour.

Article 2 of the Convention on forced labour (CFL), 1930, defines “forced or compulsory labour” as “...all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily” (Art. 2(1); emphasis added). Involuntary exaction of labour or service and the use or threats of penalty are the two critical elements in the definition of forced labour. The approach of the international efforts to prohibit governments, state agencies, private companies, political parties, army generals and individuals from recourse to forced or compulsory labour have been inextricably linked to the efforts of eradicating slavery and other institutions and practices that are either associated with it or similar to it. One such practice is the institution of forced or compulsory labour, which is referred to as ‘slavery-like practice’ (ILO 199811).

The Slavery Convention, 1926, *inter alia*, states, “The High Contracting Parties recognize that recourse to compulsory labour or forced labour may have grave consequences and undertake ... to take all necessary measures to prevent compulsory or forced labour from developing into conditions analogous to slavery” (Art. 5 Slavery Convention, 1926, emphasis added).¹² The Convention limits the conditions under which forced labour may be exacted and vests the responsibility for exacting forced labour in “competent central authorities of the territory concerned”(Art. 5(3), 1930). Article 25 of the Convention, 1930 states: “The illegal exaction of forced or compulsory labour shall be punishable as a penal offence and it shall be an obligation on any Member ratifying this Convention to ensure that the penalties imposed by law are really adequate and are strictly enforced.” The framing of this proviso clearly indicates the international community’s determination to eradicate the slavery-like practice of forced labour.

The General Conference of the ILO’s adoption of the Convention Concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour in June 1957 reinforced the provisions of the 1930 Convention. The latter stipulates that states that ratify the Convention are required to “suppress and not to make use of any form of forced or compulsory labour: (a) as a means of political coercion or education... (b) as a method of mobilizing and using labour for purposes of economic development; as a means of labour discipline...”¹³ As seen earlier, not only do conscripts of the indefinite

ENS/WYDC participate in building infrastructure and economic development, but rigorous physical work and political socialisation are imposed as a means of engendering work ethic, compliance, submission to authority and discipline contravening the letter and spirit of the conventions that prohibit forced labour.¹⁴

The fact that other international instruments proscribe such practice suggests that the international norm against forced or compulsory labour is deeply embedded in international human rights law.

Nevertheless, it is important, not to assume that all Eritreans who participate in the ENS do so involuntarily. Before the degeneration of the ENS into forced labour (see Kibreab 2009),¹⁵ there were four methods of conscription. In a survey conducted by the author in 2012 among Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, South Africa and Sudan, who deserted from the ENS and fled Eritrea after serving on average six years; reported that 23 per cent went to Sawa to join the ENS voluntarily before receiving call up papers. It is worth noting that all in this category joined the ENS before the introduction of the WYDC in May 2002, i.e. before the national service became indefinite and open-ended. Among the 190 respondents, 38 percent went to Sawa after receiving call up papers without further notice. Another 20 percent were conscripted through the Warsai School at Sawa at the end of 11th grade. The remaining 16 per cent were rounded up and forcibly taken to Sawa, Wi'a and later to Meiter to join the national service. Among the total 190 respondents, 35 percent were conscripted before the ENS became indefinite and all those who said they were rounded up joined the ENS after it had become open-ended which suggests that the propensity to join voluntarily ceased as a result. Before and during the border war, there were conscripts who joined voluntarily before receiving call up papers, but not after the introduction of the WYDC, which turned the ENS into indefinite obligation and modern form of slavery.

After the degeneration of the ENS into forced labour, the only mechanisms of conscription are through the Warsai School at Sawa and rounding up of draft evaders and deserters. No national joins voluntarily or in response to receiving call up papers these days, save those who join the Warsai School at Sawa. Those who are conscripted through the school system are taken to Sawa to complete 12th grade in combination with rigorous military training and political socialisation. Those who drop out and abscond, as well as those who are outside of the school system are rounded up and conscripted forcibly.

The ENS and its Detrimental Consequences as Major Drivers

The total number of deserters, draft evaders and others approaching the age of conscription, including children under the age of ten years fleeing from Eritrea has been increasing dramatically since 2000, save the slight decline in 2015 (see Table 1). Although reliable statistics are hard to come by as there were many who proceeded to the Sinai desert on their way to Israel in the past without reporting to the Sudanese authorities and currently, thousands are proceeding to the Sahara Desert on their way to Libya for further emigration to Italy via the Mediterranean Sea as the first port of entry to Western Europe, available guesses suggest that in 2012, about 2,000 Eritreans fled to Ethiopia and Sudan per month. This figure is said to have almost doubled in 2013 reaching about 3,600 in total. There are thousands of Eritreans stranded in Libya in anticipation to take the dangerous route to Italy. Between January and June 2014, about 13,000 Eritreans arrived in Italy and most of them have moved on to Norway, Sweden and Denmark, Switzerland and Germany subsequently. Sadly, most Eritreans who crossed the Mediterranean and landed in Italy are stranded in the country and are consequently languishing in the streets of Rome and Milan because of concerted EU government's inhumane actions that have successfully prevented them from leaving Italy for Northern Europe. Those who are stranded receive no food, shelter or medical care. The aim is to make their lives unbearable so that those in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya do not attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. There is no evidence to show that these draconian measures are stopping people from crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

When Eritrea achieved its hard-won independence, it was expected that independence would stem the flow and those who were displaced during the thirty years war and residing in Sudan—most of them in abject poverty—to return home in safety and dignity. Given the level of devastation Eritrea's economic, social and physical infrastructure had suffered during the thirty years war, the enormous tasks of repatriation and reintegration could only be undertaken in collaboration with international donors spearheaded by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs. Nevertheless, the Eritrean government's relationship with the office of the UNHCR as mentioned earlier, was from the outset marked by outright hostility. This was also exacerbated by the government's hatred of NGOs. This was not helped either by Eritrea's unilateral decision to break diplomatic relations with the Sudan which hosted the large majority of Eritrean refugees. One of the many consequences of this was Eritrea's refusal to sign a tripartite agreement. No large-scale repatriation could succeed without a tripartite agreement.

Thus, not only did many of those who fled during the war stayed put in Sudan, but over time, tens of thousands of Eritreans have been fleeing independent Eritrea in search of international protection using Ethiopia and Sudan as stepping stones for further emigration to Western Europe and to a limited extent to North America, Australia and New Zealand. It is an irony of Eritrean history that a country that fought one of the most costly wars, in terms of loss of lives, destruction of property and forgone opportunities, in modern Africa, still produces large numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees.

The question that arises therefore is: why are so many young Eritreans leaving the country? The findings of a study conducted by the author among post-independence Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers shows that the large majority are between the ages of 18 and 35 years, which suggests that at the heart of the problem lies forced labour resulting from the open-ended ENS and its detrimental effects on the livelihood systems and social fabric of Eritrean society. However, although the fact that people in this age group are affected more than others is a clear indication of the relevance of the ENS in the explanation of the large-scale flows, it is important to bear in mind that human motive is a very complex multi-dimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to mono-causality. Human actions are, more often than not, motivated by inextricably interwoven and mutually reinforcing complex factors and so is migration, including refugee flows. The reason why it is difficult to isolate a single factor that determines refugee flows is that human behaviour, including migration, cannot be explained within the natural science reductionist cause and effect framework. Asylum-seekers and migrants like all other social actors are not passive victims that flee solely in response to external pressures and stresses.

The ENS besides degenerating into open-ended forced labour has been the single most important factor for the collapse of household livelihoods. Eritrea on top of being poor is located in arid and semi-arid area where the majority of the population live on the edge. Family labour is therefore the single most prized resource on which most households' survival depends. Before the ENS became open-ended and degenerated into forced labour, diversification of income sources was the major survival strategy of most families. In order to spread the risk of failure, different family members engaged in different economic activities and pulled together the incomes earned by different family members to make ends meet. The ENS gave a devastating blow to this historically tried survival strategy developed in response to the need to eke out a meagre existence in adverse circumstances. In a country where the average life expectancy is very low,

a universal national service that affects all citizens between the ages of 18 and 40, later extended for women to 47 and for men to 54 years, can easily threaten the subsistence security of the large majority of the population. In the earlier mentioned study conducted by the author, the respondents were asked whether they had a sibling/s in the ENS. Among the 190 respondents, 84 percent had one or more siblings serving in the national service. The results show that 25 percent had one sibling, 28 percent, 18 percent, 7 percent, 4 percent, 1.6 percent and 1 percent had two, three, four, five, six and seven siblings, respectively in the ENS. The devastating effect of the ENS on the subsistence security of most families is evident from the fact that they were deprived of the most productive family members.

The respondents were asked to explain the reasons why they deserted from the ENS. Among the 190 respondents, 51 percent, 19 percent, 5.3 percent, 5 percent and 1 percent, respectively said that “it was too long”, “needed to support family”, “quarrelled with commander”, “escaped from prison” and “left with permission”, respectively. Another 12 percent said that they left because they are “opposed to the notion of forcible conscription”. These results clearly show that at the heart of the problem lays the ENS and its devastating consequence on families’ livelihoods. Only one percent of the total respondents said that their decision was unrelated to the ENS. Of the total 99 percent fled due to the ENS. Asked whether they would have fled the country had the duration of the ENS were limited to 18 months as stipulated in the proclamation on national service, 80 percent said “no”. Only 16 percent said that they would have left the country regardless. Asked to state whether the ENS was good or bad for families of conscripts, 90 percent of the respondents said that it is “bad” because it has threatened their survival.

The open-ended nature of the service and the harsh environment and rigorous punishment regime within which it is enforced engender resentment and different forms of resistance, such as absconding, failure to return at the end of home leave, disobedience, etc. Such behaviours are dealt with severely. Among the respondents, 48 percent said that they were subjected to cruel and inhuman punishment. When asked to state the types of punishments they were subjected to, they said that the typical punishments meted included being sent to the warfront or being subjected to gruesome punishments, such as the “helicopter”¹⁶, “otto”¹⁷, “goma”¹⁸, “Jesus Christ”¹⁹, severe beatings, detention in shipping containers or underground cells, exposure to extreme heat and denial of home leave. A number of the respondents said that they and some of their friends fled rather than facing the gruesome punishment regime.

Main Exit Routes

Except the minority who exit the country by army trucks belonging to the EDF arranged by corrupt and rogue elements, the large majority of deserters and draft evaders exit clandestinely. As a result, there are no known exit points. The purpose would be defeated if the exit points were known by third parties. The Eritrea-Ethiopia and Eritrea-Sudan borders are porous and hence exit is determined by the presence or absence of border perambulations. Given the unresolved conflict between the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments, the border between the two countries is heavily guarded. However, given the intimate local knowledge of the border communities, it is always possible to find escape routes without being detected. Although the exit points along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border are continuously changing and shifting in response to varieties of intervening obstacles and opportunities, they generally include areas in the vicinity of Zal Ambesa, Ambasate Geleba, Tserona, Kisad Ika and for the Afar along the Eritrea-Djibouti border. The Eritrea-Sudan border in addition to its porosity is not heavily guarded due to the friendly relations between the two governments. Deserters and draft evaders, as well as others who exit illegally cross the border at myriad points. These include Hamdait, Um Hajer, Goluj, Talata Asher, Adibara, Tamarat, Girmaika and Karora.

How they leave the country

The large majority of draft evaders are from the border communities along the Eritrea-Ethiopia and Eritrea-Sudan borders. These even include young unaccompanied minors. Given their familiarity of the localities and the landscapes, as well as the movement of the border patrols, they organise their flights without involving third parties or without using services of smugglers. How deserters flee the country is dependent on varieties of intervening obstacles and facilitating opportunities. If they are assigned close to the border, they organise their own flight without involving third parties, including smugglers. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of those who flee from active service tend to go first on home leave where they raise the necessary funds to hire the services of smugglers through the help of contacts or mediators.

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- 1 C.E. Welch, 1991. 'The military and social integration in Ethiopia', in Dietz et al. *Ethnicity, Integration, and the Military* (1991), pp. 151-78.
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- 3 Eurostat, Five main citizenships of (non-EU) asylum applicants, 2015 (number of first time applicants, rounded figures) YB16.png. Available at [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Five_main_citizenships_of_\(non-EU\)_asylum_applicants,_2015_\(number_of_first_time_applicants,_rounded_figures\)_YB16.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Five_main_citizenships_of_(non-EU)_asylum_applicants,_2015_(number_of_first_time_applicants,_rounded_figures)_YB16.png) (accessed 6 September 2016).
- 4 In Ibid.
- 5 Although this should be taken with pinch of salt, it is generally believed that about 5,000 young men and women leave Eritrea every month. The exact truth however is hard to know.
- 6 Sound of Torture Eritrean refugees, trapped and tortured in the Sinai desert, reach out to an activist radio host in Sweden. 18 Mar 2015. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2015/03/sound-torture-150318094959803.html>
- 7 Vered Lee At Least 7,000 Eritreans in Israel Survived Torture, Rape in Sinai, 6 June 2016. Available at <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.723281>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Gaim Kibreab "The national service/Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign and forced migration in post-independence Eritrea" *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, (2013) Vol. 7, No. 4, 630-649, Gaim Kibreab "Forced Labour in Eritrea." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, volume 47, issue 01, (2009), pp. 41-72.
- 10 UNHCR, Sharp increase in number of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe, Ethiopia and Sudan, 14 November 2014 by Adrian Edwards. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2014/11/5465fea1381/sharp-increase-number-eritrean-refugees-asylum-seekers-europe-ethiopia.html>
- 11 ILO (1998 *Forced labour in Myanmar (Burma): Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed under article 26 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organization to examine the observance by Myanmar of the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)*, Geneva, 1998, Part IV, Examination of the case by the Commission
- 12 Slavery Convention, 1926, Article 5, Amended by Protocol, 1953 (emphasis added).
- 13 Art. 1 (a-c) Convention Concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour 1957).
- 14 Eritrea ratified the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) on 22 Feb. 2000
- 15 See Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Economy*, Vol. 47, No. 1
- 16 In which the hands and the feet of the victim are tied behind the back and he/she is put face down and left outside in the hot sun.
- 17 In which hands are tied together behind the back and the victim is left to lie on her or his stomach outside in the hot sun.
- 18 The victim is forced to double up inside a tire for long periods of time
- 19 The victim is tied with rope to a tree which conscripts refer to as a "cross" and then left to hang, and sometimes beaten.

“No Idea What You Mean”

Tens of thousands flee the country. The Eritrean Minister of Information Yemane Ghebremeskel says in an interview with the German newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung that there is neither torture nor political prisoners.

SZ: Hon. Minister, why do so many Eritreans flee their homeland?

Yemane Ghebremeskel: Because Europe invites them. In Europe Eritreans are almost automatically granted asylum; that is a huge incentive.

Is it not rather, that many Eritreans find conditions in their country unbearable?

We had a war with Ethiopia, which still occupies parts of our territory. That has forced us to extend the National Service, which is a burden for many young people.

It's no wonder that people flee, when they have to endure this drudgery, which often lasts years and is so miserably paid, that no one can live off it.

Yes, the National Service is arduous, but this is no policy of our choosing. It was forced upon us by an existential threat.

You are making it easy for yourself, you are placing blame for everything on the conflict with Ethiopia, but Eritreans were driven out of the country by the serious human rights violations. When they arrive in Europe, they speak of despotism and torture.

They have to, otherwise they won't be granted asylum. You must look sometime at how many thousands of Eritreans come from Europe each summer for a visit, among them many who were granted asylum. Do you really believe they would come here, when they fled from persecution?

You want to claim that in Eritrea there is no torture, no arrests without trial, no suppression of fundamental freedoms?

Eritrea is not Guantanamo. Torture here is prohibited by law.

And this law is also followed?

So I assume.

Going on that, would the almost 500-page long report of the United Nations, which lists such human rights violations, be a fairy tale?

Yes, it is a fairy tale, written by people who were never in the country.

Because they were not allowed in. Is Eritrea also not a heavily equipped military state, which spends three times more on the army as on health care?

False; we have invested enormously especially in the areas of health, education, irrigation. Regarding the army, we look after its upkeep. We can hardly afford more, besides which the UN has imposed an arms embargo against us.

Don't you have an army with more than 200,000 men in a population of around 3 million?

No, no.

Back to the refugees: what are you doing to encourage them to stay? Or is flight quite OK by you, since then you can count on even more remittances from the diaspora than you already receive anyway?

Eritrea is a proud land. Forget the remittances, we don't even want development aid. To state it clearly: We do not want our people to go; it is a blood loss that hurts us. But naturally there are also those who wish to do their Masters abroad...

I am speaking about those who at night secretly go over the border.

Whoever does this, is acting illegally. Those who are caught are punished with two, three months of imprisonment.

Only two or three months?

Normally. Perhaps even less. It's about discouraging potential refugees. It is crucial however that Europe stops granting Eritreans automatic asylum, and that Ethiopia gives up our land and stops beating war drums and destabilising us. We could immediately limit the National Service to 18 months again, if Ethiopia were no longer to threaten us.

Ethiopia once again...

I believe you are underestimating what we have gone through. We lost 60,000 men in the War of Independence, and later in the border war with Ethiopia another 20,000. Every family here has its dead to mourn. We do not want another war, but we must be prepared.

Eritrea has a frightfully bad image. What are you doing to improve it? Why don't you allow more journalists into the country?

We had a presence here of international reporters, but then so many negative reports filled with prejudice appeared, that we have introduced limits. It is not helpful, when people with certain aims come here.

Journalists are not there to be helpful.

I only want accurate reporting. Whoever comes here with the belief that Eritrea is the North Korea of Africa, a land of demons, will naturally find people to confirm this.

But don't the facts speak for themselves? Your own predecessor has flown; national football players have not returned from overseas matches ...

Yes, because they were lured with false promises.

If the players had been happy and content in Eritrea, quite possibly the best promises would have been to no avail. And what about your predecessor, Ali Addu?

That is a political matter.

He is supposed to have had a close relationship with President Isayas Afewerki, yet he fled.

Let's leave that.

Hon. Minister, does your government have something to hide?

No.

Why then may the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) not visit the various camps where people are held imprisoned?

Because the ICRC has no mandate for that.

The ICRC has a different opinion on that. But would you then allow Amnesty International in?

Apparently you also belong to those who believe that there are 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea. I am saying to you that we are living here in a state under the rule of law. The first established right in Eritrea was written in 1492. America had only just been discovered by Columbus at the time.

Would you allow Amnesty to visit Eritrean prisoners?

We would not call Amnesty, because we have a problem with them. But if the question arises whether a third party investigates allegations that were raised, then I would say we are open to that.

Are there political prisoners in Eritrea?

We have no political prisoners, but we have politicians who are in prison.

Journalists as well?

Yes, but that has to do with complicated events, from long ago.

2001, the 'Group of 15', who denounced abuses in an open letter ...

Those were our comrades, our heroes, who turned traitor.

Could they defend themselves in orderly judicial proceedings?

Their case was handled in the National Assembly.

... where only the State Party was represented.

It was a kind of impeachment with the result that they were imprisoned.

Are they still in jail?

Yes.

Are they still alive?

That I don't know.

Are there other political prisoners?

Listen, in this country anyone can advance his view on the government, without having to fear that he will be arrested.

Then why are so many people afraid to speak with a foreign journalist?

I have no idea what you mean. I live in this city; I see how people sit in bars and talk about a hundred and one things, without any kind of holding back.

The people of Eritrea have the right to state their opinion, whenever and wherever they wish?

Yes, they do. I know of no one who would be locked up because he spoke with a foreigner.

Is Eritrea a democracy?

That is a question of definition. We have no opposition, no private media, and we also have no Constitution, because the war prevented that. But now we have reinstated the Constitutional Commission.

And what will come out from that?

We think that political parties are required, because the society should not be monolithic.

And then there will be elections?

When there is a Constitution, yes, naturally.

Interviewed by Stefan Klein

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Translation: Roxana Kawall

Yemane Ghebremeskel, 63, studied mathematics in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, and afterwards in London, before he joined Eritrea's liberation war against Ethiopia in 1978. He undertook diplomatic functions for 13 years in Rome, Paris, Brussels and London for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). After the liberation in 1991 Yemane Ghebremeskel worked for many years as confidant at the side of President Isayas Afewerki. He has been Minister of Information since the beginning of 2015 and is regarded as influential.

As greeting he says: "Do make your own programme here." The reporter was spied on nonetheless, and anyhow freedom to move around extends only up to Asmara's city limits. For each journey outside of the capital, an application has to be made. For the interview in his Asmara office he took one and a half hour's time.

Community Service or Forced Labour? The Eritrean National Service

The number of Eritrean refugees in Europe is growing rapidly. The main reason for flight is the National Service, in which all Eritreans are obliged to serve for an unlimited period of time from the age of 18. The recruits do not receive any noteworthy remuneration for their work.

The numbers speak for themselves: 650 refugees requested asylum in Germany in 2012. In 2013, their number was 3,616. In 2014 more than 13,000 Eritreans applied for asylum, and in 2015 almost 10,000 additional applications were filed.¹ Other European countries such as Switzerland, Norway, Sweden and Great Britain are also among the destinations of the refugees from Eritrea. When they reach Europe, they often have survived a perilous journey.

The great majority of both female and male Eritrean refugees live under harsh conditions in refugee camps in the neighbouring countries Sudan and Ethiopia. Those who want to continue their journey to Europe have to cross the Sahara with the help of human traffickers. From Libya, refugees are transported to Italy in mostly unseaworthy boats. Many of them do not reach their destination: the tragedy of Lampedusa, in which more than 300 Eritrean men, women and children lost their lives on October 3, 2013, shocked the public at large. Yet, only few know why so many Eritreans are leaving their country. There is no civil war in Eritrea, as for example in Syria or Iraq. Among the least known facts is the nature of the National Service, which is often mentioned as the reason for flight. Accordingly, in August 2014 a reader of the *Züricher Zeitung* commented on an article about the increase in asylum applications from Eritreans in Switzerland as follows:

“Quite interesting how one gets asylum in Switzerland today. There is neither war in Eritrea, nor are these [applicants] conscientious objectors in the original sense. In comparison this would be as if Swiss persons doing community service would apply for asylum in another country. I bet that no one in the world would take them in!”²

In fact, Eritrea is the only country that is generating such large numbers of refugees without being at war. Why is that? Is the Eritrean National Service

really comparable to the Swiss or the former German community service? Hardly likely.

Shortly after Eritrean independence in 1993, the so-called National Service was introduced by the former Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which had taken over power following its victory over the Ethiopian military regime. The service was compulsory for all women and men between 18 and 40 years, and originally it comprised six months of military training and twelve months of work in reconstruction projects, since the country was heavily damaged after the thirty-year independence war with Ethiopia. Furthermore, the revolutionary ideology of the EPLF was supposed to be entrenched in the heads of the people via the National Service.

Initially, most Eritrean women and men were willing to perform the National Service. They considered it as a contribution to the development of their country. There was no right of conscientious objection and accordingly, Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to perform the National Service for religious reasons, were arrested and disappeared in jail.

The Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign

Five years after independence, relations with Ethiopia worsened rapidly, and in 1998 both countries plunged into a devastating border war that resulted in around 100,000 deaths before it ended in 2000. In the wake of the war, there had been a general mobilisation in Eritrea: All former National Service graduates were drafted into the military in 1998. However, the end of the war was not followed by demobilisation. On the contrary, every year a new round of conscripts was called up for service. In the year 2002, the government announced the so-called Warsay-Yikealo³ Development Campaign. The National Service was thereby increased to timely indefinite periods: women generally had to serve up to the age of 27; men up to the age of at least 50 years. Exemptions from National Service were only granted arbitrarily and upon payment of substantial bribes.

At the same time a command economy was introduced in Eritrea, in which the ruling party PFDJ⁴ and the military controlled most commercial operations, for example in the construction sector and in agriculture. Since then the party cadres have been using the recruits as forced labourers, and the generals are pocketing the profits. Those who perform National Service build roads, micro-dams, or houses for high-ranking military officers; alternatively, they work as unpaid



Pompous production; The national television program EriTV broadcasts official photos of the "National Service" at parades when President Afewerki appears. It also publishes them on Youtube.

teachers, nurses and administrative staff. Even when they are working in civilian fields, they remain under the control of a military commander who in the absence of any form of rule of law can arbitrarily impose punishments for reasons such as overstay of leave and other misdemeanours.

Many women become victims of sexual violence. Their superiors have to fear no repercussions for the sexual abuse of female recruits. However, this has dire consequences for the affected women: after their demobilization, they are stigmatised by the conservative Eritrean society and shunned by many people. The following case study⁵ illustrates the fate of a former female Eritrean soldier.

Yordanos, now 37 years old and daughter of a hairdresser, was conscripted into the army in 1998, when the border war began. At the end of the war she remained in the military and was assigned to an officer as his maid. The latter soon attempted to get closer to her. When she refused to enter into a relationship with him, he made her work in the blazing sun for hours without a break. Yordanos was desperate, but remained determined to resist his advances. After some time, she came to hear that her superior's boss had arrived in a nearby military camp. She succeeded in fleeing to that camp, and told her story to the superior officer. Luckily he showed understanding for her and transferred her to another unit. In the year 2002 she

was finally demobilised. Now it became clear to her that she was socially isolated. Although she had fought in the war against Ethiopia, she received little recognition from the community around her, but was excluded and discriminated against.

Since sexual harassment and rape of female recruits frequently occur in the military, many people are treating all female recruits as outcasts. In the eyes of traditional society, they are leading a wild life, away from the control of their families.

Yordanos began to work as a hairdresser like her mother, but she was shunned and could hardly make a living for herself. She wanted to get married and to open her own beauty salon, but she was unable to fulfill any of her wishes. Two years later, she managed to get to Saudi Arabia, where she got into service as a housemaid of a rich family. She now earns a little more money, but has no private life, and is unable to found a family of her own.

In other cases, unmarried women try to get themselves pregnant. It is the only means for them to get demobilised. But even this strategy leads mainly to social exclusion and a future without hope.

Saba was 20 years old when she was called up to the National Service. At that time, the service was still limited to 18 months, and she wanted to get it over and done, and then join her sister in the USA in order to get vocational training. Her family lived in the capital Asmara and was financially well situated because most of their offspring lived in the diaspora. However, when the Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign was proclaimed in the following year, her service time was extended to an indefinite period. Her superior employed her as a secretary, and he wanted to keep her as cheap laborer. After four years her family complained to the Ministry of Defence and attempted to use their connections, but to no avail. Saba succeeded in being left alone by the officers. At the same time, she observed that female conscripts were dismissed from service as soon as they became pregnant. She made up her mind that she would also get pregnant, and was successful. In the military she had met a friend – however, he came from a poor family and was not accepted by her family. They did not agree to a wedding of the couple, but planned to arrange a marriage abroad. Saba, who did not want this lives now as a single mother in Asmara. She is estranged from her family, and has no chance of finishing her education.

No prospects of demobilisation

Thousands of Eritreans have been forcefully recruited for almost 20 years, and, just like those who joined them later, have no prospects of being demobilised. The Eritrean army comprises at least 300,000 persons in total, out of a population of around four million. This includes those who are operating within the civil sector. Eritrea is thus one of the most highly militarised societies in the world. The recruits receive no pay which would allow them to feed their families, but merely pocket money equivalent to 2.50 to 50 euro per month, depending on length of service and qualification.⁶

Eritrean price levels are comparable to those in Germany, and thus most Eritreans depend on remittances from their relatives abroad in order to survive. The state makes money out of their labour without taking the responsibility of maintaining their families. Those who have no relatives overseas attempt to escape the service by going underground, or to overstay their leave in order to earn at least a little money during that time. However, this behaviour is punished with draconian jail sentences and hard labour.

Yohannes grew up in a poor quarter of Asmara and inherited a small hut from his grandmother. He studied accountancy and worked in the municipal administration until 1996. In the same year thousands of state employees were laid off and replaced by ex-fighters from the EPLF. Yohannes became unemployed, too. In 1997 he was called up for National Service. He fought in the border war and afterwards he was not demobilised. At the time of his conscription he had been married and the father of a two-year old child. Lat-

Screenshot: EMW

A Youtube video of Amnesty International shows the "forgotten prisons of Eritrea". Foreigners don't get to see the National Service camps - so Amnesty used Google Earth data.



er the family got another child. Since his remuneration of 22 euro per month did not suffice to live on, his wife was forced to leave the children with neighbours and to take on a poorly-paid factory job. Whenever Yohannes was granted leave from military service, he made embroidery for traditional clothes in order to earn some additional money. Sometimes he did not return to the service at the appointed time in order to work a little more for his family, although this was a punishable offence. Once he was detained for six months. He felt hopeless and frustrated because he had to spend his productive years as a soldier, instead of working as a civilian employee. His labour was utilised by his superiors, who made him do the accounting for his unit. His family had to continue to live in the tiny crumbling hut without water and sanitation, and his repeated applications for demobilisation were constantly denied. In 2010 he made up his mind to flee, and finally he made it to Israel, with no chance of letting his wife and children follow. Due to the hostile policies of the Israeli government regarding Eritrean refugees ⁷, his future is uncertain. Photos of him reveal a sad, gaunt figure, whose life had been made a mess by his government.

In the case of Halima and Ismael, the National Service destroyed the whole family. Halima married Ismael, a farmer and herdsman, in the year 1996. He was called up during the war with Ethiopia and not demobilised afterwards. In 2003 he decided not to return to his unit, because his wage of 22 euros was not enough to feed his family. He secretly worked for a private construction firm, and thus he became a deserter. Very soon he was arrested and, being considered a traitor, was brought to the Wi'a military prison, which is situated in an extremely hot desert region. Now he could no longer support his family at all. For Halima and her two little daughters, life became extremely hard. There were no job opportunities in the countryside, and therefore she moved with her children to the port city of Massawa and looked for work as a housemaid. Ismael learned about her activities from relatives. He took Halima's move very badly. There were rumours about her claiming she was working as a prostitute. After a year in detention, Ismael was reassigned to his military unit. After four months of service under strict control, he decided to risk his life by escaping to Sudan together with two friends. However, all three of them were shot by border patrols.

Halima dispaired when she learnt of her husband's death, and did not know how to answer her daughters' questions about the whereabouts of their father. She is being avoided by her extended family because she works in

the city, which is not compatible with the role expectations of her conservative ethnic group, and she carves out a miserable existence, living in abject poverty with her daughters.

This example shows the effect of state violence against National Service recruits not only on themselves, but also on their families. The husband was imprisoned for the “crime” of wishing to feed his family; his wife and his children were estranged from him. Finally, he was shot because he wanted to find work in Sudan. Halima had to violate the role taboos of her community against her will, and she lost the support of her family. Their children did not only have to overcome the death of their father, but they grew up in poverty and isolation.

In the past years the number of female beggars in Eritrean cities has increased sharply. They are mainly young women with children or elderly women who see no other option, because their husbands or sons are in the military and cannot support them financially.

Escaping to survive

In only a little more than a decade, the open-end National Service has shattered the fabric of Eritrean society for the long term.⁸

More and more Eritreans are seeing no other solution than leaving the country in order to secure their survival and that of their family, and to have a future away from a state which has proclaimed the unconditional self-sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the nation as a mantra.

For these reasons, currently several thousands of Eritreans are fleeing over the border to Sudan or to Ethiopia each month. Among them are more and more unaccompanied children, whose parents wish to protect them from the grasp of the regime before they reach the compulsory conscription age of 18. Leaving the country without an exit visa is illegal in Eritrea. Similar as in the previous German Democratic Republic (GDR), it is strictly prohibited to travel out of the country without permission. Refugees were shot at the border on a regular base, although this practice seems to be applied less frequently at present. Those who escape from the Military and National Service are considered as traitors, and those who are deported⁹ from their country of refuge face threats of being rigorously punished. Torture, forced labour and atrocious detention conditions are the order of the day in Eritrea.



Demonstration against the National Service in front of the "Palais des Nations" in Geneva on 20 June 2014. The organization "Stop Slavery in Eritrea" founded by exiled Eritreans wants to raise awareness that the service is nothing but slavery under another name.

Ali was conscripted into the military in 1997 and lost his best friend in the war. After the peace agreement with Ethiopia in 2000, he thought he would be demobilised, but his hopes were not fulfilled. Therefore, he made plans to flee to Sudan with other recruits. When his unit was shifted to a place near the border in 2004, some of his comrades succeeded in fleeing. However, he himself was under surveillance, and he was unable to use the chance. In the meantime, his father had become ill. The family had no money to pay for his treatment. Thus, his younger brother left school and looked for odd jobs in order to feed the family. Shortly thereafter he was arrested, because he had turned 18 and had not reported for National Service. Ali felt ashamed that he as the eldest son was not in a position to support his family. The only remaining option to solve the problem was flight to Sudan. He tried once more to escape, but was discovered by a border patrol and imprisoned for a year. Afterwards he was sent back to his unit once more. His superior officers, who considered him a "traitor", made his life a living hell. Finally, he attempted to flee for the third time, and arrived at a refugee camp in Sudan at the end of 2008, after eleven years as an involuntary soldier.

When the numbers of refugees soared shortly after the introduction of the Warsay-Yikealo Campaign in 2002, the government demanded a compensation of 50,000 nafka (ca. 2,500 euros) from the refugees' relatives, forcing many to sell their houses. Those who could not come up with the money were taken into custody. However, with growing numbers of refugees, some corrupt generals came up with another strategy to capitalise on the mass exodus: they participate in a network of human traffickers, who, on the payment of substantial amounts of money, smuggle Eritreans across the Sahara to Libya and then over the Mediterranean to Europe.

While on their way, refugees are often passed from human trafficker to human trafficker, and have to raise extra money with the help of their relatives in the diaspora. Furthermore, abduction by human smugglers is commonplace in the Sudanese refugee camps. But all these threats cannot deter young Eritrean women and men from leaving their country, which denies them a dignified life.

To revert to the reader's comment in Switzerland: no, the Eritrean National Service is definitely not comparable with the Swiss Community Service. Eritrean refugees risk life and limb to escape from a totalitarian system that not only destroys the lives of individuals, but which makes the collapse of the whole country imminent.

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- 1 Source: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.
- 2 Reader's comment to an article in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 24.08.2014: "New Asylum Petitions. Eritreans instead of Syrians".
- 3 Warsay means "heir" or "follower"; Yikealo stands for a wise, elderly person, referring to the fighter generation.
- 4 The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) renamed itself People's Front for Democracy and Justice in 1994. It is the only party allowed in the country; no national elections have taken place since independence.
- 5 All case studies are derived from a research project that was undertaken by the author and her colleague Abdulkader Saleh from 2008 to 2010 in Eritrea. The names of all persons have been changed.
- 6 At the end of 2015, the payment for new recruits and college graduates was raised from 2,000 to 3,500 nafka (100 and 175 euros, respectively); those who had been serving for long terms received no wage increase.

- 7 Human Rights Watch, 9 September 2014: "Make Their Lives Miserable". Israel's Coercion of Eritrean and Sudanese Asylum Seekers to Leave Israel.
- 8 For an analysis of the social anomie that is generated by the militarisation of the society, see: Hirt, Nicole und Abdulkader Saleh 2013: "Dreams Don't Come True in Eritrea": Anomie and Family Disintegration due to the Structural Militarization of Society' in: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51,1, 139-168.
- 9 In the past years Eritreans were deported from Malta, Egypt and other countries. Even Germany deported two refugees in 2008, who were arrested immediately after their arrival in Eritrea and held under extreme conditions. Both of them later succeeded in fleeing to Germany for a second time, where they were then granted asylum.

A Country Without Youth

**Slavery is a strong word, but what else could one call it here?
Impressions from a country in which an entire generation of young
men think only of leaving.**

A father. A son. A difficult conversation. Don't go, says the father. I have no future here, says the son. But running away is no solution, says the father. I see no light at the other end of the tunnel, says the son. The father thinks about the dangers of flight. He thinks of death, which waits in the desert and in the sea. He thinks, too, that this is not how it was supposed to be. As a father, one does want to have one's son nearby, and grandchildren at some point. One desires to pass something on to the next generation; tradition and culture demand this. He tries with a last argument.

Reunion with Eritrea, northeastern Africa. After 22 years, Asmara, the beautiful, as if frozen in time. Independence Avenue, the palm-fringed boulevard in the heart of the capital, as endearingly worn as in former times. The little cafés, the dimly lit bars, the ice cream parlours, the hairdressers, the fussy traffic. The businesses, which still dream of better times. The Cinema Impero, as if the Italians had just left yesterday. A backdrop as if for a Fellini film, it would have been a scene of jubilation at that time. The people danced exuberantly in Independence Avenue, because they had just become independent and free. Against all likelihood. After a thirty-year war. The future, the only promise.

And today? In the Bar Impero all tables are occupied, but there is not much being consumed. One tea, one cappuccino must do for the evening. Some order nothing at all, but they are left to sit. The atmosphere is subdued, unafrikan; in a similar bar in Kinshasa there would be a beer-fuelled roaring now; here you think you sense a huge tiredness.

700 nakfa a month – just for one chicken

The father says to the son, you don't earn that badly at all; he knows it is a weak argument. 2600 nakfa is more than most get, who have to serve their compulsory labour in the hated National Service, and do not know when they will ever be released from it. But according to the only realistic exchange rate in the coun-

try, the black market rate, that is only just 50 dollars. How shall I live off that, says the son; how start a family, how find a home? A few days later he is gone.

Massawa. One needs a permit for the trip from the highlands down the winding route to the port city on the Red Sea. One has to provide data about one's self, about the vehicle, and then there is a paper with four duplicates. The traveller receives the original, and in the sweating city below he first comes across a massive monument, black marble with battle tanks, and perhaps this is indeed the moment where everything seems to reveal itself – the triumph, the pride and the tragic wrong turn.

Three tanks, once captured from the Ethiopian army. Date, location, the name of the battle, dedicated to the heroes and martyrs who gave their lives in Massawa and elsewhere. A superior adversary conquered, 60,000 fighters lost, peace still not ensured, the Ethiopian enemy still on a piece of Eritrean land, and under those circumstances the youth complain that they have to make a little sacrifice over the meagre wages in the National Service? So think the old, the guerrilla fighters of yesterday, who today are in power and do not grasp that the young prefer to run away.

They do so in masses, several thousand each month, and one feels it in Europe. In 2013 almost 22,000 made an application for asylum, in 2014 it was more than double so many, this year it could be even more. Even the students who move with permission to Europe to do their Masters' degree there, in most cases do not return. In Germany the Eritreans belong to the ten biggest groups of refugees, and almost all are granted asylum. The conditions at home in Eritrea make that possible.

The father waits every day for news of his son. Only when the police pick him up, after several weeks, does he learn that the son was caught in the attempt to flee over the border to Sudan. The father is only questioned; he is not maltreated. I was lucky, he says. The son is locked up for 18 months; no court trial, just so. He too is not ill-treated. Good luck once again, says the father. When the son is released, he is more determined than ever. He tries it a second time.

The National Service, obligatory for everyone, a mixture of military and civil service, was originally limited to 18 months. Then at the end of the 90s came the still smouldering border war with Ethiopia, and after that the National Service was changed into a storehouse for human material, a sort of reserve of humans,

which the state puts into service as it is needed. No more time limit; the state decides who has to serve how long.

Teacher needed? The young man, let's call him Tesfai, is certainly no teacher, he is a qualified engineer, but because there is currently no mathematics teacher, they send him to teach at a school, and pay him 700 nakfa a month for it. One cannot buy much more than a chicken with that.

Or Yemane, again a pseudonym. The state construction company nabbed him. He has worked there for ten years, for 450 nakfa. He points to his gym shoes: "More expensive than my monthly salary." He points to his jeans: "It costs more than double of my month's salary." He points to his T-shirt: "Not even for this it is enough." He is a talented painter. Only so does he hold his head above water.

To say this is slavery seems to him too strong, says Kahsai Habte, and sips at his tea, "but they cheat the young people of their freedom, they allow them no career choice, they give them no chance to plan their lives." Once again a made-up name. A meeting at a small café in a side street. But is that enough of a precaution? It could become dangerous for Kahsai Habte, if anyone were to see him in conversation with a foreign journalist; the word traitor is never far away. He knows that; he also knows that anyone in this café could be the informer – the waitress, the cashier. "We have this informer system here in this country", he says. "At that we're really good."

A still more secluded place is found, and now the intellectual Kahsai Habte has the ease to sketch a picture of his land. It is nothing beautiful. He belonged to those who, 22 years ago, dancing in Independence Avenue, gave themselves up to the intoxication of freedom, and when in between this irksome little question came knocking, is not everything too good to be true, it could not really disturb the joy. The Eritrean Kahsai Habte was determined to do his part for the rebuilding of Eritrea. He wanted to do something for his country.

They wanted to build the country and the country took everything from them

Instead the country has done something to him. It has robbed him of all hope, has made him poor, and, as with everyone else too, has abandoned him to a despotic system. No constitution, no elections, no opposition, no discourse – no

press freedom, no civil society, no dignity, that would be sacrosanct. “You have no civil rights”, says Habte, “no-one is secure here, at any time it can happen that they make you vanish or be tortured.” Should you enquire after someone who has vanished, if you try to find out something about his fate, you may almost even become suspicious yourself.

Not that everything is bad in Eritrea. There may be corruption, but not on a large scale, and certainly not so brazenly written in the faces of the leaders as those in Nairobi or Lagos. In Eritrea ministers are as poor as all the other people in the land; not even the President is considered rich. In the government there is definitely a vision of development; schools, streets, clinics, dams, colleges are built; they work on the future and come to grief on the present. Because qualified doctors have already absconded abroad. Because teachers, who have to do at least three jobs in order to live, hardly have any motivation left for the school. Because medicines cannot be kept cool because of the lack of electricity. Admittedly it is said that Eritrea has conquered measles and polio with a successful immunisation campaign and so strongly reduced the mother-child mortality rate, that the millennium development goals on these points can be taken as achieved. But the perception of the people is different. Kahsai Habte says: “You pray that you don’t get sick.”

A land of need, a land of scarcities

The state economy turns empty; it creates no jobs, and it allows prices to gallop ahead of the absurdly low wages. With hardly anything that earned the name private sector, one could come to the idea that all energy might be flowing into spying on one’s own citizens. Were it not for the remittances from the Eritrean diaspora strewn all over the world, the country may well have collapsed already. Even the daily bread is a worry. Not even after a good rainy season the country does produce enough grain even approaching what it needs to feed its people. This year the deficit will be particularly big, but the regime is trying to make a secret of the fact, as they try to make a secret out of almost everything.

There is a study on the prospects for the crop; there was a date for its release, but the government cancelled it. The UN organisation responsible for nutrition, the FAO, has a representative in Asmara, but he does not know what is happening in the agricultural regions of the country. Because one needs permission to look around there, but how can one plan a trip, when one never knows when it will be granted? Before he was dispatched to Eritrea, he was the FAO man in Afghani-

stan, no easy tourist destination, but except for the Taliban, he says, no-one had ever prevented him from travelling where he wanted.

Only evenings, when it is dark, says Berhane. And even then only in the car. It becomes a criss-cross journey through the city; a tape plays, and Berhane narrates the story. Berhane, who naturally in reality is called something else. His story concerns his brother and his flight, and it concerns the National Service, once again. If one wanted to empty the country of young people, one could have invented nothing better. A measly wage, a feeling of hatred, a human-smuggler who demands around 2,400 dollars, a friend in the US who sends the money, and the rest a huge risk. The risk, of getting caught at the border and imprisoned. The risk, of falling into the hands of criminal gangs operating at the border, who feel free to use refugees to blackmail their families, or when that does not work, to kill their victims and do business with their organs. In this case it went well. Berhane's brother is now in Addis Ababa and ponders how to proceed. There is no shortage of guides; he has friends in Italy, in Switzerland, one is on the way to Denmark, but money is still lacking.

Asmara in the dark. Entire city sections without electricity. Once, in the BDHO Avenue, Berhane gestures outside to a hill. It is supposed to be one of these underground prisons, of which there are several. There are also prisons, which look from the outside like quite normal houses. Basically Berhane himself is already on the go. He is still trapped in the National Service and has to do the donkey work in a state enterprise, but when his brother succeeds in finding a way to Europe and sets himself up in life there, then he will follow him. "Everyone thinks of fleeing", he says. "No one wants to stay."

And if things should change in Eritrea? President Afewerki is the man who practically single-handedly has brought the country on this dire course, but he is apparently sick. The medical consultations overseas are becoming more frequent; he was just at a treatment in a clinic in Baden-Baden, Germany. But even with him at the top, there are delicate hints which appear to point to a course correction.

Instead of relying only on China, they apparently now want to re-open discussions with Europe.

In any case the door, which was locked for years, has again opened a chink, and in Europe there are signs of a cautious rapprochement. It is not fair to punish the population for their regime, is the new word out; however, above all it appears

to be the chance to see if through some betterment of the economic situation, whether the flight to Europe may not be reduced to some extent.

Visit with Hagos Ghebrehiwet. In the state party, the so-called People's Front for Democracy and Justice, he is the one responsible for economic development. Not a happy subject. The World Bank says nowhere in the world is it so hard to do business as in Eritrea. It placed the country on the corresponding list in last place. Yet party member Hagos Ghebrehiwet speaks undeterred of the wonderful prospects which Eritrea has, and how much they would like serious investors. That there is still much to improve in the country – well of course.

Does that also go for human rights? He squirms at that and says such things would first and foremost be discussed internally. No answer? He writhes a bit more still, and one can literally see him casting about for a formula to allow him to save face. A seasoned party functionary who suddenly seems to be worried he could say something wrong. Similarly so in the interview with Asmelash Abraha, the director of the state television. He wants to demonstrate that they can be exactly as bold and investigative as banned private stations, and says that naturally they also deal with the subject of abuse of authority. He then goes on to make it abundantly clear, that actually there is no abuse of office in Eritrea.

It takes a while, but then, after some thought, Hagos Ghebrehiwet has found what he has been seeking. He says: "Just as in every other country in the world, we also have a few things to improve here, including human rights."

The father, the son: they are now living two different lives at two very far apart ends of the world.

At the second attempt the escape was successful. The son is in Australia; he has begun his life over there; it's a good start. The father is happy about that, but the joy is mixed with grief at the loss. His mind tells him that his boy has made the right decision. He, the father, indeed experiences it every day anew; the pitiful condition of the land, the ailing economy, the self-censorship, to which one has accustomed one's self, "out of caution, out of fear." But the heart says otherwise.

It is like an undertow

The father does not believe that the exodus of young people can still be halted. Naturally, like so many, he hopes for a change in the country, but unlike for one

or the other observer, for him it is “a hope without hope.” In almost every family in these times there is talk of fleeing; practically every young man is busying himself with flight; it is as if the whole land has been infected with thoughts of escape. Even quite young lads flee. “It has”, says the father, “become a mass movement.” He says that with great sorrow, as he, the father of five children, still has a son who is suffering under the National Service. Again the conflict between the heart and the mind; one looks at the father and senses that it is almost tearing him apart. He was always so proud of his family, of their togetherness and the close bonds between parents and children. He had thought that it would be for an entire lifetime.

Father and son have spoken with each other. Once more a difficult conversation. The son says that all his friends have already gone. He himself has not made a final decision. The father says it hangs in the balance, fifty-fifty. Prognosis: The second son also will go.

By Stefan Klein

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Translation: Roxana Kawayl

Faith, Politics and the Lack of Religious Freedom

Christianity and Islam have a long history in Eritrea. Often Muslims and Christians were pitted against each other. Today, all suffer from the lack of religious freedom and the control the regime exercises over religious institutions.

Eritrea is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural state in the Horn of Africa and it is inhabited by nine ethno-linguistic groups: Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre and Tigrinya. There are no reliable data about the population and on religious affiliations in the country, but the number of inhabitants is estimated between 4 and 5 million. According to the government, the population is equally divided between Christians and Muslims. The highlanders are predominantly Christians and lead settled peasantry lives, while the eastern and western lowlanders are predominantly Muslims and most of them are farmers.

From the 16th to the 19th century, the Ottomans and the Egyptians controlled the Red Sea coastal areas and the pastoral population living in its surrounding. Their centre of administration and capital was the famous port city Massawa¹, and the local *Naib* family was mandated to rule Massawa and its hinterland in the name of the Turkish and the Egyptian authorities, respectively. On the other hand, parts of the highlands were under Abyssinian influence. However, the Egyptian authority was weak and its deputies, the *Naib* family, could not protect the local population from violent Abyssinian raids and attacks.

At that time, Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1890) and his representative *Ras Alula* in Asmara exploit religion and declared a crusade war to subjugate the Muslim population together with local highland nobilities². The Muslim local population rose up against Emperor Yohannes and *Ras Alula*, who committed crimes against their lives and properties. Simultaneously, the Italians established their colonial rule over Eritrea (1890-1941) and they did not face much resistance from the population, who saw their presence as a guarantee for protection from the Abyssinian raids and attacks. Thus, Eritrea in its present boundaries is a creation of the Italians. After World War II it came under British Military Administration (1941-1952)³. In 1952 the United Nations decided to federate Eritrea with

Ethiopia (resolution 390 A (V)), but Haile Selassie undermined the federation right from the beginning and annexed Eritrea in 1962. However, the emperor was overthrown by a military coup in 1974, and the Military Council (Derg) consolidated its supremacy by a “Red Terror Campaign”. However, after 30 years of armed struggle the liberation front succeeded and Eritrea got its independence in 1991.

Religion as Marker of Identity and Source of Conflicts

The historical trajectory of religion in Eritrea can be traced back to the 4th century, when Syrian priests arrived at the Eritrean coast and converted the Axumite King to Orthodox Christianity. On the other hand, the first Muslim immigrants who landed in Massawa in 615 were followers of the Prophet Mohammad (which is known as *al Hija al ula*) and preached Islam among the coastal people. These



Nicolas Germain/AFP/Getty Images

The Meskel Festival is the major ceremony of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, here in September 2004. The festival celebrates the discovery of the cross of Christ in the 3rd century by Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine.

two events make Eritrea a country in which both Christianity and Islam spread early compared to other areas of Africa. Followers of both faiths from Syria, Egypt, the Hijazi (Arabian Peninsula) and Yemen were the first who spread Christianity and Islam among the local population through trade activities and inter marriage. At that time, these religions were adopted by the local communities. The religious leaders have played an immense role in re-organizing the scattered tribal agro-pastoral communities and in mobilizing their followers for political purposes, because religion is deeply rooted within the different segments of the Eritrean society, and both Christians and Muslims regard practicing their faiths as part and parcel of their cultural heritage.

During the Italian colonial period, all religious institutions (Muslim, Orthodox and the Roman Catholic) witnessed hospitable environments for their development and expansion. Protestant missionaries arrived from Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Finland during the 19th century. Later, they were suppressed by the Italian Fascist government in favour of Catholic missionaries, but they were empowered and rehabilitated during the British rule.

After the demise of the Italian colonial rule during World War II and during the British rule⁴, the peaceful co-existence between the two communities was disrupted due to the Ethiopian claims on Eritrea as part of the old Abyssinian Kingdom. Haile Selassie exploited religion as a political weapon for mobilizing the Coptic Christians in favour of a federation, while he was leading an undeclared war against the Muslim population, who opposed the Ethiopian claim on Eritrea.

Discrimination of the Muslims

During the federation period and the subsequent years, the Muslims and the Islamic institutions suffered from subjugation and suppression, and the Muslim population was discriminated, marginalized and treated as second class citizen at best⁵. In this regard, religion shaped the political identity of both the Orthodox Christian population, who felt religiously and culturally attached to the Ethiopian Empire, and the Muslims, who opted for independence due to their negative historical experiences under the hegemonies of violent Abyssinian rulers. The liberal policy of the British administration, including the right to establish parties increased the political consciousness among the population. In this context, religion was used as political weapon by the Eritrean Orthodox Church to mobilize its members in support of the unconditional unification with Ethiopia as a 'Christian Kingdom'.

On the other hand, Muslim intellectuals founded the Muslim League in 1947, which opted for independence and succeeded in mobilizing the Muslim population across the country. At that time, the relations between the two religious communities were conflict-ridden, and violent conflicts inspired by religious affiliations occurred on a regular base. Churches and Mosques were exploited as centres of political agitation. Many Muslim politicians and students fled the country and established two liberation movements: The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) from abroad. The ELF launched an armed struggle against Ethiopian rule in 1961, but it was fractioned due to ethnic and regional frictions. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged in 1975 and dominated the field after defeating the weakened ELF through joint attacks together with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)⁶ in 1981. This situation exacerbated the mutual mistrust, between Christians and Muslims that emerged in the period of the British rule, inspired by King Haile Selassie's claims on Eritrea.

The Status of Religious Institutions today

The Transitional Government's Proclamation No. 73/1995 (regulating religious activities and institutions) confirms that religion and state are separated by law. According to the EPLF/PFDJ⁷ government's official discourse, the freedom of religion and of religious practices is guaranteed for all segments of the society, and the state is secular. The ratified, yet un-implemented constitution of 1997 recognizes freedom of belief as one of the fundamental rights (Article 19). However, from the early years of independence, the government has directly interfered in all religious affairs and has attempted to control all religious leaders and institutions. It started immediately to bring all Islamic institutions and Muslim religious leaders under its control, due to a certain degree of historical mutual mistrust between Muslims and Christians in general and due to the EPLF's suspicion against the Muslim majority's attitude towards its secular policy in particular, which has its roots in the times of the armed struggle.

The government restructured the Islamic institutions, namely the *Dar al Ifta* (Fatwa Council) and the *Dar al Awqaaf* (Islamic Endowment), and President Isaias himself assigned the Mufti of Eritrea, Sheikh al Amin Osman in 1996 without consulting the Muslim religious leaders. Sheikh Alamin associated himself with the PFDJ ruling elite⁸, and other members of Islamic institutions such as the *Majles al Awqaaf* (Endowment Council) and the Qadis (judges) of the *Sharia* courts are appointed by government loyalists and co-opted individuals,



The Coptic cathedral Nda Mariam in Asmara was completed in 1920. It was designed by the Italian architect Cavagnari in its style of classical modernism.

who lack qualification, experience and knowledge of the *Sharia* law.⁹ The *Sharia* is applied in civil jurisdiction of disputes related to marriage, divorce and inheritance when Muslims are involved.

Similarly, the Orthodox institutions were targeted, and the legitimate Patriarch Antonios was replaced by the government-selected Dioskoros in 2007. The suspension of Antonios was related to his alleged interference in government policies and his favourable attitude towards a reform movement that emerged inside the Orthodox Church, called Medhane Alem (Saviour of the World). Eritrean Orthodox Christians in the diaspora are split in their attitude towards the government-appointed Abune Dioskoros¹⁰. However, Abune Dioskoros passed away on 21 December 2015 and the post has since remained vacant.

In 2001, the government banned the activities of the ‘unregistered’ religious institutions, namely the Evangelical Churches such as Pentecostal denominations, the Faith Mission, the Seventh Day Adventist Mission and also the activities of Salafi or Wahhabi Muslims. A large number of members of these groups were arrested and are held under oppressive conditions under the threat of torture.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea was founded at the beginning of the 20th century by Swedish missionaries, and Lutheran Christians are a small com-



Veronique Durruty/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

A village mosque near Massawa.

munity living predominantly in urban areas. The Swedish missionaries played an important role in the extension of the educational sector in the country¹¹ and during the British rule the protestant intellectuals, who had been marginalized by the Italians were appointed to high administrative posts, which they maintained during the federation years. Even today, a number of high government officials are Protestants. Yet, the majority is a-political, and many Protestant intellectuals have arranged themselves with the existing power.

In present Eritrea, the government strictly controls the four recognized religious institutions and their affairs (the Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Lutheran Church), including the assignment of religious representatives and leaders, and it monitors all their resources and activities.

Restrictions against Religious Leaders and Institutions

According to the report of the United States' Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2013 (USCIRF) around 2,000 to 3,000 religious prisoners have so far been arbitrarily arrested, tortured, and put into detention without charges. The vast majority of them are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians, Jehovah Witnesses and Muslim reformists. Due to the reluctant attitude

of many Muslims towards the EPLF during the liberation struggle, they were the first community that faced persecution. From 1991 onwards, reformist Muslims (Sunni reformists and Wahhabis) were labelled as fundamentalists and potential terrorists. In 1994 about 140 school teachers and religious leaders were labelled as ‘terrorists’ and killed by the Eritrean National Security (See Amnesty International 2005: 14-15). In August 2009 Amnesty International reported that hundreds of Muslim Sheikhs and teachers and religious leaders from different cities and towns such as Asmara, Keren, Massawa, Ghinda and Senafe had been arrested over the years for alleged “Islamist radicalism”, and at least 40 Muslim clerics and religious leaders from the Saho ethnic group were among them (Amnesty International 2009; Human Right Watch 2011)¹². Most of the Quran schools are currently closed and only a few schools in urban cities are allowed to operate.

The Office of Religious Affairs must approve the construction of Churches and Mosques and printing and distribution of religious materials. The import of religious books and reading materials (especially Arabic books) is restricted, and those who bring such books have been arrested and imprisoned.

In the aftermath of a military mutiny against the government led by Muslim officers, in January 2013 Muslims were angered by statements of Presidential Adviser Yemane Gebreab, who labelled the mutiny leaders as ‘Muslim terrorists and members of Al Qaida’¹³. In fact, some of these leaders enjoyed a high reputation among the people due to the courage they had shown during the war with Ethiopia (1998-2000).

In an important and courageous move, the four Eritrean Catholic Bishops published a Pastoral Letter titled “Where is Your Brother?” in May 2014, which evoked consciousness among all segments of the population. The letter expresses their concern about the imminent danger of extinction (‘tsanta’ in Tigrinya) or depopulation of Eritrea in the near future due to the flight of the young generation and reminds the political leadership, but also general population to shoulder the responsibility of saving the nation from this fate¹⁴. The letter deplores the current psychological and moral crisis of the nation, due to the militarization of the society and the timely unlimited military service, which is the main cause for the disintegration of families. The letter is explicitly addressed to all segments of the Eritrean society. Thus, the publication of the letter was reported by various international news agencies (for instance BBC and Bloomberg), as well as by the Vatican News website. This enhances the prominence of the four



Eric Lafforgue/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

Crosses on the metal market in Asmara. Many of the things offered here are made of scrap left over from the independence war.

bishops and indirectly serves as a protective measure, because it will be hard for the government to simply arrest them without risking further international condemnation¹⁵.

Conclusion

Religion has been one of the main markers of identity and is deeply rooted within Christian and Muslim communities who regard practicing their religion as part and parcel of their daily lives. In the aftermath of World War II religion played a significant political role and it polarized the Christian and Muslim communities against each other. Since then the relationship between both communities has been conflict-ridden. Religion was used as political instrument by the competing political organisations in the 1940s and during the armed struggle it was exploited by the leadership of the liberation fronts as a tool to unify different ethnic groups and to mobilize them against their opponents. Since independence in 1991, the EPLF/PFDJ government has held a tight grip on all religious leaders and institutions. In the absence of rule of law and freedom of expression, the PFDJ ruling party has systematically dismantled all of the public institutions, including the religious organizations.

However, there are a number of factors which could challenge the repressive PFDJ ruling elite and facilitate regime change, such as the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation, the military mutiny of 2013, the exodus of the youth and the Lampedusa tragedy of 2013, which manifested itself in a number of international and national protests. The four Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter has created consciousness among people from different faiths and particularly among the youth. Religion is deeply rooted in the Eritrean society, and people dream that under a future democratic government all religious communities will be free to practice their faiths.

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The Deliberate and Systematic Destruction of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

Though the Eritrean-Orthodox Church has been recognized officially by the government it has been exposed to harassment and chicanery. It's facing today the deepest crisis since the fourth century.

Eritrea is a small country located in northeast Africa with approximately six million people. Its population is comprised of a fairly equal number of Muslims and Christians. Ninety-two percent of the Christian population are believed to be adherents of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (ErOC). The ErOC, both as an integral part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church before – it attained its autocephalous (self-governing) status in 1994 – and since, is undoubtedly the oldest and most venerable institution in Eritrea. Besides its deep well of spiritual wealth that one can trace back to the apostolic age, the church is also noted for being the repository of learning and a major pillar of the society for nearly two millennia. Moreover, the ErOC is responsible for the transmission of this rich spirituality, learning, and culture down to our own age.

Sadly, however, the ErOC, a member of the See of St. Mark (the two other members being the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and the latest addition to the six-member Oriental Orthodox Churches, has been in the crosshairs of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), the Marxist organization that "liberated" Eritrea in 1991. This is consistent with the anti-religion stance of the EPLF, as attested from the organization's own publications going as far back as 1975.

Because of the size and influence of the church, the government did not close down the ErOC when it officially rendered illegal a dozen or so of the newer and smaller evangelical churches and sects in April, 2002. The plan for the ErOC, instead, had always been to co-opt and utilize it as a tool for the total political control of the Eritrean people in the Soviet Union style, which provided the playbook for the government's suppression and control of the Orthodox Church.

The Earliest Occurrences of Persecution

The earliest visible sign of the government's actions against Christians in general took place in 1996 when it made possession of personal Bibles intolerable in Sawa, the notorious military training camp where all young people are sent for mandatory training. This control was then expanded throughout the military establishment. Bibles were being confiscated and worship services banished. In the same year, the security forces stood idly by and even encouraged young members of the ruling regime who burned bibles in certain church compounds in Asmara, the capital city. The government took another major step in taking complete control of the Orthodox Church when it placed Yoftahe Dimetros, a lay political appointee, as "the general administrator" of the ErOC, a position that gave him full control over the Holy Synod. The Synod of the ErOC was subsequently rendered subservient to the dictates of this lay government-appointee. What followed was the arrest of the Church's four prominent clergies in November 2004, the defrocking of scores of others from their clerical responsibilities, and intimidation of the rest in 2005.

One particular Orthodox Church in Asmara where three well known priests (Fr. Ghebre Medhin Ghebre-Giorgis, Fr. Dr. Fitsum Ghebre-negus, Fr. Dr. Tekleab Mengisteab) served, the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church, became the first target. Even before the April 2002 decree, it had been closed off and on. The three priests mentioned above were all arrested on November 24, 2004. They remain in prison without being charged with any crime. As the government was tightening its grip, it became the first church of any faith community to be entirely closed and many of its adherents imprisoned. The government took this action because the church was attracting thousands of young people.

The Further Tightening of the Government's Grip

His Holiness Abune Antonios, the eighty-eight-year-old Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, soon found himself on a collision course with the Government of Eritrea and its hatchet-man in the Church, Yoftahe Dimetros. Abune Antonios voiced opposition to all government interferences in the church, the imprisonment of clergymen, and the closing of churches. He took an uncompromising and principled stand to maintain the integrity and independence of the church.

In the eyes of the totalitarian regime, such defiance is never tolerated. Dimetros who, on behalf of the government, managed to wrest complete control of the

Patriarch Abune Antonios at the consecration of a priest of his church. Soon after his election as Head of the church, conflicts with the government began.



church through intimidation and arrests, and with the acquiescence of members of the synod, orchestrated the gradual and illegal de-enthronement of the Patriarch. In January 2005, he sent out a circular letter to all the dioceses of the church that Patriarch Antonios was relieved of the day-to-day administrative responsibilities of the church. As a prelude to a total purge of potential opponents within the church, the Prelate was put under a stringent house-arrest. He was denied all access to visitors. His telephone line was disconnected. The isolation to which he was subjected was so severe that even physicians could not attend to him for the treatment of his diabetes. This remains the condition of his imprisonment to this date. On March 14, 2006, the patriarch's secretary, Merigeta Yitbarek Berhe, was arrested. He remains in prison without charges.

Following a relentless campaign of character assassination against the patriarch by the Government of Eritrea, in May, 2006 the Synod, by this time under full control of the regime, was forced to elevate a pliant bishop to the throne of the patriarchate. The arrest of the Patriarch, and replacing him in the manner it happened, has created the most significant canonical crisis in the history of the ErOC. As a result, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, which is both the mother- and sister-church, denounced this illegal action by the government and promptly severed all relationships with the ErOC. The ErOC has thus become isolated from all its sisterly Oriental Orthodox Churches. Most recently, even the Ecumenical Council of Churches has denounced the Government of Eritrea for its continued imprisonment of the canonical patriarch.

The Persecution of the Eritrean Church Goes Global

The actions of the Eritrean government against the ErOC was condemned by the Council of Clergies of the North America Diocese in a unanimous vote taken as far back as August 1, 2005. When it became apparent that the government was planning to replace the canonical patriarch, the same diocese released statements that it would recognize no other person as a legitimate patriarch of the ErOC other than Abune Antonios. The North America Diocese has since expanded to include the Dioceses of Europe and the Middle East. Largely because of the work of these dioceses abroad and a growing similar sentiment within the country, His Holiness Abune Antonios has attained the status of the spiritual father of all Eritreans, irrespective of their confessional affiliations.

As the only organized bodies that have consistently resisted the government's interference in the affairs of the church, the arrest of their patriarch and clergies, the forcible conscription of the clergies into the army, as well as many other hostile actions, the dioceses in Diaspora have been targeted by the Eritrean government. No other Eritrean religious group or leaders in the Diaspora have been subjected to so much hostile acts. Consequently, all clergies of the ErOC abroad who have opposed the government's hostile actions against the church have been declared enemies of the state.

In an Open Letter, published on October 19, 2011 to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Diocese's Director of External Affairs stated the following: "Although no one who holds a contrary view is ever tolerated, the initial targets of the Government of Eritrea were four distinguished clergies of the Church in North America who wield immense influence in their respective communities and beyond. These priests and the large parishes they lead have taken an unwavering stand with which the Government of Eritrea is displeased. The names of these leaders are: The Rev. (Archpriest)

<http://theorthodoxchurch.info>



It is said this photo of the Patriarch taken secretly by a cell phone is from the end of 2013. After that he is assumed to be under house arrest somewhere in the capital city of Asmara. The photo was distributed by the OCP Media Network, a US-based information service of orthodox churches.

Ghebre-mikael Yohannes of Atlanta, Georgia, the Rev. Kesete Ghebre-Mikael of Seattle, Washington and two prominent priests in Washington DC, the Revs. Woldensae Berhane and Rev. Tesfom Gezae.”

The Government of Eritrea uses all its embassies and consular offices throughout the world for the purpose of intimidating clergies of the ErOC and lay-people. The government’s work of harassment and intimidation in each local Eritrean community is carried out by the organized members of the ruling party that operate through instructions that come directly from the embassies of Eritrea. In this context, it is important to mention two letters that were sent out by the Eritrean Embassy in the United State on August 9 and 25, 2005, respectively, addressed to all chapters of the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party in Eritrea. Both letters instructing their party members (cells) in every community to take over local Orthodox parishes, if possible; and if not, to undertake their “political work” in their local parishes. In the year that followed, these cells of the ruling party managed to take control of many parishes throughout the United States.

The NGO *InChainsforChrist.org* – *Voice of the Persecuted Church in Eritrea* refers to another incident: “On September 30th and again on October 7th, 2007, the Eritrean Embassy in the United States of America had a statement in Tigrigna [the main language spoken in Eritrea] read on Voice of Eritrea (VoE.). VoE has time slots in the city of Decatur, a Georgia-registered radio station broadcasting at 1420 KHZ. These broadcasts clearly state that the message came out of the Embassy of Eritrea in Washington. Through its embassy in DC, the Eritrean regime is giving directives to one group of Eritreans to deny the religious rights of another group of Eritreans some of whom are no doubt Eritrean-Americans. It is encouraging one group of Eritreans to take control of the religious assets of an institution which, no doubt, is registered and, therefore, an American institution. It is threatening and presenting ultimatums to priests who are either legal residents or citizens of the United States, who refuse to comply with its ultimatums and it is inciting others to be its proxy enforcers.

The broadcast named the aforementioned clerics, casting aspersions on their good names, fabricating lies about them, and calling on the local followers of the ruling party to take over these parishes, by force if necessary. There are documents from the embassy, which have become public, that were sent to the ruling party’s cells throughout the United States instructing them to join these parishes and then utilize their membership as a ticket for propagating the party

line. These documents, emanating from the same den of iniquities, provide the operatives in the secret cells with talking points and outright lies that they could use in their campaign to discredit priests who the Government of Eritrea did not approve of. It is instructive to note that this broadcast and the vicious attacks on the priests were timed to coincide with the election of the officers of the particular parish in Atlanta. It was designed to intimidate the people to electing candidates favoured by the government.

On February 2 and again on February 9, 2008, a similar weekly radio program was broadcast by the Eritrean Embassy at WUST, 1120 kHz. This weekly program targets the large Diaspora community in the greater Washington DC area. On these particular days, the program from the embassy aired a venomous attack on the parish of the Medhane-Alem Eritrean Orthodox Church and its priests. Strangely enough, this radio broadcast also was designed to coincide with a periodic election for the officers of the church scheduled to take place on February 10, 2008. Although the election went on without a hitch, the action of the Eritrean Embassy defies all normative behaviour of a diplomatic office.”¹

Mandatory Conscription of Orthodox Clergies into the Military

The most hostile action of the Government of Eritrea took place in summer 2005 following a circular that was sent out by the government on July 4th. The circular announced that all clergies of the church, including monastics, under the age of forty are obliged to perform military training. This forcible conscription into the army of deacons, priests and monks in their thousands was no doubt designed to deprive the Orthodox Church of any future servants and leaders. This posed a dilemma to thousands of people affected by the order. *InChainsforChrist.org* reported at the time: “Since the Eritrean Government revoked the exemption of all Orthodox clergy (priests, deacons and monks) from military service and ordered their conscription in July 2005, over 1400 known Orthodox priests and deacons have been forced into the military.”

Considering the fact that refusal to do so would bring the wrath of the dictatorial regime upon them, hundreds of clergies and monks decided to leave the country instead. At first, just a few scores, but by 2010 and since, the number of clergy who have chosen to flee the country and take refuge in other countries rather than serve in the military has risen to thousands. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Orthodox believers of all ages – but mostly the young – have also been taking similar steps. This continuing exodus of mostly Orthodox Chris-

tians and their clergy has put the church in the most critical danger since its founding in the early fourth century. InChainsforChrist.org also published an article in October 2011. It was entitled: “Eritrean Orthodox Churches are closing at an alarming rate.” This trend of churches closing because of the dearth of priests continues to accelerate, thus jeopardizing the future of the church. It is not difficult to surmise that this policy of the government towards the Orthodox clergy is designed to weaken and finally render the ErOC irrelevant.“

Conclusion

From its very moment of inception in the very early years of the 1970s, the ideological underpinning of the ruling regime in Eritrea has been one of extreme Marxist-Leninist. This being the case, its views on religion in general was shaped by a communist ideology that purported to eradicate religion and create an atheistic society. Although the regime seems to have outwardly shed this anachronistic position of “eradicating religion” from the Eritrean society, it is clear that its hostility to religion remains unaltered.

In April, 2002, the government officially closed down very small evangelical denominations and sects. Owing to its size and influence, the process of destroying the ErOC, however, has been a longer term project, very deliberate and systematic. It has so far succeeded in taking total control of the Holy Synod, imprison its canonical patriarch and replacing the pontiff with a pliant bishop who does the government’s bidding. Around the city of Asmara alone, over sixty priests have been put out of the church for being suspected of sympathizing with the canonical patriarch. Many more remain imprisoned. In total departure from the past practices and the canons of the church, the exemption of clergies in the military has been revoked. Consequently, it is estimated that over 800 priests and deacons were forcibly conscripted in the army. Because a much larger number of the clergy were opposed to serving in the military, they have chosen exile and fled the country. As a consequence, a large number of parishes now remain without priests and deacons. The implementation of the PFDJ’s plan to systematically and efficiently destroy the ErOC, the largest and most ancient institution within Eritrea, thus continues unabated.

The international community has a critical role to play in stopping the Government of Eritrea from destroying the ErOC through demanding for the following actions. Although the fate of the ErOC is inextricably tied to the fate of the nation’s deep political crisis and the oppression of the people by the ruling regime,

the call for the release of H.H. Abune Antonios and his return to his patriarchal throne should be given its urgency. The large number of priests, monks and lay people that have now been languishing in prison for so long without ever being brought to court must be released. The age-old tradition of exemption of clergies from serving in the so called “national service” – meaning’ the military – must be restored. The government of Eritrea must cease its total control of and interference in the affairs of the ErOC.

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1 <http://www.inchainsforchrist.org>

The Missing Patriarch – A Church Whodunit

His Holiness Abune Antonios is the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The regime deposed him in 2005 and placed him under house arrest. Over his whereabouts and state of health nothing is known.

Patriarch Antonios was born in 1927 in the town of Hemberti north of Asmara in the Hamasien province. His father was a priest, and already at the age of five Antonios entered the monastery of Debre Tsege Abuna Andrews, where he was brought up for service in the church. At twelve years he became a deacon. He took his monk's vows in 1942 at the age of 15, and in 1955 he was elected abbot.

When the Eritrean Orthodox Church split from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church after Eritrean independence in 1993, he was one of the five abbots who were sent to Egypt to be ordained bishop. The new church needed bishops, with which to form its own synod. On June 19, 1994 he was consecrated as Bishop Antonios of Hamasien-Asmara in the St Mark Cathedral in Cairo, by the then Coptic Pope Schenuda III. When Abune Yacoub, the second Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church died in 2003, the church members and the Synod of Bishops unanimously elected Bishop Antonios as the new Patriarch. He was enthroned in Asmara by Pope Schenuda on April 23, 2003.

Problems with the regime, which was interfering more and more in religious affairs, increased. Patriarch Antonios made no secret of his opposition. In particular, he refused to accept instructions from Yeftehe Dimetros, who had been set in place as General Administrator of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by the government. In January 2005, the message of the Patriarch on the occasion of the orthodox Christmas was neither carried on television nor broadcast on radio. The Synod of the church, whose membership had partially been co-opted by the regime, decided at their sitting in August 2005, that the Patriarch should be stripped of all executive powers. Among the accusations which were levelled against the Patriarch was his resistance against the demanded excommunication of 3,000 members of the Medhane Alem Church in Asmara, who were much loved for their successful Sunday School work especially with young people. He was also accused of pressing the regime for the release of Christians who

had been accused of treason. Rumours were spread that Abune Antonios had offended against good morals, and had beaten up a nun. However, he was permitted to continue to fulfil his role in church services; regarding the administrative affairs of the church he should henceforth no longer meddle therein.

Initially the government denied that the Patriarch had been deposed and pointed out that he continued to perform various ceremonial duties. But while Abune Antonios remained practically under house arrest at his residence in Asmara, a delegation travelled on July 25, 2005 to Egypt, in order to bring Pope Schenuda on their side, and formally depose the Patriarch and replace him with someone new. The Coptic pope however refused, and invoked prevailing canon law.

On January 13, 2006 the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Church met at a secret sitting in Asmara, and formally relieved the Patriarch of his office. His detention was tightened, in order to be sure that he had no more contact with anyone. On January 20, 2007, two priests, accompanied by three security personnel of the government, entered the residence of the Patriarch and confiscated his personal episcopal insignia.

On May 27, 2007 the government set up Bishop Dioskoros of Mendefera as anti-Patriarch, thereby breaking the church constitution and canonical law. On the same day Abune Antonios was fetched from his residence in the wee hours of the morning and taken to an unknown location. The Patriarch suffers from severe diabetes. The condition of his health was assessed as of grave concern in 2012. The Eritrean government does not release information about his current state of health.

The regime-faithful Abune Dioskoros was not recognised as legitimate Patriarch by the other orthodox churches. In October 2014 the Union of Eritrean Monasteries published a decree in which Dioskoros was excommunicated. Dioskoros died on 21 December 2015. Concerning the Patriarch Abune Antonios the regime doesn't give any information whether he is still alive and under which conditions he lives.

Katja Dorothea Buck

The Last Letter of The Patriarch

Two days after the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Church had dethroned the Patriarch in a secret session and under questionable circumstances His Holiness Abune Antonios answered in a letter on January 15, 2006. It is the last letter of the Patriarch which has been published. But it had no consequences at all. Abune Antonios is being held for years at an undisclosed location. For the oriental sister churches outside of Eritrea and for many Eritreans he is still the only legitimate Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

To: Your Grace Archbishops, Bishops, Episcopos, Members of the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

I send you my spiritual greetings. Also, I acknowledge receipt of your letter, dated January 13, 2006 informing me that you have removed me from my position as the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church.

The grave action that you have taken is illegal as it is in total contravention of the Constitution of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, the Canon of the Church, the guidelines enumerated in the *Didascalia*, the *fit'ha negest* (*Law of the Kings*), and the writings of St Clement. According to the above, which are the legal foundations of our church, a Patriarch, once consecrated, can be removed only under the following three specific circumstances:

- (1) grave moral failure, such as adultery
- (2) falling into heresy, or
- (3) physical and/or mental infirmity.

In this case, the false accusations that you have raised against me, and used for my illegal removal, are neither within the bounds of the legal framework of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, nor substantive enough to merit the slightest consideration. The reasons for your actions can not be the result of your ignorance of the Canon of the church; it is rather because you have become a law

unto yourselves. There is one thing that you need to be reminded of: No one can be above the law. Whosoever tries to trample the law underfoot will himself end up being trampled over by the law. This is a veritable truth.

Even if, in the very unlikely event, you were able to raise legitimate grievances against me, is it not proper for the accused to face his accusers, be presented with the accusations in a formal and properly constituted church tribunal, and the accused given the right to defend himself? Instead, you have appointed yourselves – the very accusers – jury and judges in order to accomplish your sordid plans. Your accusations are all baseless. For this illegal act of yours, the first in the long history of our apostolic faith and tradition, therefore, the Canon and the Constitution of our church will judge you.

This one fact remains unchallenged. What has propelled you into such a deplorable act, without regard to the life of our Church, is my longstanding belief and vehement stand that it is illegal and unacceptable for Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros, a layperson of absolutely no clerical credentials, to become the highest administrator of our Church.

Considering the grave danger into which you have put our Church, a council consisting of all the abbots of the monasteries and the learned men (*liqawnti*) of

our Church should immediately convene, in front of whom I will respond to your accusation. Furthermore, the traditions of our sisterly Oriental Churches and the relevant articles in the *fit'ha negest* (*Law of the Kings*), and the Canon of the church clearly state that if an accusation is brought up against a patriarch of one church, another patriarch from a sisterly Oriental Orthodox church has to sit in the adjudication of the matter. A patriarch cannot be removed unless these preconditions are met. In ignoring such important procedures, you have, of course, rendered any decision you have made against me totally invalid.

Since the matter has now come to a head, I hereby appeal my case to:

- (1) the Council of the Monasteries of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and
- (2) The Egyptian Orthodox Church through which we have received our apostolic mandate.

There is no doubt that the person who is orchestrating all that has transpired behind the scene is Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros. Therefore, in consideration of all the above; pending the above mentioned appeal; and until the matter is adjudicated legally and in accordance with the Canon and traditions of our Church; and, as the duly consecrated Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, and with the consequent power that is vested in me, I hereby issue the following binding injunctions:

I order you, in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to desist from

- (1) Anointing a Patriarch
- (2) Consecrating bishops, episcopos, or ordain priests and deacons.
- (3) Furthermore, since the person responsible for the confusion in

our Church is none other than Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros, he is hereby excommunicated, and should immediately vacate the position he holds in our church as the chief administrator.

- (4) Fr. Habtom Russom, deputy secretary of the Synod, has been engaged in an illegal and malicious campaign against the person and authority of the patriarch. Hence, from January 14, 2006 on he is to be considered excommunicated. Consequently, he is to desist from any clerical activities either as a deacon or as a priest.
- (5) On the basis of the above, I implore Abune Dioscoros to refrain from your negative activities.

May God grant his peace to our Church
May God bless our Country, Eritrea .

Official seal and His Holiness' signature

cc:

Department of Religious Affairs of the Government of Eritrea

All the monasteries of our Church

Council of the Learned Men (*liqawnti*) of the Orthodox Church

Department of Censorship

All the Orthodox Tewahdo Churches of Asmara

All the dioceses, including the Diocese of Asmara

All the Oriental Orthodox Churches

Fr. Habtom Russom

Debre M'ewan Abune Aregawi Church, Asmara

The Only Voice of the People

With their pastoral letter, published in May 2014, the Catholic bishops have taken great risks. In a repressive Eritrea such voices are very rare. “Their critical words therefore are taken seriously far beyond the bounds of Catholic parishes”, says Hans-Peter Hecking, desk officer for East African countries at the Pontifical Mission Society, Missio.

Does it often happen that the Catholic church in Eritrea speaks out so explicitly?

In the past years the Catholic bishops have very clearly spoken out in an entire series of pastoral letters on the happenings in their country. I could name around ten such missives. Along with the pastoral dimension they are also concerned about calling the political and social grievances in Eritrea by name, insisting on the compliance of law and social justice, and demanding broad public participation in the political decision-making process. Already in July 1991, shortly after the victory over the Ethiopian regime, they addressed themselves in a message of peace to the Catholic population and to “all people of good will” in the country.

In April 1993, before the referendum on independence, they called among other things for a free and safe vote as well as the building of a state based on the rule of law. In an urgent appeal for peace in spring 2000 they demanded an ending of the „useless slaughter“ in the border war with Ethiopia. Under the title “God loves this Country“ on the tenth anniversary of the independence victory, the bishops honoured the rebuilding capacity of their people after all the destruction of war and the catastrophes of drought, only then with very outspoken words to espouse the building of a just and pluralistic society in which human rights are protected.

In this letter they explicitly name the right to religious freedom, the right to freedom of expression and of the press, and they demand the preparation of democratic elections, the adoption of a fair constitution, the removal of corrupt structures, and a fight against inflation. In a separate chapter they concentrate on the equality and dignity of the woman within the family and society. Since the publication of this pastoral letter, up to today, the leadership of the state refuses personal meetings or official dialogue with the Catholic bishops. In 2007,

they turned directly in a public letter to the President of the state and urged the free exercise of religion without state interference in the internal affairs of the church. The courageous pastoral letter of May 2014 is therefore in line with many previous pronouncements of the bishops.

How was the letter received in Eritrea?

One hasn't heard much either from the political opposition abroad or domestically or from other religious representatives in the country. The Orthodox church had for years been brought into line politically. The Catholic bishops have practically become the only voice of the repressed people of Eritrea. They keep the spark of hope for a better future alive in the people. Their critical words therefore are taken seriously far beyond the bounds of Catholic parishes.

Was there an international reaction to the bishops' letter?

The pastoral letter and its contents were reported on in newspapers worldwide. Through it the background to the mass flight from the country and also to the

Veronique Durruty/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images



St. Joseph's Cathedral in Asmara was built during the Italian colonial period and consecrated in 1922.

frightful refugee tragedy of Lampedusa in October 2013 was made more understandable for many readers. Official reactions from politicians in and out of Eritrea are not known to me; though I would hope for such. In the commentary on the internet sites of some Eritrean opposition groups, the bishops' letter was described as the most courageous statement that was ever released within Eritrea.

To what risks do the bishops open themselves with this official missive?

That is hard to say, because the Afewerki regime is ultimately unpredictable. I think that more important to the bishops themselves is the question of what reprisals could happen to their congregations in the country because of their letter. That the regime is not squeamish can be seen from the expulsion of men and women missionaries some years ago, who virtually had to leave the land harum-scarum. The fact that none of the Eritrean bishops took part in the important regional East African Episcopal Conference in Lilongwe/Malawi in July 2014 shows that they gave priority to being with their people, in the tense times after the release of the document. Because of the unpredictability of the regime they must also have feared that re-entry into their country would have been denied to them.

What role does the Catholic church play in Eritrea as a whole?

The Catholic church in Eritrea, with its four dioceses (eparchies) follows the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox rite. It is a comparatively small religious minority with around 120,000 believers. In the society however it plays a far greater service provider role in the social and charity sector than its small number of faithful would lead you to imagine. It is especially the male and female religious orders and local religious congregations who are active in these fields in the service of the poor. A clear elevation and thereby more internal room to manoeuvre was received by the Catholic church through the decision of the Vatican in January 2015 to establish Eritrea as its own church province, with Asmara as the Archdiocese, and Keren, Barentu and Segheneity as the three belonging suffragan dioceses. Up until then, the Eritrean bishops had formed a cross-border Joint Conference of Bishops with the bishops in Ethiopia, but in light of the existing political tensions and because of the closed borders between both lands, such a structure no longer functioned.

Interview Katja Dorothea Buck.

“Where is Your Brother?”

On May 25, 2014 when Eritrea celebrated its 21 years of independence, the four Catholic bishops of the country published a letter to the Eritrean population. In it they wonder why so many compatriots take a perilous escape.

„The people would not be forced to leave our country, if the living conditions would be better,“ write the Bishops of Segeneiti, Asmara, Keren and Barentu in the 36-page letter, which is entitled with God’s question to Cain in the Old Testament: „Where is your brother?“ They remind the shipwreck of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013 in which around 400 refugees mostly originating from Eritrea drowned near to the coast of the Italian island. In Eritrea itself the tragedy had terrified people. The bishops state soberly. „The environment in which we live worsens the situation rather than it finds solutions in order to preserve us from similar disasters as of Lampedusa. Therefore, the question of the fate of our brothers prevents us from sleeping.“

In the letter, the bishops speak of all the major challenges which the country is facing: the low level of education; the lack of law; the economic misery; and the disasters which happens to young people when they try to escape the situation at home and take a long way through the desert or on the sea. They also speak about the pro-

blems that people in the country face. For the bishops the most important point is the disintegration of families. Family members are forced to live separately from one another, be it because of the long time in the national service, be it because they are in prison or in labor camps. Often the elderly people are left alone, because no-one can take care of them. „All this leads to a desperate situation in our country.“

The bishops also denounce the lack of freedom in Eritrea. Therefore, the young people flee „to peaceful countries, to countries where justice prevails, where they can find work, where one can speak out loudly his opinion, in countries where one can earn a living.“ They conclude: „We wouldn’t search for the country of milk and honey, if we already lived there.“ Furthermore, the bishops call for the respect of human rights of prisoners: „All those who are arrested must first and foremost be treated as human beings and should then, based on the charges against them, attend personally in an ordinary court.“

“We are Deeply Concerned”

In response to the letter of the Catholic Bishops in Eritrea, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has issued a statement on the situation of human rights in Eritrea on July 8, 2014 where it states:

Over the past years, the ecumenical family has received various accounts of the deteriorating state of human rights in Eritrea and on-going reports of serious violations of human rights by the Eritrean authorities against their own population, as well as the alarming number of civilians, especially youth, fleeing Eritrea as a result of these violations.

There is a high level of lack of freedom in the country, aggravated by the arbitrary arrest and detention, including enforced disappearances and *incommunicado* detention of persons for suspected infractions being perceived as critical of the government.

Media is state-owned and does not leave any room for independent media. There is no independent judiciary, and individuals are detained without any due process. There are no political parties, nor any unions to protect workers' rights. There is no right of association, or to demonstrate peacefully. No public meetings are allowed. No human rights defenders are allowed to operate within Eritrea; and most NGOs have been expelled from the country. As a result of drought and famine, food is rationed and controlled by the government.

There is no religious liberty. Authorities have stripped the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch of his ecclesiastical authority and have placed him under house arrest since 2005, after he protested against the detention in November 2004 of three Orthodox Priests from Medhane Alem Church.



We have all sadly witnessed the death of more than 300 Eritreans in October 2013 during the Lampedusa boat tragedy. Indeed, many Eritrean refugees – both women and men – who seek to avoid forced military conscription are fleeing their country in search for a sanctuary, often at the peril of their own lives.

Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have fled their country to seek sanctuary in neighbouring Ethiopia and Sudan, often at great personal risk. In their journey to a better and safer place, many of them have become easy targets for traffickers, and consequently face horrifying experiences, such as torture, being held hostage against a ransom, or routine rape for women and girls. For those who take the northern route through Egypt to reach Israel, they often end up being captured by Bedouin traffickers in the Sinai desert and are daily abused and tortured while family and friends are repeatedly pressured with exorbitant ransom requests.



WCC Secretary-General Olav Fykse Tveit and chairman of WCC Central Committee, Agnes Abuom, at a press conference during the meeting in July 2014 in Geneva.

In view of these harsh realities in the country, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea issued a pastoral letter on 25 May 2014 which has been fully endorsed by the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the Diaspora.

The central committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 2-8 July 2014, therefore:

Expresses deep concern over the degrading state of human rights in Eritrea and the impact on the lives of thousands of innocent Eritreans;

Commends the initiative taken by the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea for letting the world know the existing realities and the consequent tragedies;

Calls on member churches of the World Council of Churches in neighbouring countries and beyond to cooperate in dealing with issues of human trafficking in the Sinai desert that is costing the lives of many innocent persons daily;

Stands in solidarity with His Holiness Patriarch Antonios and his ideals of non-political interference in church affairs;

Appeals to the government of Eritrea to immediately release His Holiness Patriarch Antonios from house arrest and allow him to travel freely;

Calls on the Government of Eritrea to treat prisoners with dignity and to assure that they are given fair trials;

Expresses grave concern about the arbitrary arrest and detention, including forced disappearances and incommunicado detention of persons for suspected infractions being perceived as critical of the government;

Urges the government to adhere to the obligations of Eritrea under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Religious Persecution in Eritrea and the Role of the European Union

In its short post-independence history, Eritrea has seen egregious violations of human rights, including systematic and widespread religious persecution. However, the European Union (EU) continues to support the Eritrean government with significant amount of funds as “development aid.”

This continued support to one of the world’s most ruthless dictatorships raises serious questions, and makes the case that the EU is in violation of its own laws by providing this support. The EU is obliged by its treaty obligation to make sure that its policy towards Eritrea is compliant with its commitments to the protection of human rights in Eritrea and elsewhere.

Major instances of religious persecution

Eritrea is a multi-lingual and multi-religious country. It has been known for many centuries as a hub of religious tolerance. However, since the early years of independence, there has been disturbing trends of religious persecution. The crisis reached its climax in 2002, when the Eritrean government ordered by an executive decree the closure of all but the following religious groups: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation.¹ According to the 2002 executive decree several religious institutions, including those which have been active for many years, have been arbitrarily ordered to close.

The earliest and most cited case of religious persecution since 1991 is that of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The incident dates back to 1993, when Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to vote in the referendum for national independence and participate in the National Military Service Programme (NMSP) on religious grounds. The “punishment” for this was harsh. By an executive order issued by the state president on 25 October 1994 Jehovah’s Witnesses were prohibited from employment in the public sector, refused to engage in any commercial enterprise and deprived of the right to obtain relevant documentation such as national and

identity papers. The executive order was not only morally abhorrent but also legally repugnant. As far as refusal to vote in the national referendum is concerned, there is no clearly defined Eritrean law upon which the punishment can be based. However, the law which introduced the NMSP has set clearly defined punitive provisions for those who refuse to comply with the requirements of the NMSP. The punishment is two years imprisonment or a fine of Nakfa 3000, or both,² without prejudice to graver penalties provided by the Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea. None of the punitive prescriptions in the executive order are based on law.

Amnesty International reports that as a result of the executive decree several Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to arbitrary detention, some 250 families have fled the country and sought asylum elsewhere, 100 families have been dismissed from government employment, and at least 36 families have been evicted from their homes.³ A very important point in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses is that they did not reject non-military alternatives to the requirements of the NMSP. According to Amnesty International, the NMSP does not comply with international standards and best practices on the right to conscientious objection to military service, especially those based on one's religious, moral or ethical conviction. The law also does not offer alternatives for those who refuse to do military training on the basis of their beliefs. This, by itself, is a flagrant violation of international standards and best practices on conscientious objection.

Some Eritrean Muslims have also suffered persecution in the early years of independence. Some instances are difficult to portray as examples of religious persecution, because they involve other persecutory factors. One important example in this regard is an incident reported by Amnesty International as having taken place on 5 December 1994. Government forces arrested hundreds of young Muslim teachers who were reportedly extra-judicially executed in May 1997.⁴ There is a stark similarity between the report of Amnesty International and what some writers call "the Dirfo Massacre," an incident that allegedly took place in June 1997 in a place known as Dirfo.⁵ As reported by Awate Team, the incident involves the extra-judicial execution of some 150 Eritrean Muslims by Eritrean security forces operating under orders given by the chief of National Security, Brigadier General Abraha Kassa and the state president.⁶

The Dirfo Massacre can be described as one of the most shocking en masse killings in post-independence Eritrea. One possible reason behind the Dirfo Mas-

sacre is the perceived allegiance of the victims with some armed opposition groups operating from neighbouring country, Sudan. In this regard, Amnesty International reports that Muslims, especially in the western areas bordering Sudan, have often been suspected of having links with armed opposition organisations supported by “Sudan’s National Islamic Front government and the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood.”⁷ In post-independence armed rebellion, the most visible and earliest opposition came from groups led by Islamist leaders primarily based in Sudan. The consequence was that the government associates any outspoken Muslim Eritreans with the Sudan-based armed opposition groups. As a result, some members of those communities have been viewed suspiciously by the government and therefore treated harshly. The fact that all victims of the Dirfo Massacre were Muslims could mean that the violation also involved the element of religious persecution. Perhaps another clear case of religious persecution against Eritrean Muslims is that which took place in September 2004. The incident involved the arrest of a dozen Muslim students belonging to a new Islamic religious tendency, known as Wahhabism. Amnesty International recognises the believers as victims of incommunicado detention because their whereabouts have remained unknown.⁸ Compared to the persecution of Christian minority groups, the persecution of Wahhabis or other Islamic groups remains a hitherto under-researched area.

Relatively, the most publicised aspect of religious persecution in Eritrea is that of minority Christian groups. These groups are interchangeably referred to as evangelical or protestant Pentecostals. Introduced to Eritrea in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Eritrean Pentecostal movement flourished considerably in the mid-1990s, with an ever-increasing momentum in the aftermath of the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict. Kifleyesus observes that in different historical contexts, Pentecostalism proved to be responsive to the predicament of Eritreans and its increasing influence is owed to this particular feature.⁹ In deciphering the hostility of the Eritrean government towards Pentecostals, it is important to understand how the growth of this movement is perceived by non-Pentecostals.

Two elements of the growing Pentecostal movement are apparently in contradiction with the established political culture of the Eritrean government. These are: (1) the fact that conversion to Pentecostalism takes place in the context of a conscious break with traditional practices and, (2) the growing number of Eritrea’s middle class attracted by the movement.¹⁰ From the viewpoint of the political elite, a conscious break from the status quo is seen as a serious threat to

its continued political hegemony. This has the potential of breeding dissent and spreading discontent within the larger Eritrean society and hence considered incompatible with the political ideology of the ruling elite. As noted by Kifleyesus, the growing attraction of Pentecostalism among Eritrea's middle class is also resented by traditional Eritrean Christian churches.¹¹

The government's ambivalence to religion dates back to the liberation struggle era, which is also strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist tendency. This is evident, for example, from the statement of an army commander given in relation to a punishment meted out against a member of a Pentecostal movement: "Like in North Korea, this type of religion should never be allowed to spread in our country because this is a religion of the CIA and accordingly no one should be allowed to read and preach the Bible."¹² The victim who narrated this story was detained in a prison cell around Keren. In a very small room, he said, 45 people were detained for several months. The place was full of lice and mice. Prisoners were not provided with adequate food and there was no medical treatment whatsoever. This underscores that religious persecution is perpetrated as a premeditated government policy focusing on certain categories of people. As a result, thousands of Eritreans have been victimized in different types violations on the sole of ground of their religious belief.

The role of the EU in tackling religious persecution

The EU is a global actor in development cooperation, particularly via its partnership agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States. Eritrea receives considerable amount of funds from the EU in the form of development aid. This triggers legitimate concerns, particularly when there are no effective mechanisms for democratic accountability. Aside from religious persecution, Eritrea is also a country known for its sad record of human rights violations, epitomized by the establishment of a UN Commission of Inquiry on 27 June 2014. In the face of such alarming levels of human rights violations, EU's development aid with Eritrea may contradicts its own commitments with regard to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

As with other developing countries, EU's cooperation with Eritrea is believed to be anchored on the attainment of sustainable development and poverty alleviation, as clearly recognised in article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Poverty alleviation is hardly achievable in an environment which is unfriendly to good governance, democratic accountability

and respect for the rule of law, as is the case in Eritrea. The EU's position in this regard needs to be scrutinised in terms of specific treaty obligations emanating from its founding documents and the relevant provisions of EU law which govern its foreign relations.

EU development cooperation is defined by article 208 of the TFEU, which obliges the EU to design its development cooperation "within the framework of the principles and objectives" of its external action. EU's principles and objectives of external action are defined in article 21(1) of the Treaty of the European Union as values which promote the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, including respect to the UN Charter and international law. In spite of publicly available and overwhelming evidence of human rights violations in Eritrea, the EU is involved in an engagement with the Eritrean government, which is in violation of the standards stipulated by relevant EU law. This is particularly evident from the continued flow of funds from the EU to Eritrea in the name of "development aid." Funds are provided in agreement with, and aimed at directly supporting, the Eritrean government. The EU could therefore be regarded as condoning violations of international law by the Eritrean government and as complicit with its human rights violations.

The legality of the bilateral agreement between the EU and the Government of Eritrea has been questioned by the European Parliament which recommends the establishment of a specific monitoring entity. The European Parliament also recommends for an increased attention to freedom of religion in agreements and cooperation with third countries and compliance with article 17 of TFEU.¹³ In light of this, EU cooperation with Eritrea should take religious persecution and other instances of human rights violations in Eritrea into consideration. It appears that in the Eritrean case, the EU has not clearly articulated the objectives of its development agenda. Its engagement fails to fulfil essential criteria for good governance, democratic accountability and respect for human rights.

Concluding remarks

More than two decades after its independence, Eritrea is yet to offer its people the promises of national independence one of which is respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The country has become one of the worst places for religious freedom. In spite of such a disheartening record, the country is also one of the main beneficiaries of EU's development aid. This runs counter to the guiding principles and objectives of the EU. Seen against its binding

treaty obligations, the continued engagement of the EU with the Eritrean government is morally and legally unacceptable. The importance attached by the EU to religious freedom as a fundamental human right is clearly contrary to the sustenance of cooperation with the Eritrean government. As an alternative, EU institutions could consider starting a dialogue with credible non-state actors, most of whose representatives are now in exile. EU development cooperation with Eritrea needs to be aligned with the real challenges of Eritrea.

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- 1 Amnesty International, Eritrea: Religious Persecution, AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005, p. 1.
- 2 Articles 20 and 37 of Proclamations No 11/1991 and 82/1995, respectively.
- 3 Amnesty International 2005, p. 7.
- 4 Amnesty International 2005, pp. 14-15.
- 5 Daniel R. Mekonnen, *Transitional Justice: Framing a Model for Eritrea* (Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing, 2009), p. 110. Other sources indicate that the place of massacre is Qushet, not Dirfo.
- 6 Awate Team, "The 'Executed': No Smoking Gun, but Plenty of Circumstantial Evidence," 13 March 2003, available at <http://www.awate.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi/11/1090>.
- 7 Amnesty International 2005, p. 14.
- 8 Amnesty International 2005, p. 15.
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The Very High Price of Press Freedom

Since 2001 Dawit Isaak has been detained in prison - and no one knows why. The Swedish-Eritrean journalist has never been indicted for anything. Reporters Without Borders is working since many years to get him and other journalists released.

I have never met Dawit Isaak. But I have come to work for him and think about him for over ten years. I have spent many late nights writing about him or on his behalf. Dawit Isaak is Swedish and Eritrean. His Swedish home town is also mine: Gothenburg. Dawit is my colleague but he is paying a very high price in the name of press freedom and liberty of expression. He is my colleague, but I never read him while he was employed by Setit, the biggest weekly in Eritrea.

Dawit has been imprisoned since 23 September 2001. He has never been charged with anything. He has never been sentenced for any crime. The Eritrean regime simply keeps him imprisoned. Even worse; he is not alone. Eritrea is Africa's largest prison for journalists. When I write this in January 2015 28 colleagues are incarcerated. Seven of the journalists who were arrested at the same time as Dawit have succumbed due to the harsh prison conditions: Dawit Habemichael, Mattewos Habteab, Sahle Tsegazab, Medhanie Haile, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, Said Abdulkader and Fessehayle Yohannes (aka Joshua) were also arrested in the government clampdown in September 2001. Only Dawit Isaak, Seyoum Tsehaye, Amanuel Asrat and Temesgen Gebreyesus are still alive of those imprisoned at that time. But we do not know for how much longer they will survive and we do not know in what state they are mentally and physically.

The regime doesn't care of the Eritrean law

The Eritrean regime breaks many international and national rules, agreements and laws by these imprisonments. According to Eritrean law a person must either be released or charged within 28 days after the arrest. In January 2015 Dawit and his three colleagues had spent close to 4900 days in prison and they have never been given the chance to stand a trial. According to international conventions and Eritrean law they have the right to legal counsel. The regime denies them this right.

About Dawit Isaak

Dawit Isaak was born on the 27 October 1964, in Asmara. He fled to Sweden in 1987, where he became a Swedish citizen in 1992. After Eritrea became independent in 1993, he returned to his homeland, where he worked as a journalist and founded the weekly paper, *Setit*.

On 23 September 2001, Dawit Isaak along with ten other journalists and eleven reformist politicians from the G-15 Group were arrested. Since then he has been held in solitary confinement.

In April 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that Dawit Isaak had been hospitalized because of torture. Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders and other NGOs have for years now been interceding for his release.

Since March 2009, the four largest Swedish daily papers, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Aftonbladet and Expressen have been leading a campaign to free him (www.freedawit.com). Actors and politicians have also joined the campaign. Every week Reporters Without Borders, the National Press Club and other organizations send a petition for Dawit Isaak's release to the Eritrean Embassy in Stockholm. Dawit Isaak is the only Swedish citizen who is being kept imprisoned for political reasons.

On 26 May 2009, in an interview with the Swedish television station TV4 about the Dawit case, the President of Eritrea declared: "There will be no court proceedings and we will also not free him. We know how

to deal with someone like that. Sweden is irrelevant to me. The Swedish government has nothing to do with us."

On 2 March 2007 Dawit Isaak was awarded the newly created Anna Politkovskaya memorial prize by the Swedish National Press Club. In November 2009 Dawit received the Tucholsky Prize from the Swedish section of PEN. The citation speech read: "The name Dawit Isaak has become, for the whole Swedish people, synonymous with



The Swedish section of Reporters Without Borders reports on their website about Dawit Isaak.

the struggle for freedom of speech and liberty of the press." The prize is normally awarded to writers who are persecuted in their own land, and therefore have to live in exile. In October 2011 Dawit Isaak was awarded the Golden Pen of Freedom Award by the World Association of Newspapers. His brother Esaia travelled to Vienna for the award ceremony to represent him. (kb)

Translation: Roxana Kawall

The prisoners are not allowed visits by family, priest, imam or even the International Red Cross which makes visits around the world even to prisons like Guantanamo Bay. And in the case of Swedish-Eritrean Dawit Isaak he is denied visits by Swedish diplomats.

The imprisoned journalists are kept at an undisclosed location. According to a prison guard who escaped in 2010 from the prison camp Eira Eiro at least Dawit Isaak was kept there then. The prisoners are held in total isolation and not even the guards are allowed to speak to them. They are locked up for 23 hours a day and manacled most of the time.

The regime is in breach of so many international and African conventions and Eritrean laws. Some examples:

- Eritrean Criminal Procedure Code
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
- Arusha Declaration
- Kampala Declaration
- Robben Island Guidelines
- UN Declaration on Prison Conditions
- UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

The regime in Asmara is brutal. It does not respect the basic human rights of its citizens. Yet in 2001 there was hope. In the morning when Dawit Isaak was arrested the two police officers who came for him up stayed for breakfast and when he left with them he told the family he would soon be back. He thought he would just be questioned. His family has told of how he came back in the afternoon just to pick up tooth brush and towel, still convinced that he wouldn't be away for a long time.

But that is the last they saw of him.

His twins were eight years old. His youngest daughter just three. Ever since they have had to grow up without their father. By now his twins are adults. His arrest was cruel not only to him but also to his family, to his children. Sometimes people ask what he had done to be arrested. What text he had written, that was out of line? It is perhaps natural to ask that if you are European and have grown up in societies with a free press, with elections and with political parties shifting power. That is not the case in Eritrea.



Press freedom for Eritrean journalists only exists abroad. Aaron Berhane escaped the imprisonment and fled to Canada. There he runs a website for the Eritrean exile community.

Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after a liberation struggle that had lasted for 30 years. In 1993 it became an independent state. By then Dawit Isaak was a Swedish citizen. He had fled to Sweden during the war. After the independence he returned to Eritrea like many others to start build the new nation. While in exile Dawit had published his first books and he was a well-known playwright. Back in Asmara he formed a children's theatre company. He married and his twins were born.

Failed Hopes

The new country began developing a constitution, there were political discussions, plans for holding elections and independent newspapers were started. The largest was the weekly Setit which was founded in 1997. The founders recruited Dawit to write for them, and before long he became a part-owner. Dawit wrote about cultural affairs, literature, but also about issues of land ownership and aids. And there were several papers in the young nation. Then, a new bloody war with Ethiopia 1998-2000 began. Tens of thousands died.

But even without the war Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki had begun tightening his grip on the country. He had led EPLF the strongest group during the

liberation war and became an interim president. After the war in 2000 some of his old companions from the liberation struggle began questioning why it took so long to adopt the constitution and hold elections. In 2001 a group of fifteen prominent members of the ruling party, ministers, generals and long-time political leaders wrote an open letter asking for peaceful and open dialogue asking the President to have meetings and discussions and speed up the democratic process. Setit like so many other papers wrote about this.

September 2001 was a fatal month in Eritrea. Just a week after 9/11, when the eyes of the world were focussed elsewhere, the President struck. All members from the group behind the open letter who were in Eritrea were arrested. All independent newspapers were closed. Dawit Isaak did not believe that this was more than something temporary. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

There was nothing wrong he – or any of the other journalists who were arrested – wrote. There was nothing wrong Setit – or any of the other newspapers – did. What happened was the result of a power hungry president and his close circle. They crushed the free press. They crushed the open debate. They halted any development towards democracy. The ruler in Asmara and his regime are responsible for so many thousands who are imprisoned for political reasons. They are responsible for all those thousands of Eritreans who flee their country despite the risk to be arrested, tortured, killed or to die. They are also responsible for three children in Gothenburg growing up without their father.

The regime is brutal. It says the Swedish Government is irrelevant in Dawit Isaak's case as for Asmara Dawit is only Eritrean. Sometimes it wants aid from the European Union. Sometimes not. Sometimes Eritrea wants to have good re-

Six Years in Prison

At the end of January 2015 six Eritrean journalists, who had been in jail since February 2009, were released. "We are delighted to learn of the release of these six journalists, which is an exceptional development in the terrible conditions prevailing in Eritrea", said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk. "At this point, we don't have additional information about the circumstances of their release or their state of health. We will obviously follow the situation closely."

The six journalists were arrested in February 2009 at Radio Bana, a small broadcaster in the center of the capital, which mainly provides education programs financed by the Ministry of Education. At that time, all 50 journalists of the station were arrested and taken to the Doboziro prison outside the capital. The regime didn't give any reason for this. (kb)

lations with the African Union. Sometimes not. This means it is hard to reach the ruler in Asmara.

In 2011 a writ for Habeas corpus was sent by courier to the High Court in Asmara by two Swedish jurists and Reporters without Borders' jurist in Paris. A second copy of the writ was handed over to the authorities in 2012 by the Office of the European Commission in Asmara. The Court, however will not even acknowledge they got the document. The jurists have therefore turned to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights which has decided to try the case. Hopefully there will be a decision later this year.

I have taken part in some of the Commission's meetings. In Luanda (Angola) in May 2014 it was striking to see how isolated the Eritrean delegation was. The Commission meetings are very open. Civil servants, diplomats – even ministers, mix with people from NGOs. There are so many discussions going on around coffee tables, in corridors, during evenings and early mornings. But in the four days I was there I never saw the two Eritrean delegates talk to anyone else except one man in a yellow suit. I do not know who he was. I approached the delegation during a coffee break to ask when they were going to take the floor and speak. “Why do you want to know that”, one of them answered aggressively. I explained I simply wanted to listen to them. “You can find that out for yourself”, he snapped and turned his back on me. This is the mindset of the representatives of the regime.

Being European and Swedish I must also express my deep disappointment with the European Union and Sweden's Government. They do say that they want to help Dawit Isaak. The EU Parliament adopted a strong resolution on Eritrea in March 2016. But in practise we do not see much done. When EU decided to give Eritrea 200 million Euro in aid for 2016 to 2020 Dawit's name was not even mentioned. Not by the EU, nor by Sweden's Foreign Ministry. This stands clear from my communication with the European Commission and with the Ministry. It is deplorable, even heartless.

For many years now we have been working to free Dawit Isaak and his colleagues. It sometimes feels as if we are working in vain, but we have no choice but to go on. Because Dawit and the other journalists are given no choice at all.

Bjoern Tunbaeck is a Swedish journalist in Gothenborg and member of the board of the Swedish section of Reporters Without Borders.

Powerless Against Injustice?

At the end of June 2014, three lawyers in Sweden filed charges against Isaias Afewerki in the case of jailed journalist Dawit Isaak. Three months later, the Swedish prosecution closed the file arguing that it was a waste of time.

“If such a crime cannot be persecuted even in a stable democracy like Sweden, where should it then be punished,” the Swedish newspaper Expressen asked. Reporters Without Borders stressed that only the tenacity of the international community could induce the Eritrean government to give up its criminal behaviour and to release all detained journalists. “It is unacceptable that Western democracies give up so quickly,” the NGO said.

On 30 June 2014, two Swedish lawyers, Jesús Alcalá and Percy Bratt, as well as Prisca Orsonneau, who is responsible for the legal commission at Reporters Without Borders, filed charges against Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, Foreign Minister Osman Saleh, Minister of Justice Fawzia Hashim, Secretary of Defense General Sebhat Ephrem, and a counsellor to the President, accusing them of crimes against humanity, torture and deliberate disappearance of Dawit Isaak. The Swedish-Eritrean journalist has been in prison since September 2001.

The three lawyers could file the charges only because of the new Universal Responsibility Act, which took effect on 1 July 2014 in Sweden. They had repeatedly submitted the file to other courts, including the Sup-

reme Court in Eritrea and the African Commission on the Rights of People and Peoples. However, so far without success. In summer 2014, human rights organizations had high expectations in the Swedish judiciary. “What we expect from the Swedish authorities now is that they intercept and question those responsible for these abuses when they visit Sweden so that they finally account for their actions before a court”, said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk. “The silence of the Western democracies on the subject of Eritrea must end. In April (2014), the Eritrean authorities told the Human Rights Council that there was no arbitrary detention in Eritrea and that no one was being held because of their opinions or for criticizing the government. This position is no longer tenable, Kahn-Sriber said.

But also the Swedish judiciary found itself helpless in the case of Dawit Isaak. They announced on 24 September 2014 that it would be a waste of time to pursue the case, since it was to be assumed that the Eritrean authorities would refuse any cooperation. It was exactly the day on which Dawit Issak was arrested and abducted 13 years ago.

Katja Dorothea Buck

Radio Station Transmits from Paris to Eritrea

Since 2001 the regime in Eritrea has full control over the media. But only in its own land. The independent Radio Erena has been transmitting in Tigrinya since 2009 from Paris. It can be received on shortwave radio even in remote parts of the country.

The idea to start in France an independent radio programme in Tigrinya for Eritrea came from Reporters Without Borders (Reporter sans Frontières – RSF). The NGO, which has its international bureau in Paris, had long kept an eye on the brutal media policies of the Afewerki regime. Then in 2009 two Eritrean journalists appeared in Paris, who had escaped from persecution in their homeland.

RSF rented a two-room apartment in the 13th district of Paris on favourable terms



In addition to his radio program, Radio Erena also runs a website with news in Tigrinya and English.

from the municipality, provided the necessary equipment, and in June 2009 the two exiled Eritreans Biniam Simon and Amanuel Ghirmai took up their work. Although eleven flight hours, or 6,000 kilometres as the crow flies lay between them and Asmara, they daily send new information about their homeland. They receive their initial information via the social networks in Eritrea or from the community in exile. Then voluntary informants in Eritrea check them out. Correspondents in the USA, Italy, Great Britain and the Netherlands work for the editorial office in Paris.

Until three years ago the programme was broadcast via the ArabSat satellite. In the summer of 2012 however, unknown persons torpedoed the editorial work and set a jammer on the Erena frequency. The programme providers could locate the source of the interference signals in Asmara. Even the internet website of Radio Erena was hacked during this time. Today Radio Erena, which translated means “our Eritrea“, can be received via NileSat in all the countries on the Horn of Africa and in the Arabian peninsula. The programme can also be heard worldwide over the internet.

Via shortwave, Radio Erena reaches even the remotest corners of Eritrea. For the people of Eritrea, it is often the only possibility to be informed about what is happening in neighbouring states, as for example being able to follow the consequences of the Arab Spring in Egypt. The regime has done everything to censor news from the Nile. The youth in its own land should not be exposed to bad thoughts. It is officially forbidden in Eritrea to listen to Radio Erena.

Admittedly there are other media which are critical of the regime situated abroad. They are all however financed from different opposition groups in exile. Radio Erena on the other hand has the claim to having a totally independent coverage for the people of Eritrea and for those who are escaping.

For instance, when in 2011 the Gaddafi regime in Libya was overthrown and the country sank into chaos, the two editors warned their countrymen to avoid that escape route at all costs, since Africans in Libya were regarded as collaborators with the old regime. They also draw attention to the brutal practices of human traffickers. Every Thursday for example they transmit a broadcast from the human rights activist Meron Estefanos, who is in contact with women and men from Eritrea who are being held hostage in Sinai, and who is trying to free them.

Katja Dorothea Buck

Translation: Roxana Kawał

There Are Many Dangerous Routes to Europe

Most Eritrean refugees don't have any clear destination when they leave their country. They go when they get the opportunity to do so and want to go where they can live without fear.

The following quotation from one of my numerous interviews with Eritrean refugees is illustrative for tens-thousands of Eritreans who continue to flee their home country despite of the many risks involved.

“Yes, I knew all the risks that would face me including getting killed by the Eritrean army or caught before I left Eritrea. Again, when I decided to cross the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, I was aware of all the risks including death but there was no other option for me; either make it or die trying to reach safety. [...] It's all the same for me: if I returned to Eritrea and be killed by the regime or die in the Sahara or Mediterranean Sea”

According to the UNHCR around 34.000 Eritreans reached European shores in 2014. These are 22 percent of all refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean by boat. Our study was conducted among a limited number of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands and Belgium to examine how refugees make decisions during their journey that eventually leads to a final destination. The results may stimulate thinking of how immigration issues could be approached through the eyes of the migrant.

Two theories in the limited available research on refugee (im)migration are considered to see how they help describe the Eritrean migration flow to Europe: (1) the push and pull factor theory and (2) the facilitation theory. The former focusses on the economic concept of 'utility maximizing' behaviour which drives people to carry out a cost-benefit analysis between the home country and a higher-income country. The main idea is that potential migrants weigh the negative factors about the home country against the positive factors of a destination country in order to determine a decision to migrate and a destination. This theory makes assumptions that commonly do not apply to refugee migrants, namely free will and full access to information.

The facilitation theory perceives migration to be a process rather than a pre-determined move. Migration takes place if the opportunity is there. The refugee's journey consists of a sequence of 'stay or go' decisions which will be taken by carrying out an opportunity analysis. In this sense, the distinction between these two theories can be categorized as social structure versus agency. The pull factor theory argues that (im)migration is largely determined by the macro-level structure that every person is subject to, whereas the facilitation theory infers that a migrant is an agent capable of making individual decisions within the limits of the structure.

From the analysis of the interviews with Eritrean refugees it is concluded that the facilitation theory appears to be most helpful in explaining the Eritrean exodus. First, due to the restriction on international movements in Eritrea, people tend to leave only when they (suddenly) see a clear opportunity to do so.

"My unit was deployed in southern Eritrea and we were less than 250 meters away from the Ethiopian soldiers positioned on the other side of the border. [...] One day I decided to cross the border and I started to run to the Ethiopian side of the border. [...] My officers started to shoot towards me once they saw me running. But I managed to reach the Ethiopian side without heavy injury."

Most Eritrean refugees do not have a clear destination in mind before they start their journey and neither do they have one when they are on their way:

"Honestly, at that time I had no idea where I was going. [...] You follow the wind."

"People do not think of where they are going, they all live in stress. The people who are escaping have no idea where they are going. [...] When you are under constant stress of being caught by the military or other risks, then you don't know [your destination]."

A lack of knowledge partly explains this:

"I didn't have any idea where my destinations could be, but I know I have to go to a place where I can live without fear. Before I left Eritrea, I had very limited knowledge about the outside world."

Secondly, Eritrean refugees are arguably more focussed on opportunities than on pull factors in determining their direction and their final destination.

“In each city you gather new information and sense whether it is a good place to stay. We learn through experience. “

It becomes clear that refugees certainly do exercise agency in the migration process through making a choice between the opportunities they perceive to have. Instead of merely being pushed and pulled towards the best option by the social structure, they evaluate for themselves whether staying is a satisfying option or whether facilitation exists for their move to a next and potentially better destination. The fact that a refugee does not know whether the next location is a good place to stay and that the refugee waits to assess that by experience, shows that he or she exercises agency.

There are various routes to Europe and this reality is also best explained by the concept of opportunities. Refugees will encounter different facilitation methods to reach a next destination and they will choose differently among these options. Most of the Eritrean refugees crosses the Sudanese and Libyan deserts with jeeps run by human smugglers to arrive in the harbour of Tripoli where other human smugglers offer boat connections to Italy. Upon arrival in Italy refugees usually make use of trains and busses to get to other European countries. Some refugees encounter human smugglers that offer affordable plane connections from Sudan or Libya to European countries. All in all, the human smugglers facilitate most of the Eritrean migration flow to North Africa and to Europe.

Upon arrival in Europe refugees seem to construct a clearer picture of their final destination; however, often they are restrained by European border controls to reach this (imagined) final destination. Refugees then turn to their network for advice:

“When I was going to Sweden I spent a few hours in Belgium and I called one friend in Italy and asked him how I could go to Sweden and he told me that it is all the same (Sweden and Belgium): the only thing I need is to ask for protection. Then I changed my mind and decided to stay in Belgium.”

Eritrean communities have been proven to be a substantial pull factor, but it often happens that refugees are caught by the police in transit countries. This situation then forces them to apply for asylum in another country than what they had



Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty Images

Being safe: Rescued boat people in Palermo in October 2014. Only after having survived the Mediterranean, they can start thinking about their future.

planned. The destination in Europe is resulting from emerging situations and facilitated by information received through the network of Eritrean refugees.

Analysis of migration routes needs to take account of the individual agency of refugees as well as their reliance on networks that helps them in reaching their individual decisions. Looking at migration from the perspective of refugees is instructive. The Eritrean refugees see as the main cause for their dangerous departure, the tragic situation in Eritrea. Testimonies show that refugees would readily return if living conditions in Eritrea would improve:

“I will stay in Belgium until there is change in my country Eritrea. I hope one day Eritrea will have a free and democratic government and I will join my family and live in peace there.”

To the refugees, their final destination is only a temporary stay; their final hope is to be able to go home.

Leande Grezel has contributed to the study “The Eritrean Exodus: Refugee Routes to Europe” in the context of her studies of International Relations at the Amsterdam University College.

An Immense Needle's Eye of Sand

Samson escaped from Eritrea. After a long, gruelling and life-threatening odyssey, the environmental scientist has now lived for seven years in Switzerland, where he helps his countrymen to integrate.

If your image of an Eritrean refugee is a young, shy man speaking broken German, then you would be wrong in Samson Kidane's case. The academic wears a white shirt, has come straight from his residence in Sarnen, and is on his way to a meeting in Basel. In the café, he allows the short explanation of what it's about, says he unfortunately has only an hour's time, and opens the laptop he has brought along. A power-point presentation appears with the key data on Eritrea, then follow maps and photos of his escape route and a list of the most frequent problems regarding integration in Europe. In polished German, he efficiently and systematically goes through the essential points.

No Prospects

Kidane has lived for seven years in Switzerland. On the one hand, he is active as an intercultural go-between in various organisations and institutions, and on the other he is working in Willisau with the Cewas Company, to found a start-up firm in the field of environmental technology. He is clearly not the type who hangs around the train station and waits for social security payments.

Like all young people in Eritrea, he was conscripted into military service. Military service – that means indefinite forced labour in Eritrea. The accommodation, the hunger, the diseases – these are harsh conditions. Hardest though to bear is the sheer arbitrariness of it. Because military service can always be repeatedly extended, sometimes for over more than ten years, it is almost impossible to make plans, to carry out projects, to found a family, to build something.

No wonder the country is a wreck

At the same time things were still comparatively good for Samson Kidane. He had studied Agriculture in the capital Asmara and later obtained a Master's degree in Environmental Science. But as a young man in Eritrea he was first stuck

into the army camp at Sawa and then shifted to Dongolo, where they provisionally placed him as army archivist. He then did the official military service, until he fled out of political reasons. “Up to today I can’t quite rightly grasp it, when I remember the desert“, says Kidane. He crossed the border to Sudan at the border town of Kessela. That is a dangerous area, because refugees are repeatedly kidnapped by Sudanese gangs and only set free for a high ransom. Even the UN refugee camp there is a right hunting ground for kidnappers, who above all set their sights on women.

Skeleton in the Wasteland

He manages however to avoid the pitfalls, and reaches the Sudanese capital, Khartoum. He remains there a couple of months, tries in vain to find work. Having entered illegally that is hard. His goal, the Libyan capital Tripoli on the coast, is more than 2,000 kilometres away. Between the two cities lies practically only a no man’s land, a wilderness almost empty of people. Eventually he finds a ride for a lot of money. The smugglers squash more than thirty people into a pick-up vehicle. Kidane has to watch out, that he is not crushed or falls off. The metal becomes so hot during the journey, that one cannot hold on to it.

At last they cross the border with Libya and reach the Kufra oasis. The god-forsaken Kufra is to a certain extent the furthest outpost of Europe. Since all refugees from the region have to pass through, the European Union has set up reception camps here, financed through the Frontex organisation, and under Libyan control. Migrants are often kept for months, simply to prevent them from continuing their journey long before they reach European borders. At last the journey continues.

Now the hardest part begins

There are no longer any streets; the smugglers often miss the way, and simply leave behind the human ‘goods’ in the sand. “Towards midday the thermometer rises to above 50 degrees, nights are icy cold“, says Kidane. “No village, no animal, no plant. Occasionally one saw human skeletons in the sand. ‘Those are your relatives’, said the driver.“ At some point the vehicle turns over. Several passengers break their arms and legs. But medical help is not to be dreamt of. Quite soon the drinking water supply also grows scarce. The smuggler ‘stretch-es’ the water with petrol. “Some could not bring themselves to drink it, and died of thirst. Others drank their own urine.“

Taken back and betrayed

Finally, Kidane reached the Libyan coastal city of Benghazi. In a truck, hidden between boxes of vegetables, they travel in the direction of the capital, Tripoli. There are several checkpoints. At one of them a stowaway has to sneeze. They are thrown into jail and deported back to Kufra – in a container on a lorry. “120 refugees were locked up in there for 24 hours. Under the metal it was unbearably hot and we could barely get air“, relates Kidane. “A few lost consciousness.“

In Kufra Kidane was imprisoned once more and passed a week in a cell, together with 50 other inmates. The police chief, who was supposed to take them back to Eritrea, sold them for 30 dollars each to a smuggler. He takes 200 dollars off each of them and takes them on the way for a second time in a northerly direction. After a further odyssey Kidane at last arrives in Tripoli. However, life there is like running the gauntlet. “Young Libyans beat us and demanded money“, he remembers. “In the night we would sometimes sleep in clothes and shoes, because you continuously had to reckon with police controls and had to run away.“ He again tries to get hold of a job, but it is hopeless. He pays a smuggler for the crossing to Italy, but the man vanishes with the money. “I knew a man to whom that happened five times“, narrates Kidane. “He went mad.“

Many have to wait years long, before they manage to make the break. Most refugees cross the Sahara in winter, because it is cooler then, and one does not need so much water. The further journey across the Mediterranean in the cold months is however dangerous.

Kidane therefore holds out in Tripoli until spring. For 1,200 dollars he finally finds a passage to Sicily. The kamikaze mission lasts over fifty hours. Three of his travelling companions die. He stays a few days in Syracuse, then strikes out for Milan. Actually, he wants to go to London, but that appears difficult. Eventually he lands in Basel and then Obwalden, where he is granted asylum.

The Sahara is immensely large, but for refugees it is like the eye of the needle. Kidane has come through and has survived. Switzerland is neither one single huge barrack like Eritrea, nor do immigrants here risk their lives as on the journey through the desert. Nonetheless life here also for an immigrant from Africa is not that easy.

David Signer studied ethnology, psychology and linguistics in Zurich and Jerusalem. He was lecturer at the Ethnological Seminar at the University

of Zurich amongst others and worked for several years in the field of refugees. Since 2008 he has been working as a freelance journalist and author. He edits the Africa Dossier at Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

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Translation: Roxana Kawall

The Second UN Report on the Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

Published June 4, 2015

Summary: The commission of inquiry undertook its investigation in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 26/24. Although the commission was unable to visit Eritrea, it obtained first-hand testimony by conducting 550 confidential interviews with witnesses residing in third countries. It also received 160 written submissions. On the basis of this body of evidence, the commission found that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity. In the present report, the commission shows how the initial promises of democracy and rule of law, incarnated in the never-implemented Constitution of 1997, were progressively suppressed and then extinguished by the Government. It details how the Government has created and sustained repressive systems to control, silence and isolate individuals in the country, depriving them of their fundamental freedoms. Information collected on people's activities, their supposed intentions and even conjectured thoughts are used to rule through fear in a country where individuals are routinely



Special Correspondent of United Nations for Human Rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, at a press conference.

arbitrarily arrested and detained, tortured, disappeared or extrajudicially executed. The commission also describes how, on the pretext of defending the integrity of the State and ensuring its self-sufficiency, Eritreans are subject to systems of national service and forced labour that effectively abuse, exploit and enslave them for indefinite periods of time.

UN Inquiry finds Crimes against Humanity in Eritrea

Crimes against humanity have been committed in a widespread and systematic manner in Eritrean detention facilities, military training camps and other locations across the country over the past 25 years, according to the third report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, published in June 2016. Mr. Mike Smith, Chairperson of the Commission of Inquiry, presented the report at the 32nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Mr. President, High Commissioner, Distinguished members of the Human Rights Council,

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and thank you all very much for the opportunity to present to the Human Rights Council the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea. I am joined on the podium by my fellow Commissioners, Sheila B. Keetharuth and Victor Dankwa.

We presented our first report to you 12 months ago, documenting a multitude of human rights violations in Eritrea. The Human Rights Council unanimously approved – without a vote – a resolution – and mandated the Commission to determine whether these violations might amount to crimes against humanity and to address the issue of accountability.

The Commission has concluded that Eritrean officials have committed crimes against humanity. The crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, torture, persecution, rape, murder and other inhumane acts – have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic campaign against the civilian population since 1991. The aim of the campaign has been to maintain control over the population and perpetuate the leadership's rule in Eritrea.

I want to focus on some of the crimes the Commission documented by the Commission. With regard to the crime of enslavement, the Commission found that

the violations relating to Eritrea's military/national service programmes include their arbitrary and indefinite duration, often for years beyond the 18 months set out in the law; the use of conscripts as forced labour, including manual labour; the inhumane conditions of service; the rape and torture often associated with service, and the devastating impact of these programmes on family life and freedom of choice. Despite promises to the contrary, the Eritrean Government has taken no steps to address any of the problems associated with its military and national services programmes. For these reasons, we have concluded that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of enslavement.

The use of arbitrary detention has been and remains routine across Eritrea. It is not only reserved for critics of the Government. Indeed, many of the witnesses to whom we spoke described arrest and lengthy detention for reasons difficult to discern or categorise. The vast majority of those detained said they had not been brought before a judge, tried or involved in any form of judicial proceeding.. In addition, the Government very rarely informs family members or judicial authorities about detentions and most former detainees described widespread torture. These acts are on-going and constitute crimes against humanity.

The Commission has also documented various acts of sexual and gender-based violence. In military training camps and in the army, some young women are used as slaves to perform domestic duties and are also raped. Rape is also committed in detention facilities by officials and guards, not only against a significant number of women, but also against men.

While some forms of torture are used against both men and women, other forms are gender-specific such as the beating of pregnant women in military training camps or in the army to induce abortion. Instances of sexual violence against men were also documented by the Commission, including sexual torture done intentionally to ensure that these men are no longer able to reproduce.

The Commission found that the crimes it documented have been committed primarily, directly or indirectly, by State and ruling party officials, military commanders, and members of the national security office. The Commission has identified alleged perpetrators and has compiled files on those individuals to assist future accountability mechanisms.

The Commission has concluded that the Government of Eritrea has neither the political will nor the institutional capacity to prosecute the crimes we have docu-

mented. We therefore recommend that the UN Security Council refer the situation in Eritrea to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and that the African Union establish an accountability mechanism.

The Commission has also asked Member States to prosecute or extradite suspects on their territories, and that the Security Council impose travel bans and freeze the assets of individuals suspected of crimes against humanity.

I would like to highlight some of our recommendations to the Human Rights Council:

- Renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea and provide the mandate-holder with additional human and financial resources;
- Keep the situation in Eritrea on its agenda, and invite the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to report periodically on the situation of human rights;
- Support the establishment of a structure by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with a protection and promotion mandate, in particular to ensure accountability for the crimes against humanity set out in our report.

We are aware that several visitors to Eritrea, as well as some diplomats based in Asmara have recently painted a more favourable picture of Eritrea. We have been mandated by the Human Rights Council to investigate systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations that generally take place in isolated locations and behind closed doors, in places where casual visitors, journalists and diplomats do not have access. The Commission would have wished to visit the country and have unhindered access to sites and locations, but was denied such visit by the Government of Eritrea.

Our findings are based on detailed statements and information from over 833 individuals in over 13 countries, the overwhelming majority of whom have personally suffered human rights violations in Eritrea. We have been able substantially to corroborate the information provided by these witnesses. We also selected contacted a sample of 500 individuals who wrote to us saying that our first report was inaccurate and read with care the written submissions of thousands more.

In our report we have acknowledged some signs of increasing engagement from Eritrea with the international community, including with OHCHR, but we have noted any substantial change with regard to the human rights situation in the country.

Where is the rule of law in Eritrea? The rule of law must be paramount in any country. The Government and its agents must be subject to the law. People who have their rights abused must have an avenue to raise their grievances. And when they do so, they should not be arrested and thrown into prison. Rather, they should be heard by a properly constituted, independent court which is staffed by professional judges who are also not frightened of being arrested.

So long as there is no constitution, so long as there is no parliament where you can debate national questions, so long as there is an abusive national service which is unending, so long as there is no free press, so long as there are no civil society organisations apart from government-appointed ones, so long as people are living in fear and controlled by the State, there will be no full enjoyment of all human rights and no real progress for the Eritrean people.

The preamble of the ICC statute states that crimes that shock the conscience of humanity, such as those that we have documented in our report, threaten the peace, security and well-being of the world, and therefore must not go unpunished. We need collectively to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice not only for the sake of the countless number of Eritrean victims but to demonstrate that such behaviour is simply unacceptable anywhere in the world today.

Redemption in Sinai – A Story of Slavery today

This is the true story of the birth of a child in Sinai.¹ The name in Tigrinya given by his Eritrean mother is: Ra'ee. Ra'ee means Redemption.

Ra'ee's birth was not a happy birth. On the day she went into labour, Ra'ee's mother was tortured, as she was each morning. Chained to the other prisoners, she was electrocuted and beaten. Several hours later Ra'ee was born. When she delivered the baby, she could not free her hands to pick him up as she was chained to the other prisoners. She had no cloth to cover him with and keep him warm. She could not hold him to feed him. She had no water to wash him. But despite all the odds, Ra'ee was there and he was alive.

Ra'ee's mother, HT, is a young Eritrean woman who escaped her country a few months earlier to join her husband in a refugee camp in Sudan. She joined the 5000-monthly stream of refugees who attempt to escape the open-air prison which is her home-country. Eritrea enforces an unlimited 'military service', which is in reality a forced labour camp for young people, children and under aged minors. The conditions are harsh, poverty is rampant, there is no rule of law and prison conditions are unbearable. Detainees are held in ship containers placed under the hot desert sun and in holes dug under the ground. In Eritrea, young people have no future, and they will risk an (effective) shoot-to-kill policy at the border to escape. HT fled to Sudan.

Her husband had left earlier and had arrived in a very large refugee camp in Kassala, called Shegarab. There he was waiting for HT to join him. HT, who was pregnant from him, was able to cross the border. Unfortunately, she never made it to Shegarab as she was abducted by an armed criminal gang, which took her to the Sinai instead. There she was chained to the other prisoners and tortured daily. She was asked to speak to relatives to collect ransom for her release. Now held in slavery, she was forced to beg and she was tortured to make her do this.

When HT's husband heard that she was imprisoned in Sinai he left the refugee camp and went to try and find her. Worried about her condition, he fearlessly put himself in danger to try and help her release or escape. However, he failed to find

her and decided to go to Israel instead, so that he could collect the money needed to release his wife. Unfortunately, in Israel he was detained under the Anti-Infiltrators Law², a law which allows the Israeli authorities to detain people, mostly Africans, who have entered the country ‘irregularly’ under the law. No exception is made for asylum-seekers, refugees or humanitarian circumstances.

Panicking about the fate of HT who was now very pregnant, and worrying about the need to help her release, HT’s husband begged to be taken to court and in court explained to the judge the situation of his wife. An extraordinary decision was taken by the judge in Israel, who heard his case. He ordered that HT’s husband would be temporarily released so that he could beg for money to collect the sum needed as ransom for his wife.

Meanwhile HT delivered Ra’ee and was trying to keep her son alive under the most difficult of circumstances and begging her husband to collect the ransom for the release of herself and her son. Having given birth, the ransom had now doubled, HT had to pay for the release of herself and for her son. HT’s husband begged and collected money in Tel Aviv among the other refugees, among members of the Eritrean diaspora in Europe and from (poor) family members at



Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

Refugees illegally crossing the Egyptian border are retained in a camp at Holot in the Israeli Negev desert.

home. He succeeded to collect the ransom and paid it to an intermediate in Tel Aviv. HT was finally released together with Ra'ee.

For HT it was now no longer possible to try and find safety in Israel or join her husband. A large high tech protected fence was constructed by Israel to block African refugees from entry into Israel. HT was released close to the fence and begged to the Israeli military for water and food for her child. She was not allowed to enter. She was now so worried that her child would die from thirst and lack of food. She was taken by the Egyptian military to a prison, as are most other survivors of Sinai trafficking, who are released in the desert.

Why a prison? What was her crime?

In the prison, she found no medical support, no access to a lawyer, no access to a court. HT learned that, in order to be released, she had to collect money for a plane ticket for her and her son so that she could be deported by the Egyptian authorities to the country she had fled: Eritrea.

HT's husband continued to collect money in Israel by begging as he was not allowed to work. He collected the sum needed for the deportation of his wife and his son to the country he would never be able to return to, Eritrea. A few months later, HT and Ra'ee arrived in Eritrea and live there now. Meanwhile HT's husband is still in Israel, trying to stay out of the hands of the authorities who could legally detain him indefinitely, as so many other Eritrean refugees; men, women and children.

Why are they detained? Why should he be detained? What is his crime?

Ra'ee has never seen his father who delivered him from Sinai at great personal risk and fearless of the consequences. HT's husband is waiting for the day he will first set eyes on his eldest son. This is a family where two parents support each other and their young child across borders despite the injustices and tragedies inflicted on them. Ra'ee is their Redemption as they have shown courage, resilience and above all: love.

Slavery today: our responsibility?

The crimes committed in the Sinai are beyond comprehension. Babies are beaten. A child suffering from epilepsy is electrocuted. A trafficker refuses to negotiate the ransom for four young siblings. A young man loses two healthy hands, because he is suspended on the ceiling. A mother gives birth while in chains. Women and men are raped and ripped of their dignity in front of children and

loved ones. Being burnt electrocuted and tortured they shout into mobile phones for help to their relatives. Please pay so that I can be released. Those who cannot pay ransom fear being killed.

Does this world exist? Is this the biblical land of Sinai where Moses received his ten commandments? What is worse? The pain of knowing what is happening or the realization that it is easier for us to turn our head and look the other way?

Thousands of refugees, mostly from Eritrea, have been abducted, held captive in slavery in Sinai. The torture serves as a way to pressure the refugees to collect ransoms for their release. They phone parents, relatives, friends, and beg for money. The ransoms are high, very high. They have increased in the last five years as family members have paid these ransoms for the release of their loved ones. The torture is part of a new model of doing business – to make profit, lots of profit.

Who is right? He who refuses to pay for the release of a loved one so as not to promote the 'trade' in human beings or he who pays (ever higher) ransoms to release his mother, his son, his child?

The Sinai Trafficking started in 2009 when Italy began to return Eritrean refugees to Libya. Libya deported these refugees to Eritrea and the refugees feared the punishment awaiting them on the forced deportation to the country they had tried to flee. Looking for a safe route and destination they attempted to try and go to Israel through the Sinai. The Eritreans that were kidnapped were able to collect the ransom, which quickly went up. Realizing that Eritreans were 'profitable' the organized criminal networks started to look for Eritreans and began abducting them from the refugee camps in Sudan and their surroundings.

Which country is to blame? The country where refugees are tortured and extorted? The country that should have been a home, but turned its back on its own people? The country that refuses the refugees to enter? The country that deports the refugees?

Israel has now built a big high tech fence. The survivors of Sinai Trafficking can no longer find security in Israel. Those who have entered Israel, prior to the building of the fence, are coined 'infiltrators'. Under a law amended in 2012 to allow the Israeli government to detain anyone who entered the state 'irregularly', the survivors of the trafficking can be detained for three years. They may even be held in detention indefinitely if they cannot return to their home country – as is the case for the Eritrean refugees. Despairing, without support, traumatized,

wounded, men, women and children, are held in prisons and detention facilities. They have not committed a single crime. Why are they in detention?

What is more questionable? To prevent survivors of torture and slavery to enter a country, or to put them in detention?

Little has been done to stop the international criminal organization which organizes the Sinai trafficking and works in collusion with the military, police and security officials in Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt and Israel. Especially those who organize such crimes and are responsible for its continuation enjoy impunity. The anti-terrorism actions in the Sinai have focused on the military security objectives and ignored the human dimension of the enslavement of Eritrean refugees.

Egypt detains the Sinai survivors and forces them to collect money by begging for the purchase of flight tickets. They are deported to Eritrea or Ethiopia. Deportation to Eritrea means an unsure future. The returning refugees have illegally left the country under the draconian Eritrean laws and can therefore be charged with treason. This can result in detention or even in the death penalty. They can be recommitted to the army and its forced labour camps where they will serve as slave labour to serve self-improvement programmes of the Eritrean generals: to build their houses, work as slave labour on agricultural fields, in the mines or to provide sexual services.

How can the Sinai survivors be delivered from the vicious circle that holds them in slavery?

Churches have spoken up. As early as December 2010, Pope Benedict called for prayer for «the victims of traffickers and criminals, such as the drama of the hostages, Eritreans and of other nationalities, in the Sinai desert».³ Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have continued to do so. In July 2014 The World Council of Churches adopted a communiqué which “calls on member churches of the World Council of Churches in neighbouring countries and beyond to cooperate in dealing with issues of human trafficking in the Sinai desert that is costing the lives of many innocent persons daily.”⁴ The statement followed a pastoral letter issued by four Eritrean Bishops in June 2014.⁵ The letter asked “On top of the crisis of people leaving their country (...) the family unit is fragmented because members are scattered in national service, army, rehabilitation centres, prisons, whereas the aged parents are left with no one to care for them and have been spiritually damaged. And all that combined is making the country desolate.”⁶ The four Eritrean Bishops have been commended for their courage to speak up in a country where the right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion mean little.

Sinai survivors reaching Europe

On 3 October 2013, a boat sank for the coast of Lampedusa. It carried some 600 Eritrean refugees. Many of them died. Among the survivors: Berhane. Berhane fled Eritrea when he was fifteen, to avoid the slave labour camp of the military service. He was kidnapped to Sinai where he spent long months in harsh circumstances where the torture was severe. He collected a ransom of \$ 38.000 for his release. He was then detained in prison by the Egyptian authorities and he collected the money for a ticket for his release. He was flown to Ethiopia, and ordered to go in one of the refugee camps. Seeing the lack of future in these camps, he decided to go through Libya and try to reach Europe. Berhane was on this boat when almost 400 people died when it went down. He was 17 when he reached the European shore in Italy. His name Berhane means: Light.

Many unaccompanied minors from Eritrea have now reached Europe. As the age of the slave labour camps in Eritrea decreases, so are the refugees coming at an ever younger age. Support workers find that these young people behave differently from any other young asylum seeker. It has been reported that many say that they are older than they are. They do this, despite knowing that as minors they would have access to asylum in the country where they have arrived. Their priority is not their own safety, but their responsibility towards their family. They want to work and they want to help their families and those trapped in the situation of slavery in their country, in Sinai and elsewhere. They are impatient to enter the labour market and take their responsibility to contribute to the survival of other family members. As HT and her husband have also demonstrated: living in different places and unable to meet, they were able to join in carrying responsibility for Ra'ee and for each other.

The unsafe situation for legitimate asylum-seekers from Eritrea in the neighbouring countries is a serious challenge for Europe. The European Union and its member states have an important role to play in resolving this situation; in identifying what can be done to change and improve the situation in Eritrea and enforce this; to help ensure safety for the refugees and asylum-seekers in neighbouring countries in Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt and ensure that in these countries proper asylum procedures are in place; to stop the slavery and trafficking in the Sinai, stop the torture and forced begging and stop the impunity of the international organized crime networks that are involved in the abduction of people into slavery; to ensure that Israel carries out its responsibility to give a safe haven to refugees and carry out its responsibilities under international law and to stop all deportations of refugees to Eritrea where they are punishable as traitors.

None of these problems have easy solutions. But what is needed is the recognition that our world of today needs redemption from modern day slavery and that we all carry a responsibility to make this happen. This is the promise of the birth of Ra'ee: no matter where we are, we all carry the promise that we can deliver ourselves from slavery. This is the modern message from the Sinai: the responsibility to deliver justice and free mankind from slavery is still relevant today.

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- 1 The original interviews on which the story of 'Ra'ee' is based have been described in: *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond* (2013), by Mirjam van Reisen, Meron Estefanos and Conny Rijken. It has been published by Wolf Publishers. The story is reconstructed from the interviews with journalist Meron Estefanos and HT in 2012.
- 2 This law was amended in 2012 to include irregular border crossings by Africans. The law has been successfully challenged in the Supreme Court but a new law was introduced by the government allowing the detention of African refugees in an isolated camp in the desert. The circumstances are so bad that in recent months demonstrations and hunger strikes have taken place to draw attention to the situation. The refugees have not been charged with any wrongdoing other than that they crossed the border looking for safety and asylum.
- 3 Khataza Ghondwe (2012 12 9) The pope lifts the lid on Sinai's tortured Eritrean refugees. *The Guardian*.
- 4 World Council of Churches (2014 07 08) Statement on the State of Human Rights in Eritrea.
- 5 The four bishops are Mengsteab Tesfamariam, eparch of the capital Asmara; Tomas Osman, Eparch of Barentu; Kidane Yeabio, Eparch of Keren; and Feqremariam Hagos, Eparch of Segeneti.
- 6 Pastoral Letter, printed on awate: <http://awate.com/eritrean-catholic-bishops-ask-where-is-your-brother/>

No-one Cares About the Hostages in Sinai

Meron Estefanos (39) telephones Eritrean refugees being held hostage in Sinai from Stockholm. „As the fifth one died, I resolved to free at least one hostage“, says the Swedish-Eritrean radio editor.

Do you still recall your first interview?

That was three years ago with Biniam. I had already heard, that fellow countrymen of mine would be kidnapped and tortured in the Sinai desert, but had never spoken with a survivor. Until an Eritrean from England called: “My brother has been taken hostage. They are demanding 20,000 US dollars. You don’t believe me? Here is a telephone number!” I called and got to speak with Biniam. He was being held, along with 28 other persons. I couldn’t fathom it, that they were being held for 20,000 US dollars per person. Why didn’t anyone know about it?

You then often called Biniam.

He had stored my number and called me back shortly after. Later I called him over Skype. I also spoke with other persons in the group.

Did you speak with all 29 hostages?

Yes, and with some I felt a special connection. To Biniam for example, and also to Sehar (18). She was the only woman in the group. Everyone had been tortured, but Sehar was on top of that raped every day by four or five men. The way she cried – I had never heard anyone cry like that.

How did you know that they were tortured and raped?

Your phone rings, you say “Hello”, and the kidnappers start their torture. They do that deliberately, so that the family hears the screams and pays the ransom faster.

What do you say, when you speak on the telephone with someone who has been tortured to such an extent?

At first I cried with them. That does them good, because their own family will put down the phone. They cannot endure the horror. In the meantime, I know more. When for example I am on the phone with someone who has been tortured by Abu Omar – a more measured hostage-taker – then I say: “Chin up, those

with Abu Abdullah are jealous of you. It is a lot worse there!” And when I have a hostage of Abu Abdullah’s on the phone, I talk about people who have survived the torture. I also say: “When you are free, we will go and have a coffee.” I want them to look towards the future, to think of the moment when it will all be over. That way they keep up hope.

But I also ask them how they want to be remembered, in case they do not survive. I want something of them to survive. I remember a young man. He regretted two things: that he had had no child, and that he had not kissed his mother goodbye, as he fled Eritrea.

What was his name?

Yonas. He is dead.

Where is he buried?

Nowhere. The bodies are simply thrown into the desert.

What happened to Biniam’s group?

One after the other died. Three, four, and as the fifth died, I could no longer sleep. They had called me every five minutes. The hopelessness, their screams ... I abandoned my studies and wrote to dozens of relief agencies and politicians. After three weeks with not an answer, I knew: These people have been abandoned to themselves. And I resolved that I would save at least one person.

You collected money, to buy Sehar free.

Yes, that was very difficult, because the Bedouins did not want to let her go at first, and because an Eritrean who secretly brokered for us, went over to the side of the Bedouins in the end and worked for them. In the end, she was indeed released and reached Israel. She lives in Sweden today.

Did you ransom any more hostages?

Yes. I don’t even know how many in total. The second hostage was a girl, who reminded me of myself. I ransomed her with money that was still left over from Sehar. The girl was in another group of hostages, with whom I’d also made contact in the meantime. As I was on the telephone with her, all she could do was crying. I had also done exactly that as a 14-year old girl before, when I had moved to Sweden. My mother had stayed in Eritrea. At that time, it was very expensive to phone Africa, something like three Euro per minute. My father got together quite a lot of Kronor [Swedish currency – Ed.], and with the money we

then went to a telephone booth. I called my mother, and then was unable to say anything more at all, to my father's great frustration.

When a Dutch person is kidnapped, on the government side they will say: "No ransom money is to be paid! That will only lead to more hostage-taking." Between 2009 and 2014, the price to ransom someone rose from 1,000 US-dollars to 30,000. Is what you do right?

When a Dutch citizen is kidnapped, the government perhaps pays no ransom. But all other possible measures will be taken, to free that person. In March 2013, the Norwegian Ingvild (31) together with the Israeli Amir (34) were kidnapped in Sinai. Within a week they were free! No one intercedes for the Eritrean hostages. I know that it is not good to pay ransom money, but as long as the world does nothing, there are only two options: pay or let die.

How do you obtain these thousands of Euros?

I try over chat programmes like Paltalk and post little messages on Facebook. Sometimes listeners donate money, when a particular request touches them. Many ransoms are paid through a sort of "ransom group", which originated by chance in Norway. Many Eritrean refugees also live there. An Eritrean, whose brother was kidnapped, encountered the same girl every day in his village in Norway. One day she asked him: "Why do you look so sad? What is the matter?" And he told her about his brother. At first she did not believe him. Then she researched on google, and came into contact with me. She decided to help. She is incredibly creative; she called up local papers, organised a benefit concert. She enthused the whole village for the cause. One man donated 500 kilos of salmon. This was sold and the money donated. Another offered his paintings. It was conceived as a one-off action. But as I later told her about a father whose four children from age eight to 13 were abducted, she began anew to help

MeronEstefanos was born in Eritrea. At the age of 14 she came together with her father to Sweden. From her home, she phones Eritrean refugees in Sinai, while these are being tortured.

She broadcasts these conversations every Thursday in her radio programme, „Voice of Eritrean Refugees.“ The broadcast is aired on Radio Erena, a radio station in Paris, which can also be received in Eritrea via satellite. Radio Erena is regarded as the only independent information source in Eritrea

In 2013 Meron Estefanos collaborated on the documentary, "Sound of Torture". In it one also hears the voices of Biniam and Sehar. The film won the Prix Europe for the best intercultural TV programme in October 2014.

with collecting money. Norwegians, who have helped once to ransom a captive, are also prepared to help again. They remain in contact with each other over it.

How do you send 30,000 US-dollars to a kidnapper in the desert?

Via Western Union or through MoneyGram. Those are businesses where one pays in the money to one branch, and someone else can pick up the money at another branch. A little while ago the "ransom group" met and exchanged experiences. A man from Bergen, a real villager, had to take a large amount of contact money to Oslo. He was only allowed to send up to 4,500 US-dollars from each office. He went with his banknotes from one office to the other, and told a different story each time. One family, who already very often had ransomed people, was put on the black list by MoneyGram. "Your name keeps showing up too often! The amount is too high. Please do not use our services anymore!", they would be told.

You can't ransom everyone.

No ... Some just don't have any luck. With one mother (21) I felt an enormous connection. Salam. She was kidnapped together with her one-year old son. They

Why the Way Leads Through the Sinai Desert

Eritreans flee to the first democratic land where they can settle. Initially they went through the neighbouring land of Sudan to Egypt and Libya, from where they took a boat to Europe. In 2005 the European Union concluded a deal with the former Libyan leader Muammar Al Ghaddafi, whereby this route to Europe was closed to refugees. Egypt also undertook strict measures against illegal immigrants. They were taken into detention, from which the only way out was deportation back to Eritrea.

The Eritreans eventually discovered the smugglers' route set up by the Bedouins through the Sinai to another democratic country: Israel. However, the more Eritreans came to Israel, the more they were less welcome. They don't get work permits and were all at once described as infiltrators – a

word which up to then had only been used to designate the Palestinian arch-enemies. The Israeli Interior Minister even once called the Eritreans the „cancer in our body“.

The remilitarised Sinai desert is a lawless area. The abduction of Eritrean refugees has become a new source of income for some Bedouins in the Sinai desert. Huge houses were built with the first ransom money, with cellars full of iron chains to shackle the kidnapped Eritreans. These are veritable torture camps. Eritreans are not only abducted in the Sinai wilderness, but also from refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia. The ransom sum demanded in the meantime stands at 30,000 US dollars per head, but can go up to 60,000 US dollars.



Still exhausted and drawn by the exertions of flight, the refugees have to go on fighting for their rights. Two men protest against the refusal of refugee status in Israel in February 2014.

tortured the child and forced her to look on. When he cried, they tortured Salam particularly gruesomely. They poured petrol over her head and set it on fire. “Make him stop screaming!“, they shouted. He cried even louder, so they tortured the mother even more. I wanted to ransom Salam, but by the time I got the money together, it emerged that she had been sold to another group. It lasted months, before I found her again, but then I had to start collecting all over again. I called her often, but somehow she couldn’t put over her story well. When Sehar cried over the radio, people called, who wanted to pay the ransom. For Salam nobody called.

What happened with Salam?

She died. Her little child was sent with another freed hostage two months after her death. He is living now in a home in Israel. Things haven’t gone well with him. He sees it as a game, to maltreat the other children in the crèche with a knife.

How are other Sinai survivors faring?

I try as often as possible to visit them. Then the memories surface. Biniam is now better. He even makes jokes now about the torture. “Do you still remember

how the Bedouin hit you back then like that? You cried like a baby! Ha ha ha..." That is his way of coping. The first time Sehar saw me, she fainted. Then she began to scream. She was that traumatised. Survivors who arrive in Israel or are deported to Ethiopia, receive no psychological support.

Is there no one who accompanies the hostages after their release?

I have a friend, whom I know because of Sinai. After ransom money was paid for him, he was deported to Ethiopia. On the way to Libya he was abducted again. His family paid a ransom for him once more. At last in Libya he managed to find a boat to Italy. This boat sank. He survived, but 366 fellow travellers died; among them twenty survivors of Sinai. Mankind had let them down twice.

„The Human Trafficking Cycle“

Since her first telephone call with Biniam, Estefanos Meron has spoken with hundreds of hostages. The information thus gleaned forms the basis for two scientific research projects of both Professor Miriam van Reisen and Professor Conny Rijken from the Tilburg University in the Netherlands. The most important results coming out of this:

- From 2009 to 2013 at least 25,000 to 30,000 persons were taken hostage in Sinai.
- A quarter of those, about 6,000 to 8,000 persons lost their lives because of this.
- 85 per cent of those kidnapped came from Eritrea.
- During this time a total of 622 million US dollars in ransom was paid.

The latest study, „The Human Trafficking Cycle“, contains an over two-page long register of the individual torture methods which were practised by the kidnappers, such as for example breaking hands, jum-

ping on the chest, beating with hot iron bars, cutting off of fingers, hanging upside down, electric shocks, rolling in a blanket and then setting this on fire...

There are also torture methods about which no one wishes to speak. Men had their genitalia set on fire. They now have to fear never being able to have children. Two good friends were forced to mutually rape each other. If they meet today, they pretend not to know each other.

The Human Trafficking Cycle
Wolf Legal Publishers, Oisterwijk 2014
ISBN 978-94-6240-082-5



Sweden is the only European country which will invite in Sinai survivors from inside Israel. Currently three hundred Sinai survivors live here in Sweden.

Do the Eritreans who reach Sweden receive psychological help?

Yes, sometimes. But even if they process their experiences, the misery is not over. In Eritrea, entire families have put themselves in debt, in order to ransom son or daughter. Almost all civil court cases in Asmara concern Sinai loans. A neighbour will want her money back, when she hears that the neighbour's boy is now free. But from where can a tortured young man, who lives in a park out in the open, come by 30,000 US-dollars so fast? Last week a man called me, who had borrowed money to help the family of a kidnapped person. The family has never paid him back anything. Therefore, he too cannot pay back his creditors. His wife has left him. It is tearing the whole society apart.

Is it also tearing you apart?

I have to watch out that I don't burn out. Sometimes I put my phone in airplane mode, so that I can recover. But not for long, because if I am called from a satellite phone [which would mean a call coming from the Mediterranean – Ed.], I have to move immediately. Then I call the Italian navy, that a boat filled with refugees is in danger of sinking.

Sanne Terlingen and Eva Schram are Dutch journalists.
This text first appeared in OneWorld.

Translation: Roxana Kwall and Owe Boersma

“The Drama of the Situation is too Little-Known“

The Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), at their conference held in November 2014 in Dresden, has adopted the following resolution on measures to counter the human trafficking of refugees in the Sinai:

With great concern and sorrow the Synod of the EKD takes note of the situation of trafficking of refugees in the Sinai peninsula. The drama of the situation is still too little-known to a wide portion of the public as well as to the church.

The Council of the EKD requests the Federal Government and European institutions to intervene so that

- consistent prosecution of human trafficking and torture occurs and co-operation with Interpol is strengthened
- Investigations by Europol on the flow of ransom money from the EU to the region be taken up

- Investigations through the United Nations on what role the Eritrean authorities play in organized human trafficking be made
- Stronger security measures for the protection of refugee camps be put in place through the UNHCR
- Victims of human trafficking be neither illegally deported nor for such processing be held in detention
- The release of all ex-hostages and survivors of detention in the named countries takes place
- That any further development aid for Eritrea is linked to the improvement of the human rights situation in the land.

Dresden, 12 November 2014
The President of the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany
Dr. Irmgard Schwaetzer

“The Lives of Countless People have Been Destroyed”

In a press release for the International Day of Human Rights, 10 December 2014, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) urged more protection for refugees and emphasized the insufferable situation in Sinai and Libya.

“The situation on the Horn of Africa continues to be highly problematic. Ever more people are fleeing from the region and are attempting to get to safety via dangerous routes through North Africa. Many fall into the hands of human traffickers, who kidnap and terrorize them in torture camps“, says Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber, who heads the ecumenical and overseas work of the EKD. Indeed, the Egyptian authorities recently destroyed one of the biggest torture camps on the Sinai peninsula.

According to recent findings the problem has now shifted in the direction of Libya. It must still be assumed that brutal human trafficking gangs are active. “The interna-

tional community must not stand by and watch while the lives of countless people are destroyed.“

Since 2009 there have been reports that refugees and migrants are kidnapped by local bands of robbers and sold to human traffickers. Estimates by the United Nations assume that thousands in the past years have been tortured on the Sinai peninsula. The vast majority of the victims come from Eritrea, but also from crisis areas like the Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.

Many trust themselves during their flight to traffickers or are forcibly abducted from refugee camps. Should the relatives not come up with the huge ransom money, the hostages are further tortured or killed. It must not be, says Bosse-Huber, that „in the region a lawless zone exists, in which fundamental human rights are not protected.“

Hannover, 10 December 2014
Translation: Roxana Kawall

Lampedusa and Sinai – Linked by Tragedy

The shipwreck of Lampedusa and the torture camps on Sinai have become symbols of the unscrupulous human trafficking with refugees from Eritrea. The 26-year-old Nataniel has survived both – and much more.

Two human tragedies will forever scar the memories of Eritreans from the past decade, during which hundreds of thousands fled repression and despair in their homeland to seek sanctuary in a more open, democratic society: the brutal kidnapping, torture and ransom of refugees in the Egyptian Sinai and the drowning of hundreds more in the Mediterranean when their criminally unseaworthy and over-crowded boats went down, a disaster epitomized by the October 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck.

Each of these captured the attention of the international media, if fleetingly. But the two phenomena are connected by more than the fact that so many of the victims come from the small northeast African state of Eritrea, which has lost as much as one-fifth of its population of 4-5 million over the past decade. They also offer a window into the horrifying practice of human trafficking that stalks the Eritreans in their quest for a safe haven. None of the many hundreds I have interviewed over the past three years in Africa, the Middle East, North America and Europe typifies this more than Nataniel, whom I met in the Swedish town of Lindesberg in October 2014. He, like most I spoke with, asked that his family name be withheld to protect them from retribution at home.

Nataniel was one of the fortunate few who survived the Lampedusa shipwreck, but that was only the last of the trials he faced. His reasons for fleeing Eritrea were typical of many of the young men and women making this journey over the last several years, though his odyssey had more agonizing twists and turns than most. Now 26, he was born and raised in Asmara. The youngest of four children, he has an older brother in the Eritrean army and two sisters still living at home. He had only finished ninth grade when he turned 18 in 2006 and was told he was “too old” to be in school. He was then called up for national service, trained at the Sawa Military Camp in Eritrea’s western lowlands and assigned to an infantry unit where he remained until 2008.

He told me that in those two years he lost all hope for his own future after being denied the chance to return to school and seeing others who had been in service for as long as 14 or 15 years under similar circumstances. Fearing he would be tortured and humiliated after a “fight” with his immediate superior, he fled. “I left to find a better life,” he says, having little idea then of the myriad hardships and dangers he would confront on the journey or much of an idea of where the journey might end.

His unit was in the Barentu-Tokombia area, not far from the Badme Plain where the 1998-2000 Border War with Ethiopia broke out and which is today the reason Ethiopia and Eritrea remain in a confrontation often described as one of “no-peace-no-war.” Badme was awarded to Eritrea by an international boundary commission in 2002, but Ethiopia refused to give it up and Eritrea refuses to negotiate. The standoff has become the rationale for an undeclared state of emergency within Eritrea under which a previously ratified Constitution has been left unimplemented, elections have been indefinitely postponed and all dissent has been branded as traitorous. It is also the reason used to justify the open-ended terms of national service.

Nataniel slipped out of his camp one night with his AK-47 assault rifle and a hand grenade, which he says was to make sure he would not be captured and taken back, and he walked eight hours by himself to the border. Once across, Ethiopian authorities registered him and sent him to the Mai Aini refugee camp, one of two such camps at the time in northwestern Tigray. (Two more have been established since 2008.) Nataniel spent two years there with little to do but count the days and dream of something better, as there was then no school at the level he had reached and little work. To that point his story is fairly typical of thousands of young Eritreans who have ended up in such camps in Ethiopia or Sudan.

But Nataniel wanted more, so he contacted relatives abroad to get support to pay smugglers to get him first to Sudan and then across Libya where he could catch a place on a boat to Europe. In July 2010, he paid an Eritrean to get him to Sudan and set off one night in the back of a Toyota pick-up with 26 other refugees. The journey to the border was to take four days, traveling only at night, but they never quite reached their destination, the frontier town of Humera. Ethiopian soldiers caught them and took the entire group, all Eritreans, prisoner. But Nataniel speaks Amharic, a major Ethiopian language, and he insisted he was Ethiopian, not Eritrean, just a migrant hitching a ride, so they let him go and he

walked the rest of the way to Humera. After two days there, he paid a stranger 200 Ethiopian birr to get him across the border to the Sudanese town of Hamdeit. This time he was not so lucky.

Almost as soon as they got to Sudan they were captured by armed men, whom Nataniel at first thought were Sudanese military. His captors drove for ten hours into the desert to a remote camp where more armed men were waiting with 15 other prisoners and a convoy of more than a dozen Toyota pick-ups all loaded with contraband, much of it small arms. These were smugglers from the Rashaida people who live along the Eritrea-Sudan border and have been trafficking in illicit goods cross the region for decades. In recent years, they've come to see young Eritreans from the mainly Christian central highlands as a new revenue source and have been kidnapping them from Sudan refugee camps and along the border to sell them to traffickers in the Sinai. Nataniel quickly realized where he was – and where he was headed.

The group set off almost immediately and drove eight days across northern Sudan and Egypt to reach the Sinai where they demanded \$3,500 from each of their “passengers” before they would release them, which Nataniel got through



Alberti Pizzoli/AFP/Getty Images

Port of Lampedusa, October 3, 2013: A ship of the Italian Guardia Finanza has just returned from rescue operation. The boat Nathaniel came with caught fire and sunk - he was one of the people who was saved.

a relative in the Netherlands. But he was not let go—he was instead handed off to Bedouin traffickers who took him and 42 others in two pick-up trucks to a compound near the Israeli border where they demanded another \$22,000 and threatened to kill all of them if they didn't raise the money.

There were 36 men and seven women, thrown into a windowless room with one toilet, a dirt floor and nothing to sleep on but what they carried. Each day their captors came and demanded money, handing them cell phones and insisting they call relatives abroad to get it. Several came up with part of it—\$5,000, \$7,000—but none could raise enough. Still, they kept demanding more and beating their victims over and over as they shouted for them to find a way to get it, according to Nataniel. "They would smoke hashish or marijuana and then come to beat you," he says. "You don't say anything, and they just beat you." They also started taking the women out with them, one by one, and raping them, sometimes forcing them to stay with them through the night.

At last, despairing of being released, Nataniel and his friends approached the women and asked them to steal a key to the room where the others were being held after the men had gotten high and fallen asleep. One Friday, the traffickers took three of the women. At 1:30 a.m., one returned with a key and a cell phone and let the captives out.

Once they were alone in the desert, they called an Eritrean in Italy, Alganesh Fessaha, who has helped hundreds of trafficking victims through her NGO, the Gandhi Association. Known to Eritreans as "Doctor Alganesh" both for her knowledge of medicine and the healing impact of her ministrations, she told them not to move while she called a sympathetic Bedouin sheikh to organize a rescue party. But the traffickers showed up first and the next thing the freed captives heard was shooting, sending them off in all directions. Three were killed, according to Nataniel. One woman was wounded so badly she couldn't continue. Her husband stopped to care for her, he says. He never saw them again. For four hours, the survivors walked, using the stars to keep from going in circles, all the while aware that their captors were also stalking them. At six, with dawn breaking, they saw a flag over a group of tents and went to ask for help. They had stumbled into an Egyptian army camp, though, and they were immediately arrested and taken to prison, where they remained for five months.

Sinai prisons are austere affairs, one-story fortresses filled with large empty rooms, each with a single toilet at one end, perhaps a barred window, a peephole

in the door and a few straw mats on the cold concrete floor for sleeping. Men are grouped according to the crime they're accused of and women are kept separately. Last year I visited two of them with Alganesh, who was bringing food and medicines to former kidnap victims jailed under similar circumstances.

Early in 2011 a representative of the Eritrean embassy came to the prison where Nataniel was and told him and the others to let the Egyptians send them back to Eritrea. However, fearing imprisonment and torture if they accepted, they instead asked the Egyptians to bring someone from the Ethiopian embassy who said Ethiopia would accept them if they wanted to claim they were Ethiopian nationals, but they would have to pay their own airfare. Nataniel says he and the others got on the phone, raised the money, then flew to Addis Ababa and immediately set about organizing a trip to Sudan. Twenty-five days and \$600-per-person later, they left.

Nataniel spent two months in the Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan before moving on to the capital, Khartoum, where he settled in for a year and a half, finding a job driving a taxi and getting married. But life was difficult, security was tenuous and there was no improvement in sight, so in June 2013, he set out once again, this time for Libya and a boat to Europe, paying smugglers an advance of \$1,000. But bad luck seemed to trail his every move.

Near the point where Sudan, Chad, Egypt and Libya meet, their truck was stopped by an outlaw band calling themselves "Chad", according to Nataniel. He doesn't know if that's where they were from or it was just a gang tag, but they were the most brutal group he'd yet encountered.

The Chad gang kept them for two months with barely enough food and water to survive, while demanding a ransom of \$5,000 apiece and again providing cell phones for them to beg for it from relatives. There were 131 captives this time, all Eritreans, according to Nataniel, nearly all of whom insisted they couldn't come up with it, as they'd already paid everything they could raise for the journey. Again, there were beatings to go with the demands, but starvation was their worst fear. At last, the kidnappers agreed to \$3,000 per person. Any who could not come up with that would die. The captives were told to arrange for it to handed over in cash to a contact in the city of Omdurman, across the Nile from Khartoum. Those paying had either to travel to Sudan to do this or arrange for someone to do it for them. At last, the money was delivered and the convoy set off again for Tripoli.

By this time, September, it was getting late in the season to attempt a sea crossing. Nevertheless, Nataniel paid a smuggler another \$1,800 for the chance to try. At 2 a.m. on October 2, he boarded a small two-level vessel crammed with 520 refugees and migrants. Most were Eritreans, but there were Ethiopians, Somalis, West Africans, and Arabs, all poor and all desperate to get to Europe for a chance to change their lives. Nataniel found a spot on the top deck, under a blazing sun, the wind blowing, no roof or cover and only the food and water they had snuck on board, as they'd been warned not to bring anything that would add weight. The trip was to take three days, but by the evening of the second day, they could see the lights of a city—Lampedusa, their destination.

At this point the engine failed and the vessel lost all power. The captain, frantic to signal the island for help as the ship began to drift away, lit a torch to get attention. But there had apparently been a fuel leak and a raging fire broke out. It all happened so fast it was hard to register the events that followed, according to Nataniel. But people panicked, ran to the side away from the flames, and the boat flipped, sending everyone into the water at once. The boat went down almost immediately, leaving little to hold onto but bits of floating debris.

Nataniel was one of the few who knew how to swim, having learned as a child at the Gurgusum Beach outside of Massawa, Eritrea's main port, when the concession was managed by an Italian entrepreneur. In a touch of irony, it is run today by the Eritrean government using mostly national service conscripts to staff it. He says he spent four hours in the water in the dark with six other passengers trying to reach the shore but not seeming to get any closer. Still, they managed to stay afloat until dawn, when at last a sailboat happened on them and hauled them on board. When the crew heard what had taken place, they called the Italian Navy for help. Soon afterward, four ships steamed up to begin a rescue operation. One of the vessels pulled up to the sailboat and took the exhausted swimmers off before joining the effort to find and rescue other survivors. They found 157 people still alive, many of whom had lasted that long by clinging to floating bodies. There were no life jackets, according to Nataniel. By most counts, 369 died. The navy found 120 of them and retrieved their bodies.

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Where There is a Will There is Always a Way

On their journey to a better future many Eritrean refugees must endure unimaginable horrors and humiliations. Those who survive and reach Israel have to start a life as so called illegal infiltrators. But even under these hard circumstances they don't give up – despite all traumas.

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

(Emily Dickinson 1830 – 1886)

In the town of Adi Keyh, in the southern regions of Eritrea, is an area colloquially known as 'Via Tel Aviv'. The gleaming, brand new housing developments are evidence of the injection of funds from abroad. Every family that owns a house here has a relative who now lives outside the country. These expatriate relatives are men and women who have made the most arduous of journeys. They have illegally crossed Eritrea's borders, made it through the wastes of the Sahara Desert and survived human trafficking to finally land up in Tel Aviv. There they take any job they can find, adding to the extensive workforce of Eritrean refugees – labelled as 'illegal infiltrators' by the Israeli authorities. But they do not forget their obligations to their families and the remittances they send home can be seen in the new housing of 'Via Tel Aviv.'

I have many friends who now live on the margins of society in Tel Aviv; they queue for hours every month to renew the piece of paper that actually tells them, and everyone who comes across them, that they are in fact in the country illegally. There is absolutely nothing anyone in authority is willing to do to rectify the situation and make it possible for them to enjoy their convention rights as refugees, as specified by the United Nations.

In 2014 the Eritrean community in Tel Aviv decided they would take it no longer – particularly as new measures were being introduced to make their lives even

harsher. The community went on strike – staging a series of walkouts. They gathered at a park in a run-down district of South Tel Aviv that is home to some 40,000 ‘undocumented’ Eritrean refugees.

The response from their Israeli employers couldn’t have been more dramatic! They begged them to come back, even staging solidarity rallies of their own. There was simply no one to wash dishes; the farms were deserted and fruits lay rotting; the streets were full of litter and assembly lines lay idle. The farms, hotels and other businesses are reliant on this exceptionally amenable and hard-working workforce, whose members are grateful of the opportunity to work all hours and demand nothing but the minimum wage. No one else in the country will put up with these conditions.

I once had a conversation with a remarkable young Eritrean man who told me of his absolutely harrowing survival story. Out of a group of thirty-two friends

Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images



On January 7, 2014 refugees from Eritrea and Sudan in Tel Aviv demonstrate against their internment in camps and the refused recognition of their status as refugees.

and relatives who set out together to make the journey from Eritrea to Europe via Malta only three survived. Today he is a final year engineering student in a London university and his heroism deserves a blockbuster movie treatment. Yet when I asked him if his family or his friends knew the odds he beaten to make it to London and higher education he shrugged. “Who cares?” he said. “Who wants to know? All my family are interested in is that I survived and I am in Europe. I made it!”

In Tel Aviv, almost everyone has a similar story to tell. My friend Zebib used to run a Women’s centre in Tel Aviv, helping fellow refugee women and their children trying to piece together their fragmentary existence. Through my involvement with the centre I came to know many of these women and to hear their stories. Senait (not her real name) was a first class student back in Eritrea who came from a middle class family that was committed to the education of their children. Her father’s only dream was to see her progress with her studies. She too had a dream: to become a journalist, but in Eritrea both their dreams were impossible to realise – there is no free press of any kind.

Senait couldn’t face the reality of having to undergo endless years of national service, doing whatever the government decided. She crossed the border, crossed the Sahara and went through Sinai until she came to Israel. There she was detained for several months. She was only released on condition that she would work as a fruit picker for several months. Still she didn’t give up her dream of a good education and a career. She never told her family what she did for a living and how she lived. She got on with her life as a farm hand. It was only when she had an accident and damaged her legs that she actually almost gave up in desperation.

Today she is married and has a beautiful little girl, who probably has everything a girl of her age would want: two adoring parents who spend every last penny they earn on her. I asked Senait about her own dream and her response still rings in my ears. “Look at me... I work all hours to earn the basics, I haven’t read a single book in so many years, no one knows how big my dream used to be, all they see is the refugee I have become, sometimes I too feel that is all I am, all I have become. The only thing that keeps me going is my responsibilities to my little girl. She deserves a future that is not limited by the status of her parents: she is a brilliant little girl, she deserves the best of futures, and that is what I am going to give her.”

That conversation gave me an insight into the real purpose of the new housing in 'Via Tel Aviv' and the many weddings, christenings, birthdays etc. that are celebrated in South Tel Aviv every week. They are the physical representation of the glimmer of hope that persists in this refugee community despite their traumatic past and their grim present. They are what many women at the centre use to give meaning to an otherwise fragmentary, dulling and meaningless routine that is far removed from the dreams they harboured before leaving Eritrea.

Meanwhile back at the centre, Zebib and others were trying to put together programmes for the women; an advice session, language classes, child care facilities. For me something was missing –something that is essential in my own life: a bit of fun. I desperately tried to interest the women in some such activity. 'A movie night perhaps?' My suggestion was met with blank stares.

"Ok, maybe something else; what do you ladies do in your spare time?" Manna (not her real name) was the first to respond. Everything about Manna including her tall slender body and her practical attire and footwear, tell of her resilience. Manna explains to me that she works endless hours as a chamber-maid, so she can earn enough money to buy her way out of Israel. She has been cheated out of her hard-earned money a couple of times before by people who promised her a way out. Given how hard Manna works for hours on end, one might expect her to be devastated at the loss of such large sums and prone to despair. Not Manna. For her, planning her exit is the only way of keeping hope alive.

Three years after that planning evening in Tel Aviv and no doubt after several more failed attempts to leave, I saw a picture of Manna on Facebook. In the background the unmistakable grey sky of Northern Europe and enough snow which told she had finally made it. I was so excited for her. Finally, I could stop being sad about her statement from all those months ago: '...Sometimes even in my dreams I am folding sheets and making beds. If I wasn't working at a hotel on the seafront I wouldn't even have known I lived near the sea side. Everything I do is centred on my dream of getting out of here.'

Of course, not all of the women I met have stories of resilience. Some carry the terrible scars of their journeys. Hanna (not her real name), left Eritrea as a teenager. The eldest of a family of several younger siblings and cousins, she was looked after and supported by her lone mother, who worked as a cleaner in Asmara. Hanna thought she was now old enough to find a way of supporting the family herself. She crossed the border. Little did she know that her 'chosen' route

would land her into the hands of traffickers who would sell her several times over, gang rape her mercilessly and beat her until she lost the use of several muscles in one leg.

The story of her escape and arrival in Tel Aviv is a story that could fill volumes. Sadly, her physical scars were nothing compared to the emotional scars that lay deep within her. She couldn't keep a job, for the demands of such long hours and hard labour were beyond what her weakened muscles could cope with. She was too emotionally fragile to cope with friendships and the many sexual advances from men who were simply unable to see what lay just underneath her youthful appearances and urbane demeanour. Finally, her search for solace led her into the clutches of a religious cult leader who took advantage of her vulnerability and inexperience. He isolated her from the little support that she would have received from fellow refugee women. All Hanna ever sought from him (and what he promised her) was that he would exorcise the demons of Sinai from her tormented soul. A few months after our last meeting a common friend reported to me that the 'priest' claimed to have exorcised the Sinai demons and was working on the Tel Aviv ones. Hanna was never the same again. My friend asked "what hope is there for her if the demons are even here in Tel Aviv?"

The utility of hope

At about that time I started thinking about what allows these men and women to adjust to the harsh realities of life as an 'illegal infiltrator' in Tel Aviv, without resorting to negative coping mechanisms including alcohol and domestic violence (which are also prevalent.) I also started wondering if we should think of these terrible, hazardous journeys from Eritrea as positive acts of positive hope, rather than the desperate measures of a generation faced with the despair of Eritrea's current reality.

Perhaps it is a hopefulness instilled into this generation of Eritreans by their parents and grandparents; a residual trait from the legacy of the independence struggle and the near miracle of successfully confronting Ethiopia backed by first one and then the other superpower – the USA and then the USSR. Perhaps this drives young Eritreans to be ever so hopeful and willing to overcome endless obstacles in the realisation of their goal of getting out of their country.

Although I don't have concrete empirical data, a majority of those leaving Eritrea are under 30 years of age. In Tel Aviv, I would say most are about 26. They would

have been mere toddlers 23 years ago, at Eritrea's independence celebrations. The oldest were probably carrying palm branches and dancing on the streets and the youngest would have been on their mother's backs as they danced. During the euphoric post-independence years many would have had their psychological births, the age at which a baby realises that she or he is separate from other entities (including the caregiver). From this point on it is the village that is raising the child (in Eritrea it still takes a village). The community and its hopes are instilled in the young.

Where previous generations of Eritreans were taught bitter perseverance and sacrifice, this generation of Eritreans have been brought up on a staple diet of sweet victory and the achievement of a longed-for goal (an important element of hopeful thinking). If this hypothesis is true, then hopefulness is something of a double-edged sword for Eritrea's young. It is both the force that is making it possible for them to choose exile as a pathway to goal attainment and it is perhaps the trait that makes it possible for them to survive the most difficult of circumstances. Hope allows them to work all hours and still manage to turn up at weddings looking ever so elegant, with immaculately turned out children on tow, on their only free day of the week.

Propelled by hope

Theorists define hope as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and to motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways¹. Goals can be short-term or long-term, and inevitably they will vary significantly in terms their importance or probability of attainment. When a goal is appraised and if it is of high enough importance then the person moves to a phase where they consider the pathway and the agency.

Pathways represent a person's perceived ability to devise workable routes to goals, the resolve that makes people say: 'I will find a way to get this done'.² People with high hope are more often than not able to imagine multiple routes, and herein lies the factor that is the real difference. Agency is the motivational component that propels people along their imagined pathway towards their goal. It is the mental will-power characterised by the internal speech such as: 'I am not going to be stopped'. Like the ability to devise alternative route, agentic thinking is also crucial as it provides the necessary motivation that ought to be channelled to alternative routes.

Researchers have also found a link between higher hope and successful coping with unforeseen stressors (barriers to goal)³, enabling individuals to think effectively about the future, with full appreciation of the fact that, at times they will face major life stressors. By contrast low hope individuals are more likely to consider the future as bleak and catastrophic.

Successful adjustment is dependent on the ability to cope with major stressors by reducing, eliminating or containing them. High hope individuals are more likely to be flexible enough to find alternative goals in the face of immutable goal blockages. My friends building houses and supporting their families in comparative comfort in 'Via Tel Aviv' back in Adi Keyh have found a worthy alternative goal. This allows them to cope with the fact that they are stuck in Israel without the prospects of making the lives they envisaged for themselves.

In my work with many refugees (from Eritrea and elsewhere), I have come across many people who are all too willing to entertain fantasies about 'magically' escaping their particular entrapment; unfortunately, it sounds as if Hanna may have fallen for this when she agreed to go through abusive rituals as solution. Others in Tel Aviv demanded that we talk to the UNHCR and effect their resettlement from Israel. All this is a form of disengaged (avoidant) coping behaviour, more akin to low hope individuals, and often results in an unhealthy consequence, as well as a missed opportunity for learning from the experience of overcoming goal blockages.

Clearly the capacity that some Eritrean Refugee women have shown for coping with numerous adversities and the fact that many may have even thrived as a result of this experience is a bitter-sweet triumph. Others have simply not had the opportunity or ability to contemplate the alternative pathways that may have been available to them.

Conclusion: A hopeful agenda for Eritrea

In October 2013, a boat carrying Eritreans sank and 366 people died. Eritreans across the world grieved, with the bitterest expression of anguish coming from a massive memorial service held in Levensky Park in South Tel Aviv. The torment of unrealised hope had come to haunt them: even after every pathway had been pursued some goals can be unattainable.

A few months later the same crowd gathered in the same park refusing to go back to work until the Israelis sort out their refugee policies. The same men and women gathered and demonstrated their determination to dismantle every barrier to them attaining their goal of living their dream of stability and security. The women's centre was abuzz with activities, organising the women and children protest day, hosting information session for wives of diplomats, organising food rota for the protestors and child care facilities for those who needed one: a sign that Eritreans in Tel Aviv always find a way back to hope.

The policies of both the Eritrean and Israeli governments have so little hope to offer Eritrean youth. Yet they are unable to delete the hope programmed into their psyches by the villagers that brought them up. If hope is such a persistent feature of Eritreans, there is a good chance that the Eritrean nation will be able to reverse every obstacle that is placed before us.

It is the low hope policies of the regime in Eritrea that have become an immovable blockage preventing the realisation of the goals of our people. The search for alternative pathways leads many frustrated young people to choosing exile. Therefore, the task of those of us fighting for a better Eritrea should include fighting for a high hope government with policies that facilitate the removal of blockages to the attainment of the goals of its citizens. We should also fight for policies that facilitate the setting and achieving of collective goals that enables the entire society to gain common benefits. And finally, as my friends have so clearly demonstrated, where there is a will there is always a way.

Selam Kidane is an Eritrean Human Rights activist. She is cofounder of the Anti-Slavery-Campaign and living in London.

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Three Women Who Are Taking on the Regime

Feruz Werede, Selam Kidane and Meron Estefanos are finding ways of challenging one of the most repressive states in Africa.

Eritrea – bordering on the Red Sea – is a land of extremes. The searing heat of its deserts and the harness of the mountains are softened by abundant valleys and a green, fertile plateau. Much the same can be said of its politics. Fierce and stubborn in their 30-year war of independence from Ethiopia that ended in May 1991, the Eritrean people briefly held the promise of a model state, with an open democracy and real hopes of prosperity.

Yet today Eritrea is among the most repressive states in Africa. Thousands of its youth, desperate to escape interminable conscription, flee the country, running the risk of drowning in the Mediterranean or being sold to people-traffickers in the Sinai. These tragic facts are never far from the minds of the Eritrean diaspora, some 17,000 of whom have made England and Wales their home, according to the most recent census. In a flat in central London, two bouncy little girls play on the family couch. Their elder sister, keen to get on with her homework, shoos them off to bed.

For their mother, Feruz Werede, it's the end of a long day at work. With the supper cleared away, her campaigning begins. Feruz collates a lengthy report to be sent to British politicians. She's campaigning against a tax imposed on the diaspora by the Eritrean government. "If you don't pay the tax – 2 per cent of all your income, in addition to the tax you already pay to the British government – you can do nothing for your family back home," she explains.

The tax is collected from the moment any Eritrean starts working. Even students must pay £50 (ca. 56 Euro) a year. For many in this immigrant community, this means scraping together their meagre savings, or borrowing from friends. "Even if you want to send clothes home, you have to be 'cleared' by the Eritrean embassy," says Feruz. "Want to register your child or get a passport? It's just the same!"

The tax was outlawed by the UN Security Council and her campaign, launched last month, is beginning to pay dividends. In reply to a question from Lord Dubs – Alf Dubs – the government minister, Lord Dolar Popat replied that Britain had condemned the tax and called on the Eritrean ambassador in October last year to cease using illicit means to collect it. Answering Lady Dianne Hayter, the Foreign Office Minister, Baroness Warsi explained that Eritreans were “urged” to report “any use of coercion or other illicit means” of collecting the tax to the police.

But why does Feruz spend her few spare hours fighting the government of a country she no longer lives in? She was born “in the field,” as Eritreans say. Her parents were fighters during Eritrea’s long war of independence. She grew up in the liberated zone that was under rebel control. “My parents together gave 40 years of their life to the struggle and achieved the impossible. They – and so many other Eritreans – who fought for independence did not do so for tyranny, dictatorship and one man rule,” she says. “This was not our dream!”

Feruz is not alone. Across London, Selam Kidane has been running another, remarkable campaign. “Freedom Friday,” as it has been called, has been using phone-banks to get through to Eritreans back home. A group of Eritreans in the diaspora, armed with nothing more than phone cards, began dialling numbers at random to convince their compatriots that they were not alone in opposing the regime. “Freedom Friday” then hit on the idea of using the technology developed by telemarketing – robocalls. These uses a computerised autodialer to deliver a pre-recorded message. Not wonderful but better than the isolation that has descended over a country that has absolutely no independent media. Today the campaign has found means of smuggling posters and pamphlets back home. Local people paste them up whenever the regime is not looking.

In Sweden, another Eritrean mother, Meron Estefanos, is probably the best-known of these feisty campaigners. She is a presenter with Radio Erena, an opposition station broadcasting into Eritrea. It was while broadcasting back home that she was contacted by Eritreans attempting to find refuge in Israel. Traveling through Sudan and then into Egypt and the Sinai, they were easy pickings for people-smugglers.

Meron’s experience began with her family. In 2012, she received a phone call from her cousin, who had been kidnapped and taken into Sinai. Her captors were demanding \$37,000 for her release and they didn’t just use threats. Their tactic

was to put their victims on the phone to their relatives while they were being tortured. “If you’re listening to your cousin being gang-raped or burnt – the cries, the begging... you just want to end those phone calls,” said Meron. “So I collected the money [from friends and relatives] and borrowed some.” Her cousin finally ended up in an Ethiopian refugee camp, severely burnt and deeply traumatised.

Her cousin’s plight spurred Meron to action. She has been campaigning on the issue ever since, with increasing success. She teamed up with Professor Mirjam van Reisen, a foreign policy adviser to the European Commission. Together they produced a major report on the issue: “Human Trafficking in the Sinai”. The campaign has been a considerable embarrassment to the Eritrean authorities, who like to portray the country as being fully behind President Isaias Afewerki.

Together these women have begun to dent the Eritrean regime’s sense of invulnerability. A year ago there were disturbances that shook the regime to its core, with an armoured column seizing the television station. The coup was poorly planned and failed. But the president’s prestige was badly dented, making the activities of dissidents like Feruz, Selam and Meron increasingly important.

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The Eritrean Diaspora: Between Compliance and Resistance

Eritreans living abroad hold strongly opposing positions regarding the regime, and are correspondingly divided. Yet all have to pay a diaspora tax, regardless of whether they support or oppose the policies of President Isaias Afewerki.

Since the time of the independence war against Ethiopia (1961 to 1991), many Eritreans have been leaving their homeland to build a future abroad. Even at that time the exiled Eritreans were not politically unified, and the question whether Eritrea should become independent or remain a part of Ethiopia has split Eritreans much earlier. From 1890 to 1941 the small country in the Horn of Africa was an Italian colony. During World War II, it came under British administration. In those days, the majority of Muslims wanted an independent Eritrean state, and accordingly they organized themselves in the Muslim League. On the other hand, most of the highland Christians campaigned for unification with the Ethiopian Empire. They were organized in the Unionist Party, whose militant youth organization threatened and intimidated opponents. In addition, the Orthodox Church actively supported the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in his attempts to annex Eritrean territory.

Geostrategic considerations also played a role. The USA strongly pushed for a union of Eritrea with Ethiopia at the United Nations (UN). In 1950, the UN finally voted for the federation of both countries, which came into force in 1952. In theory, Eritrea was to be given a democratic constitution. However, it was immediately undermined by the autocratic empire. Political activists who had favoured independence were driven into exile – mainly to Cairo or to other Arab countries. In 1962 Emperor Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea and prohibited the official Eritrean languages Arabic and Tigrinya, which were replaced by the Ethiopian Amharic. The Eritrean parliament was disbanded.

Prolonged resistance against the Ethiopian occupiers

Resistance against the Ethiopian occupation policy arose initially primarily among the Muslim population, which makes up about half of all Eritreans. They were handled as second-class citizens by the Christian-orthodox dominated

Ethiopian empire. At the end of the 1950s, Muslim intellectuals founded the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) in Sudan, which planned a *coup d'état* and the proclamation of an independent state. However, they could not realize their goal and were crushed by the Ethiopian security apparatus. Consequently, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) started the armed struggle for independence in 1991. The movement was initially Muslim-dominated, and the leadership had their headquarters in Cairo. Haile Selassie used both the Ethiopian army and pro-Ethiopian Eritrean militias to counter the ELF and to commit atrocities against civilians. This scorched-earth policies led to the first wave of refugees to Sudan, mainly from the Muslim-dominated western lowlands. Some refugees proceeded to the Arab states or to Europe.

In 1974, the Ethiopian military staged a coup against Haile Selassie and seized political power. From then on Ethiopia was ruled by a military committee (*Derg* in Amharic), which sought to consolidate its power through violent purges such as the “Red Terror campaign”. Between 1976 and 1978, tens of thousands of people fell victim to this campaign, which was directed against the political opposition and against putative opponents of the Derg’s Chairman, Mengistu Haile Mariam. Now acts of violence and terror were also committed against the civilian population of the Christian-dominated Eritrean highlands and the capital Asmara. Consequently, many new fighters joined the ELF.

Simultaneously, several groups had split from the ELF at the beginning of the 1970s and merged to form the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) under the leadership of today’s President Isaias Afewerki. Both liberation fronts fought each other in civil wars in the mid-1970s and in the early 1980s. At the same time the Ethiopian army continued to bombard the country and to persecute civilians. Many Eritrean women and men fled their homeland in those days.

The diaspora gets organized

During that time an organized Eritrean diaspora emerged in the USA and in Europe. The war refugees supported the independence struggle from abroad, and were politically organised either within the ELF or the EPLF, and tensions between the supporters of both organisations were high. The EPLF finally drove the ELF out of Eritrea in 1982, pushing it into Sudan. Most ELF supporters did not return to Eritrea after independence, since the EPLF tolerated no rival parties within the new state.

At the time of independence (de jure:1993) around 16,000 Eritreans lived in Germany. Exact numbers are not available, as they were registered as Ethiopians upon their arrival. Most of them lived and are still living in the greater Frankfurt and Stuttgart areas, but other cities also have large Eritrean communities. Even after independence, only few of the EPLF supporters returned permanently. A repatriation programme for skilled personnel carried out by the Germany Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ, today German Agency for International Cooperation, GIZ) could only motivate around 300 persons to return to their homeland.

In the meantime, many Eritreans had started a family and preferred the material security and the better education possibilities in Germany for their children to a return to the unknown. When the war against Ethiopia broke out only five years after independence, return was no longer an option. Today the lack of democracy, the economic decline, and above all the timely unlimited National Service pose massive obstacles for diaspora Eritreans in regard to returning to their homeland.

A lucrative source of income: the diaspora tax

The Eritrean PFDJ government¹ profits nonetheless from the large number of Eritreans living in the diaspora. They are more than a million people globally; the majority lives in the Sudan or in Middle Eastern countries. Shortly after independence, Isaias Afewerki's government introduced a diaspora tax: all Eritrean men and women abroad had to pay two per cent of their income to the nearest Eritrean embassy, which would then forward it to the government. Those who refuse to pay will not receive consular services, such as the renewal of passports or the issuance of birth and marriage certificates. Especially for workers in Arab countries a valid passport is indispensable for a work permit, therefore they are forced to pay. However, Eritreans living in Europe, the USA, Canada or Australia also pay the tax because they, for example, want to buy a house in Eritrea or want their deceased being buried there. In some cases relatives living in Eritrea are being denied an extension of a business licence unless the diaspora tax is paid.

The Eritrean state receives a third of its income through remittances from abroad, either as compulsory tax or in the form of voluntary donations. This is purportedly intended as support for the families of martyrs of the independence struggle, or put into use for the "resolute national rebuff" against the interna-

tional sanctions imposed in 2009. However, there is no transparency regarding the use of the money – the government has never released a state budget.

Today, Eritreans residing permanently overseas are no longer split as straightforwardly between EPLF and ELF supporters as they had been during the 1980s and the first decade of independence. This can primarily be interpreted as a consequence of the 2001 internal political crisis.

At that time, 15 prominent representatives of the PFDJ government had urged political reforms and the implementation of the constitution ratified in 1997. Shortly after, President Isaias Afewerki had them detained along with journalists from the free press. None of them has since been put to trial and most of them are presumed to have died due to the inhumane prison conditions. Consequently, many former supporters of the government turned away from the regime and founded the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP) in the diaspora.

Opposition is only possible from abroad

Today the Eritrean opposition parties in exile are mainly composed of former ELF splinter groups, PFDJ dissidents, as well as ethnically or religiously motivated movements. Most are members of the opposition coalition Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). However, they are lacking a convincing political agenda, and their ability for action is weakened by chronic internal conflict. The majority of Eritreans have little hope that these parties can trigger a reform process of in the country. Nonetheless, a few youth movements have emerged in the diaspora in the past years, among them Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change (EYSC), which developed an action plan for democratic change in Eritrea. Important points on their agenda are to mobilise Eritreans at home, to foster dialogue and reconciliation between estranged opposition groups, as well as the development of mass media and the inclusion of artists in the resistance.² The most active group is *Arbi Harnet* (equivalent to “Freedom Friday”, in reference to the Friday demonstrations during the Arab Spring), which is a network of activists who are trying to encourage the population inside Eritrea to resist the regime through telephone calls and other activities. Other groups such as Human Rights Concern Eritrea lobby for the thousands of Eritreans stranded in Libya, Djibouti or Yemen. Some groups such as Release Eritrea concentrate on lobby work for persecuted Christian minorities.

Isaias Afewerki and the youth overseas

In 2004, the government founded the “Young PFDJ” (YPFDJ), a youth organisation for Eritreans abroad to counter growing criticism within the diaspora. The YPFDJ is supposed to keep up patriotism among the youth and to encourage them to stand in solidarity with the Eritrean government. Many young Eritreans who grew up in the diaspora feel poorly integrated and sometimes discriminated against in their respective host countries. They develop a strong Eritrean identity, since their homeland is presented to them as a “heroic nation under constant threat from outside”, as the official jargon from Asmara goes. The Eritrean government spreads conspiracy theories according to which the USA in collaboration with hostile Ethiopia works tirelessly to destroy the young Eritrean nation.

The Swedish-based Eritrean human rights activist Meron Estefanos explains the fact that the YPFDJ has such strong support among many Eritreans who grew up in democracies: “Many young people suffer from an identity crisis because of their skin colour. In addition, they are furious that so many negative things are written about ‘their’ country Eritrea. Therefore, the regime can easily brainwash them and appeal to their patriotic feelings.” These sentiments are kept alive through regular festivals with music and dance, which at the same



NurPhoto/Getty Images

Sirak, 26 is from Eritrea. He arrived in Italy in 2006, but then moved to France, then he went to England. From England he was sent back to France. Two years ago he arrived in Germany. A protestant congregation in Giessen (Germany) has given him asylum.

time serve as a source of income for the regime via entrance fees and the takings from food and drink. The YPFDJ regularly organizes concert tours in Scandinavia, Italy and the USA.

Basically, many diaspora Eritreans who are in favour of the regime in Asmara have difficulties to differentiate between Eritrea as a nation, and the former liberation front which is now ruling under the leadership of President Isaias Afewerki, and which they unconditionally recognize as “liberator” and representative of the people. Therefore, they regard regime criticism as “treason”.

Moreover, they do not suffer under the miserable living conditions that prevail in Eritrea, and are exempted from the National Service, to which their countrymen at home are subjected for the greater part of their productive lives. Many show little understanding for the current mass flight of young conscripts from the country.

When the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against Eritrea in 2009 because the government had supported armed groups in the Horn of Africa, including the jihadist Somali Al-Shabaab militia, both the government camp and the opposition camp mobilised their supporters.³ The government organized demonstrations, including in Geneva and Washington D.C., against the “unjust and illegal” sanctions. At the same time they called for a “resolute national rebuff”, which implied first and foremost a demand for financial assistance from the diaspora.

At the same time the opposition mobilised against the collection of the diaspora tax, especially after it had been declared illegal by the World Security Council in 2011 because it could be misused for purposes prohibited under the imposed sanctions. Among these were the acquisition of weapons and their delivery to rebel groups in Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

In the meantime, diaspora activists succeeded in having Eritrean diplomats expelled from Canada (2013) and Sweden (2014), who had been involved in the collection of the tax. The German government also demanded that the Eritrean Embassy in Berlin no longer levy the tax, but it now collects the money via informal channels.

The extreme polarisation of the Eritrean diaspora communities became clear once again when the UN Commission on Human Rights (COI) in Eritrea re-

leased a report in June 2015, in which it stated that the Eritrean government was answerable for grave human rights violations. The event was followed by a demonstration of government opponents who declared their support of the Commission's work in June, as well as by a rally organized by government supporters, who denounced the work of the COI as slander against the Eritrean people.

34 small opposition parties

The opposition's failure to present a credible alternative to the current government is mainly due to its fragmentation, and mutual mistrust. A diaspora community is basically a mirror of its home country, which also applies to Eritrea. The Eritrean population consists of nine different ethnic groups, each speaking their own language, and is divided roughly by half into Christians and Muslims.

Memories of the violent experiences of the past, such as the conflict over the future status of Eritrea at the time of the British Military Administration in the 1940s, persist until today. In addition, deep mistrust reigns between former ELF supporters and former EPLF supporters, the former being typically Muslim, and the latter mainly Tigrinya Christians. The Swedish member of parliament, Arhe Hamednaca, an Eritrean by birth, confirms: "There are too many small parties, around 34, and they are not based on specific ideologies, but on ethnicity, religion, or on origin from particular regions".

A further divide separates the "established diaspora", referring to those who fled during the independence struggle and who in the meantime often adopted a different citizenship, from the new arrivals. Democratic ideas are often alien to the latter – they have grown up under the EPLF/PFDJ's propaganda, and 'politics' means for them the ideology of nationalistic sacrifice and submission disseminated by the government.

Yared Fisshaye, a member of the Oslo Eritrean Youth Movement for Change, explains: "We need to take small steps with the refugees. We need to explain to them what democracy and freedom mean, because for their entire lives, they were suppressed and had to carry out only monotonous physical labour. Therefore, they lack political consciousness."

Although the government considers the new refugees who fled the endless military and national service as traitors, it attempts to exploit them as a source of financial income. Every Eritrean who has arrived overseas and is in need of

consular services, such as the issuing of a birth or marriage certificate, has to sign a letter, in which he or she attests to regret having escaped and accepts any punishment that the government considers suitable upon their return. At the same time, the refugees agree to immediately start the payment of the two per cent tax, which is also levied on the social assistance they receive from the host country.

Currently, it looks as if the government is gradually losing its support among the diaspora, partially due to its cold-hearted stance on the tragic accident at Lampedusa, during which more than 300 Eritrean boat refugees drowned in October 2013. Eritrean state media initially spoke of the victims as “illegal African migrants” who had died. Later the government attempted to blame the USA for the human trafficking of refugees. This caused outrage among the Eritrean diaspora, and the famous singer Wedi Tikabo, who up to that time used to sing the praises of Isaias Afewerki's government, and was on a US-tour promoting the PFDJ, changed sides and turned his back on the regime. It remains to be hoped that his fans will follow his example.

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- 1 In 1991 the EPLF took over the de facto government in Eritrea. At a congress in 1994 it re-named itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), without giving up its Marxist organizational structure. The party leadership consists of a central committee and a politburo; however, both committees were neutralized by the president and are no longer active.
- 2 Press release: Bologna Summit 2014 Concludes with a Road Map to End the Reign of Dictatorial Regime in Eritrea, <http://www.eysc.net/?p=952>.
- 3 For more details see: Hirt, Nicole 2015: 'The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN Sanctions', in: *African Affairs* 114 (454), 115 -135; Hirt, Nicole 2013: *The Eritrean Diaspora: Savior or Gravedigger of the Regime? Diaspora Responses to the Implementation of Sanctions*. GIGA Working Paper No. 236, http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/system/files/publications/wp236_hirt.pdf.

The Limited Influence of the Diaspora

About one million Eritreans live abroad. They could contribute a lot to the development of their homeland. But the regime in Asmara is not in favour of this and stokes additional differences among them.

Diasporas of different backgrounds are noted to maintain linkages with the countries of origin in ways that entail multiple and simultaneous transnational networks. Most acknowledged are relations with family and next of kin, culture, sentimental and material links (Sheffer, 2003). Still the most significant determinant factor in the diaspora ties with country of origin is the position of the state on the role of diasporas. The government policies and relations with its diasporas are very significant for the return of diasporas and their engagement in the local development processes. The relations can be cooperative or antagonistic depending on how a group emerged in the diaspora. These relations can lead to restrictive or open policies for diaspora engagement.

Diaspora engagement has received mixed attention with one strand of literature focusing on the role in conflicts (Demmers, 2002) and another emphasizing their role in peace building and development (Van Hear, 2003). However, diaspora ability to return and to contribute through transnational activities depends on the political environment in the country of origin. Eritrean diasporas fall into the category of political and conflict-induced diasporas (Lyons, 2007). Eritrean diaspora relations with the government are characterized by long-distance nationalism (Glick Schiller, 2002) and a more controlling approach by the ruling party. Eritreans make contributions to the home country through mandatory remittance. Still they maintain ambivalent contact and relations with Eritrea and the regime.

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which Eritrean Diasporas maintain link with the country of origin and what development outcomes are likely within the current circumstances of constricted political space (see Ong'ayo, 2014b). Understanding the extent to which Eritrean diaspora can collectively engage in local development processes in the country of origin this requires exploration of the complex relationships between local, national, and transnational forces in the construction of identity politics and the interests served by such a politics. While located far from home, the Eritrean government closely monitors Eritrean diasporas with different tools deployed in this process.

This paper is organised as follows. Section one provides an overview of the influence of political context in Eritrea on long distance relations between Eritrean diaspora and country of origin. Section two examines the nature of Eritrean diaspora collective organising. Section three analyses the nature of Eritrean diaspora engagement with country of origin and how this impact on their involvement with local communities. The final section summarizes of the main conclusion points.

Political context in Eritrea and emergence of Eritrean diaspora

Eritrean diasporas in the Netherlands can be traced back to the regime conditions in Ethiopia prior to independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The liberation struggles waged by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the 1960s and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) against the Derg regime, the civil war that ensued in 1980s-1990s, and forced conscription (Bereketeab, 2004), forced many Eritreans to flee the country. In recent years Eritrea refugees continue to leave the country with majority heading towards regional countries that act as transit routes namely Sudan, Ethiopia and across to the Middle East and eventually to European countries (table 1). In the first half of 2014 Eritrean refugees have been heading to Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands as popular destinations in Europe.

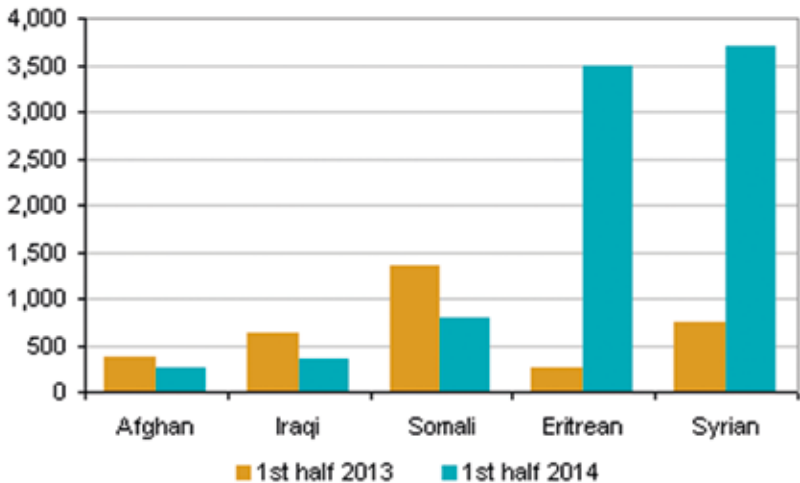
Table 1: Top 5 countries of residence for Eritrean migrants (2013)

Country	Numbers
Sudan	144 170
Saudi Arabia	39 834
United States of America	36 565
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	20 172
United Emirates	17 404
Total	258 145

Source: UNDESA (2014)

As at 2014 there were about 2,595 Eritreans in the Netherlands. As figure 1 shows the arrival of Eritrean refugees to the Netherlands has increased significantly from 2013, with first half of 2014 recording the second highest (3,500) after Syrians (CBS, 2014). Up to 3,000 Eritreans flee every month in escape from harsh regime conditions, human rights abuses, torture and detentions (Tecle and Hepner, 2013). An estimated 95 percent of the refugees held hostages in the Sinai are Eritreans (Van Reisen et al. 2013). This is because Eritreans encounter strict controls in terms of legal exit from the country (Bozzini, 2011).

Figure 1: Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands 2013-2014



Eritrean diaspora collective organising in the Netherlands

Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands is composed of several groups along political, ethnic (Tigrinya, Hamasen, Sahawa, Kunama among others) and religious (Christians and Muslims) identities. A conservative estimate suggests some 30 groupings mainly operational in the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. A variety of motives (box 1) and contextual factors influence collective organising among Eritreans in the Netherlands.

Motives for collective organising by Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands

- Welfare of the community members
- Maintaining of Culture and traditions
- Advocating for the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers
- Democratisation and respect for human rights in Eritrea
- To change socio-economic conditions in Eritrea through philanthropy

Source: Adapted from Ong'ayo [2014a]

A major motive, is advocacy for the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands and democratisation and respect of human rights in Eritrea¹. Examples include Eritreans for Justice and Democracy – Benelux (EJDB), Eritrean Association Amsterdam and Environment, the Eritrean Platform Netherlands and Eritrean Liberation Front-RC (ELF-RC). The main political party in Eritrea the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is also represented in the diaspora and enlisted as a diaspora organisation.

From an institutional perspective, Eritrean diaspora organisations in the Netherlands have access to Political Opportunity Structures (Ong'ayo 2014a/b) that includes favourable policy, institutional and legislative framework. Subsidies provided by the Dutch institutions and development agencies at the national and local government levels also facilitate diaspora participation in policy processes. However very few Eritrean organisations have access to subsidies and are hardly involved in host country policy processes such as the annual policy consultation meetings at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs or diaspora platforms such a Diaspora Forum for development (DFD). Eritreans undertake fundraising for within their community, which is a sign of self-reliance but also lack of knowledge about subsidies available through different institutions.² These traits have implications for transnational engagement since they shape activity choices and strategies.

Transnational activities towards the country of origin

Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands have broad networks and are highly connected at the transnational level by modern technology, especially the use of internet. ICT has significant influence on diaspora networks (Vertovec, 2004), as it brings together groups and individuals originating from one particular country or region. Through the Internet and digital media diasporas maintain linkages with countries of origin (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

The relationships between Eritrean diasporas and country of origin is an ambivalent one in terms of loyalty (voluntary or involuntary). It is always in constant shift based on political and policy choices of the government and migrants' transnational political practices. The relationship is rather dominated by coercion (direct and indirect) as the government largely focus on the diasporas for the purpose of mobilisation and surveillance (Bozzini, 2011). This derives from the high premium that government places on its diaspora namely the 20 percent diaspora contribution during the armed struggle against Ethiopia and post war 2 percent tax which has been institutionalised with embassies and consulates as collection points abroad (Hepner, 2009). Some Eritrean groups question the rationale for continued payment, when the Ethiopian-Eritrean war is over³. However, payment of this tax determines access to public services and other opportunities including investment or engaging local development.

Eritrean diaspora engagement with the country of origin dates back to the struggles for independence, continued direct and indirect contributions to the local economy through remittances and political support from a distance. Diaspora remittances serve as a major earner of foreign exchange that ends up in banks controlled by the government. Diasporas sympathetic to the regime also serves the interest of the regime in image management and taking on opponents of the regime especially spies within the Eritrean diaspora communities (see Bozzini, 2011). These agents continue the policy of surveillance during the asylum.⁴ These observations reveal the role of high-ranking military officials in border crossings through laissez-passers (Bozzini, 2011) and human trafficking (Van Reisen et al. 2013). Eritrean diaspora relations with the government confirm that diaspora networks act as important 'facilitators of internal, inter-state, and worldwide political, cultural and economic connections' (Sheffer 2003).

Eritreans operate in a politically constricted space (Ong'ayo, 2014b). Opposition groups mainly undertake activities that focus on democracy and human rights.⁵

Others include petitions, demonstration and mobilisation, lobbying and advocacy to influence policy in the host countries. For example, in 2002 exiled Eritrean opposition parties, NGOs and diaspora organisations protested the Dutch aid to Eritrean on the grounds that such support undermines efforts by groups that fight for democracy and human rights in Eritrea.

Nature of engagement with country of origin institutions and local communities

Diaspora transnational activities between the country of residence and origin largely depend on diaspora motives, experiences in the host society, and conditions in the countries of origin. Consequently, diasporas engage in collective organising as an instrument for realising both individual and groups objectives. The motivations linked to the countries of origin are often influenced by the political and economic marginalisation and exclusionary policies that constituted the main drivers of migration.

As shown in the case of Eritrea, government and diaspora relations can be antagonistic, paternalistic and opportunistic at the same time. The regime attitude towards the diasporas derive from the development challenges in the country while others stem from the political establishment and system of governance. In such situations, diaspora engagement can be constrained. Eritrea pursues a tight control policy towards its diasporas thus compelling Eritrean diasporas to develop strategies for mitigating policy conditions and interests of high ranking officials and party affiliates in the diaspora if they wish to engage in development activities in Eritrea.

Conclusion

Diaspora transnational activities have been acknowledged to have the potentials for social transformation in the countries of origin. These are mainly derived from both individual and collective initiatives. However, the environment in which the diaspora operates in the country of residence, especially their visibility and ability to engage with communities, authorities and other institutions in the country of residence is also critical for diaspora transnational engagement. This is because through the Political Opportunity Structures in the country of residence diasporas are able to organise, mobilise and access subsidies for activities between the country of residence and origin.

For diasporas to make a difference in the country of origin, various formations must be in a position to return. Others include availability of frameworks for diaspora engagement, political will and policy choices that facilitate diaspora involvement in local development processes. Diaspora transnational activities can also be impacted upon by the fragmentation within the diaspora community. Fragmentation can result from diversity or different affiliations (political, ethnic and religious). Although diversity within the diaspora is not a negative development, differences and conflicts within the diaspora community can be incongruent with host country policies that target diaspora engagement.

To the country of residence, the antagonistic relations between the diasporas and country of origin government can lead to challenges about social cohesion. Tensions between groups can turn counterproductive to municipal policies that target integration and participation in a multicultural setting. Host countries are likely to encounter opposition from diaspora groups if the bilateral relations concerns about political developments in the origin country. The Eritrean case illustrates how geo-political interests of host countries can clash with international community norms and practices for holding countries of origin accountable on human rights questions. These policy choices thus impact on diaspora transnational activities as fluctuating political and policy environment in Eritrea presents challenges of unpredictability and de-motivation for diaspora engagement due to government control and transnational surveillance on diasporas. In this case diaspora transnational activities are not possible in conditions of constricted political space. Eritrea thus loses the opportunities to harness diasporas development potential.

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- 1 Interview with the leader of Eritreans for Justice and Democracy - Benelux, Utrecht, 2008
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Interview with Eritrean community in Amsterdam and environment, Amsterdam, 2008
- 4 Interview with Eritrean asylum seeker, Amsterdam, 2014
- 5 Interview with Eritreans for Justice and Democracy - Benelux, Utrecht, 2008

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**Evangelisches Missionswerk
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The Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW) is the umbrella body and professional association of Protestant Churches formed for ecumenical, missionary and development-related collaboration with overseas Christians and Churches, and for the raising of ecumenical awareness in Germany.

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Very little is known about present-day Eritrea. When the small land situated on the Horn of Africa gained independence in 1993, hopes were high, and not only in Eritrea, that after the thirty-year-long independence war against Ethiopia, a peaceful and better future would begin for everyone. Even at the international level it was conceded that the country had good prospects to develop itself into the first stable and independent democracy on the African continent.

However, since then all hopes and expectations were smashed. Today Eritrea belongs among the most repressive states in the world. The victorious liberation fighters of those former days have metamorphosed into a power-hungry military regime. Systematically the regime preys on the population; dissenters are mercilessly silenced.

The international community takes little notice of what goes on in Eritrea. Placed within the entirety of the global structure the country is apparently too unimportant. In the meantime however, more and more women and men from Eritrea are attempting to flee. It is estimated that it could be around 4,000 persons every month who, in great danger, try to make their way to Europe. Their plight and defencelessness are unscrupulously taken advantage of by human smugglers in transit countries.

Tens of thousands of women and men from Eritrea have become victims in recent years of organised people smuggling, whether it is that they are abducted and brought to torture camps in the Sinai peninsula, from where they have to beg for shocking ransom sums from their relatives, or whether it is that traffickers demand horrific sums from them so that they can cross the Mediterranean at huge risk in disintegrating boats.

Those fleeing who do make it to Europe, then stumble across a lack of understanding from the authorities and within society. Why have they left a land that is known not to be at war, or in a civil war, and in which there is no famine? This publication will contribute to ensuring that the breadth of human rights violations in Eritrea becomes known, and that the issue of human trafficking migrates more strongly upwards into the public eye.