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Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya

Morgane Wirtz & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes:
Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

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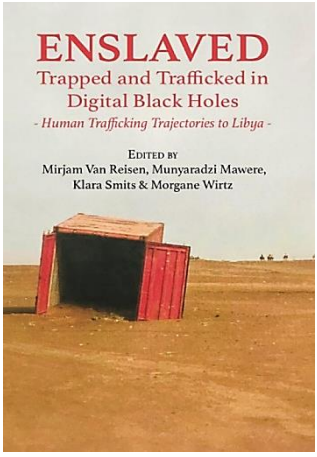
Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in Africa



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Contents

Preface by Honourable Chief Fortune Charumbira.....vi

Acknowledgements xix

Acronyms xx

Glossary of Terms.....xxii

Chapter 1.....1

Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction 1

Trapped in a human trafficking cycle for ransom 1

Methodology and aim of research.....4

Organisation of this book 5

Summary of findings..... 7

Human trafficking trajectories: A string of black holes..... 18

Number of migrants and refugees detained in Libya..... 20

Number of Eritreans and payments in Libya..... 23

Conclusion 23

Acknowledgements 25

Ethical clearance..... 25

Author contributions 25

References 26

Chapter 2.....30

Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration 30

Introduction 30

Methodology..... 35

The flaw in the push and pull theory of migration 37

Problem framing..... 40

Black holes in the digital infrastructure..... 45

Ethnographic monitoring of black holes in the digital landscape 48

Remoteness and cultural entropy 54

The human trafficking cycle: Living in a black hole in the digital landscape 55

Conclusion 57

Acknowledgements 60

Ethical clearance 60

Author contributions 60

References 60

Chapter 3 70

Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma 70

Introduction 70

Is human trafficking for ransom researchable? 71

The research contributors 79

Research approach 80

The research Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation 83

Locations and materials for SDDI research 91

Fieldwork preparation and conduct 94

Data analysis 100

Management of potentially traumatising experiences of the research team 103

Conclusion 110

Acknowledgements 112

Ethical clearance 112

Contribution by authors 112

Author contributions 112

References 113

Documentaries and videos 118
Chapter 4 121
Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review 121
Introduction 121
Methodology 123
Description of human trafficking for ransom 125
Practices 126
Human trafficking networks 133
Trauma of victims 136
Prosecution and delivery of justice 139
Unintended effects of ICTs 141
Documentation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai 145
Conclusion 145
Acknowledgements 147
Ethical clearance 148
Author contributions 148
References 148
Chapter 5 154
The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya 154
Introduction: Crossing the desert is not just a job 154
Methodology 157
A fertile ground: Historic context 160
Migrants and refugees in Libya today: Findings from the interviews 174
Discussion 184
Conclusion 185
Acknowledgements 187

Ethical clearance 187
Author contributions 187
References 187
Chapter 6 195
Enslaved by their Own Government: Indefinite National Service in Eritrea 195
Introduction 195
Methodology 200
The definition of slavery: Ownership vs control 203
Forced labour, but not slavery? 214
Forced labour for the purpose of economic development 221
Control over Eritrean national service conscripts 226
Conclusion 238
Acknowledgements 240
Ethical clearance 240
Author contributions 240
References 240
Chapter 7 255
Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking 255
Introduction 255
Methodology 257
Literature review: Exodus from the 'black hole' of Eritrea 260
Reasons for fleeing Eritrea 268
Leaving Eritrea 274
Situation in neighbouring countries 280
Conclusion 287
Acknowledgements 289

Ethical clearance 289
Author contributions 290
References 290
Chapter 8 296
TRUST Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea 296
Introduction 296
The need for mental health support for Eritrean refugees 297
Research question 305
Research design 307
Results 315
Discussion and conclusion 320
Acknowledgements 323
Ethical clearance 324
Author contributions 324
References 324
Chapter 9 332
Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking 332
Introduction: From the Sinai to Libya 332
Documentation of human trafficking routes 333
Methodology 339
The start of the journey 341
The routes to Libya 355
Conditions on route across the desert 361
Payments for the journey 368
The organisation of trafficking to Libya 376
Discussion 379

Conclusion 383
Acknowledgements 386
Ethical clearance 386
Author contributions 386
References 387
Chapter 10 392
Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya 392
Introduction 392
Holding camps, official detention centres and departure points 394
Methodology 397
Southern route (from Niger) 400
South-eastern route (from Sudan) 405
Western route (from Algeria) 410
North-western route (from Tunisia) 412
North-eastern road (from Egypt) 414
North Libya – Departure point for the Mediterranean Sea 422
Discussion 443
Conclusion 445
Acknowledgements 446
Ethical clearance 446
Author contributions 447
References 447
Chapter 11 451
"You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya 451
Introduction 451
Methodology 455

The relationship between refugees and traffickers 459
Key human traffickers and where they work 461
Libya as a 'black site' for Eritrean government's nefarious activities 503
Cloaking of human traffickers 505
Synthesis: Tracing the trafficking network 506
Discussion 511
Conclusion 514
Acknowledgements 515
Ethical clearance 515
Author contributions 516
References 516
Chapter 12 521
Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya 521
Introduction: Living skeletons 521
Human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and Libya 522
Methodology: Exploring the perspective of survivors 525
Experiences of detainees in holding camps 528
Extortion of ransoms 538
Discussion 560
Conclusion 564
Acknowledgements 566
Ethical clearance 566
Author contributions 566
References 566
Chapter 13 570
Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in Official Detention Centres in Libya 570

Introduction 570
Methodology 578
Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard 581
Conditions in official detention centres 583
Relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities 603
Discussion 613
Conclusion 618
Acknowledgements 619
Ethical clearance 620
Author contributions 620
References 620
Chapter 14 627
"Dead-dead": Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya 627
Introduction 627
Methodology 631
Escape from detention – what's next? 634
Travel within Libya 637
Urban areas 641
Facilities provided by humanitarian organisations 643
Slavery in Libya 644
The sea 648
Escaping by land to Tunisia 652
Evacuation to Niger 655
Discussion 659
Conclusion 662
Acknowledgements 663

Ethical clearance 663
Author contributions 663
References 663
Chapter 15 669
"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya 669
Introduction: Many did that…rape 669
Methodology 672
Literature review: The culture of sexual violence in Libya 675
Theoretical considerations: Three categories of sexual violence 683
Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation 685
Sexual exploitation 691
Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime 697
Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma 703
Discussion 706
Conclusion 709
Acknowledgement 710
Ethical clearance 710
Author contributions 710
References 710
Chapter 16 715
"Gate Closed": The Situation in Libya during COVID-19 715
Introduction 715
Methodology 719
Push and pull theory of migration during COVID lockdowns. 723
Findings of the interviews 725
Findings of the desk review 740

Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks 747
Acknowledgements 748
Ethical clearance 749
Author contributions 749
References 749
Chapter 17 759
Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya 759
Introduction 759
Digital connectivity in exile: Power and agency 762
The Eritrean online public sphere 765
Methodology 767
Findings 770
Discussion 778
Conclusion 779
Acknowledgements 780
Author contributions 780
References 781
About the Authors 786

Chapter 12

Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya[1]

Morgane Wirtz & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction: Living skeletons

They all have a remarkable shape – long, skinny bodies with big eyes. They look like living skeletons. People who escape the camps where migrants and refugees are held in Libya show the trauma on their bodies. These are the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

Human trafficking for ransom was first identified and documented in the Sinai (Egypt), Mexico and Malaysia in around 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy & Kidane, 2018). In the Sinai desert it seemed to target Eritrean refugees fleeing the country (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). It has been linked to the development of

There are striking similarities between Sinai trafficking and human trafficking for ransom in Libya. This chapter presents evidence to compare the practices, including the experiences of detainees in the holding camps, the torture methods used to extract ransoms, and the use of mobile phones to broadcast the torture to relatives and facilitate payments. In both places, Eritreans are (were) targeted and, in both places, refugees are (were) trapped in a cycle of human trafficking from which it is hard to escape. It can be concluded that trafficking for ransom has morphed and spread through the whole Horn of Africa – and, with the profitability of the practice, it could spread even wider.

[1] The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the first author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

new information and communication technology (ICT), especially mobile phones, which are used to extort ransoms from relatives while their loved ones are tortured on the phone (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy & Kidane, 2018). This specific form of human trafficking for ransom, facilitated by the use of ICTs, has expanded across the Horn of Africa, trapping refugees in a vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape – even after ransoms have been paid (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). This cycle also traps relatives of the victims, as well as whole communities, and leads to what Kidane (2021) identifies as secondary and collective trauma.

This chapter seeks to present a picture of human trafficking for ransom in Libya and investigates the following research question: *How is human trafficking for ransom experienced by migrants and refugees in Libya in relation to the conditions of detention and how are ransoms extorted, and is this an extension of the situation of human trafficking for ransom that took place in Sinai?* To answer this question, this research looked at the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, including the conditions in the places where the victims are held and the practices involved in the extortion of ransom payments. These are compared to human trafficking in the Sinai, as previously described by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014).

Towards this, the next section sets out a definition of human trafficking for ransom, comparing Sinai trafficking to human trafficking for ransom in Libya. This is followed by the methodology of this study. The subsequent section sets out the findings. Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and Libya

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014, p. 23) describe human trafficking for ransom as:

> *[…] particularly brutal and is characterised by abduction, displacement, captivity, extortion, torture, sexual violence and humiliation, commoditisation, serial selling and killing. The 'trafficking' aspect of the phenomenon involves the taking of people against their will or by misleading them and holding them as hostages for ransom*

and further sale. The trafficking victims are exploited as they are forced to beg for money from relatives, extended family or people in the diaspora to pay the ransoms demanded.

The names given to the places where migrants and refugees are held are many: holding camps, prisons, warehouses, torture houses, houses, hangars, stores, farms and credit houses (see Glossary of Terms).

Human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai ended in about 2014, after a military operation by Egypt in the region launched to counter an insurgency by Islamist militants (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The 'torture houses' used to hold the trafficking victims were destroyed and, most likely, many lives lost. However, this lucrative trade in people has continued to expand across the region, including to Libya (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

Since 2015, the United Nations (UN) Security Council has adopted resolutions on the situation of human trafficking in Libya and renewed these annually:

> *Members condemned all acts of migrant smuggling and human trafficking into, through and from the Libyan territory and off the coast of Libya, which undermine further the process of stabilizing Libya and endangers the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.* (Resolution 2598, UN Security Council, 2021)

In 2018, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that identified six human traffickers operating in Libya (UN Security Council, 2018), some of which were also identified by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017). The situation is serious. The UN Security Council speaks of hundreds of thousands of people held in trafficking-like conditions. Resolution 2598 in 2021 states that the UN Security Council:

> *Condemns all acts of migrant smuggling and human trafficking into, through and from the Libyan territory and off the coast of Libya, which undermine further the process of stabilisation of Libya and endanger the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.* (UN Security Council, 2021)

Ignoring the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council on human trafficking in Libya since 2015 (see UN Security Council, 2015, 2021), Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2019) present an argument that the modus operandi in Libya constitutes kidnapping and extortion, but not trafficking, because they claim that they found no evidence of force, deception or coercion of refugees when the people they interviewed commenced these journeys. Their research is based on interviews with refugees who arrived in Italy, having been tortured in Libya until their relatives paid for their release. They argue that the modus operandi constitutes crimes against humanity.

However, other authors have raised concerns about the practice constituting human trafficking. In 2021, a report was published by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL) to support the call for the opening of an investigation by the International Criminal Court into the crimes committed against migrants and refugees in Libya, demonstrating that they meet the threshold for crimes against humanity (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021). Award winning journalist Sally Hayden describes how: "In Libya, migrants pay smugglers to get them to Europe. Instead, they are tortured, raped, killed" (Hayden, 2020). She refers to human trafficking for ransom as Africa's 21st century slave trade.

Researcher and journalist Sara Creta shows in her documentary *Libya, No Escape from Hell*, how European Union (EU) financing for Tripoli to arrest migrants and refugees on the way to Europe is closing its eyes on "a system governed by impunity and collusion between smugglers, militias and authorities" (Creta, 2021). Like Sara Creta, Sally Hayden highlights how EU migration policies exacerbate the situation in Libya. In her book *My Fourth Time, we Drowned*, she describes the inhumane circumstances that migrants and refugees face after having been intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea and returned to Libya (Hayden, 2022). Both Creta and Hayden relate the issue to the broader migration policy of the European Union, in which facilitators handling the refugees and migrants are encouraged to stop them from coming to Europe – by all means possible. The

transportation and harbouring of migrants and refugees within the region to stop them from coming to Europe is a key 'task' performed by those facilitators, that a cynic may say, furthers the aims of these policies.

Libya is one of the places where human trafficking for ransom is most widespread. Jerôme Tubiana and Thierry Chavant draw attention to the gravity with a cartoon describing the daily life in the house of Doctor Hussein, in Bani Walid in Libya. In this house, people who have recently escaped the human traffickers' warehouses are treated (Tubiana & Chavant, 2021).

There is no disagreement among experts about the testimonies of survivors, which point to the inhumane conditions and violent treatment of detainees. Whether or not these situations are recognised as human trafficking is relevant to the protection and support extended to the survivors. Unfortunately, authorities often fail to acknowledge survivors as victims of human trafficking (Rozen, 2019).

The human trafficking cycle refers to the notion that the victims of human trafficking for ransom are trapped in a cycle and that this cycle is difficult to escape from (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). The available literature now points to this cycle of entrapment expanding across a wider region and increasingly involving more people, as victims and as perpetrators (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Creta, 2021). Apart from the human and legal considerations, this indicates a widening criminal economy that is based on human beings as commodities.

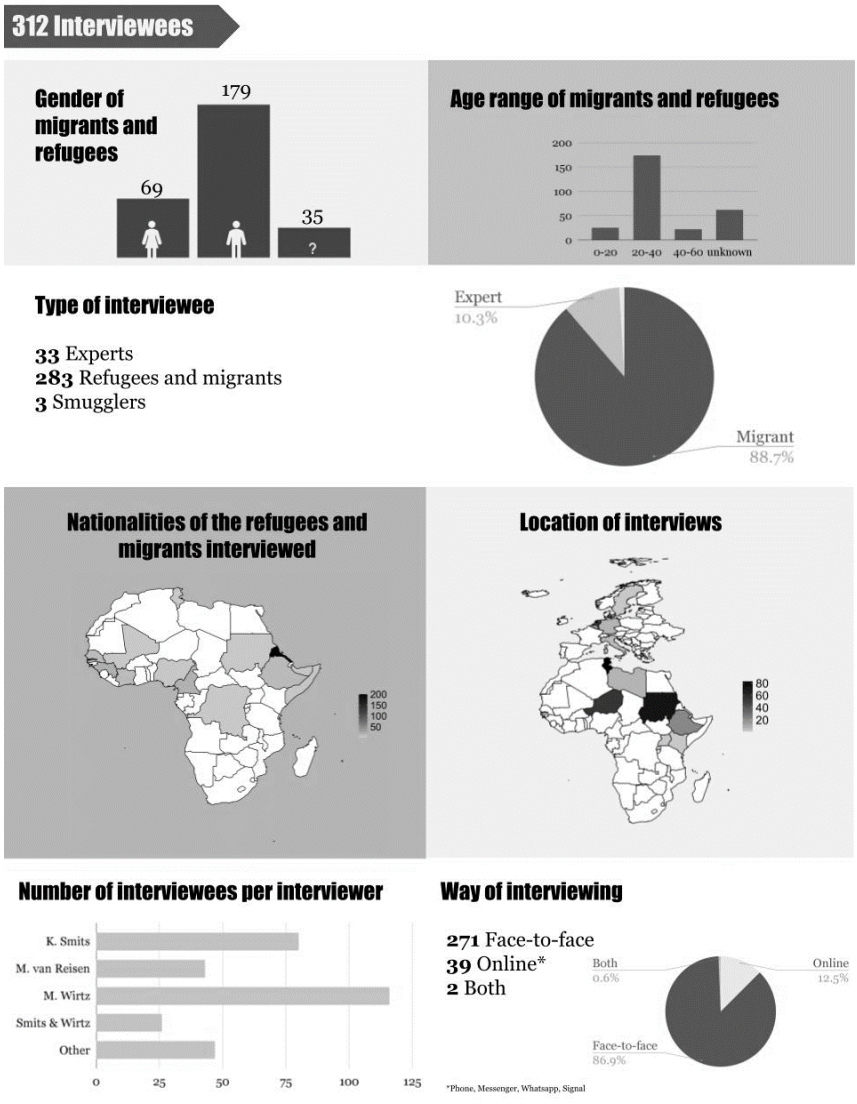
Methodology: Exploring the perspective of survivors

The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma.*

The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background of this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs and other information, collected and sent to us by resource persons in social media spaces and in personal communications, using participatory ethnographic research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017).

The large majority of the interviews analysed in this chapter were carried out between March 2019 and December 2021 by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits and Adoum Moussa. Interviews by Mirjam Van Reisen were conducted in small focus groups, and several interviews from her previous research have been re-used. The SDDI research includes 312 participants in interviews. A total of 213 interviews were conducted and 12 reports based on interviews were analysed. Some of the interviews were held with more than one person at a time. This included 11 focus group interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. Of the respondents interviewed, 33 were experts/resource persons; 3 were smugglers; and 283 were refugees/migrants (89%). Of the refugees/migrants, 128 had been trafficked in Libya. Two-thirds of the refugees and migrants interviewed were aged between 20 and 40 years. The majority of the interviewees (n=203) were Eritrean. Other interviewees were from: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online. The majority of interviewees were in Tunisia (n=83), Sudan (n=73), Niger (n=54) and the Netherlands (n=48).

Figure 12.1. Overview of interview statistics[2]



After analysis of all interviews, the interviews of the participants who had been in detention in Libya were selected for use in this chapter. The topics covered in the interviews were: the situation in places

[2] Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

where the refugees were held, what happened in those places, whether or not the refugees were forced to pay ransom, how this extortion happened, and any slavery-like conditions of exploitation. One interview was carried out while the person was still in captivity in several locations, giving the researchers detailed information on the daily experiences in the various holding camps, as well as the interviewee's perceptions, emotions and hopes at different times. This person shared information over a period of almost one year, including pictures, whenever he was able to access a phone and make a connection.

This chapter describes the experiences of refugees and migrants in holding camps in Libya, and we would like to warn the reader that what is described can be hard to process. As much as possible, we have tried to follow the voices of the interviewees and to show the world through their eyes. We have done this on purpose to strengthen our understanding of the modus operandi, as it appears to those who have experienced human trafficking situations. The excerpts provided from the interviews are a very small selection of all the material analysed for this study; they were selected based on their relevance to the modus operandi.

Experiences of detainees in holding camps

After having been carried in a pick-up truck for weeks in the Sahara, and completed long and challenging journeys from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, refugees finally arrive in Libya (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*). On arrival, they are generally transferred directly to a 'holding camp' where they are

distributed according to who their 'connection man'[3] is. This place can be called a 'warehouse', 'transit point' or 'distribution centre':[4]

> *They separated us; the people from the truck, to different places. Everybody has a different smuggler. I followed the way of my smuggler with other migrants.* (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Once transferred to the holding camp of his/her connection man, the refugee is asked to pay for the journey. Most of the interviewees stated that the money asked at that moment is much higher than what was originally agreed in Khartoum and that they had not made any agreement about the new level of payment. This already indicates an element of extortion, in addition to the refugees being moved to a holding place where they are held captive, with no freedom to move. The duration of stay in these locations vary from a few days to several months, and even years.

This section focuses on the conditions in the holding camps.

Starvation, disease and lack of hygiene

'Overcrowded', 'awful', 'hell'', 'dark', 'warm', 'cold', 'very bad' – these are some of the terms used by the refugees to describe the inhumane conditions in the holding camps:

> *For three months, we could not even see the sunlight. It is in the middle of nowhere, it is an ordinary house, a big warehouse. There were more than 100 people from many nationalities, such as Eritrea, Egypt and Somalia.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In the hand of human traffickers, the interviewees described lacking food. In many cases, they explained that food was served once a day and in insufficient quantities.

---

[3] The term 'connection man' was widely used by the migrants and refugees interviewed to refer to both those at the top of the trafficking network, as well as the facilitators/smugglers (see Glossary of Terms).

[4] The terms 'prison', 'warehouse', 'house', 'hangars', 'store', 'farm', and 'credit house' are all used by migrants and refugees to refer to the places where they are sequestered and tortured for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

In that house, we didn't receive food for like three days. We found Arabic sugar, which expired five years ago, and we started eating expired sugar. (Interviewee 1052, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

They had covered our eyes. When we entered, they closed the door. We didn't see anything. We couldn't escape. Every day, at 4 o'clock in the morning, they gave us food. One time a day. Half [a piece of] bread for 24 hours. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Water is also a luxury in the camps. This impacts directly on the hygiene of those detained. In general, refugees say the 'houses' in which they were locked all day were overcrowded and dirty. Because of that, and because medicines are not available, many people suffer from different diseases and pests. Lice, scabies and tuberculosis are mentioned in almost every interview.

In Brak Shati, Aziz [our trafficker] took us to a small apartment. There are two rooms; one big room with 400 people, and 500 people in the other one. […] There are a lot of people suffering from TB [tuberculosis]. TB starts from bad things, bad water, bad conditions, also diarrhoea. […] Because there are a lot of people gathered in one place. They are suffering from many diseases. (Interviewee 1056, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Even there are lice there. People are scratching their body. It is not allowed for you to pee outside. They have only this kind of bottle. You can't even finish your piss. You can't because the bottle is full. Because there are so many people that need to urinate in this bottle. So you can't make it full. […] And every morning, there is a dead body. People are dying every morning. Ten people. They are throwing outside. It is because of hunger. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

The circumstances are aggravated when the refugees try to communicated with the outside world. In the following excerpt, a refugee was able to hide a phone, and send out pictures to draw attention to the situation. He also tried to reach out to staff from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organisations to seek help, particularly at a moment

where he felt threatened by what he referred to as "the chief of the holding camp":

> *Z: Wait, message coming from Mr P.*
>
> *Z: I will send to you, forward.*
>
> *Z: "Dear Mr. X thank you for your messages. As I told you, I am coordinating with other colleagues on the best way to assist you. I don't have any feedback for now. I will contact you as soon as I have more information. I am sorry, but I cannot reply to all your messages and phone calls. It is not for lack of will, but because of other equally urgent demands."*
>
> *Interviewer: Tell him that you feel threatened in the camp by the chief*
>
> *Z: Now our chief is coming inside. He has broken the four toilets. He is nervous [agitated] now.*
>
> *Z: People are fighting with him.*
>
> *Z: Pls keep this picture.*
>
> *Z: Have you seen my life professor? That's why day & night [I am] calling you. This is Libyan think. So today destroyed toilets, tomorrow also he will kill me. His attention is to me now.* (Interviewee Z, interview with Van Reisen by WhatsApp, February 2019)

The unhygienic conditions in this holding camp (called Gharyan), which housed 165 Eritreans at the time with only four toilets, are already cause for illnesses, with people reported to be dying every day from tuberculosis and other illnesses related to the poor conditions (Interviewee Z, interview with Van Reisen by WhatsApp, February 2019). This camp comes under Wedi Isaac, who is referred to as 'Chief'. The information provided to the researchers on the death of people was followed by a series of pictures showing the corpses of people who had died in the camp (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen by WhatsApp, February 2019). The destruction of the toilets in this incident is understood by the refugee who reported it as retribution for alerting international organisations to the situation. He also reported feeling that his life was threatened for having drawn attention to the situation and being identified as the communicator.

Refugees have a monetary value for human traffickers, as their release depends in part on the payment of a ransom. However, there are many of them, especially those who do not pay quickly who appear to be dispensable. The conditions in which refugees are detained indicate a lack of concern by the human traffickers about their health and the testimonies show that little is done by the human traffickers to keep the detainees alive.

Bani Walid, which is a hotspot for human trafficking, is infamous due the number of people who die there, and the migrants refer to it as the 'ghost city'. Refugees and smugglers stated that detainees stay locked up for days with the bodies of co-detainees who have died.

One Eritrean refugee interviewed in Tunisia explained that even suicide may not provide a way out of human trafficking.

> *If you hang yourself with ropes or if you commit suicide, basically, the people who are close to you have to pay for your money. So, there are cases that even if you are not alive, the people around you will have to pay for your money.* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Death seems to be everywhere around human trafficking for ransom. Victims die anonymously. Sometimes the families of detainees pay for their release without knowing that their loved one is already dead.

Torture

The refugees interviewed reported that torture is carried out in the camps. They described routinely being beaten with sticks, metal sticks, electric wires or plastic pipes. Many also said that they were burnt with boiling water, cigarettes or by having hot plastic poured on their skin. Other mechanisms include torture while the victim is tied up. Many refugees describe how they were tied up in unofficial detention centres:

> *They tie your hands and your legs and then they lay you on the ground. Then they beat you.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020).

Chains and plastic wires are used to tie the refugees. Pictures of refugees tied in prone positions are shared with their relatives. An Eritrean man recalled the following:

> *[The smuggler] asked [me]: "You have been here for a long time. Why don't you pay the money?" He called somebody working for him, took me outside in the sun. He made milk and sugar. He shook it. He tied my hands and legs. He put the sugar and milk on me. After that, there is the sun, also flies. They beat me.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many refugees also describe how they have been tied up in unofficial detention centres, including upside down and by the hand and legs:

> *They tie your hands and your legs and then they lay you on the ground. Then they beat you.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

An Eritrean man said he had his feet and hands tied together on his back while being electrocuted with an electric wire, a punishment that refugees call 'helicopter' (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). A smuggler recounted the following:

> *[Human traffickers] tie you up, they put your feet up. Sometimes they light a stove downstairs and put your feet up. They leave you like that. The heat of the fire will even touch you.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

Some of the interviewees described the use of electric shocks against detainees:

> *Everything! You know the batteries we put on the vehicles, they'll take that, they'll put that on you here. They're going to bring water in a bucket. You're going to put your feet up there. They're going to bring the wires, they're going to plug this into the socket, they're going to put a cable in the water and they're going to plug the wire on you, on your shoulder. That's how they're going to do it, they're going to plug it in. I swear it! That's why, if you see someone who's been there for four months or six months, he's finished.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

According to interviews, the torture carried out in the holding camps can include the removal of body parts:

> *People are using a pen and removing your eye with a pen. He is just using eyelashes and put the pen like this, and removing the eye inside.* (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Another form of torture is witnessing a friend or relative being tortured. One woman shared the following:

> *I was not that much beaten. My husband has been beaten. They wanted us to see him being beaten.* (Interviewee 1016, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

A survivor explained:

> *If someone dies even, it will take three days or four days without taking the dead body from there. It will start smelling and changing colour. It becomes… If you don't put a dead body in the cemetery, the body smells. Everybody knows. We are sleeping here and there is a dead body here. So, dead body. And even the room is full of smells.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Minors are not exempt from this torture; one minor was 15 when he was beaten with electric wires and endured other torture in Bani Walid (Interviewee 7024, interview with Stocker, WhatsApp, October 2019). Another minor was coerced into paying the ransom under threat of her mother (who was already in Europe) being killed (Interviewee 7032, interview with Stocker, face-to-face, October 2019).[5] The interviewees said that detainees are often raped:

> *In that house they also do sexual abuse. They do it all the time. Maybe one day, one night, three women and then another day, another one.* (Interviewee 1016, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

[5] For more information on the ethics of interviewing minors, please see Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*.

The experience of sexual violence in the holding camps is elaborated on in Chapter 15: *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya.*

The treatment of detainees seems to improve a bit after payment of the ransom has been completed, but this does not mean immediate freedom, as the testimonies below shows.

> *After [the trafficker] had made sure the payment had been made (they use their own coded text messages to ascertain who had paid and who hadn't), those who have paid are transferred to a different place. Anyone who pays gets out of the collecting house.* (Interviewee 3002, interview with Van Reisen, written testimony, 2017)

> *[After you have paid], they keep you for a while. If there are more people paying, they send you [to the sea] and if there are many people who aren't paying, there you can stay for one more year.* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The improvement in the conditions after ransom has been paid, seems to suggest that at least one objective of the torture is to put pressure on the victims to beg for ransom and to complete the transfer of the ransom amount.

Use of drugs

The interviewees also described the use of alcohol and different kinds of drugs by the drivers, human traffickers and human trafficking victims. It is not always clear under what conditions these are used and to what extent this is voluntary.

Many interviewees testified that their driver was high on drugs during the crossing of the Sahara.

> *The Libyan drivers are like crazy. They take hashish, so they can drive. If you fall down, they don't care. Just they stop if they want to stop, for praying or to eat.* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

In the unofficial detention centres, the consumption of drugs is often linked to beatings and the humiliation of the detainees, as described by the following interviewees:

> *Every Thursday, they get drunk. They drink alcohol. They come and they beat the people. They beat us all.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

> *At night, when we arrived at Garabulli [near Tripoli, Libya], they removed our shawl. You can wear only one shirt, and they are using water and pulling up to the top of our body. They open water and fill our body to the top [make them drink]. They become drunk outside, they drink alcohol, and smoke weed. And after they become drunk, they are just using us, as if they were playing football. They are playing with us. We become a toy. They are playing with us as if we are something that is not very important. You know, when the footballers are playing football, the ball is not feeling well when they kick it or, for example… They don't think that we are human beings.* (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Some testimonies from refugees suggest that in some cases the human traffickers – who are often linked to armed groups in Libya – use drugs to build courage:

> *[They are] very, very dangerous. They are not afraid of death. They are always ready to die. Not only do they have explosive belts, they are not afraid. […] When they find that you are going to take them, they will explode. People are not afraid of death. They are fools. They get drunk. They take beer, drugs, coke. Now they shoot anyone.* (Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Migrants and refugees who work (whether forced or not) for human traffickers as translators or torturers are also sometimes under the influence of drugs. One Gambian survivor explained:

> *1043: [The chiefs of the houses], yeah, they take drugs. They smoke cannabis. Drugs like hashish. Some people take drugs but you don't know. We don't use to see them because we are not living together.*
>
> *Interviewer: They give you drugs?*

1043: No, they don't give people drugs. Only to the people working with them. Because there are many… Even some black people are there working with them. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Solidarity among detainees

There are uplifting testimonies of how refugees try to maintain their humanity under such difficult circumstances:

In Eritrea, I learnt to nurse. Actually, I was a soldier military health. So I had to help my group of Eritreans and Somalis in Libya. […] I have helped four women to have children. Without any material. Four children, two children were killed instantly. Two children though – one girl, she lives in Switzerland. One boy, he lives in Friesland [the Netherlands]. (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

[In a warehouse in Sabratha], I met her. This is the first time. She arrived after me. But I was having some water. I gave it to her. This is the start of us. We were starting the relationship there. (Interviewee 1088, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

These testimonies of solidarity reflect the desire of the detainees to keep their humanity under testing circumstances. Older detainees take minors who are on their own under their wing.

Sometimes the black hole in the digital landscape in the holding places temporarily opens. This is often due to support given by those engaged in the trafficking organisation, who allow them access to a phone. Even then it is difficult to obtain pictures, as a lot of communication is carried out on old Nokia phones:

Z: I call the one in Gharyan – a man in prison. I asked [him] to send a picture. But he is using a normal Nokia phone. He calls me by one of the people working [for the traffickers] who is cooking food for them. He is from Sudan. (Interviewee Z, interview with Van Reisen by WhatsApp, 24 March 2019)

Rare pictures received from the Gharyan holding camp in 2019 show how refugees celebrated a religious festival, making a holy cross with bottles and other materials, showing creativity and resilience. This celebration, dignifying the people detained in the holding camps, was apparently also permitted by those managing the holding places.

Extortion of ransoms

Use of mobile phone

A former smuggler in Agadez, with intimate knowledge of human trafficking explained how the modus operandi is centred on the mobile phone (although he insisted that he did not take part in such activities):

> *We [the human traffickers] take you, we confiscate your phone. We see numbers on your phone and we call those numbers. We say: "Do you know this person?"*
>
> *"Yes, I know him very well."*
>
> *"So you have contact with his parents?"*
>
> *"Yes, I have contact."*
>
> *"So you have to call his parents and tell them he is in prison."*
>
> *There you go. They send a video, a bad video where [the parents can see] the person getting hit, getting beaten up. He screams. He is tied up. So we tell them: "The amount [of the ransom], you bring it to this place." It's like what we used to see in the movies. And then if the parents say they don't pay, we'll kill you that's all. They have nothing to do with it. They are bad people.* (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018)[6]

A large majority of the refugees interviewed for this research have been molested, maltreated and tortured while they speak to relatives, with the objective to extort money. An Eritrean refugee explained:

> *You have to call your family by yourself while they are beating to ask them to pay for you. Beating with sticks. Calling with the phones of the traffickers using audio calls. If we don't pay, if people don't pay within a specific timeframe, they shoot people to death.* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

[6] This interview was also published in the documentary *Teghadeẓ Agadeẓ* (Wirtz, 2019).

The torture is carried out as a way of extorting ransoms from relatives abroad, who are forced to listen to the torture by phone, in order to compel them to pay the ransom:

> *They give you the phone. Then, you have to talk to your family. Even when you are talking to your family, they hit you. Many times. They shoot the gun. Because they need it to be noisy, because they need to worry our family. [I tell] my family: "I am here. I am under some smuggler. They asked me this amount."* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

If the detainee's family refuse or are unable to pay the ransom, they face serious consequences. A smuggler who was interviewed explained:

> *There are people who are beaten there until they die, because if your parents don't have anything in the country, you risk dying there.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)[7]

Interviewees added that it is often the case that family is not informed that their relative has been killed by the traffickers.

Ransom amounts

It is often in Khartoum in Sudan that Eritrean refugees come into contact with the facilitator(s) (often called 'connection men'[8]) who assist in organising their journey to Libya. The arrangements are made for the journey from Sudan to Libya either by phone, though a third person or face-to-face. They refer to this part of the journey as 'the desert'. They usually make another deal for crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which they refer to as 'the sea'. While the price is usually negotiated before departure (at least for the desert), several interviewees stated that, at this point, no mention was made by the facilitator about payment for the trip.

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[7] This interview was also published previously (in 2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

[8] 'Connection men' can also be used to describe the top traffickers (see Glossary of Terms).

Refugees can pay substantial amounts in subsequent places – which were not part of the initial arrangement – which are extracted as ransoms. The payments made by one interviewee included ransom payments to Islamic State (ISIS) in 2018:

> *I pay money only in Bani Walid 7,500 US dollar and I paid ISIS 3,500 US dollar and in Zawiyah 3,500 US dollar.* (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

The interviewee was subsequently released by ISIS and held by Libyan traffickers, who, he explains, work with Eritrean traffickers, in this case, Wedi Isaac:

> *With these Libyan human smugglers there is same Eritrean are working with Wedi Isaac. You pay in Dubai.* (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

Even with a more 'regular' arrangement, additional money is demanded. For instance, with regard to payments arranged for the journey from Sudan to Libya, the traffickers change the amount of money that must be paid and ask for much higher amounts once the refugees arrive in Libya (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*) for more information on the amounts paid):

> *In Sudan, the connection man said to me that I will pay 3,800 USD. But when I entered Bani Walid, he asked me for 5,500 USD. Me, I don't have 5,500 USD, because I only had 4,500 USD when I left Sudan. So I stayed there for a long time.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Refugees are often not able to pay the additional amounts demanded. To extort these higher amounts, the refugees are pressured to beg relatives on the phone to pay these amounts. The effectiveness of the extortion is increased by the communication of audio recordings of the refugee in a distraught emotional state (sometimes compounded by videos of the refugee under torture).

Ransom amounts vary and depend on different factors, such as the trafficker who the refugee is connected to:

> *Not all the people are in the same traffickers. They don't behave the same way, they are not the same. Some people ask you for 2,000 USD, some people ask you for 5,000 USD. Some people take your money and will sell you again and again, you know. They don't have all the same behaviour.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2019)

Prices for ransoms may also differ at different times, but appear to be increasing. Reflecting on the costs (including ransoms) associated with the route to Libya, an Eritrean man comments on the high total cost involved:

> *I know one man, he paid 4,000 [USD]. I know someone, [who paid] 15,000 [USD]. One time, 15,000 [USD], one time 12,000 [USD]. That is a lot of money. Still he is in Libya. If he would be in Addis Ababa, with this money, he can [go] out illegally by airplane. If you have money, you can [get] out. If I had money in Ethiopia, I would not have come to this place. I want my life, so I pay money.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

Another factor that impacts on the amount of ransom demanded is the nationality of the refugee. The analysis of the interviews collected for this research shows that the ransom is often higher for Eritreans than for West-African refugees:

> *Some Libyans know that we are Eritrean, so we are like diamonds. In Tripoli, they say that the Eritrean people, Somali people are diamond and gold – not people, not humans. They say that. So, they can bring the people and put them in the house to ask them to bring some money.* (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

According to the testimonies collected, the detainees in official and unofficial detentions centres in Libya are also divided according to the country they come from:

> *[In Bani Walid], men and women [were detained] together in the same room. Eritrean, Somali, all! Eritreans, they have a small position alone. And Somalis, also, alone, in different rooms.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

In every room. Here there are 70 Somalis and in the other room there are 70 Eritreans. There is every nationality! There are so many rooms! (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Eritrean and Somali refugees seem to be one of the most targeted categories by human traffickers, for a number of reasons. First, many of them cannot go back to their country of origin and are, therefore, often prepared to take greater risks to continue their journey. Secondly, there is a large Eritrean and Somali diaspora in Western countries and in the Arab peninsula, who can afford to pay the high ransoms demanded to free their relatives. Lastly, Eritrean human traffickers are active in Libya and target Eritrean victims (see Chapter 11: "*You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

How ransoms are paid

There are many different ways in which ransoms are actually paid. When a refugee says "I paid x amount", it often does not mean that s/he actually made the payment transfer; it means that this amount was paid by his/her relatives. The technicalities of the transfers are usually not known to the survivors of human trafficking for ransom:

Interviewer: How was your ransom paid?

1050: I don't have any idea; I was locked up and I don't know how the transaction proceeded. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The transactions are also not clear to the relatives who make the payments. They receive little information and usually rely on an agent, who takes care of the 'the rest':

They paid in Sudan to smugglers. Who he is or which phone he has, I don't know. My family doesn't know either. (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Interviewees often recalled what amount was paid for which location, but not how the actual transaction proceeded. They were either not aware, or perhaps afraid to speak of the details.

Being illegal, payments for human trafficking made by family and friends cannot be transferred through legal bank accounts. Money is often paid cash, hand-to-hand, through a sprawling network of money-handlers or agents spread across different continents and countries. A smuggler in Agadez explained:

> *They are cunning! If you, for example, are in the Ivory Coast, they will give you a number in Ghana. There, they have an agent who will collect the ransom. When you have transferred the money, he will call the credit house to say that you have paid and that they should release you.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)[9]

The interviews show that the relatives of victims of human trafficking for ransom have the possibility to make payments to correspondents based everywhere in Africa, but also in Europe, in North America and in the Arabian Gulf.

When a transfer is made to a connection of their trafficker living in Sudan or in Eritrea, the survivor may provide slightly more information on how the process works. One of the interviewees explained how her ransom was paid from Eritrea:

> *There are smugglers who have contact with them [the family] in Eritrea. For example, if it is your brother is paying the money, he will be called and he will be requested to deliver the money in secrecy during the night.* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The person who is paying, has to call a certain number in Eritrea, after which they have to pay the money at the place indicated by the facilitator. Another interviewee described in more detail how the money drop off is organised:

> *There are the workers. Like with the smugglers, workers in Asmara. They are so hiding, not normal. If you want to pay, for example, for a smuggler worker, you can call with a street telephone. They say to you: "Leave the money here, at the corner".*

[9] This interview was also published previously (in 2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

You didn't see him. After that, when you leave it, he can pick by taxi, I don't know. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

The interesting detail in this interview excerpt is that the people who collect the payments (or arrange for their collection) are contacted by street phone. These phones are strictly monitored by the Eritrean intelligence, which is linked to the highest level of the regime. Those making the payments do not see the agents handling it. However, the agents who are collecting the money are clearly controlled by the State, which can follow the transactions on the street phones. All interviewees who are paid in Eritrea reported this way of payment.

While the explanations for paying ransom from Eritrea are characterised by silence, paying ransom in Sudan is somewhat less obscure. One of the interviewees explained how his payment from Sudan went:

Thank God, at that time I called my friend. I gave him the address. He paid the money. They have somebody working in Sudan. My friend will just go and give it to him. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

I had little money from my family. They paid to people who know Aziz in Sudan. They transferred the money to Sudan and then, someone that I know collected the money and gave it to the friends of Aziz. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

One of the interviewees provided an explanation that might illustrate the more direct way of paying in Sudan:

0002: All smugglers live in Sudan. The situation in Sudan is better than everything. Better than any country. Because there is also a dictator […]

Interviewer: So everything you have to pay goes to Sudan?

0002: Yes, everything in Sudan. (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Interviewees indicated that for payments, agents make use of the *hawala* system, an informal system of money exchange. One of the interviewees explained that some of the agents are known to be in a specific location:

There are some houses. They go there and ask if they received money. If you don't have a house, they tell you where to leave the money, but you will never see their face. Even in Eritrea, you pay like that. They say: "Leave the money under the tree and go". If you pay in Libya, the traffickers send the money to Sudan via hawala. (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The use of the terms '*hawala*' and 'black market' can be confusing:

My mother sold our goats to raise the money. The person who received the money in Eritrea gave her an appointment somewhere. Then, she went there and she gave him money. That person is working in money transfer. He is not a smuggler, but he has contact with the smugglers to send the money and to receive the money. He doesn't work only for smugglers. He works also for anybody who needs to transfer money through the black market. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

In Eritrea, *hawala* and the black market are both tightly controlled by the PFDJ – both within and outside Eritrea. The Eritreans are central in a substantial part of the payments that are carried out:

Interviewer: You pay the Eritrean smugglers direct?

Z: They collect the money.

Interviewer: The Eritrean smugglers collect the money?

Z: They received the money when you go to Libya. When you enter Libya, the smugglers are then paid by the chief.

Interviewer: Who is the chief?

Z: Wedi Isaac. My chief in Bani Walid is Wedi Isaac.

Interviewer: And how do you pay the chief? In Dubai? In Sudan?

Z: 7,500 [USD] is all [paid] in Dubai, 3,500 [USD] in Sudan.

Z: They give only the telephone number for Dubai. Then you need to phone by any way possible to Dubai. Then you need to pay.

Interviewer: The 7500 [USD] is for Wedi Isaac?

Z: All, yes.

Z: Even the 3,500 [USD] is for him.

Interviewer: The 3,500 [USD] is also for Wedi Isaac? But the 3,500 [USD] you pay to number in Sudan? Correct?

Z: All to pay him. Then they can allow you to go with the Libyan smugglers. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

Another interviewee explained how money would get lost along the way while being transferred through the agents:

How many times [the money got lost]? Pfff! Because it is not like Western Union. You cannot believe it. It is the black market, you know. […] It is a matter of chance. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In the *hawala* system, there is no recourse if money is 'lost'.

An Eritrean refugee interviewed in Niamey had an impression that most of the funds paid for the ransoms ended up going to the main trafficker in chief. He indicated:

If you pay 2,200 [USD], 1,200 [USD] is for him. The rest is divided among a lot of workers, just like that. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

However, whether this is exactly so, and what payments are made for collaboration with those in power is not clear from this research.

Ransom negotiations on the phone

When victims of human trafficking beg relatives to pay the ransom money, this is usually not done using the victim's own mobile phone. Phones that belong to the victims have often already been stolen on the road, or were not brought along in the first place, as explained in this interview excerpt:

You cannot bring any telephone, because the smugglers are thieves. Even clothes, if you have a bag, they try to take it from you. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

This means that all requests for payment are supervised by the human traffickers. They dictate the time of the calls and the ways in which the requests are made. The refugees are not able to ask for help, other

than when they are tortured while their family is being called. This lowers the control they have over the situation.

In many cases, payment requests are made directly by the detainee who is asking for payment of the ransom in exchange for his/her life. Hearing the voice and the screams of their loved one instils fear in the family of the detainee. A smuggler explained:

> *When they give you the phone, you call your mum. They will make the phone hands free so that your parents can hear that you are being teased, that they are beating you up, so that the money can be sent faster.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)[10]

In addition to phone calls, human traffickers use photos and videos to incentivise the payment of ransoms. They are sent to the families of detainees to show how they are tortured. A Somali refugee shared the following:

> *He called our parents by WhatsApp, video call and said: "Speak with your parents". He called them and said: "Do you see this gun?" He shot over our head and our legs.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

These testimonies are sometimes published on social networks. This allows communities to see directly what is happening to members of the community. Families also sometimes share this content on social networks to call upon their community to help them in collecting money for the ransoms. The interviewees explained:

> *A friend of mine shared my picture on Facebook to ask people to help me. After ten months the money was paid.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *I could post a voice record to the Somali community on Facebook in order to collect the money from every clan. There are so many clans in Somalia.* (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

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[10] This interview was also published previously (2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

These photos and videos reveal the conditions in which the detainees are held and the torture inflicted. They do not contain any other information except for the extortion for money and the pain of the victims. So, communities do not have any particular element or sign of where and when their relative is imprisoned. The doors of the unofficial detention centres are closed and information does not trickle in from outside. Some refugees have no, or only a vague, idea of where they are.

The interviewees expressed concern about the amounts of ransom and how the payment of these enormous sums of money can have serious consequences for the living conditions of their family and friends. One of the interviewees explained:

> *[My family] paid 6,000 USD, 8,000 USD. Even some people paid 12,000 USD, 15,000 USD. They sold their houses. Maybe they are sleeping on the streets now.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

People unfamiliar with human trafficking for ransom are often surprised how much money relatives are able to collect for the ransoms. However, that money comes from selling complete properties, cattle, draining savings, begging friends, collecting in churches and through social media. A survivor recalled the following:

> *My family sold houses and animals. They sold it. Afterwards, they sent me the money so that I could pay the 1,700 USD. While I was calling my family to ask them to send me the money, I was being beaten.* (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many interviewees regret and feel shame that their family had to pay for their journey. Several explained that their family had to sell their house or livestock to do so, or beg for support from members of the community. This causes stress even long after the refugee has arrived in a host country.

Figure 12.2. Woman in Um Rakuba refugee camp in Sudan receives audio recording of the screams of her cousin in Libya (24 June 2021)
(Photograph: Morgane Wirtz/Hans Lucas)

Trapped without room for negotiation

Despite the tragic situation in Libya, very little information comes out and communication is tightly controlled by the traffickers and their helpers. A refugee who had hidden a phone and found a creative way of establishing a connection sent information on the situation, but he was terrified that he would be discovered. Reporting from the holding camp Gharyan and referring to killing of over 20 refugees by police as well as ISIS, he asked the recipient to remove the message immediately from their phone:

> *Pls [please] take to your phone this message because every time I will make delete after you put in your phone. blc [because I] am afraid always.* (Interviewee Z, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 16 February 2019)

Refugees and relatives feel trapped in the situation. One refugee explained that he cannot return to Eritrea:

> *I cannot [go] back to Eritrea. I am a rebel for the Eritrean government.* (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

Given the desperate situation in Gharyan, it is revealing that he was so insistent that he cannot return to Eritrea. He explains that his options are limited:

> *Interviewer: Why do they keep you in a camp?*
>
> *Z: They want to kill us.*
>
> *Interviewer: Why do they want to kill you?*
>
> *Z: To stop people to come to Europe.* (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

In another message, received a month later, Z expressed his frustration about the European authorities, which he perceives as negligent and uninterested in resolving the situation:

> *I trust you don't follow this fake meeting in Europa. Pls do your attention to solve my case. Be careful. European Union they know everything. Refugees are sold like sheep in Libya. Libya is only for them a human smugglers country.* (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, March 2019)

Some holding camps are feared more by refugees than others, and in these places communication is also more tightly controlled. In this account about the holding camp in Gharyan,[11] a refugee explained that phones are not allowed. However, a group of refugees in this camp succeeded in keeping one phone, which they only use at night:

> *Please understand that if I go to Gharyan you can never contact me. The chief there is very dangerous. They take your phone one by one. That is why refugees last year were in prison. To have a phone with refugees is good, but in Gharyan it is much too*

[11] This is not an official detention centre in Gharyan, but a holding camp of the traffickers.

hard. In Gharyan, they remove all clothes from your body, then they collect money and phones, and also documents, from those who were taken. Now to reach them in Gharyan, there is only one phone. Only after 10:00 pm it is turned on. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019)

Sending information from holding camps is reported to be very dangerous. When it is discovered that Z is communicating with the outside world, he fears that he will be taken to another place, as he communicates in a WhatsApp message:

Z: Am with friend in my hangar. Am not okay. My chief [the one in charge of the camp] takes me outside. He asked more questions about what are you working on here inside.

Interviewer: What did he say?

Z: To whom are you sending information? For what purpose do you contact politicians and with Geneva [UNHCR]? At last he gave conculation [an ultimatum], if I see my hangar in Facebook or if a report comes from any officers, I will take you to another prison. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, March 2019)

Even though the refugee is communicating with international organisations, the options for any change in his situation remain extremely limited and the contact exposes him/her to the risk of repercussions. This situation – in which there are very few if any options and international organisation seem to be able to do little, if anything – influences the relatives of the victims, who also feel that they have no negotiation space with the traffickers. "If you want your child, you have to pay the money," the parents of one interviewee were told (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Room for negotiation is tight, and trying to negotiate carries risks. One family member who was interviewed had attempted to negotiate

with the traffickers about the ransom of a relative held in a trafficking camp in Libya. It did not work:

> *I got the call that he was in Libya. They let me hear his voice for a few seconds. […] I spoke to a man who was doing the negotiations for the ransom. They asked for 5,500 USD. The man on the phone sounded young – maybe 20, 22. He said that he prayed for me, but that I should really pay the money, because he was afraid they would kill my nephew. I tried to get more time, to stall them. I said: I have only 2,500–3000 [USD], I don't have any more. They told me it was not enough. Now, suddenly, I had to pay 6,000 USD. They kept calling me to pay – it was very stressful. I asked to speak to my nephew, but they said no.*
>
> *[…] Then the young man in Libya gave me the contact number of another person, who was in [a European country]. They said I had to pay 6,000 EUR now. That is more than 6,000 USD, so suddenly I had to pay 1,200 USD extra! […] He gave me no choice. […] I had to go and collect money from people that I know. I paid him.*
>
> *After I paid, I tried to give my [relative's] name so the contact person could tell them that I had paid. However, he didn't want any name. They were just using codes.*
>
> *The young man who first called me was killed – he was hanged.* (Interviewee 0020, interview with Smits, face-to-face, September 2021)

Out of fear that the price will go up even further, family members feel that they have no choice but to pay.

Other interviewees also testified that they were threatened with being sold to a trafficker, or that they would ask for more money, if they did not pay:

> *If you came by 3,800 [USD]. If they sold you, it's 6,000 [USD], or over 5,000 [USD].* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Families of people on the road to Libya worry constantly, as they know what can happen. Feeling unable to help is extremely painful. An Ethiopian refugee in Sudan showed the authors of this chapter

the messages she received from the human traffickers who were keeping her cousin in Libya captive. She said:

> *They are always beating him. They send us the recordings of his screams. And they ask us [for] 300,000 Ethiopian birr. In dollars, I think it is 7,000 USD. And we don't have that much money at this moment. Because we left our properties, our home, we don't have a job, everything. Even we are trying to gather money from our people here to help us. And they help us, the people are helping us, but the Sudanese money is much less. So we couldn't help him till now. Maybe he will die. God knows about him. But we are so stressed about him. And he sends audios of his voice. I can't handle this. This is more than my capacity. I cannot control this, I cannot suffer these challenges at this moment. The people asked us: "If you need your family, send the money. Otherwise we will hum …".* (Interviewee 5028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2021)

A mother of an Eritrean refugee in Sudan described how she discovered that her daughter had left to Libya:

> *When we went to the church, we discovered there were many girls who had escaped. Everyone was asking where the girls were. Then my brother sent her photo to people in Khartoum. For that reason, I felt sick. They sent me to the hospital. Because I know my situation, I haven't got the money to give the ransom to people in Libya.* (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Somali refugees, talking together, recalled the particularly traumatic experience that one of their compatriots faced in Bani Walid and the impact it had on her mother:

> *1026: Those who have had a pen used on their eyes, I can tell you their names: [X]*
>
> *1027: Oh [X], I know her. She paid USD 14,000 in an underground prison. 14,000 from her family. When the smugglers asked her mother [for] the money, her mother, she just fainted and got diabetes and after that she died because of heartbreak. Even her [X] teeth, they broke it. […] I know her.* (Interviewees 1026 & 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

Human trafficking for ransom creates a pervasive culture of fear among Eritrean and other migrant communities, which prompts

relatives to collect payments if they can, expanding the business of human trafficking.

Buying and selling of people

After months locked up in dark, crowded and gruesome 'warehouses', facing torture and sexual violence, the interviewees met for the purpose of this research – the ones who survived – had either escaped or had the ransom paid and been transported across the Mediterranean Sea. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, paying the ransom does not necessarily mean freedom, or that the trafficker will keep his promise to help them reach Europe.

In most cases, once their ransom is paid, refugees wait until a large group of detainees are ready to be transferred. They are told that they will be driven to a location close to the Mediterranean Sea. Being illegally on Libyan territory, they are hidden in trucks and transportation is often uncomfortable and hazardous. Crammed into pick-up trucks, they have to strap themselves in because these vehicles do not stop if someone falls out. An Eritrean refugee woman explained that she was among 80 people who were transferred from Kufra to Bani Walid; they were "loaded in big trucks that transport goods" and covered (Interviewee 1052, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Other interviewees describe very dangerous travel conditions:

> *You know, we are going under the big truck. We are under the truck, and then we are over us… bricks, for building houses. […] Yes, even two people died at that time, because we don't have any air. Even if you are protesting, they beat you. We are in a big truck, and then we are going.* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *I stayed in Bani Walid for six months. After I paid the money, they took those who paid in a tank transporting the petrol from place to place. There is a wall under. Do you know the petrol tank? So there is a wall under and again there is a way that you can enter inside. They close you in and there is a small open place from which you can breathe in and breathe out. Three people died in that container. We stayed in this tank for approximately 24 hours. We were 75 people, but those who remain*

alive are 66. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

If detainees are sold by their trafficker, the same nightmare starts over for them. The modus operandi is the same. Only the location differs. Trapped in a vicious cycle, refugees and migrants are detained each time until an additional ransom is paid for them to be released. These practices have led to the emergence of smuggling and trafficking hubs (Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*). One interviewee explained:

Some people stayed with me in Sabha. After six or seven months, we gave him some money and asked him to bring us to Italy. But right after that, [my connection man] fought with the people of Sabha. So, me and 40 people were sold to another person in Bani Walid. The Libyan people are not good people. They are bad people. They tied us and put electricity on our legs. I will show you a picture. This is Bani Walid. [The picture shows a half-naked woman lying on her stomach on the ground. Large chains tied her legs and arms together behind her back]. This is a girl who was with me in Bani Walid. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Refugees, and particularly Eritrean refugees, who are valuable commodities in the hands of traffickers, are particularly vulnerable to being resold or recaptured when being moved from one place to another. One refugee explained his journey from Bani Walid to the departure point on the coast:

When we arrived at the [Mediterranean] sea, another connection man caught us. His name is Abduselam. He is from Eritrea. He caught all of us. When we arrived at the sea, the Libyan people called Abduselam, because he knows somebody living in that place. They warned him. The men of Abduselam came. Their faces were covered. They came with guns. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Human traffickers also sometimes fight one another in order to take control of a group. An Eritrean explained:

At that time they were fighting each other… the connection men [traffickers]. […] When the fighting started, every person was separated; 270 were caught and kept

again in a store in Sabratha. (Interviewee 1007, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Whether those kidnappings are real or orchestrated by human traffickers to get their money twice or more effectively, is hard for the refugees to know. An Eritrean woman explained:

When we arrived in Kufra, we were asked to pay 3,600 USD and when we paid that money, we were informed that we would depart to the sea. However, after three months, we were again locked up and we were asked to pay 5,500 USD again. […] Within the same city in Brak Shati, they changed the warehouse and they told us that we had been kidnapped and we have to pay again. They just told us that we were kidnapped, but we had no idea if we were kidnapped or not, because we didn't have the sunlight and we didn't know where we were exactly. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Several interviewees explained that human traffickers impersonated workers from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or UN agencies to earn their trust and take advantage of them:

We embarked on the sea. We travelled for eight hours and then we were sent back. And we attempted again, on the second instance, we were arrested by people impersonating UNHCR. Not really UNHCR. Fake UNHCR. Then, we were sold from there. At first, they distributed drinks, shampoo… And they had a UNHCR badge. And after that they were intending to sell us and our smuggler brought us back to the warehouse. […] They were calling the smugglers and they were asking them if they were interested in buying us. (Interviewee 1052, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This creates a lack of trust and imposes a significant barrier to the formation of a relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations.

Human traffickers brim with connections in Libya. If their branch of the network lacks refugees, they can buy them directly from official detention centres (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*), from the police or from ISIS. The following two testimonies below show how sprawling the human trafficking

networks are and how difficult it is for the victims to find an exit door:

> *From Bani Walid, I went to Misrata. I was ready to go to the sea. But they caught us. On 8 June 2017, Arabic people came to kidnap us. By this time, we were 160 people together. We were arrested by policemen. They have communication with the connection man [trafficker]. They took me to Misrata's police station. Another connection man knew this place. His name is Abduselam. He is Eritrean. He has good communication with the police. He asked the police to catch the people so that he could take them afterwards in exchange for money. After 22 days at the police station, they took me to the store of that connection man, in Sabratha.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *We were going to the seaside. We had been kidnapped by Daesh [ISIS] in a town called Zawiyah. They took us to a building and they tortured us without asking [for] money, just because we are Jewish. We faced a lot of violence with them. We received food one time every two days. They distributed us packets of cigarettes and forced us to smoke. They burned our skin with the cigarettes. I stayed one month and one week in this place. El-Amu, a Libyan, the main smuggler in Sabratha managed to take us out of that place. He had prisoners of Daesh. They made an exchange.*
>
> *Kidane, an Eritrean smuggler working with El-Amu, took charge of us. Kidane and El-Amu work together, but they have their own warehouse. At the beginning, Kidane asked for 3,500 USD. But we didn't have it. So they gave us to another warehouse that belongs to Wedi Isaac. [At that warehouse] they asked us for 1,500 USD. When they received it they sent it to Wedi Isaac in Bani Walid.* (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

As refugees are kidnapped, sold, and resold to different human traffickers, the length of their journeys and the ransoms being asked for their release keep increasing.

Forced labour

Eritrean refugees seem to be less often used for forced or slave labour than other migrants and refugees (other than forced begging) and are usually kept inside the detention centres (official and unofficial) and holding camps. However, there are tasks allocated to them to

accomplish inside the 'warehouse'. A Somali refugee who was detained together with Eritreans in Bani Walid recalled the following:

> *Do you know the sewage? The sewage where all the toilets are coming from the houses. […] There is a tank. You know, there is a tank lorry that sometimes comes to remove those things? Sometimes. That one, when it becomes empty, there is some urine or dirty that stay inside. They told us to go inside and collect it with our hands without wearing gloves, without anything. Like that. Me, and [my friend], we lived together in Bani Walid. They forced you to do that! And they are not forcing you only: "Go to do that job". As they are beating us, walking to that wall to walk inside there is somebody who is just punching you, and you fear him while entering. You can't say you don't go inside. No, nothing like that. "Go inside! Go! Go! Go!" There is one person here, he has a stick. And this one is here and this one is here. They are beating you. […] When you come outside, all of your clothes are just a toilet. You are smelling.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

As the human traffickers are either members of the armed groups or connected to them, refugees in Libya also report having been forced to fight in the civil war (see also Chapter 11: "*You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). A young Eritrean man who was detained in El-Amu's 'warehouse' in Sabratha testified:

> *El-Amu told us he would bring us to the sea. But he fought with the Libyans. With Haftar,*[12] *or with someone. And, then, we [were] made to fight. El-Amu, is a soldier. They told me: "You, you, you, from the camp, you go to bring the shooting guns from underground! More shooting guns! A lot of shooting guns!" They asked us to fight. I think in this camp, there was a lot of stress. I worked with small shooting guns. I saw everything – the bombs, the Kalashnikov… I saw it all. I was fighting by force! El-Amu was defeated. The other group caught me. The soldiers of Libya, the soldiers of Haftar or something. They caught me.* (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

[12] Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar is commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalifa_Haftar).

Refugees also work for their human trafficker – willingly or by force – as translators and even torturers. In one testimony, a family member of a person who was being tortured was in touch with such an intermediary. As this intermediary was working unwillingly, they were able to engage on a more personal level with the family member. When he warned that the payment had to be made fast, the warning was taken more seriously, as it came directly from one of the refugees detained by the trafficker. This intermediary was later killed (Interviewee 0020, interview with Smits, face-to-face, September 2021).

Several interviewees gave details about refugees who were forced to collaborate with the traffickers:

> *The ones who are opening the door and locking the door to us are a Sudanese, an Ethiopian and one Eritrean. They have guns and a stick, a metal stick. If you try to run, they will shoot you and beat you. We say: "How can a refugee like us ask us the money? Where is the Libyan?" […]. And even the one that is responsible, the Eritrean man that is responsible for us, […] he killed himself because he doesn't have a mother, he doesn't have a father, he is just a refugee like us, but he doesn't have the money to pay. He stayed there so long. So that is why he worked for them. Not earning a salary, he worked for free. Opening the door, taking the people, guarding with the gun, taking the people to the toilet and bringing them back along to the room.* (Interviewee 1086, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

> *These smugglers, they don't leave you. If they see that you can translate, that you speak Arabic very well, they will want you to work.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

> *[The human trafficker] Aziz is Sudanese, but this Somali guy is working for him because he doesn't have money to pay, so that is why he works for him. He can't release him until he works for him and goes to Europe. Now that guy is in Europe. He becomes responsible for us and we pay Aziz.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

The future of the refugees who are forced to work as torturers for their traffickers is uncertain. If one day they find their way out of the camps, will they be considered victims or torturers?

Discussion

Even though the interviews for this chapter were held in different places and over a relatively long time period (2019–2021), the similarities in the modus operandi reported by Eritrean refugees were striking. The similarity with human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai (2009–2014) was equally remarkable. Human trafficking for ransom seems to have expanded in the region. If Sinai trafficking originally covered the region around Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the Sinai, human trafficking for ransom has now well expanded across the Horn of Africa to Libya.

Both in the Sinai and in Libya, on arrival refugees are first moved to a location that functions as a 'distribution centre', from where they are 'distributed' to holding locations. The distribution seems to be based on the 'connection man' who facilitated the journey to Libya, the nationality of the person (with the perception that Eritreans are worth more than many other nationalities), and the contacts that the refugee has (how much money he or she can potentially raise through ransom extortion). After they are distributed, the refugees find themselves in the holding camps of the traffickers. This practice is similar to that described in Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, 2014, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

In the holding camps, refugees are held in deplorable conditions. They have no freedom and kept in overcrowded conditions. The interviewees talk of a lack of hygiene and starvation. Torture is a daily occurrence that includes being burnt with cigarettes, boiling water and hot plastic, electrocution, severe beatings, and living in proximity with dead corpses. Many refugees fall ill and die. The interviewees mentioned being routinely tortured with sticks, metal sticks, electric wire and plastic pipe. This is similar to the torture documented in Sinai trafficking. Van Reisen and colleagues reported that Sinai survivors experienced beatings as a part as a daily routine: "Beating with whips and sticks (three times a day, and sometimes four to five times a day)", as well as other trauma (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017, p. 286).

The interviewees who had been detained in Libya reported being tied up and hanging, including upside down by the hand and legs together, the removal of body parts and threatening to cut off limbs. Sexual violence was also used as a tool for subjugation and humiliation, and the survivors reported being forced to consume drugs. Witnessing the suffering of co-detainees was also reported to be part of the torture. Sexual violence and sadistic treatment are reportedly common and are particularly traumatising; such acts have the effect of stripping the victims of their dignity. Similar torture routines as those reported in Libya have also been reported previously in relation to Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017, p. 287), as well as inside Eritrea (Human Rights Council, 2016).

The modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, as in the Sinai, entails collusion between different authorities, armed groups and groups in power. Moreover, the main aim of the trafficking of the refugees is the extraction of money from the diaspora, as ransoms are collected from relatives. In both places, the operations are conducted over mobile phones, while the use of these is extremely tightly controlled and restricted. Torture is perpetrated while refugees beg with relatives, in order to incite anxiety and promote the realisation of payments (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

Refugees are often moved between different places, sold on and pay multiple ransoms, in addition to the original first payment agreed to be transported to Libya. The payments are usually higher than originally agreed and once trapped in captivity, additional payments are being demanded. The amounts of the ransoms have also increased over time. This is all similar to Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). In addition, in both Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya, detainees may not be released despite the ransom being paid, may be sold on another time, and/or may be released but re-captured. Ransoms may be collected even if victims have disappeared or died.

In both Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya, suicide is not a way to avoid payment of the ransom, with interviewees

reporting that other detainees were forced to pay the ransom of those who had committed suicide. A survivor who was abducted and trafficked to the Sinai and severely tortured (to force him to beg for ransom) explained that he had tried to commit suicide three times, thinking that his family would suffer the least that way. However, his suicide was prevented by the trafficking facilitators and he was tortured so gravely that he lost parts of his body. He was subsequently released after his ransom had been paid (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken, 2014).

As with Sinai trafficking, some of the detainees ended up working for the traffickers, even as torturers. In 2017, a 22-year-old Somali man was sentenced to life imprisonment for murders and tortures committed in Bani Walid (InfoMigrants, 2017). And in 2020, three refugees were sentenced to 20 years in prison in Italy for "human trafficking, sexual violence, torture, homicides, kidnapping of human beings for the purpose of extortion and aid to irregular immigration" (Debarge, 2020). They had been recognised by other refugees. Whether they had been forced to work as torturers by their trafficker or not remains a question.

There are also some important differences between Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya. The ransoms demanded in Libya are high, but they are lower than the amounts demanded in the Sinai. While in the Sinai, the higher ransoms reached about USD 56,000, the highest ransom mentioned by survivors of trafficking for ransom in Libya was USD 7,500 (for details on payments, see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*). This may be due to the large number of refugees involved and the degree of exhaustion among members of the Eritrean diaspora in relation to coming up with these funds. Ransom amounts differ according to nationality, and also take into account the network of relatives that a refugee has. There are also variations in amounts in different periods, but during the period under research, the total amount of ransom in Libya increased, with more and more refugees being sold several times.

Another difference between the situation in the Sinai and in Libya is the perspective that the victims of human trafficking have about the future. Feeling that Europe has closed its borders and is taking any kind of measure to stop refugees from crossing the Mediterranean Sea, refugees are shifted between criminal trafficking groups and armed groups (including ISIS) and with little hope that their suffering will end. Refugees are often recruited into forced labour and the performance of sexual services (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021).

In both Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya, Eritreans are reported to be at the top of the trafficking network, as well as present everywhere in the chain. The payments made through the Eritrean system of agents (*hawala*) is tightly linked to the collaboration with Libyan traffickers. According to Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017), the *hawala* system is "a network of agents that informally exchange money" (p. 127). In Eritrea, this network is controlled by the Red Sea Corporation, which is in turn controlled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party in Eritrea (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). According to the former Eritrean Deputy Minister of Finance, Kubrom Dafla Hosabay, the persons in Eritrea who receive the ransom from family and friends of the victims are associated with the *hawala* system (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

In line with Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017), this study found evidence of the involvement of Eritreans in human trafficking, including members of the Eritrean regime. This is evidenced by, among other things, the modus operandi of payments within Eritrea itself. Those making payments in Eritrea must speak to an 'agent' who remains invisible to them but who speaks to them from a street phone booth. They then receive instructions where to leave the money. In Eritrea, the street phone booths are tightly monitored; hence, it can only be concluded that the Eritrean authorities are fully aware of all of these transactions and that they benefit from them, corroborating earlier findings by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017).

Conclusion

The chapter looked at the question: *How is human trafficking for ransom experienced by migrants and refugees in Libya in relation to the conditions of detention and how are ransoms extorted, and is it an extension of the situation of human trafficking for ransom that took place in Sinai?* It is clear from the interviews conducted for this research that the elements of human trafficking for ransom in Sinai are being repeated in Libya, although the ransoms demanded are lower. As with Sinai trafficking, the victims are mainly Eritrean, who are kept in inhumane conditions while tortured to extract ransoms from their families.

As with Sinai trafficking, the mobile phone remains a key tool in the modus operandi of trafficking for ransom in Libya. Control over phones and communications is a key element of this practice; phones are taken away to prevent images and information from being sent out of the holding camps/warehouses, where hundreds of refugees at may languish any given time. Phones are also used by the traffickers to send information to relatives, with the victims being forced to beg for the payment of the ransom while being tortured, as a way of ensuring that payment is made. The financial chains can be traced all the way back to the 'chiefs' of the trafficking networks, who are mainly Eritreans. The perpetrators collude with those in power, authorities and armed groups.

As with Sinai trafficking, victims of human trafficking for ransom in Libya are sold and resold. They are exchanged between the different holding houses as goods, with some value, but, given their large number, also dispensable. In Libya, as in the Sinai, refugees find themselves trapped in a human trafficking cycle, from which it is hard to escape.

This research shows that the human trafficking cycle is widening in geographic scope and now includes Libya, in addition to the original countries where the trafficking networks were active: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. If strict measures are not taken against human traffickers and those behind the 'business', at least at the international level, this geographic scope could widen further, as the

practice has been proved to be highly profitable. Although beyond the scope of this research, human trafficking has been linked to the trafficking of drugs and arms, and is potentially supporting criminal and terrorist organisations, which is of great concern (see Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

The entrapment in this cycle is aggravated by a perception by Eritrean refugees that Europe is supporting any measure to block them from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. As they also wish to avoid returning to Eritrea at all costs, given the retribution they are likely to face for fleeing national service (Human Rights Council, 2016), the refugees find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. The lack of an escape from this situation seems to further contribute to creating a situation of vulnerability on which extortion thrives.

The interviews for this research describe a desperate situation, with countless deaths. Those in captivity live with the corpses, which are not removed for days. If they find some space from where they can speak about their ordeal, as those who participated in interviews for this research did, their bodies tell the stories of what they have lived through. With empty eyes peering out of living skeletons, they recall their ordeals, never far removed from death.

As researchers, it is difficult to find the right words to write about these situations. While trying to understand what interviewees were telling us, we felt their pain and it became ours. Without entering our emotions and our sympathy, it is not possible to relate to the stories of those considered of even lesser value than slaves. But in listening, and in writing their experiences, we hope that some dignity is returned to all of those in the same situation. What is described in this chapter is only the tip of the iceberg. The situations described in this chapter profoundly degrade humanity as a whole, and it should be the highest concern to all – countries in the Horn of Africa, the international community, and Europe – that this practice stops, the perpetrators are brought to justice, and the survivors are supported to heal, both emotionally and physically.

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Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz wrote the initial version of this chapter and is author of sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen is author of sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Sara Gianesello contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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