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Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking

Klara Smits & Morgane Wirtz

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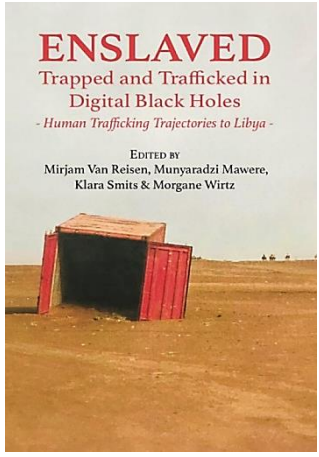

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Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking

Klara Smits & Morgane Wirtz[1]

Introduction

In Sinai trafficking Eritreans made up the majority of victims. But what makes them so vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom? The interviews for this chapter found a number of reasons, including the fact that Eritrea is a 'black hole' in the digital landscape – which means that Eritreans are uninformed and dependent on smugglers and traffickers for information. In addition, the indefinite national service and human rights situation in the country drive many to flee, forcing them into the arms of traffickers. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Tigray.

Since the time of Sinai trafficking, it has been noted that Eritreans make up the vast majority of the victims of human trafficking for ransom in the Horn of Africa (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). In 2014, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) conservatively estimated that 30,000 people had been trafficking to the Sinai during the period 2009 to 2013 – with Eritreans making up 95% of the victims (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). Eritreans also feature prominently in other human tragedies. In the 2013 Lampedusa disaster, 368 persons died and 155 survived after a boat carrying refugees and migrants capsized off the Italian coast. The vast majority of the victims were Eritrean (Horsti, 2017). Horsti (2017) indicates that in the aftermath of the disaster, the Eritrean government tried to repress these deaths

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

in order to avoid attention to the reason why large numbers of Eritreans are fleeing the country in the first place.

According to the data of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), by 2020, more than half a million Eritrean refugees were registered under its mandate (UNHCR, n.d.). In addition, it is estimated that 600,000 Eritreans (16% of the population) are currently living outside the country; with an estimated population of only 3.6 million people in 2022 (O'Neill, 2022), this is a substantial number (UN Human Rights Council, 2022).[2]

In 2015, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea estimated that 5,000 Eritreans were leaving the country each month (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Today, the number of Eritrean refugees registering in neighbouring countries has not declined (UNHCR, 2022a; 2022b) and Eritreans continue to flee to Ethiopia (Miller, 2022) and Sudan (UNHCR, 2022a; 2022b). So, how does this make Eritreans particularly vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom?

This chapter sets out the reason for the focus on Eritrean refugees.[3] Hence, the main research question is: *Why are Eritreans particularly vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom?*

In exploring this question, this chapter examines why, and how, Eritreans are fleeing the impact of the war in Tigray and COVID-19 on Eritreans, and the difficulties they encounter staying in the region that prompt them to keep moving, pushing them further into the arms of the traffickers. Accordingly, the sub-questions are:

Sub-Q 1. *Why do Eritreans flee Eritrea?*

Sub-Q 2. *How do Eritreans flee?*

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[2] In 2018, Human Rights Watch found that 12% of the population of Eritrea had fled abroad (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

[3] While it is believed that all of the Eritreans interviewed for this chapter meet the criteria for refugee status, in this chapter the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

Sub-Q 3. *What is the situation for refugees in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan?*

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with Eritrean refugees and members of the Eritrean diaspora. The findings build on previous literature and reports about (information) repression in Eritrea, but look at this in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, taking into account the changing context in the last few years. Before presenting the findings, the next sub-section sets out the methodology. This is followed by a section on the situation in Eritrea, including the control of information, surveillance and human rights abuses, to position the findings in the context. The findings are then presented in three parts: the reasons why Eritreans are fleeing Eritrea, how they are leaving, and the situation for Eritrean refugees in neighbouring countries. The chapter finishes with a brief discussion, followed by a conclusion.

Methodology

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).

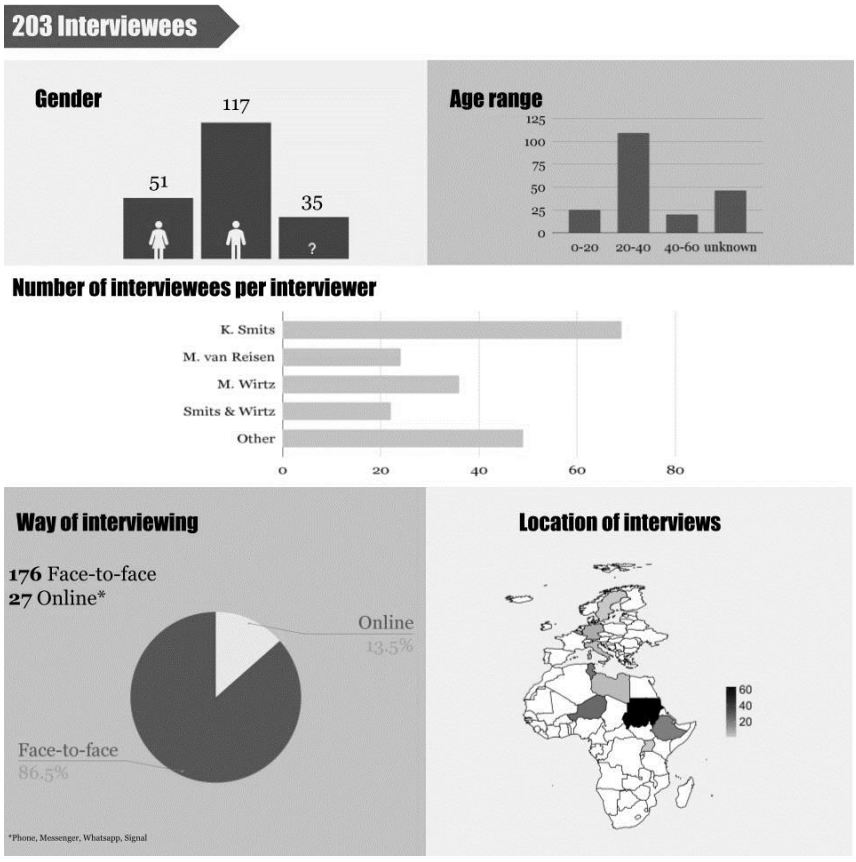
This chapter builds on previous research to examine how the circumstances under which Eritreans live in Eritrea and the circumstances that cause them to flee are tied to vulnerability to human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It assesses Eritrea as a 'black hole' in the digital landscape, where information is severely restricted. In addition, it looks at other factors that may contribute to the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees in the human trafficking cycle, including the war in Tigray.

The chapter is based on a literature review and ethnographic research data. 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. This chapter has analysed a subset of these interviews, namely, all interviews with Eritrean participants (n=203). The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online.

In the interviews, the Eritrean refugees were asked to tell their stories in relation to their trajectories, starting with their lives in Eritrea and the reasons why they fled. These first parts of the interviews were analysed for the purposes of this chapter.[4] In relation to the other interactions with members of the Eritrean diaspora, the exchanges were related to particular events, in which the researchers were able to further explore certain issues at play with the Eritrean groups participating in the meetings.

[4] Other parts of the interviews related to the human trafficking trajectories were used in other chapters of this book.

Figure 7.1. Overview of interview statistics[5]



The literature was selected through a general scan of the sources that cover human rights abuses in Eritrea. Keywords such as 'free press Eritrea', 'control information Eritrea', 'fleeing Eritrea', 'number of refugees Eritrea', and so forth, were used to select academic and non-academic reports, books, articles and other sources. Google Scholar was used to find academic literature, and Google was used for non-academic material. From these sources, key literature was selected that comprehensively covers the control of information in Eritrea, methods of leaving Eritrea (and the consequences), and vulnerability

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

of Eritreans to human trafficking for ransom. The literature and documents were then analysed in relation to the most relevant information and the sources were checked to identify further key literature and documents through snowballing. The new sources identified were similarly analysed. The next section presents the literature review.

Literature review: Exodus from the 'black hole' of Eritrea

The section analyses the literature on what is known about Eritrea as a 'black hole' in the digital landscape – a place where connectivity is either lacking or purposefully denied to certain people in the population (see Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*) – as well as the exodus of Eritrean refugees and their vulnerability to human trafficking.

Control of information

The flow of information is heavily restricted in Eritrea – both in terms of access and distribution. This started with the abolition of free media in 2001 (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). The country tops all rankings for repression of the media and freedom of expression (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). In 2019, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that Eritrea ranked as the worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). In addition, Freedom House has classified Eritrea as 'not free' with a score of just 2 on a 100-point scale (Freedom House, 2021).

The repression of mainstream media is not the only way in which information is restricted in Eritrea. It is difficult for Eritreans to access information online due to limited access to the Internet. In 2017, only 1.3% of the population was estimated to have Internet access (World Bank, 2017). An article published by Bloomberg Businessweek (Winter, 2014), titled 'Eritrea's Communications Disconnect', reports that access to the Internet is difficult and expensive. This article called Eritrea the world's least connected country. It reported there are about a hundred or so Internet cafes, often with fewer than 10 computers (Winter, 2014). In these cafés,

the connections are poor and the sites and pages consulted by users strictly controlled by authorities. According to the Eritrean opposition movement, Arbi Harnet, Internet cafes have been targeted to identify opposition activity within Eritrea (Arbi Harnet, 2016). In May 2019, the authorities suspended social media. Since then, people have been forced to turn to virtual private networks (VPNs), to exchange messages (BBC, 2019).

In addition, the state has a monopoly on communication through its sole provider, Eritrea Telecommunication Services (EriTel). Only 6% of Eritreans have a mobile phone (Winter, 2014). "Sim cards are like gold dust in Eritrea" (BBC, 2019). As well as being expensive, people need permission from the authorities to have a mobile phone. People who have not completed national service generally cannot get a sim card (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019). All landlines and mobile phone lines, as well Internet communication, are heavily controlled by government intelligence (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019).

Another key tool used by the government to control information received and transmitted by the population is the population itself. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea recorded in its 2015 report widespread surveillance of the entire population in Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). The surveillance network includes state tools, such as food coupons, which are used to collect information. It also includes spies who are members of the community. As a consequence of any perceived wrongdoing, people can be arbitrarily arrested and detained. The result is a climate of fear in which Eritreans are afraid to even think (as reported by Eritreans to the Commission of Inquiry). To suppress the exchange of information and any potential protest, citizens are not free to assemble (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

The Eritrean government also maintains control over the diaspora community through its embassies and various organisations. This control includes threats, coercion, forced payments including payment of 2% diaspora tax, and the infiltration of organisations (Smits, DSP-Group & Tilburg University, 2017). Eritreans abroad who speak against the government fear reprisals against themselves

and their family members, especially those still in Eritrea (Amnesty International, 2019).

The tight control over the population is accompanied by severe punishments and frequent imprisonment. Many Eritreans end up in prison, and the conditions in the prisons and human rights abuses are severe. In 2021, a Frontline documentary (Williams, 2021) showed shocking video footage, smuggled out of Eritrea, of one of Eritrea's prisons, Adi Abeyto, in which people were lying on top of each other in crowded conditions. Witnesses from another prison, Mai Serwa, describe how they were locked up in prison cells not tall enough to stand up in. In Eritrea's extreme heat, many prisoners have died after being kept in these cells. Escape from these prisons is difficult and even discussing escape may lead to torture if discovered. Frontline witnesses described torture by electrocution, beatings, and being tied up in extreme positions (Williams, 2021).

The control exerted over the population by the Eritrean government, means that Eritreans are living in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape (Bergin & Lim, 2022; Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam & Ong'ayo, 2019). A black hole is a place where people are unable to access or disseminate information. Both are true in Eritrea. This creates a climate of fear around communication, silencing independent media. Nevertheless, Eritreans have tried to find alternatives. Some members of the diaspora have launched online media outlets, but access to them from within the country is difficult. Creative alternatives include robocalls[6] made by Eritrean opposition outside the country to within the country (Syed, 2013). These automatic calls broadcast messages of peaceful resistance to the current repressive regime.

Leaving Eritrea

Despite this restrictive access to information, including information about what is happening outside of Eritrea, Eritrea produces one of

[6] Robocalls are phone calls that play a pre-recorded message; the calls are made via an auto-dialer, which allows calls to be made without a human operating a phone.

the largest numbers of refugees per million inhabitants (WorldData 2021). Schlindwein (2020) refers to Eritrea as "a 'top producer' of refugees worldwide – especially in comparison to other African countries". With a population estimated at somewhere between 3 and 3.6 million people in 2022 (O'Neill, 2022), more than one million Eritreans are estimated to have sought protection outside the country (Schlindwein, 2020; O'Neill, 2022). Minors are also among those who flee. According to a report by the UN Refugee Agency in June 2020, the last quarterly report before the outbreak of the war in Tigray, minors constituted around half of the total number of refugees fleeing Eritrea (UNHCR, 2020). Van Reisen and Al-Qasim (2017) note that the main reason why so many minors flee Eritrea is the young age of conscription in indefinite national service; minors have either experienced national service, or have seen their family members serving for a long time and want to avoid this fate. In addition, minors are sometimes targeted by security officials and many flee to avoid imprisonment or harassment (Van Reisen & Al Qasim, 2017).

Eritreans flee despite the shoot-to-kill policy at Eritrea's borders for those trying to cross (Williams, 2021) and the challenging situation in neighbouring countries, including war and instability, which offers little scope for protection or prosperity (O'Neill, 2022; Schlindwein, 2020).

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and the outbreak of war in neighbouring Ethiopia, the number of refugees from Eritrea remained stable, with the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea warning that thousands continue to flee (UN Human Rights Council, 2022). The UN Refugee Agency's January figures show that the number of arrivals of Eritrean refugees in 2020 and 2021 dipped only very briefly at the beginning of 2020, before stabilising to 2018 and 2019 levels (UNHCR, 2022).

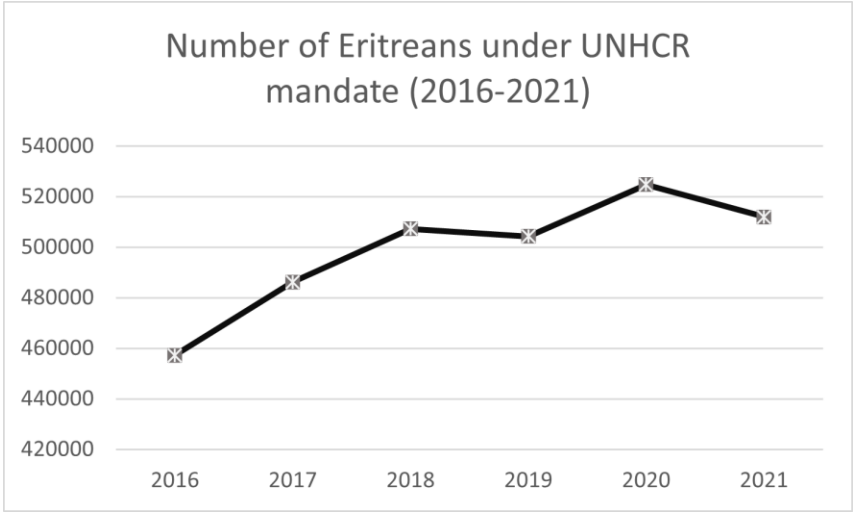


Figure 7.2. Number of refugees from Eritrea registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees worldwide (2016–2021)
(Source: Created using UNHCR data, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=ena7Cx)

At this point, it is relevant to ask if there are any legal ways to leave Eritrea that do not involve the irregular crossing of borders. All travel within Eritrea, even to the next town, requires a yellow travel pass. Check points are in place in between towns. Furthermore, passports are very difficult to obtain; a young Eritrean told a BBC journalist: "Getting a passport is like a dream come true" (BBC, 2019). In addition, those who want to travel legally need a valid exit visa and a valid international health certificate. Exit visas are issued in the form of a stamp in your passport, should you be fortunate enough to have one (UK Home Office, 2016).

As described by the UK Home Office (2016), citizens within the so-called age limit for national service are not allowed to leave the country legally. The list of individuals who are eligible to apply for permission to leave Eritrea includes men over 54 years, women over 47 years, children under 5 years, persons exempted from national service for medical reasons, persons travelling abroad for medical treatment, persons travelling abroad for studies or a conference, businessmen and sportsmen, freedom fighters and their family

members, and representatives of the authorities in leading positions and members of their families (LandInfo, 2015). In order to obtain an exit visa, you must also have shown your loyalty to the government, as well as having a good reason to leave – and/or good connections (LandInfo, 2015). Permission is generally given arbitrarily, even for persons falling within one of these categories (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

Hence, the majority of Eritreans find themselves in an untenable situation: they cannot leave legally, nor can they stay in a country where their freedoms are continuously violated. If someone manages to escape national service, they find themselves trapped, forced to circumvent police control and unable to lead a normal life as long as continue living in Eritrea. They cannot work, help their families, or move around freely (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2019). However, staying in the country involves daily negotiations; it is a matter of deploying strategies for survival and managing constraints. David Bozzini (2014) mentions falsification and trafficking of passes as a technique for thwarting repression. Hence, the situation encourages a culture of survival under repression.

Vulnerability to human trafficking for ransom

It is well established by previous research that, in the context of Sinai trafficking, Eritreans were disproportionately targeted as victims of human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). Human trafficking for ransom, with its severe torture practices and use of mobile phones, was first observed in the Sinai desert in Egypt around 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), although it the practice may have started earlier. At that time, the authors estimated that about 90% of the Sinai victims and survivors were of Eritrean origin (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). Research also suggests that Eritreans are involved at the top level of trafficking organisations, and that this includes authorities and military generals (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Van Reisen refers to the process of targeting youth and driving them out through "deliberate impoverishment" as a "way of exercising control" (2017, p. 12).

The profitability of human trafficking for ransom – and the money that can be made from related circumstances – is not negligible. Based on interviews, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) conservatively estimated that 25,000–30,000 people were victims of Sinai trafficking in the period 2009–2013 and that the value of the ransoms paid in what they referred as the 'Sinai trafficking industry' was around USD 600 million. In 2017, Van Reisen estimated that the cumulative value of human trafficking related ransom payments by Eritreans had reach USD 1 billion by 2016. These amounts are raised in what these authors refer to as "a sad state of affairs" in which:

> *Young Eritrean refugees crisscross between countries in the Horn of Africa and North Africa in search of a safe place. They do so in the realisation that returning to Eritrea is not an option. But there are few places of safety. Refugees from Eritrea are surveilled in many countries of the region, including Sudan and Ethiopia. The risk of deportation makes them vulnerable to extortion (to avoid being sent back to Eritrea). They are looted, threatened, intimidated, violated, and held for ransom. Women routinely suffer sexual violence.* (Van Reisen, 2017, pp. 12–13)

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2012) identify several core reasons why the majority of victims of Sinai trafficking were Eritrean. These include: (1) the large Eritrean diaspora and tight-knit community and family structures, making collection of high ransoms relatively easy; (2) the large number of Eritrean refugees and their vulnerability due to lack of alternatives; (3) the inclusion of Eritreans in the trafficking networks; and (4) the apparent involvement of Eritrean authorities and military officials in the trafficking. In relation to the last factor, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) link Eritrean authorities at the highest levels to human trafficking for ransom (see also Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). The work edited by Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) shows that Eritreans are at the top of the trafficking networks that organise the trafficking of Eritrean refugees for ransom. In addition, the authors show that the refugee outflow from Eritrea is not just a result of people fleeing hardship, but of a deliberate policy of impoverishment and human rights abuses of the Eritrean government (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). This results in an outflow of people from which the Eritrean government then

profits, most openly by collecting funds and payments from its diaspora community as a part of a 2% tax and other contributions, which are extracted using threats and coercion (Smits, DSP-Group & Tilburg University, 2017).

In addition, Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam & Ong'ayo (2019) argue that Eritrean refugees are vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom partly because they are trapped in a black hole in the digital landscape, both inside Eritrea as well as during their migratory journeys (see also Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019). This severely restricts the access to information and distribution of information by Eritreans, making them dependent on the information they receive from the human trafficking networks. Schlindwein (2020) goes one step further and claims that the Eritrean regime profits from the exodus of refugees and from the diaspora. Others have also suggested that the Eritrean regime has, at best, a stake in the outflow of refugees and is, at worst, complicit in it (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

Impunity and a lack of accountability (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014) increase the appeal of the profits that can be made from trafficking for ransom, creating an alternative regime in the entire region. If this is the case, the slavery-like conditions of human trafficking for ransom will become a consistent feature in the region, and these conditions will expand. Hence, it is important to understand what the drivers are of the attempts by refugees to escape the slavery-like, 'black hole' conditions inside Eritrea.

Sinai trafficking ceased in 2014, for various reasons (including the building of a fence between Egypt and Israel and the return of Egyptian forces to fight terrorism), but appears to have since morphed into human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Eritreans continue to make up a large proportion of the victims of this form of trafficking. However, there is a lack of literature on the reasons why Eritreans are trapped in this cycle of vulnerability, and also how the situation in Eritrea has evolved in relation to recent events, such as the war in Tigray and COVID-19 lockdown. This chapter seeks to fill

this gap. The following section presents the methodology for this research.

Reasons for fleeing Eritrea

There are many reasons why Eritreans are fleeing their country. This section outlines these reasons, based on the findings of the interviews and interactions with members of the Eritrean diaspora.

Indefinite national service

The main reason for fleeing Eritrea given by most of the interviewees in this research is the indefinite national service – either fear of being conscripted, escape from indefinite national service, or escape from imprisonment due to desertion:

> *I left because I reject the government of Eritrea. I don't want to be a soldier. One of my brothers died being punished and another one died fighting. [...] When I was an Eritrean soldier, the first time I signed for seven years. After that, by force, I signed for fifteen years. [...] That is why I decided to go to another country. All those problems happened to me because of this.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Interviewees who have been in national service describe tight control and arbitrary punishments. This starts at the time of training. In the following interview, a young Eritrean woman explained that fleeing is heavily punished, sometimes culminating in death:

> *Yes, they punish us all time. You will go on the ground, crawling. Sometimes you go. Sometimes, they put water on you. […] Many kinds of punishment, until they will kill you if you try to escape. They will gun you directly. Sometimes, punish you… They beat body, and even they will kill if someone tries to escape.* (Interviewee 5002, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Women conscripts regularly experience sexual abuse:

> *They [military leaders] choose some girls [for sex]. I don't know how they choose. They take whom they want. […] They have their house near us. For example, they send me to the group and tell for example: "[name] come, the leader wants you [for sex]". There is another, she will come to another and say "come, the leader wants*

you at that place". (Interviewee 5002, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Conscription into national service comes with a complete lack of choice and lack of freedom. This is not only the case when it concerns military service, but also other areas of work:

National service is everywhere. National service is all the year. When you are … you don't have choice for anything. Because of this, I went out of my country. When I graduated from any field, by education the government told me to do this one without anything. Unfortunately, by force. So, if the government told me to do this thing, you cannot do anything else. Because of this, I came out from my country. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Since Eritrea became involved in the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees who fled to Sudan indicate that the efforts to round up youth for the national service have increased. In a collection centre in Sudan, groups of youth – separated into groups of women and men – indicate that round-ups have increased (Interviewees 5017, 5018, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). A girl said that one of her friends was sent to Tigray:

I don't want to mention her name. She finished [school] until 11. Then they sent her to the training and then to Tigray. (Interviewees 5017, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

The round-ups also pick up minors who look like they might be old enough. When asked how old the youth collected are, one girl answered: "18 – but also it depends on your body. If you look bigger [you are taken], [even] if you are 13" (Interviewee 5017, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). Another interviewee said that, first, they distribute a notice to each house calling up anyone over 18 years, then, they go door to door to gather recruits (Interviewees 5011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).

One interviewee stated that he was taken to prison and then to the military service at the age of 13, because his father had been an opponent of the Eritrean government:

> *My father was a protester of the government. Because of that, they put him in prison. […] When he died, the members of the government came to our home. They were threatening my mother. Then, even when I wanted to go to school, I was having problems. […] When I was 13 years old, suddenly, the military took me to prison; Bedhom prison. Then they took me to the military service of Himbrti. I stayed two weeks there. I really hated that place because it was difficult for me.* (Interviewee 1020, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Fear of being conscripted is heightened by the fact that many, especially male, family members are also stuck in the national service and not able to provide for their families. The interviewees explained that, if drafted, they would not be able to support their family:

> *Once I quit school, I received a conscription letter. It is compulsory to do national service. I didn't want to join the army. I had to support my family. We have economic problems. I decided to leave.* (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

One interviewee described not receiving a salary or being able to see his family while in national service:

> *19 years without salary, without family. When I need to see my family, I cannot get permission. So, it is very difficult.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

For one interviewee who was already conscripted when the war in Tigray started, the fear of dying in Tigray and leaving his family with nothing was a driving factor for him to escape:

> *I know that they will send me to Tigray area for fighting, and I know it is a very dangerous area. Some people they have died, some are arrested… I'm thinking, if I die at that place, the government will not continue to see how my family will live and they will not give them anything. They will not care for my family. So I decided to leave Eritrea and I told my family about that.* (Interviewee 5005, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Therefore, a sense of duty to be useful to one's family is a major driving factor. This is in addition to other factors that limit their freedom to earn money, including imprisonment, which is discussed in the following sub-section.

Imprisonment

Many of the Eritreans interviewed reported being imprisoned – one or more times – for what seem like arbitrary reasons, and often without trial. Desertion or trying to leave the country were common reasons given for being sent to prison:

> *I am in many prisons. First am late to come to [the place of deployment in the national service]. Many,* many *times I am in prison. Because I am late. Because I want to escape out, and they catch me.* (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The conditions in the prisons and the human rights abuses are shocking, as confirmed by the interviewees:

> *They will beat you; if you speak anything, if you say I want to go to the toilet, I want water, something like that. They will beat you.* (Interviewee 5004, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Imprisonment is indefinite and the prisoners do not know when they will be released. Although opportunities for escape are few, prisoners sometimes manage to escape when being let out to use the toilet, as described by one of the interviewees for this book:

> *[...] they gave us four months [in prison] [...] When they allowed me to go to the toilet, I escaped.* (Interviewee 5010, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Spending time in prison appears to be common place in Eritrea; many interviewees answered 'of course', when asked if they had ever been to prison. Four interviewees[7] explained that they bounced between

[7] Interviewees 0002, 0008, 0016, 0017, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March-June 2019

prison and national service, because they were late or refused to return to military service from the rare leave granted to them.

Fear of imprisonment and national service, as well as the human rights abuses that occur in both, were key reasons cited by most of the interviewees for fleeing Eritrea. Another reason given was the difficult living conditions.

Difficult living circumstances

Difficult living circumstances in Eritrea include a general lack of freedom – not only in terms of freedom of work, but also freedom of speech and freedom of religion:

> *First my religion was Eritrean Orthodox [Christian]. Then, I had a Protestant friend. He taught me the Bible. Then, there is a problem in Eritrea. This religion is not allowed. So we were hiding to study the Bible. But finally, everybody knew. If people know, they gossip [about] you and maybe the others, if they know, that you are using this, or trying to study or to be like this, it is so risky. So, I decided to leave.* (Interview 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

In addition to the lack of freedom, interviewees also describe general economic difficulties and lack of food. The difficult living conditions mean that many families in Eritrea depend upon money sent to them from outside of the country. Basic items such as food can be hard to come by, as described in the following excerpt:

> *Before it was better than now. Because before I found work, here, here... There is some money. But now there is no job. I came before from the Highland. At that time I found work. But now even we have difficulties to find things like food. (Interviewee 5007, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).*

Another interviewee said that people leave due to the lack of job opportunities:

> *It is clear why people leave Eritrea. There is no good work. And also I haven't got an ID because it is under the national service. I haven't got the right to travel. To travel in Eritrea, you need papers and I haven't got that.* (Interviewee 5011, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Some leave to help their family:

> *I had to help my family. In Eritrea it is not easy. So I decided to go outside, to go abroad. I had to help my father and my mother.* (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The COVID-19 lockdown in Eritrea made living conditions even harder. Due to the lockdown, roads in Eritrea were closed. This meant people and goods could no longer travel easily from town to town:

> *Corona brought more pressure on me and my family because at that time many things stop; sugar, some food… Because no travelling. Many things stop. And that time also my mother was travelling to my sister [outside of Eritrea] and also that motivated me to leave Eritrea to Sudan. There is nothing to do in that area. I was suffering from Corona also.* (Interviewee 5001, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

One interviewee noted that he could only survive as a soldier in the national service because he also had a side-job. However, he lost this job during COVID-19:

> *When Corona came, they closed all the roads. [I had] No job, and as a soldier we are suffering because we depend on another job. Normally, also, I work on my bicycle. I have many goods; I sell to people outside of Teseney. It's about 20 kilometres. When Corona came, they banned me from continuing this work and they want me to work with them all the time to protect people from Corona. We work on closing all the roads everywhere. Then one of our leaders heard that I'm working in selling goods and travelling and he stole my bicycle and said "maybe you have the Corona and you will send it to other people or something like that, so you can give us your bicycle".* (Interviewee 5005, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Other interviewees who had recently fled did not see much difference between the situation before and after COVID-19. One interviewee shared the following:

> *It is all the same, before or now. Also I see that the Corona is bad. But before also and later all the situation is the same. No work. No work. No work. Before and*

after. (Interviewee 5007, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

The economic circumstances mentioned by interviewees are often mentioned in combination with the lack of freedom or fear of conscription into national service. For example, interviewees said that they cannot afford to take care of their families because they are in national service. This means that in order for them to take care of their families, they see no choice but to flee.

Leaving Eritrea

Crossing the border

Despite the fact that fleeing Eritrea is dangerous and may lead to imprisonment or being shot at the border, many people undertake the journey with little planning or help from others:

> *No [I didn't tell my family I was leaving]. I have my friend. He knows how to cross, because he tried one time. So, I asked him to go with him. So he took me to Ethiopia.* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

When people decide to leave the country, they communicate as little as possible. Their knowledge of the situation outside Eritrea is extremely limited and they are focused on a successful escape in which they need to negotiate dangerous terrain. The information blackout in Eritrea makes it difficult to receive or exchange information. Beyond the occasional message exchange, which are generally on superficial topics out of fear of harming themselves or others, as the Eritrean government may be listening in, families may face total silence. In some cases, the first that family in Eritrea hears of their relative's departure is a phone call from Libya demanding ransom for their release:

> *At first when I came to Ethiopia, people were putting me in conference call with [my mother] but later on I never spoke with her and then after I came to Libya, it was my friends who were talking with her.* (Interviewee 1052, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Full information is, therefore, not available in the process of fleeing the country, or when negotiating the way forward afterwards. As everyone is surveilled, or may be surveilling others, it is also difficult to trust anyone. Leaving Eritrea without an exit permit can be a very dangerous business. A shoot-to-kill policy is arbitrarily implemented at the Eritrean border. One of the interviewees in this study said that the officially policy is to shoot at the legs of those trying to cross the border illegally, but that higher-ups tell them to shoot to kill (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Most Eritreans who flee do so by crossing the border by themselves, with a small group, or with a smuggler or guide. The interviewees mostly fell into one of two categories: those who escaped Eritrea by themselves or in a small group; and those who went with a 'smuggler' or 'facilitator', often referred to as a guide. People in the first category form a narrow majority of the interviewees who had escaped Eritrea. Their stories were characterised by the following: they went on foot or by donkey; they had an opportunity (due to the location they live in or where they work) to be relatively close to the border; and they indicated that they were with a group or had made some effort to figure out how to cross the border on foot:

> *I crossed the border alone, by foot. It took me one day and a half. When I was in the army, I learnt the way to escape the country.* (Interviewee 1005, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *I didn't make contact with a connection man. I got some information on the way. Then I started the way by foot in the night, with four persons. We left from agriculture of Forto Sawa to Kassala. It took us three days. But we were walking only by night. We took no gun. We brought a small bag with only food and water.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face to-face, April 2019)

Many interviewees went with small groups made up of friends or people they knew, for example, fellow villagers or acquaintances from the national service:

> *We were 5 persons. We were in the national service and we know each other from the village where we lived. And then together we fled, left the country.* (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Although most went on foot the whole way, some people also used other modes of transportation to make it to the border area, from where they could walk. This included public transport (two cases), or personal cars (in one case):

> *We left from Asmara. We took a car and we walked. I just went using public transport.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

> *I came to the border by the car. I left the car at the border and I crossed to Ethiopia. [I crossed at]* the *[…] point [where] Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia [meet]. I crossed from Sudan to Ethiopia.* (Interviewee 0012, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Attempts to cross are not always successful. Three interviewees specifically mentioned that they had tried to cross before, but they had been stopped. In all cases, this resulted in being sent to prison, and, after that, to national service. One person tried to cross five times before he was successful on the sixth attempt:

> *I went walking. In 2016. But I already started in 2015 to go to Ethiopia, but I could not manage. It was difficult. I was caught a few times. I have tried five times to go to Ethiopia and also Sudan. [...] I had to cross the soldiers and they sent me to prison. There I was for sometimes one or two months, sometimes a year. That was difficult.* (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Usually the actual border crossing takes place at night. The people fleeing need to avoid military patrols along the borders. Some interviewees said that they were shot at. Three interviewees reported being shot at while crossing the border:

> *When I fled from Eritrea, it was night and then I fled with another two people when we were moving towards the border, the military listened our steps and then they fired at us at that time – but fortunately no-one was bitten by the fire gun.* (Interviewee 0003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

A minority of interviewees went with a smuggler/guide across the border. In most cases, they paid for this service, but some indicated

that people were willing to help them because of interpersonal connections. Not all guides are smugglers:

> *I told them my problems. I said that I needed to leave Eritrea. They told me that from their village, it is easy to leave. They took me with them. They know where the checkpoints and the militaries are, where we take the bus, where the place where we have to walk from is.* (Interviewee 1020, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The guides in this case, according to the interviewee, did not ask for money, but were helping out of goodwill. The interviewees who use smugglers appear to be persons who live or work further away from the borders:

> *I left by foot. We were walking for almost two weeks with other people together. We were 12 [people]. It's an Eritrean guy who organised the journey.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The smuggler in this case took the group on foot, with the journey taking almost two weeks. Payments for smugglers show a wide range. Some prices are relatively affordable, when compared to payments that will come later on in the journey:

> *The smuggler was Eritrean. I forgot his name. He took 3,000 Eritrean nakfa (ERN) [approximately EUR 180] for that.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Sometimes, such journeys can be more expensive when the interviewees come from places such as the capital, Asmara, even when the smugglers are transporting people on foot:

> *I left by foot from Eritrea to Ethiopia. I paid someone to show me the way. It was over 20,000 ERN [approximately EUR 1,200[8]]. We were a group of six persons. I am from Asmara. (*Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

[8] The exchange rate used throughout this chapter was calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

Another interviewee shared:

> *I paid USD 4,000 to reach Khartoum, in Sudan. We travelled by foot. It was long. It took us like two weeks. We were walking during the night and during the day we were hiding. Our connection man was from Eritrea. I don't know him personally. He was walking with us.* (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In these cases, the smugglers were professionals and not known to the interviewees previously. The people coming from Asmara particularly appeared to be paying high prices for smugglers to bring them across the borders. This is probably because it is risky to smuggle people from Asmara through these local areas, where they can easily be identified and apprehended, as they have not received permission for the journey. Given the strict controls to reach the border, paying bribes might also be necessary an imputed into the price.

None of the interviewees indicated a clear objective of where they wanted to go after fleeing Eritrea. At this stage of the journey, leaving appears to be the only goal. Once they are out, they will see what happens next.

Minors

Many of the people who flee Eritrea are minors or youth. Conscription in national service starts for some when they are still minors. Some of the interviewees were minors or saw minors when they were sent to the training camps for national service. The youngest unaccompanied refugee encountered in the research for this book was 8-years-old. One interviewee shared the following:

> *When I was 16-years-old, I was in Sawa. Sawa is the place for the military service for the third-grade education.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

In order to escape being drafted into the national service, minors have been leaving the country, often without their parents, at an increasingly young age (Brandpunt, 2016; Williams, 2021). Girls are married young with the hope they will get pregnant before being

drafted (Human Rights Watch, 2019). During the war in Tigray, it is reported that minors were conscripted and deployed on war fronts (EEPA, 2021).

In a Sudanese refugee camp, two groups of recent arrivals of Eritrean refugees were interviewed. The majority of the interviewees in the group said that they were minors (Interviews 5017 and 5018, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).[9]

Threats – against those leaving and their family

Leaving Eritrea is difficult, because the government continues to look for you and pressures your family to force you to return:

> *Then, from my parents, the military service didn't leave them. They asked many time: "Where is your son?" "Where is your son?" Even one time, they took my father to the police station instead of bringing me. But me, when my parents told me: "Your father is in prison, so you have to come," I never came back to that village because I saw that the militaries were looking for me and that is why I didn't go back to my village.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As fleeing Eritrea is illegal, the family of those who flee may be punished for the crimes of the person who has fled, particularly if they deserted national service:

> *You cannot trust any people in Eritrea. Even my mother. So we are not talking with any person. Just: "Let's go, let's go, let's go".* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

These threats are often effective, as the wife of a conscript testified:

> *In 2006, my husband was a soldier in the army and one time he escaped from the army and he went to the area of gold mining. Then the government came to us and threatened us: we will take your restaurant, if your husband does not come back. [...] When he moved away from the mining, we sent someone to him to tell him about the threats of the government. Every day, they came to my small restaurant. So my*

[9] See Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*, regarding the ethics of interviewing minors.

husband came, and he went to the government. So the threats stopped at that moment. After months, some people found him – he had died. It looked like the government shot him when he tried to escape. (Interviewee 5003, focus group interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

In many cases, the Eritrean refugees interviewed for this research did not tell their families that they were leaving. The interviewees instead chose to make their way out quietly. On some occasions, their family did not hear from them until they had reached a refugee camp – at which time, it would be too late for them to return.

Situation in neighbouring countries

This sub-section describes what happens to Eritrean refugees once they flee the country. It first discusses the situation refugees face if they try to stay in the region. It then describes the 'long arm' of the Eritrean regime in the neighbouring countries. Finally, it analyses the impact of the war in Tigray in the region.

Staying in the region

After leaving Eritrea, many Eritrean refugees either end up in official refugee camps or informal situations in the Tigray region of Ethiopia (Mai Aini or Adi Harush) and Sudan (Shagarab refugee camp). When refugees cross the border, they are gathered in collection points, from where they are brought to registration or transit centres. In Ethiopia, this was Endebaguna. In Sudan, reception centres are used at crossing points, then refugees are moved to (temporary) refugee camps, such as Wedsherify and Shagarab.

The situation in the refugee camps is challenging. One interviewee described Mai Aini in Ethiopia as follows:

There was nothing there. In the camps, I survived with many from my family. The houses are small and cold. If you are old or infirm, they give you a small house, but if you are young and able, you have to build it with soil and cover it with plastic. This often does not work very well and can fall apart. (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Some refugees choose to avoid the camps altogether, because there are no opportunities for them to earn a livelihood:

> *Some of my friends told me that there is no work in Shagarab. Some of them spent one and a half years without anything. Even the [refugee] card, they will not get the final card. All of us we get the yellow card, but they didn't get the final card and there is nothing to do in the camp.* (Interviewee 5001, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2021)

In Sudan, refugees are not entitled to a refugee card[10] unless they are living in a refugee camp. It is a choice between a refugee card and the possibility to work, although irregularly, in the host community. Staying in Sudan is possible, especially for people who speak Arabic fluently. Interviewees explained that although they were able to work in Sudan, the situation became more challenging when the police started to perceive that Eritreans have plenty of money. This has resulted in extortion under the threat of return to Eritrea. Threats of return have put pressure on Eritrean refugees to leave, and many did:

> *If you stay in Sudan, you need an ID from Sudan. And the refugees, if you pay money, you will get that card. You will stay in the city of Al-Qadarif. I paid Sudanese pounds (SDG) 2,000 [approximately EUR 293at that time]. I paid that cash. So, there is a problem from workers of the government. Government workers, when they see someone from Eritrea, they think he has money. That is why they caught me. They asked for a lot of money. They asked me for SDG 3,000 [approximately EUR 440 at that time]. If I paid money, I could stay here. If I didn't pay money, I would return to Eritrea. […] If I go to Eritrea, they will put me in prison. That is why I was afraid.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, April 2019)

[10] A refugee card is issued by UNHCR to the refugees in the refugee camps. The card demonstrates the refugee's identity and refugee status.

Other interviewees said that they feared the Sudanese police, because they may be arrested and forced to pay money in order to get out of prison:

> *I paid 140 [Sudanese] pounds [approximately EUR 18 at that time] to go to Khartoum. But the Sudanese police caught us and took our mobile phones and arrested us. We had to pay 400 [Sudanese] pounds [approximately EUR 51 at that time] to get out. I stayed in the prison for one month. I could not take a shower, we could not lie down at the same time. There was very little space. I was beaten in prison.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

According to a group of interviewees in Khartoum, the situation has deteriorated since the recent economic downturn, particularly following the adjustments to the new political situation since 2019. Even refugees who have lived in Sudan for decades do not have an official status. Refugees fear that they could lose their jobs or right to study, and they fear being arrested arbitrarily (Interviewee 5029, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).

Interviewees also reported being afraid that they would be returned to Eritrea. One witnessed the following:

> *Actually they did that for about six people. They deported them already. Four days ago, they deported six people. Still we are afraid of that, and those people were ten when they told them that they wanted to deport them, four of them went quickly, escaping, and they caught the other six and deported them [...] in a car, it is a car of the security. If they try to catch one of us now, we will try to escape on foot to another area.* (Interviewee 5018, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

It is impossible to confirm whether or not these people were indeed taken back to Eritrea, but the interviewees said that they have received threats of return, and the fear of this is real.

In addition, many Eritrean refugees fear that there may be representatives of the Eritrean government observing and reporting on them, as was noted earlier in this chapter in an interview with an Eritrean refugee in Wedsherify, in East Sudan (Interviewee 5002, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2021).

Many refugees stay in Ethiopia and Sudan, or travel to other countries. The Central Mediterranean route is by far not the only, nor even the most frequently-used, route to escape the Horn of Africa. Many refugees go south, move to Kenya, towards Uganda or onwards to South Africa. Before the border fence between Egypt and Israel was completed in 2013, many Eritrean refugees made their way to Israel. However, a significant portion of the Eritreans interviewed, especially young people, aspire to travel to Europe. The reasons for wanting to do so vary. Many interviewees report looking simply for safety and freedom:

> *After that, I didn't have any choice; I decided to go to Sudan. At that time I heard somebody can go from Sudan to Libya and after that go to Europe. In Europe, they have freedom, they have humanity, they protect your life. That is why I decided to go there.* (Interviewee 1009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewees rarely indicated a specific country that they wished to go to within Europe. It should be noted that for ethical reasons, this question was not specifically asked. The interviewees usually emphasised that anything would be better than staying in the places where they had been – refugee camps or cities – which they felt held no future and were not safe. This left most feeling that moving onwards, and not staying in the region, was the only option.

The long arm of the Eritrean regime

The interviewees in this research also described being afraid of the reach of the Eritrean government, even after they had fled. An Eritrean human rights activist told the researchers that his mother had received a visit following his activities opposing the Eritrean regime in Europe. Another interviewee explained how this fear played a role in his decision to leave Hitsats, Ethiopia:

> *I am scared about informants. [...] It happened two times. First by a paper [official notice of recruitment drive]. They put the paper in my house. And the other one, I found in the night time, I cannot remember them, but they try to catch me, they try to take me [...] They said to me, you cannot leave your country. We will follow you everywhere.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

This is also the case for some Eritrean refugees in Sudan:

> *Yes. I still feel danger from Eritrea. Even if I am in [Sudanese city]. I am feeling that there are people collaborating with Eritrean government in [Sudanese city]. [...] I worked with the government as a soldier and I know, I have the ability to distinguish. Looking in your eyes, I know if you are working with the government. I observe people. The one that target you have different way of looking at you.* (Interviewee 5002, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Hence, it seems that even though refugees escape Eritrea, they are still persecuted by the Eritrean government intelligence or supporters. At the same time, the Eritrean government officials have also been implicated in the smuggling/trafficking business:

> *I know many traffickers that send people to Sudan. The [government] officials, they know the names of the traffickers. Some cross in Shire, some cross in Humera – this is a meeting point in Sudan. I went to Sudan, because life was so hard in the camp. Everybody in the [Mai Aini] camp knows who the traffickers are. They also stay in the camps.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another Eritrean living in a European country told researchers:

> *The Eritrean regime organises festivals in Europe. In these festivals they collect money from the diaspora. The band which comes from Eritrea is a military band and it glorifies violence. It makes people terrified. But I also saw a human trafficker from Eritrea traveling with them. How do I know [he is a trafficker]? Everyone knows he is a human trafficker.* (Interviewee 3008, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, August 2022)

One interviewee indicated that a family member had been kidnapped from Ethiopia to Libya, after having fled Eritrea on account of his opposition activities (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, September 2021). Two other cases are known of politically active persons living in Europe whose relatives were abducted, one of which is understood to be a punishment and to stop the person's political activities.

Impact of the war in Tigray

The war in Tigray has also had an impact on the ability of refugees to stay in the region, as well as providing some with a reason to flee. Before the war in Tigray, when federal Ethiopian troops and Eritrean troops entered the Tigray region in the north of Ethiopia, this region housed four camps for Eritrean refugees: Shimelba, Hitsats, Mai Aini and Adi Harush.[11] Ethiopia was a key destination for those fleeing the country. One refugee interviewed for this book testified that he was returned by the Eritrean army to Eritrea after having lived in Hitsats refugee camp in Tigray for seven years, before he was again able to flee and left for Sudan (Interviewee 5010, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).

In the wake of the war, refugees interviewed for this book have indicated that forced conscription in Eritrea has intensified:

> *The government is sending a paper to all the youths in their houses. This paper says that you must go to the national service. If you don't go, they will come and you will come with them.* (Interviewee 5011, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Another interviewee testified that he was taken directly to the battlefield in Tigray, where he arrived on 2 November 2020. He had spent nine years in prison in Eritrea, but at the end of October, he was taken out, together with others who had spent a long time in prison. They did not realise they were going to Tigray until they arrived at the border.

> *We didn't understand anything until we reached the area of Badme, the conflict area between Ethiopia and Eritrea. At that area, we just know what will happen.* (Interviewee 5009, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

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[11] During this war, two of the refugee camps – Hitsats and Shimelba – were completely destroyed and refugees attacked and killed (Schlein, 2021). In addition, an unknown number of refugees were coerced into going back or directly transported back to Eritrea by Eritrean forces (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This interviewee fought in the war for three months, before being returned to Eritrea due to an injury. From there, he escaped. Conscripts indicate that they were sent to the war in Tigray under false pretences. Some who declined to fight were imprisoned. Others managed to escape after realising what was going to happen:

> *Four months ago, in February 2021, they wanted to send us to the area of Omhajer. They wanted to send us to training. They told us: "You will be sent to that area just for two weeks, just for training". But we did not trust that, because we knew that it is not a training area. The area of the training is like the west, or another area. I know that they will send me to Tigray for fighting, and I know it is a very dangerous area. Some people have died, some are arrested… I'm thinking: "If I die at that place, the government will not continue to see how my family will live and they will not give them anything. They will not care for my family". So I decided to leave Eritrea and I told my family about that.* (Interviewee 5005, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Thus, the context of the war is not only a destabilising factor for the whole Horn of Africa, but also a direct reason for people to flee Eritrea. Refugees from the camps in Sudan indicate that human smugglers have already come into the camps to advertise the journey to Libya (Interviewees 5003, 5022, 5027, interviews with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021). Furthermore, new trafficking routes have emerged due to the conflict. One interviewee indicated that after his relative had fled from the Shimelba refugee camp to Addis Ababa, he was kidnapped from there and taken directly to Libya (Interviewee 5003, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021).

During the war in Tigray, Eritrean and Tigray refugees suffered increasing repression in other parts of Ethiopia, leading to an opening of new routes. The following excerpt is about a young girl, who was looking after her two younger siblings on her own in Addis Ababa, but disappeared. The researcher found that she had been taken to Kenya, through the mediation of her mother, who was living in a Western country as refugee. Interviewing the younger sister who has

stayed behind, the researcher found the following (in the words of the researcher, noted at the time of the interview):

> *Her sister went to Kenya with her friends through the smuggling people and she is still in Kenya. She is still without legal papers, even she didn't find a way to ask for asylum in Kenya.*
>
> *I asked her how her sister dealt with her friends or the smugglers when she decided to go to Kenya. And she said her sister didn't say anything when she took that action and also they didn't talk about anything regarding how she moved to Kenya.*
>
> *She told me that her mother motivated them by saying those people will help you, that's why you should be close to them.*
>
> *She asked me some help for food expenses and clothes for this cold season.*
>
> *She informed me that she and brother went to Red Cross to ask for help, but they couldn't help them, because they can't help individuals.* (Interviewee 7016, Interview with [researcher],[12] field note of face-to-face interview, August 2022)

The ongoing war and instability in the region has created more opportunities for smugglers and traffickers to target refugees.

Conclusion

This chapter explains the selection of Eritreans as a case study for analysing human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Previous research, in relation to Sinai trafficking, found that Eritreans were disproportionally targeted. However, Sinai trafficking ceased in 2014 (for various reasons), and the literature does not sufficiently assess these factors in relation to human trafficking for ransom in Libya, particularly amid new developments, such as the war in Tigray and the COVID-19 lockdowns. It is estimated that 16% of Eritreans have left the country, the majority of whom are minors. Hence, this chapter looked at why Eritrean refugees are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom, including why they flee, how they flee and the

[12] Name withheld due to security concerns.

situation for refugees in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan.

This chapter depicts a complex situation in Eritrea, including a system of political repression in which the government of Eritrea makes a show of deterring irregular migration through measures such as imprisonment, while at the same time using deliberate impoverishment, which forces many of its citizens into irregular migration. The interviewees for this chapter describe imprisonment, conscription and fear of conscription (including of minors), difficult living conditions, and human rights abuses as the key reasons for fleeing the country. The political regime in Eritrea, the lack of freedom, and human rights abuses – which have been thoroughly documented – continue to push Eritreans outside of Eritrea's borders.

Most of the interviewees reported fleeing the country for political reasons, and many mentioned the need to support their families, as the government policies, especially the indefinite national service, has caused widespread poverty. New developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, have exacerbated the living conditions in Eritrea. The war in Tigray – and the subsequent forced mobilisation of the Eritrean military to fight the war – has also worsened the situation, increasing the number of refugees who have been forced to undertake secondary movement, forming a group of potential victims for human traffickers operating in the area. At the same time, the government is profiting off those who have fled, either through the involvement of government officials in human trafficking for ransom or by collecting taxes and financial contributions from the diaspora under threat.

The severe restrictions on access to information and communication by the Eritrean government means that Eritreans are living in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape. Within this black hole, information is not only restricted by controlling the media and controlling the digital infrastructure, but also by implementing a widespread system of surveillance, which causes mistrust, even within families. Inside Eritrea, there are severe restrictions on the media, the use of

computers, access to the Internet and mobile phones, as well as the strict surveillance of all communication. Hence, the information flow to and from the country is severely limited. As Eritrean refugees flee, they carry with them their lack of familiarity with free information, as well as the mistrust instilled in them in Eritrea.

The Eritrean refugees interviewed for this book took great risks to cross the border – alone, in small groups, or under the guidance of a smuggler. Being caught at the border can lead to being shot at or put in prison, and afterwards being (re)conscripted into Eritrea's national service. Legal alternatives to leave Eritrea are not available to the vast majority of Eritreans; their first border crossing is, therefore, already illegal.

Once they have fled, Eritreans find themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation, as there is no possibility for them to go back to Eritrea, without facing prison time and being forced to (re)join national service. Life is difficult in the refugee camps and urban areas of Ethiopia and Sudan. A future is hard to imagine for many of them, due to the lack of freedom they have and the insecurity they face in their host country. Part of this insecurity includes arrests by authorities, possible returns and surveillance by Eritrean intelligence. Seeking decent jobs, security and freedom of movement, refugees often see the only option as to embark on the perilous journey to Libya.

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Ethical clearance

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Author contributions

Klara Smits is the main author of the text in this chapter. Morgane Wirtz provided detailed background information and research which provided input and background to the information presented in this chapter.

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