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Human Trafficking
Trajectories to Libya



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Edited by
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Preface by Honourable Chief Forture Charumbira

Reading this book titled ‘Enslaved’, my eye fell on a quote from an interview with a person who was trapped in a human trafficking warehouse. This person asked: “It is like slavery, or is it slavery?”

This was the same question I was asking as I read this book. As I turned, page after page, I realised that what is being described as human trafficking for ransom is actually slavery. I counted the word ‘slave’ 258 times.

But, how is this possible? Slavery was abolished in 1865.

When it was abolished, slavery was defined as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised”.¹ In those days, the ownership of a person was set out in a legal paper. From this book, I understand that, today, ownership is set out in a digital code. This ownership refers to the complete control of one person over another, and is realised through the use of violence. This violence is perpetrated through physical and psychological means and leaves deep trauma. For example, alleged trafficker Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, who is also mentioned in this book, has been described as using the cruellest ways to pressure and humiliate the victims he holds hostage. He is said to have organised football matches between his victims in Libya. According to an eyewitness, those who missed a goal were shot, while the team that won was ‘rewarded’ by being forced to rape women hostages.²

This sadistic violence defines slavery in Libya today, in which human beings are treated and traded as commodities, and held solely for this purpose. If they are no longer profitable, these people disappear, and

¹ League of Nations. (1926). *Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery*, 25 September 1926, 60 LNTS 253, Registered No. 1414. Geneva: League of Nations

² Hayden, S. (2021). *How did one of North Africa’s biggest accused smugglers escape prison?* [Online], 100 Reporters, 24 February 2021. <https://100r.org/2021/02/how-did-one-of-north-africas-biggest-smugglers-escape-prison/>; on Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, see also <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-sudan-arrest-world-most-wanted-human-trafficker>

many are suspected to have died. The trafficking in persons, of human beings, who are held in undignified and dehumanising circumstances, has the sole purpose of creating desperation, to encourage people to beg their relatives to pay for their release.

However, those held in slavery are not acknowledged as slaves; that is what this book tells us. They are not allowed to communicate their situation in person to representatives of humanitarian organisations or to use the Internet to bring attention to their plight. Those who disappear, who have perhaps succumbed to torture or drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, are left unburied, their families uninformed about their fate and their restless souls with no chance of finding the eternal peace they deserve. It is as if they do not exist.

It is staggering that this form of slavery has already happened to hundreds of thousands of Africans – over two-hundred thousand, according to a conservative estimate in this book. This trade has generated over 1 billion USD in revenue. It is profitable and, therefore, it expands.

In Africa and in Europe, so few know of this desperate and objectionable situation. Any reasonable fellow, African or European, would oppose this practice. As President of the Pan African Parliament, I would like to emphasise that the Parliament represents everyone. Every person in Africa, no matter what their situation, is represented by us. We are the Parliament of the people of Africa. As a Parliament, we take it on ourselves to inform others of the fate of those being trafficked and enslaved, so that we can change this situation.

The truth is that we live in a digital world, from where we get our news and information – we think that it is all on the Internet. But our fellow human beings, who are being kept as slaves in Libya, do not have access to a mobile phone, to the Internet, to social media. The only information that comes from them is what they are allowed to communicate: the amount of the ransom, where and how to transfer it, and photos and videos showing their desperate situation to encourage the ransom to be paid, quickly and quietly.

These places where communication is controlled by the traffickers are called ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape. They are black holes in many ways – the light does not come out of the darkness that defines the camps, warehouses, detention centres, and torture houses that form a string of black holes on these trajectories, controlled by the human trafficking networks. Enticing people to go to Europe, the traffickers deceive their victims with broken promises.

This situation is intolerable. It affects the dignity of Africans and the relationship between Africa and Europe. I will not rest until all Africans are recognised as full human beings. The Pan African Parliament will make it its highest priority to restore the dignity of each and every African person. The trade in persons as commodities, as described in this book, is not of this time – not of any time. As the President of the people’s institution of Africa, I say that the enslavement of African people must stop.

Fortune Charumbira

President of the Pan African Parliament

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**Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Klara Smits and
Morgane Wirtz**

Acronyms

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
CFA	West African franc
COI	Commission of Inquiry
DCIM	Directorate/Department for Combating Illegal Migration
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECCC	Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia
ECCHR	European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EEPA	Europe External Policy Advisors/Europe External Programme for Africa
EMDJ	Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Justice
EMDR	Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing
EMT	Emergency Transit Mechanism
EU	European Union
FCFA	West African CFA franc
FGD	focus group discussion
FIDH	Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme
FTDES	Tunisian Forum of Economic and Social Rights
GAIC	Globalization, Accessibility, Innovation and Care
GDF	Gathering and Departure Facility
GDP	gross domestic product
GNA	Government of National Accord
IACtHR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICER	International Commission on Eritrean Refugees
ICT	information and communication technology
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IES	Impact of Events Scale
IES-S	Impact of Events Scale-Short
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration

ISCS	Internet Social Capital Scale
ISIS	Islamic State
LFJL	Lawyers for Justice in Libya
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MANOVA	multivariate analysis of variance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OMCT	World Organisation Against Torture
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SCSL	Special Court for Sierra Leone
SDDI	Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western Communities
SER	Social and Economic Resilience Scale
TRUST	Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
UNSMIL	United Nations Support Mission in Libya
VODAN	Virus Outbreak Data Network
WHO	World Health Organization
WYDC	Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign

Exchange rate:

The exchange rate calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

Glossary of Terms

The following glossary of terms contains a description of the terms used by the people interviewed for this research, as well as the terms used in the analysis. It does not seek to define the terms, but instead describe them in order to better understand the testimonies provided. These descriptions are related specifically to the practice of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, therefore, may not mean the same thing in other contexts. The authors have attempted to stay as close as possible to the original words and meanings used by the interviewees, while at the same time analysing and adapting the meaning to fit the research into the broader context.

Agent

The term ‘agent’ refers to a person who works for the top human traffickers. They are responsible for collecting the ransom paid by the relatives of the victims of human trafficking and transferring this money to the top human trafficker using the black market or the *hawala* system. They are usually based in the victim’s country of origin or in countries where the relatives of the victim (diaspora) live.

Armed group/militia

An ‘armed group’ or ‘militia’ is a non-state entity that uses weapons to achieve its political, ideological or economical goals. Following the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, hundreds of armed groups emerged in Libya. They have control over parts of the territory. In order to gain access to these parts, it is necessary to negotiate with them.

Black hole

‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology.

Coerced displacement

The term ‘coerced displacement’ refers to the kidnapping of individuals from within Eritrea or refugee camps to be trafficked for ransom, as opposed to ‘forced (secondary) displacement’, which is displacement prompted by circumstances that force people to leave their place of origin or residence.

Connection man

The term ‘connection man’ is used to refer to the person at the top of the trafficking network, but also a facilitator of a journey (someone who connects someone with a smuggler or trafficker) or a smuggler. The name of the connection man is often used as a password to know which group refugees/migrants belong to. Later, in Libya, refugees/migrants are transferred to one of the houses of their particular connection man. Many refugees/migrants have never personally met their connection man.

Credit house

‘Credit house’ is a term used on the northwest route to Libya (from Agadez to Brak) to refer to the house or warehouse of a human trafficker where someone is held until they pay the ransom demanded for their release.

Departure point

A ‘departure point’ is a place located on the coast, close to the Mediterranean Sea. Migrants and refugees are gathered there and stay hidden until the conditions are right for them to be ‘pushed’ across the Mediterranean Sea. Departure points are generally run by smugglers or traffickers. They can host between a dozen people to several hundred people.

Driver

A ‘driver’ is a person responsible for transporting migrants and refugees from point A to point B. They are necessary when it comes to crossing the Sahara. They work for smugglers or human traffickers.

Facilitator

A ‘facilitator’ is someone who facilitates the illegal transportation of people across borders in exchange for financial compensation. The term ‘facilitator’ is used when no sufficient information is provided to the authors to determine whether the interviewee is referring to a smuggler or a trafficker.

Hawala

‘Hawala’ is a system outside the formal banking system in which money is exchanged to keep parallel accounts in different monetary

geographies (usually between hard and soft currencies) without the money being physically transferred to the actual destination.

Human trafficking

‘Human trafficking’ is a legal term, the elements of which are the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.³

Human trafficking for ransom

‘Human trafficking for ransom’ is defined as a specific form of trafficking (as defined above in ‘Human trafficking’) that combines slavery, forced begging, severe violence, and tortured (or threat of torture), often using ICTs such as mobile phones to broadcast this torture relatives or friends to motivate payment of the ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).⁴ Human trafficking for ransom is further described by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014, p. 23)⁵ as:

[...] particularly brutal, and [...] 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 or 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. Furthermore, the trafficking victims are sold from one person to another as if they were the traffickers’ ‘property’. As such, those who are trafficked are treated as slaves.

(Also see ‘Slavery’.)

³ https://www.unodc.org/res/human-trafficking/2021the-protocol-tip_html/TIP.pdf

⁴ Van Reisen, M., & Rijken, C. (2015). Sinai trafficking: Origin and definition of a new form of human trafficking. *Social Inclusion*, 3(1), 113–124. doi: 10.17645/si.v3i1.180

⁵ Van Reisen, M., Estefanos, M., & Rijken, C. (2014). *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Oosterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers

Intermediary

An ‘intermediary’ is a person who establishes a link between migrants/refugees and traffickers. They are either contacted by people wishing to travel and seeking information about the journey, or they actively encourage people to take the journey (e.g., by word of mouth, by infiltrating communities or by advertising on social media). Intermediaries earn a commission for each person they put in contact with a smuggler or trafficker; some have a deal whereby they can travel for free if they collect a certain number of people.

Migrant

A ‘migrant’ is understood as someone who leaves his or her country or usual place of residence, temporarily or permanently, for work or study, or other reasons. In this book the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeably without drawing any conclusions about their legal status.

Official detention centre

An ‘official detention centre’ is a large hall, prison, former school or other building where migrants and refugees are kept after they have been arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard or by the security forces for being on Libyan territory illegally. Official detention centres are under the mandate of the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), which is part of the Ministry of Interior in Libya. Detention centres are often managed by independently operating armed groups, without governmental oversight. Humanitarian organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, journalists and officials have (restricted) access to those places. Numerous human rights abuses are reported in these centres and migrants and refugees have no access to justice. The lines between official detention centres and other holding places are often blurred and there is collaboration between these places where refugees are held.

Push someone to the sea

The term to ‘push someone to the sea’ was used by migrants and refugees to refer to the time when they embark in a boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Refugee

A ‘refugee’ is defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010).⁶ A refugee is protected under international law, and has the right to seek asylum, as per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Libya is not a signatory to this Convention, hence, refugees have no legal status in Libya. Nonetheless, a refugee remains a refugee under the Convention, even if this does not lead to refugee status in the place of residence, if the conditions for a refugee described in the Protocol are met. The status of an ‘irregular’ or ‘illegal’ migrant does not imply that the person cannot legally qualify the criteria for being a refugee. In this book the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeably without drawing any conclusions about their legal status.

Slavery

The Slavery Convention (1926) defines ‘slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised”. This shall not be confused with the exercise of a legal right of ownership over a person, as the wording instead speaks of the exercise of powers attaching [characteristics] to the right of ownership. The wording refers to the status or condition of a person, which means that also the factual situation of ownership can qualify as slavery (*de facto* slavery). The definition thus covers both *de jure* and *de facto* ownership. The *de facto* ownership is regarded as one of the defining aspects of human trafficking for ransom, which can be defined as: “the complete

⁶ UNHCR. (2010). *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. [Online], United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

control of one person by another, through the use of violence, both physical and psychological” (Bales & Soodalter, 2009).⁷

Human trafficking for ransom is connected in terms of the legal discourse to the situation of debt bondage in which many of the refugees find themselves. Debt bondage is considered a practice that is similar to slavery in the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institution and Practices Similar to Slavery. Slavery falls within the scope of the description of exploitation within the Palermo Protocol on Human Trafficking (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).⁸

Smuggler

A ‘smuggler’ (*samsara* in Arabic) is someone who organises the illegal transportation of goods or people across borders in exchange for financial compensation. Note that a trafficker is also paid to organise an illegal journey, but the purpose is to exploit the migrant or refugee (see ‘Trafficker’). In Libya, the line between a smuggler and a human trafficker is blurred. In addition, what may have started as smuggling can turn into trafficking. The term trafficking is used when the element of exploitation is fulfilled. Exploitation is a normalised element of smuggling in Libya; hence, such smuggling qualifies as trafficking. In several cases in this book, the interviewee uses the words ‘smuggler’, ‘connection man’ or another term associated with smuggling to refer to what this book defines as a ‘human trafficker’. In those instances, the quotes have been left in their original state, but the analysis will use the term ‘trafficker’. (Also see ‘Trafficker’.)

Survivor of human trafficking

In this book, a ‘survivor of human trafficking’ refers to a migrant or refugees who has survived (been released or escaped) captivity by human traffickers. However, it should not be forgotten that survivors

⁷ Bales, K., & Soodalter, R. (2009). *The slave next door: Human trafficking and slavery in America today*. Berkeley: University of California Press

⁸ Van Reisen, M., & Rijken, C. (2015). Sinai trafficking: Origin and definition of a new form of human trafficking. *Social Inclusion*, 3(1), 113–124. doi: 10.17645/si.v3i1.180

are also victims and that this is an important question in terms of reparations. (See also ‘Victim of human trafficking’.)

Torturer

A ‘torturer’ is someone who works in a human trafficker’s house. Their job is to torture the detainees (migrants and refugees) while they are in contact with their families (by mobile phone) to induce family members to pay their ransom quickly. They are of various African nationalities. In some cases, the torturers are themselves migrants/refugees who are forced to do this work by the human traffickers, because they do not have the money to pay the ransom.

Trafficker

A ‘trafficker’ is someone who organises the illegal journey of people in exchange for financial compensation, but with the purpose to exploit those people (see ‘Human trafficking’). In this book, the term is used by interviewees to refer to the people who hold migrants and refugees in traffickers’ houses and demand payment for their release (ransom). The interviewees also refer to traffickers as a ‘connection man’, ‘smuggler’ or ‘*samsara*’ (in Arabic). The interviewees generally held the perspective that they were exploited and abused, but did not necessarily understand the experience as trafficking in its legal sense. (Also see ‘Smuggler’.)

Trafficking camp (also called ‘prison’, ‘warehouse’, ‘house’, ‘hangar’, ‘store’, ‘farm’, ‘holding camp’ and ‘credit house’)

A ‘trafficking camp’ is where migrants and refugees are kept by traffickers until they pay the ransom for their release (and for their onward journey north from where they can attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea). These places vary in size: The smallest reported during the interviews was a wooden hangar in which a refugee was locked up alone. Most hold between 50 and 1,000 migrants and refugees. Detainees are locked up, beaten and extorted for ransom. Detainees suffer from starvation, lack of water, disease, sexual violence, abuse and torture. The choice between one term or another usually indicates what the place looks like and how many people can be held there. For example, a ‘house’ or ‘farm’ is often smaller than a ‘warehouse’. However, the term recorded in the interviews also

sometimes depended on the term used by the translator. In the area of Sabha, human traffickers' houses are called 'credit houses'.

Transit point

A 'transit point' is a stopover city (like Khartoum, Kufra or Ajdabiya). In these places, migrants and refugees are gathered for the next part of the journey. They wait until they are of a sufficient number to fill a vehicle or to be transferred to a human trafficker's house. The accommodation at transit points is generally run by traffickers and holds between a dozen to one or two thousand people.

Victim of human trafficking

In this book, the term 'victim of human trafficking' refers to a migrant or refugees when they are still held in captivity by human traffickers, as opposed to 'survivors', which is used after they have escaped or are released. A 'trafficking victim' is also defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power as: "‘Victims’ means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power" (UN General Assembly, 1985).⁹

⁹ UN General Assembly. (1985). *Declaration of basic principles of justice for victims of crime and abuse of power*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/40/34, 29 November 1985

Chapter 1

Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction¹⁰

*Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Klara Smits,
Morgane Wirtz*

Trapped in a human trafficking cycle for ransom

In 2017, video footage emerged of people being auctioned as slaves in Libya (Elbagir, Razek, Pratt & Jones, 2017). Amid the shock about this situation is the awareness that we can never accept slavery of Africans (or anyone), in Africa (or anywhere), ever again. Yet, today, enslavement is still taking place, in the form of ‘human trafficking for ransom’, in Libya and elsewhere.

However, this enslavement does not begin in Libya. It starts in Eritrea, with Eritrea’s indefinite national service, from which Eritrean refugees¹¹ are fleeing in large numbers (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van

Eritreans are caught in ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape – both in Eritrea, where ICTs and Internet connectivity are strictly controlled by the government, and when they flee, forced to depend on smugglers and traffickers. This control continues on their journeys and once in Libya – where they are detained, tortured, exploited and even killed. Their ‘illegal’ status prevents them from accessing protection and makes them targets for exploitation. They do not have the ‘right to have rights’. Many fall victim to human trafficking for ransom. The policies of the EU are exacerbating this situation and trapping them in a human trafficking cycle.

¹⁰ Parts of this chapter were written as part of the third and fourth authors’ PhD theses and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

¹¹ While the authors argue that all of the people fleeing Eritrea are ‘refugees’, in this book the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeably in a non-legal way

Reisen and Estefanos, 2017). It is virtually impossible for Eritreans to leave Eritrea legally; due to this, and the government's strict control of information, Eritreans are forced to turn to smugglers and traffickers to escape. Those who do manage to leave often find themselves caught in the human trafficking cycle, as they try to find refuge in the Horn of Africa, and beyond, against a backdrop of policies that make movement 'illegal' (Van Reisen. & Mawere, 2017).

In 2009, the first Eritrean victims of human trafficking for ransom were identified by doctors in Israel (Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 2010). It quickly became apparent that the victims were mostly from Eritrea. On their arrival in Israel, they showed signs of severe torture. The researchers found that their families had paid high ransoms for their release, a practice described as Sinai trafficking and human trafficking for ransom by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). The modus operandi took place in locations where victims did not have access to communication other than to make phone calls to family members, while being tortured, to beg for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Smart phones, mobile payments and Internet connectivity have supported the practice, through the extortion and collection of payment (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2017; Van Reisen, M., Gerrima, Z., Ghilazghy, E., Kidane, S., Rijken, C. & van Stam, G., 2018).

One of the stories investigated by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) is that of Berhan, whose relatives paid USD 40,000 for his release from the torture houses in the Sinai. Subsequently, he ended up in one of the official detention centres in Egypt, from where he was deported to Ethiopia. He was then moved to a refugee camp in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. With no prospects in the camp, Berhan decided to travel to Sudan and onwards to Libya. He was on the boat that sank near Lampedusa, Italy, in 2013. The few survivors of the tragedy found themselves embroiled in a situation in which the Eritrean embassy in Italy tried to control the refugees. As you can see,

to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

the victims of human trafficking find it difficult, if not impossible, to escape, even after paying large ransoms. Hence, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) described the situation as a ‘human trafficking cycle’.

The *modus operandi* of human trafficking for ransom has continued to spread, becoming a global phenomenon. It has been described in Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2021), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020), Greece (Ekathimerini, 2019), and other places. In 2017, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) describe the expansion of trafficking for ransom to Libya. Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017) noted the emergence of a criminal culture, involving armed groups and terrorist militias, which exploit and extort migrants and refugees. They found that Eritreans (government authorities, military and others) were involved as perpetrators of the human trafficking of Eritreans for ransom. They uncovered evidence that the trafficking operations were supported from within Eritrea, at the highest level (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Since then, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees have been trapped in lawless situations in human trafficking warehouses¹² throughout Libya (Hayden, 2022). The notion of the human trafficking cycle is reflected in Hayden’s description of the situation as a ‘revolving door’ in which refugees are sold and resold, and in which pushbacks occur that keep the refugees and migrants in an indefinite situation of detention and dislocation. Her book *The Fourth Time We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the Most Deadliest Migration Route* (2022) describes human trafficking for ransom in Libya and its neighbouring countries as a toxic situation that is exacerbated by the policies of the European Union (EU). Non-government organisations (NGOs) find and protest the returning of migrants and refugees to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard, alleging that these

¹² The terms ‘prison’, ‘warehouse’, ‘house’, ‘hangar’, ‘store’, ‘farm’, ‘holding camp’ 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).

operations are sponsored by the EU and its member states (Amnesty International, 2020).

Given the severity of the situation, and the lack of academic engagement with it, a systematic description of human trafficking for ransom in Libya is urgently needed. There also is a need to explain why this egregious situation has persisted. This book aims to contribute to a description of the phenomenon and explain why it persists. It is based on empirical research that studies the situation on the ground, as it is perceived by refugees, migrants, and other stakeholders with knowledge of, and engagement in, the situation. The research takes an emic perspective, in order to view the situation from within. Previous studies have followed the trajectory of Eritreans caught up in human trafficking for ransom and, hence, this study draws on the knowledge that is available.

Methodology and aim of research

This book is largely based on the work of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western Communities (SDDI) of Tilburg University. The fieldwork was undertaken between 2019 and 2021. It includes observations, interviews, and online/offline interactions with people on the move, as well as other actors and resource persons, on the Central Mediterranean route in Libya, the Horn of Africa, Northern Africa and Europe. The researchers also analysed documentaries and photographs of situations (see Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*). The fieldwork focused on Eritrean refugees and migrants and, to allow for a comparative perspective, people from other nationalities were included. The study was conducted as an explorative ethnographic case study. It followed a qualitative methodology, except for the research by Selam Kidane (Chapter 8: *Trust Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea*), which used a mixed-method methodology.

A detailed analysis of the methodology is provided in Chapter 3, as well as in each of the individual chapters. Each chapter is presented

as a stand-alone presentation of the empirical material. However, together, these chapters contribute to the aim of this research, which is to: *describe the phenomenon of human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans on the Central Mediterranean Route to, and within, Libya, and explain why human trafficking for ransom has persisted.*

Organisation of this book

This book is divided into three parts. The theoretical and methodological considerations are provided in the first part. The second part presents the empirical findings on human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans from Eritrea to, and in, Libya. The third and last part focuses on the human trafficking cycle in Libya and discusses the revolving door situation for refugees and migrants in Libya. This includes a larger set of interviews, including with people from a non-Eritrean background.

Part 1: Theoretical and methodological considerations

Part one of this book sets out the theoretical and methodological considerations. Chapter 2, *Living in an Information Black Hole: Theoretical Framework Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*, provides a reflection on the adequacy of theoretical frameworks available to study human trafficking for ransom and proposes alternative frameworks based on theoretical plurality. In Chapter 3, *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*, the methodology is presented and the researchability of human trafficking for ransom is investigated. This chapter looks at whether or not, and how, research can be conducted on a topic that may (re-)traumatise both participants and researchers. Chapter 4, *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review*, presents a review of the extant academic literature on human trafficking for ransom. The final chapter in this part, Chapter 5, *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*, presents a spatio-temporal context that situates the research in time and place.

Part 2: Human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans

The second part of the book presents the empirical data on human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans to, and in, Libya. Chapter 6,

Enslaved by their Own Government: Indefinite National Service in Eritrea, examines the indefinite national service in Eritrea, which is often identified as the principal reason why people flee Eritrea, arguing that it is in fact slavery. Chapter 7, *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking*, identifies the reasons why people are trying to escape from Eritrea and their vulnerability to human trafficking. Chapter 8, *TRUST Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea*, investigates the effectiveness of an intervention designed to help reduce the trauma experienced by refugees who have escaped from Eritrea. Chapter 9, *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*, looks at the trajectories of Eritrean refugees to Libya and the practices that take place along these trajectories, classifying the practice as falling within the legal definition of ‘human trafficking’. Chapter 10, *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*, maps the human trafficking routes and hubs used to move Eritreans to and through Libya. Chapter 11, *“You are the Ball – They are the Players”: The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*, presents an inventory of the human traffickers in Libya, with a specific focus on those trafficking Eritrean refugees. Finally, Chapter 12, *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*, looks at the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom used in Libya and compares it to Sinai trafficking.

Part 3: The Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya

The third part of this book investigates the human trafficking cycle. Chapter 13, *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, looks at the conditions of Eritreans in official detention centres in Libya. Chapter 14, *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*, investigates the situation of the Eritreans outside official and unofficial detention centres, and their options in terms of leaving Libya. Chapter 15, *“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*, looks at sexual violence perpetrated in Libya within the context of human trafficking for ransom and more generally. Chapter 16, *“Gate Closed”: The Situation in Libya during COVID-19*, discusses the situation of refugees and migrants in the

context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders that accompanied it. Finally, Chapter 17, *Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya*, reflects on the agency of Eritrean refugees in Libya, especially in terms of using social media to attract attention to their situation.

Summary of findings

Theoretical findings and literature review

In **Chapter 2**, Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz and Smeets discuss the theoretical frameworks available for studying migration, in particular, the push and pull theory of migration. This theory is a rational choice theory that assumes that people have all the information available with which to make decisions. It is currently the dominant model of migration used, and is heavily embedded in EU policy.

In this chapter, the authors question the adequacy of the assumptions underpinning the theory to explain migration, particularly its failure to explain the decisions made by some people on the move to continue their journey, despite the high risk. They point to unequal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which enables ‘gatekeepers’ (including those facilitating human trafficking for ransom) to control access to (and dissemination of) information. The concept of a ‘black hole’ in the digital landscape is explored to explain how this unequal access makes Eritreans vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom and benefits the perpetrators. The ability of refugees to make rational decisions is also impacted by trauma, which can lead them to continue on dangerous migratory trajectories. The authors argue that the decisions that people on the move make, particularly Eritrean refugees, who are often in marginalised and vulnerable situations, require other theories, such as remoteness and cultural entropy.

This chapter also discusses the framing of migration as a problem of ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ migrants, which determines the solution adopted. Because of this framing, the policies of the EU aim to stop migrants from reaching Europe, which, it is argued, has exacerbated the problem. The authors show how these policies have not only failed

to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but have also fuelled human trafficking for ransom.

Finally, the authors point out that it is important to understand human trafficking for ransom as a cycle that traps victims, rather than a single event. The lack of protection of the rights of the survivors creates further vulnerability at each stage. Chapter 2 concludes that a pluralistic approach is needed to explain human trafficking for ransom and encourages researchers to use and develop alternative explanatory frameworks. It also advocates for policies that put the rights of migrants and refugees first, rather than aiming to criminalise the movement of people and externalise borders.

In **Chapter 3**, Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz and Mikami describe the methodology used for this research, which was conducted primarily as a case study of Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom. The data was collected using fieldwork, observation and netnography in the Horn of Africa and Europe. The research was conducted from an emic perspective, to give a voice to the migrants and refugees, whose narratives have been reported and retold by others, but seldom from their own perspective.

This chapter also discusses the ethical issues involved in researching human trafficking for ransom, including the risk of (re-)traumatising the participants and the researchers, and, hence, the researchability of such a sensitive topic. The authors describe both participants and researchers as having ‘skin in the game’. In relation to the researchers, it is explained why this is important, as it enables them to empathically collect, interpret and analyse the data. However, a research team involved in researching such a topic is vulnerable to secondary trauma. Moreover, the risk of re-traumatising the participants also requires ethical consideration. Accordingly, a trained psycho-social professional was added to the research team to advise the researchers on how to handle the potential for (re-)traumatisation. The authors recommend that studies with high exposure to trauma for participants and researchers integrate specialists in the team to advise, support and monitor those involved. It is concluded that human trafficking for ransom is a researchable topic, but requires awareness of the dangers

of (re-)traumatisation, and this requires specific support to be integrated in the design of such studies.

Chapter 4, by Lorger and Gotlieb, presents the results of a systematic literature review of human trafficking for ransom. In the academic literature, human trafficking for ransom is described as a fairly new phenomenon, driven by digital technology. The literature thus far has focused mostly on the situation in the Sinai desert (from 2009 to approximately 2014). Only a small number of publications were uncovered on the situation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai. In relation to including human trafficking for ransom in Libya, despite a thorough search, including snowballing and purposive searches, the authors were only able to identify a few academic works.

However, the extant literature does provide a relatively coherent description of human trafficking for ransom. The *modus operandi* used in trafficking for ransom in Libya is similar to that used in the Sinai, pointing to the fact that it is an extension of this practice. The review finds that human trafficking for ransom has evolved through international criminal networks that include, among others, top Eritrean military officials, Eritrean smugglers, and smugglers and traffickers from other countries like Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. The chapter concludes that there is an urgency to document the situation in Libya in more detail, to eradicate the practice, prevent it from spreading to new locations, and bring those responsible to justice.

In **Chapter 5**, Wirtz, De Vries and Van Reisen consider the spatio-temporal context (current and historic) of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The chapter considers the 13 centuries of uninterrupted human trafficking and slavery in the region. Understanding this history is vital to understand the current situation of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. As well as the legacy of this trade in people, this practice is taking place in the context of the conflict following the fall of President Gaddafi and the civil war between General Haftar and the United Nations (UN)-backed government.

In addition, the emphasis by European policymakers on the need to curb migration is fuelling the trade. The authors critically consider the effects of EU policy. Approaching migration through a process in which movement is made illegal, has meant that refugees and migrants experience great difficulties in accessing legal routes and support. This strengthens the grip of human traffickers on people on the move. The result is that the number of people driven into the hands of the human trafficking organisations has increased. Obstacles to legal movement have simply driven up demand, increasing prices and the risks of the routes. All of these factors have created a fertile ground for human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

Empirical findings

Chapter 6, by Palacios-Arapiles, looks at how the government of Eritrea is enslaving its own people through indefinite national service. National service in Eritrea has a large development aim and involves work of a non-military character. It is performed under the full control of the government, with conscripts being required to serve from the age of 18 (sometimes earlier) until the age of 50 (but in reality this extends longer), for negligible pay. Palacios-Arapiles investigates whether this constitutes slavery. In doing so, she rejects the concept of ‘legal ownership’ as the definitive benchmark for slavery, arguing that the 1926 Slavery Convention recognises *de facto* slavery, in line with the wording of the definition of slavery, which speaks of ‘powers attaching to the right of ownership’, and relevant jurisprudence.

Based on this reading, Eritrean national service fulfils all requirements to be identified as slavery under international law. The Eritrean government exercises control over the Eritrean population and has built its economy on the forced labour of the Eritrean population. In fact, the author argues that Eritreans are controlled to such an extent that they have developed a ‘false consciousness’ and repress key aspects of their identity, which continues to affect them long after they leave Eritrea.

In **Chapter 7**, Smits and Wirtz explore why so many Eritreans are leaving their country and why they are particularly vulnerable to

human trafficking for ransom. Previous research in relation to Sinai trafficking has shown that Eritreans were disproportionately targeted. The authors find that the reasons for this include systematic political repression, lack of civil freedom, human rights abuses, arbitrary imprisonment, and deliberate impoverishment inside Eritrea, as well as the compulsory indefinite national service. In addition, the authors highlight how the long-arm of the Eritrean regime, which operates in neighbouring countries through surveillance and intelligence, creates deep insecurity among Eritrean refugees, contributing to the secondary movement of Eritreans. At the same time, the Eritrean government is profiting off those who flee, through the ransoms paid by the families of the victims of human trafficking for ransom, as well as the illegal collection of financial contributions and ‘taxes’ extorted from the diaspora. The lack of alternative (legal) ways of leaving and the control of information by the Eritrean government, effectively creating a ‘black hole’ in the digital landscape, drives Eritreans into the hands of human traffickers. In particular, the government’s strict control of information leaves Eritreans dependent on smugglers and traffickers for information. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Tigray.

In **Chapter 8**, Kidane presents the research undertaken to assess the effectiveness of an intervention to deliver Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Eritrean refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress in a refugee camp in Tigray, Ethiopia. Kidane found that TRUST reduced the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increased socio-economic resilience among highly-mobile and highly-traumatised communities, such as Eritrean refugees. The intervention was delivered via mobile phones using an app that was developed for use by people on the move. The study showed that treating trauma has a positive impact on mental health, perceptions of social and economic status, and community-wide relationships. There is an urgent need for mental health support to be provided to refugees, for them to be able to recover from trauma and function socially and economically, as well as to prevent dangerous onward migration. This chapter shows that

such an intervention is possible, despite the challenges presented by a highly mobile community and limited resources.

In **Chapter 9**, Smits and Van Reisen describes the trajectories of Eritreans towards, and in, Libya. It sets out the practices involved in the movement of people along these routes and investigates whether or not these practices constitute human trafficking. According to international law, the elements of human trafficking are: (1) recruitment, (2) transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, (3) with the aim of exploiting them for profit.¹³ The testimonies collected show that Eritreans are in fact recruited by intermediaries, smugglers and traffickers, who infiltrate communities and encourage them to embark on the journey to Libya, using deception and fraud. Cases of kidnapping were also reported (recruitment by force). In addition, the agreements made by refugees in relation to the price for the journey often change once they arrive in Libya, with higher prices being demanded. In Libya, the refugees are held against their will, in poor conditions, and tortured until they pay the ‘ransom’ for their release. They are also exploited for labour, sexual services and often resold to other traffickers. The purpose of these practices is clearly to exploit these vulnerable people for financial gain. Hence, this chapter argues that the practice satisfies the elements of the crime of human trafficking.

Along the routes to, and in, Libya, information is tightly controlled by those involved in trafficking for ransom (facilitators, smugglers, drivers and guards of detention centres). The phones of migrants and refugees are taken from them and they are dependent on the traffickers and those who work for them for information. They cannot receive or disseminate information. Hence, it can be concluded that migrants and refugees are living in a ‘black hole’ in the digital landscape. This is an important aspect of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom.

¹³ See: https://www.unodc.org/res/human-trafficking/2021-the-protocol-tip_html/TIP.pdf and Glossary of Terms.

The chapter also looks at the human trafficking networks and the complicity of authorities. The trafficking trajectories taken by Eritreans to, and in, Libya are highly organised by a network of actors across the Horn of Africa. The research found that most Eritreans are trafficked by Eritreans and that Eritreans military and government authorities are involved as perpetrators, alongside other authorities, notably Sudanese, who are complicit in the rights abuses of the refugees. The involvement of authorities, law enforcement personnel and armed groups is also set out in previous descriptions of human trafficking for ransom.

In **Chapter 10**, Wirtz describes the key trafficking routes through Libya, including places of transit, imprisonment and departure points for the Mediterranean Sea. The routes used for human trafficking for ransom change often and adapt to circumstances. She investigates five routes: the southern route (from Niger and Chad); south-eastern route (from Sudan); western route (from Algeria); north-western route (from Tunisia); and north-eastern route (from Egypt). All of these routes converge in the north-west of Libya for departure across the Mediterranean Sea.

Wirtz systematically identifies and describes key hubs where refugees and migrants are held in captive, such as: Bani Walid, Garabulli, Gharyan, Khoms, Misrata, Sabratha, Sirte, Tripoli, Zawiyah, Zintan and Zuwarah. This includes holding camps, warehouses, transit points, official detention centres, and departure points, in which grave human right violations are taking place. Migrants and refugees are beaten, tortured, raped and killed in these places. Those who make it to the coast and attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe are often caught by the Libyan Coast Guard and sent back to official detention centres, where the cycle starts again.

In **Chapter 11**, Smits presents an inventory of the alleged perpetrators of human trafficking for ransom on the Central Mediterranean Route. The focus of this inventory is on those identified in the interviews as organising the trafficking from the top. Refugees refer to these actors as the ‘chief’ or ‘connection man’. This chapter provides a systematic description of those heading the trafficking organisations, as described by the interviewees. This information is triangulated with

publicly available documents on the trafficking actors and organisations.

This inventory does not constitute a legal analysis, but a description of the actors identified by the interviewees. The names of the traffickers are not anonymised, as this information is already in the public domain. Some of the traffickers have been arrested or sanctioned, others are being sought by international crime investigators. However, many operate with impunity. They carry out their activities through the safety of a network that they control from a distance, through digital means. Despite the efforts to shut down these highly profitable trafficking routes, every time a path closes, another opens.

In **Chapter 12**, Wirtz and Van Reisen investigate the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The researchers find striking similarities between Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya, including the torture methods used to extract ransoms. In both places, victims are (were) beaten, raped, subjected to electric shocks, hung using chains, and burnt with molten plastic. In both places, mobile phones are (were) used to broadcast the torture (audio and video) to relatives of the victims to extort ransoms. In both places, the victims are (were) held captive in inhumane conditions, without adequate food or water and without access to medical care. Death frequently occurs in the trafficking warehouses. Hence, it appears from the evidence presented in this chapter that human trafficking for ransom in Libya is carried out using the same modus operandi as used by Sinai traffickers. If human trafficking for ransom has spread from the Sinai to Libya, with the profitability of the practice, there is a real risk that it could spread even wider.

This chapter also looked at the role of ICTs in the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom. It found that although ICTs are an essential tool in the extortion of ransoms, they are also tightly control. The human traffickers and those who work for them control what information is shared, playing a strict ‘gatekeeping’ role in relation to the flow of information. The refugees are kept in ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape, unable to receive or disseminate information.

The authors conclude that refugees are trapped in a human trafficking cycle, from which it is hard to escape. They are sold and resold from one place of detention to another, from one trafficker to another, and even by the Libyan Coast Guard. They are treated like commodities, to be exploited for financial gain. The policies of the EU are perceived by the migrants and refugees as exacerbating the situation. They have the impression that the EU will do anything to prevent them from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. This places the refugees in a situation in which they see no way out (as returning to Eritrea is not an option). Many who have escaped Libya, and know the dangers, return to try and cross the Mediterranean Sea, as they see no future in Libya's neighbouring countries. This traps them in a human trafficking cycle.

In **Chapter 13**, Wirtz and Van Reisen describe the conditions of the refugees held in detention under the control of the Department for Combating Illegal Immigration (DCIM). While these detention centres fall under the control of Libyan authorities, in practice, many are run by armed groups or militia. Although official detention centres can be accessed by humanitarian organisations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this access is difficult and highly negotiated. This is partly because Libya is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and, hence, refugees have no legal status in Libya. As a result, they are indefinitely detained, with no clear pathway out. Without legal protection for refugees and migrants in Libya, the UNHCR and other organisations struggle to maintain access to the centres, leaving the refugees feeling abandoned by the organisations created to protect them.

Those held in detention endure severe inhumane conditions, arbitrary punishment, including torture, and severe deprivation of food, water and sleep. These conditions contribute to the spread of disease; many die or are killed. The guards and officials benefit from the migrants and refugees by extorting them. The interviewees reported being offered to Libyan civilians for labour and sexual services. They are also sold to traffickers – or sometimes released by the guards for the 'right price'. The guards are also involved in stealing the possessions of the detainees, including their phones and any provisions provided

by humanitarian organisations. Hence, the official detention centres are part of the human trafficking cycle.

If the detainees are released or escape, they risk being arrested and sent back. If they are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are either sent back to the detention centres or 'sold' to human traffickers. The EU funds the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept refugees and migrants at sea. Some of the refugees interviewed accused the EU of directly contributing to the human trafficking cycle in Libya. It is argued in this chapter that, the EU, through its policy of funding the Libyan Coast Guard, is exacerbating the predicament of migrants and refugees and fuelling human trafficking for ransom.

In **Chapter 14**, Smits describes how there is no way out of Libya or the human trafficking cycle. With no legal status or viable options, and limited access to information, migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations. Smits describes the cycle as consisting of one or more of the following aspects: (1) arrest leading to trafficking for ransom; (2) slavery, other than trafficking for ransom; (3) arrest and captivity in detention centres; (4) urban living, with high risk of robbery and abuse; and (5) few options to exit the situation. Escape from this cycle is only possible via the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, which has a high rate of interception and return to Libya. After return, the same cycle starts again. Although there is the possibility of crossing the border to a third country or, in very few cases, to participate in a voluntary return or evacuation scheme, the countries in the region also offer limited prospects for migrants and refugees. Without any viable option, many people who have escaped Libya return, despite knowing the risks, to attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, rather than living in a situation in which they feel there is no hope.

In **Chapter 15**, Wirtz considers sexual violence as an element of human trafficking for ransom. In this chapter, she throws the net wide to look at sexual violence in Libya as a whole, not only against Eritreans and not only in the context of human trafficking, in an attempt to understand the practice. Wirtz finds that the phenomenon

is widespread and systematic and the victims are both men and women.

Wirtz finds that sexual violence in Libya can be roughly grouped into three categories: (1) sexual violence as a tool of subjugation, to degrade and humiliate (and control) the victims; (2) sexual exploitation for profit, such as forced prostitution and for sexual services; and (3) sexual violence as an opportunistic crime. Sexual violence in Libya is largely perpetrated with impunity. It happens against a history and culture of sexual violence that stretches back to the times of Gaddafi. It has also been used as a weapon of war and has been normalised to some extent. The lack of legal status and protection of refugees and migrants in Libya exposes them to sexual violence, within and outside human trafficking situations. Wirtz concludes, that sexual violence is part of a culture of violence that is embed and that contributes to the human trafficking cycle.

In **Chapter 16**, Wirtz, Smits and Van Reisen consider the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and refugees in Libya and its neighbouring countries. COVID-19 changed the dynamics of movement, not only in Libya and the Horn of Africa, but worldwide. The pandemic led to restrictions on movement and the closure of borders. In response, the smugglers adapted their routes and modus operandi. The situation became advantageous to human trafficking groups, as the demand increased and the opportunities diminished, driving up prices. The routes became more dangerous, as greater risks were taken.

The border closures, lockdowns and quarantines prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic were indisputable obstacles. The theory of push and pull would predict that when more obstacles are in place, the pull decreases. Hence, migration flows should have greatly diminished during the pandemic. However, from April to October 2020, over 24,000 people arrived in Malta and Italy from Libya and Tunisia. This is three times the number for the whole of 2019. Hence, it appears that such theories do not explain the reality of migration as it happens on the ground. The findings of this chapter suggest that other mechanisms are at play. This chapter builds on the previous findings of Kidane (2021), who found that traumatic mindsets

provide a better explanation for the risky decisions taken by migrants and refugees.

In **Chapter 17**, Creta considers how Eritrean refugees in Libya make sense of their world and act upon their understanding. Refugees struggle to create digital spaces, as in the holding camps their access to smartphones is restricted. Despite the challenging circumstances, Creta observes that refugees find ways to participate online, especially through social media, and to make their voices heard. Creta finds that it is important for refugees that their own voices are heard and that they control their narrative. She considers that online platforms offer opportunities for refugees to do so. Eritreans in Libya have created new digital spaces in which they make their voices heard. In these spaces, they raise awareness about their situation, distribute pictures and videos, organise protests and denounce their situation. When they engage on these platforms, Eritrean refugees are able to communicate without the intervention of gatekeepers.

Human trafficking trajectories: A string of black holes

Human trafficking for ransom thrives best in darkness and left unexposed. This book discusses how the criminal organisations perpetrating human trafficking for ransom in Libya prosper from Internet blackouts and by creating conditions in which they control all communication. ‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places or situations where connectivity is unavailable or deliberately denied. Creating black holes where people cannot participate in the digital world is an important element of maintaining the control needed for human trafficking for ransom to take place. In these black holes in the digital landscape there is limited, or no, Internet or digital access, making those within them dependent on others for information. Those who provide such information, or dictate what information is exchanged, are called ‘gatekeepers’. The deeper and more comprehensive the black hole is, the more power the gatekeepers hold over those within it.

The trajectory of human trafficking for ransom in Libya starts for many in Eritrea. Eritreans are a ‘gated’ community, with little, if any,

access to information from outside the country, and very little ability to send information out of the country. Hence, Eritrea can be qualified as a black hole in the digital landscape. After escaping from Eritrea, refugees still have no easy access to the Internet and very limited access to information. The information that they can access is often heavily controlled. This is the starting point of the trajectory of human trafficking for ransom.

Moving from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, this trajectory twists across a string of black holes in the digital landscape. Those trying to escape from the net have little access to information, while the human trafficking networks, through their connections with governments, intelligence and armed groups, have a granular presence and act as gatekeepers along the route. They provide the information that is needed to keep people moving forward – away from Eritrea, away from whatever triggered the desire to flee.

At the same time, human trafficking for ransom requires flexible communication, money transfers and other digital applications and, hence, Internet connectivity. Without these, it would not be possible to engage relatives and friends all over the world in providing ransoms. The human traffickers strictly control the use of these digital resources, including who can use them, when and for what purpose. Human trafficking for ransom represents the ‘dark side’ of technological innovation – a side that enables criminal activities that include grave human rights abuses, torture and slavery, amounting to crimes against humanity (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; UN Human Rights Council, 2016).

The roads from Eritrea to Libya are flexible; they adapt and change with the circumstances, such as, for instance, the pandemic and the war in Tigray. During the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees were moved from Tigray to new camps¹⁴ from where the recruitment by

¹⁴ A large number of Eritrean refugees were also forcefully taken back to Eritrea by Eritrean troops who entered the refugee camps in Tigray, despite the fact that these camps are under international protection. Those left behind were all moved to new camps by December 2022.

human traffickers started. New routes have also been developed to circumvent hurdles, such as borders that were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The alternative routes are often longer and more dangerous, and, hence, more expensive.

Some people interviewed for this book have been trapped in the human trafficking cycle for more than a decade – several first experienced human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, then in Libya. However, their stories have failed to reach the mainstream public. They are not systematically studied. Part of the reason for this is because the information is not coming out of Libya. This black hole in the digital landscape creates conditions in which human trafficking for ransom thrives and can continue with impunity. The almost total control over the victims of human trafficking in this black hole is exacerbated by the versatile operations of the trafficking networks and the distance from which they are managed, which limits the risk of exposure and arrest for those overseeing the operations from afar.

A culture of impunity exists in Libya, where refugees have little, if any, access to protection and end up caught in a never-ending cycle of detention and extortion. Human trafficking for ransom is part of a toxic cocktail in a criminal culture that involves militias, terrorist organisations and other criminal entities, which operate without fear of being brought to justice. At the top of the criminal organisations are the human traffickers, many of whom are Eritrean themselves; these actors have created a layered structure in which armed groups, authorities, and communities all play a part in the subjugation of Eritrean refugees. In this system, it is hard to identify who are the authorities and who are the criminals. When refugees and migrants are detained in official detention centres, they are severely exploited, extorted and sold to human traffickers. When they attempt to cross the sea and are returned by the Libyan Coast Guard, the same thing happens again.

Number of migrants and refugees detained in Libya

The locations where migrants and refugees are held by traffickers operate in secrecy and are hidden from view. From the interviews, we

made a rough estimation of the detention capacity based on the number of locations mentioned by the interviewees (set apart by the description of the location or who was in charge), and the capacity of those locations (using estimated numbers of people detained, or the description of the size of the location). This has led to an estimation of the detention capacity in the different places that were frequently mentioned by the interviewees. This estimate is almost certainly an underestimation. There is also an increasing number of Eritreans who have died or are missing who are not included in this number.

Table 1.1. Estimation of number of people in the human trafficking camps

Places	Number of trafficking camps counted from interviews (estimate)	Detaining capacity (estimate)
Sabha	4–5	500
Brak	5	1,200
Kufra	8	4,000
Shwayrif	4	2,000
Benghazi	2	2,500
Tripoli (general)	7–8	3,500
Bani Walid	14–17	8,000
Garabulli	2–5	500
Misrata	2	200
Sabratha	8	20,500 (UN estimate) ¹⁵
Zawiyah	7	700
Zuwarah	12	1,400
Other locations	12–14	1,500
Total	87–97	46,500

Combining this estimate with the estimated number of detainees in the official detention centres run by the government and armed groups, based on the latest estimation by the UN of 12,000, which includes so-called ‘secret facilities’ of official detention (Lederer,

¹⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2017/10/59e5c7a24/libya-refugees-migrants-held-captive-smugglers-deplorable-conditions.html>

2022), the total detention capacity in Libya would come to approximately 58,500.

Table 1.2. Estimation of number of people in the trafficking camps and government detention centres

Capacity human trafficking camps	46,500
Capacity official government detention centres	12,000
Total	(Approx.) 58,500

Interviewees indicate spending anywhere from a few days to several months and even more than a year in any one place. They are then transferred to other places, or leave Libya. If we assume that half of those detained in Libya move away, escape or die every year, then a full rotation in the cycle of detention would take place approximately every 2 years. This would lead to an estimated number of detained refugees and migrants of 205,000 over a 5-year period between 2016 and 2021.

This is similar to estimations made by others. Amnesty International (2020) estimated that ‘tens of thousands’ of refugees and migrants are trapped in Libya’s cycle of abuse. ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL (2021) put the number of migrants and refugees who have suffered torture and other inhumane acts in Libya in the past decade at hundreds of thousands. Micallef states that while it is impossible to know how many have been kept for ransom in Libya, it is possible that over several years, tens of thousands of Eritreans alone may have been held hostage (Hayden, 2019). In total, Hayden notes, the number of people in human trafficking for ransom conditions may be tens or even hundreds of thousands. In 2017, the UNHCR estimated that the number of refugees and migrants held in Sabratha alone likely numbered 20,500 (UNHCR, 2017). This is over three times as much as the estimate based on our interview data (which led to an estimated capacity of 6,200 in Sabratha). If all capacity estimations for trafficking camps are similarly underestimated, the total capacity could be as much as 140,000. This would lead to an estimated number

of detained refugees and migrants of around 450,000 between 2016 and 2021.

Number of Eritreans and payments in Libya

Between 2016 and 2021, around 114,000 Eritreans submitted a first-time asylum application in Europe (EUAA, 2022). As there are currently no other routes of great significance, these would have almost all come through Libya (including those coming from humanitarian corridors). This number constitutes over half of the conservative estimate of a total of 205,000 migrants and refugees held in captivity and detention in Libya between 2016 and 2021. Based on our research, the average that an Eritrean has to pay during their trajectory to, and in, Libya to the facilitators of the networks is USD 10,000. Again, this number is a conservative estimate.¹⁶ Based on these estimates, the value of the payments from Eritreans alone is estimated at USD 1 billion from 2016 to 2021.¹⁷

This book describes in detail how this amount benefits the human trafficking networks, which are led by Eritreans at the top of these criminal organisations. The danger is that ransom these payments will increase further, as was seen in Sinai trafficking, where ransom payments for Eritreans went as high as USD 40,000 per person per time. This upward trend must be avoided and human trafficking for ransom must be abolished.

Conclusion

Human trafficking for ransom has spread from the Sinai to Libya. It is conservatively estimated that 205,000 refugees and migrants have fallen victim to human trafficking for ransom, captivity, and detention in Libya from 2017–2021, over half of which are Eritrean. The

¹⁶ At the time of writing, many Eritreans held in Libya are being asking for more than USD 7,000 in ransom – and this does not include the price for entering Libya or crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but only for the ransom when in Libya.

¹⁷ Calculated using 114,000 Eritreans, each paying USD 10,000, the total is USD 1.14 billion.

cumulative value of this trade in human beings, over the same period, is conservatively estimated at over USD 1 billion, for Eritrean refugees alone. This is based on the average payment reported by the interviewees to travel from Ethiopia to Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. At the time of writing, the amount of the ransoms being extorted from Eritrean refugees in Libya is increasing.

Libya is a critical location in the human trafficking trajectory. In Libya, the lines between trafficking networks, armed groups, criminal groups and government authorities are blurred. The result is that there is a large network of routes towards, and in, Libya, with a myriad of locations, under different control and command, which hold refugees and migrants in camps. The conditions in these camps are inhumane and degrading. Many die. Those who survive carry the wounds for a lifetime.

Many of the victims of human trafficking for ransom in Libya are Eritrean. Eritreans are easy prey for traffickers. Eritrea's national service, which constitutes slavery, and its human rights abuses push thousands across the border. Information is tightly controlled in Eritrea, and citizens live in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape. With no legal way of leaving Eritrea and no access to information, they are turn to smugglers and human traffickers. In the countries in the region, they continue to be gated. On their trajectories to Libya, they move through a string of black holes, the final one being the trafficking warehouses and detention centre in Libya, where they are extorted for ransom often by their own countrymen, who are at the top of the trafficking networks.

The concept of 'black holes' in the digital landscape helps us to understand the persistence of human trafficking for ransom. Unequal access to digital technologies has contributed to the continuation of this situation. Blocking those most vulnerable from accessing the Internet and controlling their communication gives power to the trafficking networks. They are prevented from informing the outside world of their situation. As a result, little is known of the situation for migrants and refugees in Libya and the atrocity crimes that are committed with impunity.

In Libya, and on the roads to Libya, state actors collude with criminal and armed groups involved in this trade. Authorities in Eritrea and Sudan are either directly involved in this lucrative ‘business’, profit from it in some way, or turn a blind eye. The EU is also exacerbating the situation through its policies aimed at stemming migration, including by training and funding the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. These policies, and the lack of legal status for migrants and refugees in Libya, is trapping them in a human trafficking cycle.

Once a refugee enters the human trafficking cycle, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to escape. It is shocking that this practice exists and persists today. It is unconscionable that slave-like conditions have re-emerged on the routes from Africa to Europe. There is only one way forward: Africa and Europe must work together – with great determination and resolve, to end the slave-like condition of human trafficking for ransom, protect the rights of migrants and refugees, and bring the perpetrators of this crime to justice.

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Author contributions

Mirjam Van Reisen and Klara Smits are each the author of several sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen edited the overall text. Munyaradzi Mawere provided detailed input on the content of this chapter. Morgane Wirtz provided detailed input for this chapter and provided background on the information presented in this chapter.

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Chapter 2

Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration¹⁸

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz & Anouk Smeets

Introduction

Although human trafficking is not new, the crime of human trafficking for ransom has emerged with the now ubiquitous global digital infrastructure. Traditional theories, such as the push and pull theory of migration, do not adequately explain this phenomenon. This chapter seeks to develop a conceptual framework for understanding human trafficking for ransom in the digital age and how people can become trapped in a human trafficking cycle.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones and the Internet, have facilitated a new modus operandi for human trafficking (Van Reisen

The framing of migration as an issue of 'illegal' migrants is based on flawed theories, such as the push and pull theory of migration. This generates a situation in which people on the move are regarded as less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights, leading to policies that focus on preventing migrants and refugees from entering Europe. These policies are not only ineffective, but may even exacerbate the problem. This chapter seeks to develop an alternative conceptual framework for migration based on 'black holes in the digital landscape', remoteness and trauma. This plurality of theories allows for a more realistic understanding of how migrants and refugees see their world, which helps to explain the persistence of human trafficking for ransom.

¹⁸ Parts of this chapter were written as part of the second and third authors' PhD theses and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

& Rijken, 2015). This new form of human trafficking was first identified in about 2009 in the Sinai desert in Egypt, around the same time as the connectivity of mobile phones became global (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In this new form of trafficking, migrants and refugees¹⁹ (men, women and children) were kept by human traffickers in torture warehouses in the Sinai desert where they were tortured, raped, sold, and even killed (see Chapter 4: *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature Review*).

In order to leave a Sinai ‘torture house’, victims had to pay a ransom, often amounting to tens of thousands of US dollars. This is where mobile phones, and increasingly other forms of technology, played a crucial role. To make sure that the ransom was paid, the human traffickers would force the victims to phone relatives while they were being tortured. Their cries for help would compel family members to send money for their release (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) referred to this type of trafficking as ‘Sinai trafficking’, also known as human trafficking for ransom.²⁰

While human trafficking usually happens in secret, this new form of human trafficking depends on others knowing about the situation of the victims (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). ICTs enable the traffickers to communicate with those who will pay the

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ Human trafficking for ransom in Libya involves grave human rights abuses; as will be seen in this book, it is widespread, perpetrated by organised networks, and long-term in scope. It potentially constitutes an atrocity crime. There are four atrocity crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing – of which first three are legally defined in various international instruments (the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court). They have been deemed to be international crimes because they affect the core dignity of human beings, both in times of peace and war (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2018).

ransom and to arrange the payment. ICTs also enable them to control the flow of information, plan routes and logistics, and stay anonymous (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). This *modus operandi* has evolved with the introduction of new technologies. Human traffickers have adapted their strategies with the development of ICTs, increasing the impact of their ransom demands with videos of the torture, as well as audio recordings (Van Esseveld, 2019).

After the construction of a high-tech fence between the Sinai desert and Israel and anti-terrorism activities, the human trafficking routes through the Sinai were cut off (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). However, this high-tech fence has not stopped human trafficking for ransom. It has simply moved the problem from the Sinai to elsewhere. From 2012 onwards, this form of trafficking has appeared in Libya and the surrounding countries, including Sudan and Chad (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). Human trafficking for ransom has also been reported in Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2019), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020), Greece (Callaghan, 2019) and other places. With the phenomenon constantly changing and geographically spreading, it is important to assess the relevance of the concepts and theories available to explain human trafficking for ransom.

In this chapter, we consider the availability of new technologies in the digital era, such as mobile phones and computers, as a critical factor in human trafficking for ransom and, more generally, as a critical aspect of the movement of migrants and refugees. The mobile phone, as a contested space of access, is not only vital to human trafficking for ransom, but also to migration more widely. The Mixed Migration Centre has collected data on the phone access of migrants and refugees moving from the Horn of Africa towards Northern Africa and Europe (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). This data shows that, at least somewhere on the route, around 85% of migrants and refugees have access to a phone (either a smartphone or a non-smartphone). In addition, of all the routes analysed (seven different migration routes

originating from West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan), the route from the Horn of Africa to North Africa/Europe had the most cases of lost or stolen phones, with about 15% of the migrants and refugees interviewed who had used this route reporting that their phone was lost or stolen along the way (Frouws & Brenner, 2019).

The data reported by the Mixed Migration Centre (Frouws & Brenner, 2019) also suggests that human traffickers and human smugglers are (one of) the main source(s) of information. In their report, Frouws and Brenner (2019) analysed the sources of information for migrants from the Horn travelling towards North Africa and Europe. Migrants indicated that, at the start of their migration route, family and friends in the country of destination were their first source of information (56%), followed by smugglers (37%), and family and friends in the country of origin (20%) (in this study migrants were able to choose multiple first information sources). On route, the importance of smugglers as a source of information increased, with smugglers becoming their main source of information (53%), followed by friends and family in the country of destination (50%), and others ahead on the route (33%) (Frouws & Brenner, 2019).

Furthermore, the Mixed Migration Centre found that migrants who had access to a phone on the route had access to a wider range of information channels than migrants who did not (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). Migrants without phone access reported their main source of information to be smugglers, whereas migrants with phone access were also able to use friends, family, and social media to receive information (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). Another report by the Mixed Migration Centre (2020) found that, specifically for Eritreans, smugglers are the main source of information on the migration route. In this report, 79% of Eritreans interviewed said that while on route they received information from people who they identified as smugglers.

So, how can we explain the critical role of ICTs in migration generally and human trafficking for ransom in particular? The push and pull theory, which says that pull and push factors determine the decisions of migrants and refugees to stay or move, has continued to dominate

the migration discourse, including how migration drivers are understood and framed. However, it does not offer a perspective that can help us understand how ICTs have changed migration or why it has escalated in places such as Libya in relation to human trafficking for ransom.

Does it matter how a situation is explained? We believe that it does. The conceptual framework underpinning our understanding of a situation drives the direction of policies – and if this framework does not adequately explain the situation, the policies may fail to address the problem, or even exacerbate it. As a result of the incorrect framing of the problem and, subsequently, ineffective policies, human trafficking for ransom has greatly increased in the context of migrants and refugees in Libya – as this book sets out to illustrate. It is, therefore, important to explore whether or not there are better ways to explain the causes of this phenomenon and any factors that exacerbate it.

Accordingly, this chapter looks at the link between the introduction of ICTs, such as mobile phones and increases in Internet connectivity, and the emergence human trafficking for ransom, towards developing a conceptual framework to explain the phenomenon. After the methodology, the subsequent section looks at the flaw in the push and pull theory of migration, including why it fails to explain why migrants take great risks to reach Europe. This is followed by a discussion of problem framing, including the influence of problem framing on policy making and the framing of the migration ‘problem’.

After problem framing, the next section explores how the digital infrastructure is a social structure of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, which – in extreme situations – can lead to ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape. The concept of a black hole is further explored using the empirical observations of the authors to identify key incidents that point to a more nuanced understanding of the problem (Erickson, 1977). This is followed by a discussion of the concept of remoteness and cultural entropy to help explain how areas that are disconnected from the ‘centre’ can be both vulnerable and resistant to policy, as well as affected by ineffective policies.

Finally, this chapter looks at how living in a ‘remote’ black hole in the digital landscape, in a situation in which human trafficking for ransom of migrants and refugees dominates the scene, policies to fight the criminal networks are ineffective at best, and support to victims is largely unavailable, creates a ‘human trafficking cycle’ (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). This concept has emerged from previous studies on human trafficking for ransom and has been identified as a key characteristic of this type of trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). The existence of this human trafficking cycle helps explain why the policies of deterrence and interception have not worked to decrease human trafficking in Libya – and may have even exacerbated this situation. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Methodology

The investigation set out in this chapter concerns the exploration of an epistemological point of departure for a discourse on migration that is centred on the experiences of migrants and refugees. The current migration discourse tends to take an external viewpoint that focuses on economically-linked drivers of migration based on the push and pull theory. In contrast, the research on human trafficking for ransom presented in this book takes the perspective of the victims, and those close to them, as an important source of information.

In this investigation we follow an ethnographic approach, in which the central task is to describe the people living in the situation. In doing so this research seeks to describe an emic (insiders’) perspective on human trafficking for ransom, to explore the way in which the victims, and others who are close to them, perceive their situation and act upon their understanding. This is in contrast to the epistemological lens of the push and pull theory, which dominates the current migration discourse and makes assumptions about how persons on the move (migrants and refugees) see and calculate their options. Although such assumptions may be confirmed by the research, the data collected is also framed within this paradigm, without any deeper questioning of the underlying processes at stake.

In an ethnography, all of the data available from a research can potentially be a relevant source to discover patterns of social reality. Accordingly, this chapter investigates alternative concepts to explain human trafficking for ransom in migration. Although there are no predefined hypotheses, sensitising concepts are used to direct the tools, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. In particular, the research in this chapter builds on empirical observations collected during the time of this research (2019–2021). The observations are selected as key incidents that lead the researchers to the workings of abstract principles of social organisation (Frederickson & Wise, 1977). Such research is inductive and data driven, generalising from the specific information in the data to a more general reasoning. These key incidents help to reveal a more general rule.

The key incidents were selected from fieldwork carried out in location by the researchers in Uganda and Zimbabwe.²¹ It also draws on the daily reports generated through ethnographic monitoring of the war unfolding in Tigray, on the border of Eritrea, where four major refugee camps were located when the war started. Given that Tigray, Eritrea and, to some extent, Ethiopia were closed to the Internet during the research period (at least from November 2020 to July 2021), the reports received were difficult to access and validate. These reports were published on a daily basis by Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) in its Situation Reports (from November 2022 to July 2021).

The events reported were received from sources on the ground. These events were reported by refugees themselves or through intermediaries. The incidents reported were selected in this research because of their relevance to the understanding of the concept of an ‘a black hole in the digital landscape’. This approach is inspired by the ethnographic monitoring approach developed by Hymes (1980), although in a different context. In this methodology, the researcher

²¹ The fieldwork in Zimbabwe was carried out by Van Reisen in January 2020, May 2019, and October 2018, and by Smeets in 2020. The fieldwork in Uganda was carried out in January 2020.

takes an incident to signify a social situation through observations that give reference to a conceptual understanding of that situation, analyse this in a broader theoretical framework, and return it to the social situation with the intention to help improve the situation (Hymes, 1980). The participants in the study do not emerge as objects or bystanders, but are active collaborators in the research, the findings and their use (Hymes, 1980).

Before presenting the findings on the ethnographic monitoring of black holes, the following sections discuss the flaw in the push and pull theory and the importance of framing the problem correctly.

The flaw in the push and pull theory of migration

Introduced by Ravenstein in his 1885 and 1889 works, *The Laws of Migration*, the push and pull theory is described as one of the oldest theoretical models of migration (Kidane, 2021). Ravenstein described his laws of migration mainly in relation to migration from county to county within the United Kingdom. He talked about “currents of migration” flowing to “the great centres of commerce and industry” (Ravenstein, 1889, p. 198).

This theory provided the foundation for many migration theorists. One of them was Everett Lee (1966), who stated that migration is the result of the evaluation of the positive factors in destination countries and negative factors in the countries of origin. This model also assumes that obstacles to migration weigh heavily in this decision (Lee, 1966).

The push and pull theory fits within the paradigm of the rational choice theory, which is one of the leading theories that attempt to explain the factors behind migration (Haug, 2008), especially between countries. Applied most famously in the fields of criminology and economics, the rational choice theory looks at the decisions of individuals as the result of weighing up the costs versus the benefits. These theories and narratives of calculation are integrated into European Union (EU) policy. In response to the EU’s new anti-

human trafficking strategy, the European Parliament Research Service wrote a report stating that:

Factors contributing to human trafficking can be categorised as 'push' and 'pull' factors. [...] The victims were recruited at a moment in life when they were experiencing either persistent or deteriorating economic hardship and were thus ready to take a high level of risk. (Bakowski & Voronova, 2021, p. 6)

In relation to the EU's flagship fund for addressing irregular migration, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the European Commission notes:

[It] helps [in] addressing the root causes of destabilization, forced displacement and irregular migration by promoting economic and employment opportunities, as well as combating smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings. (European Commission, n.d.)

Here, the fund refers to the promotion of economic and employment opportunities in countries of origin. In this qualification the push factors, or root causes, of migration are classified as largely economic. This approach to the issue implies that the smuggling and trafficking of migrants and refugees are an additional consequence of 'irregular' migration. These are just two examples of how embedded the push and pull theory is in the framing of the problem in EU policy.

It is not only the EU that assesses migration in terms of push and pull factors; this has become a globally dominant narrative. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) stated the following:

Migration and forced displacement in the IGAD region are driven by many factors – ranging from conflicts, degradation of the environment, disasters, and poverty – that force people to move away in search of safety and economic opportunities, among others. (IGAD, 2021, p. 6)

Also here, the push (driven by) and pull (move towards in search of) are clearly visible.

However, various researchers have questioned the adequacy of the push and pull theory as a general explanation of migration behaviour and trajectories. Haug (2008), for instance, questions the often economic-centred analyses that underlie the 'rational choices' made

by migrants, commenting that “in migration decision research there is no consensus about a list of necessary and adequate push or pull factors” (Haug, 2008, p.599). Zimmerman, Hossain and Watts (2011) found that simplistic push and pull models do not explain the health implications involved in human trafficking and lead to a criminal focus in policy that ignores the context. Cheng (2017) found that the push and pull model is not only limited in scope when it comes to understanding trafficking, but also deflects attention from the responsibility of states to address it.

Kidane (2021) adds that push and pull factors do not explain onward migration in situations where the risks of migration are clearly very high. She also points out that the model does not explain why similar push factors do not cause the same patterns of migration in different parts of the world. In her research, Kidane found that the model does not take into account psychological factors, such as trauma and collective trauma. High levels of trauma cause perpetual fear, which can lead to a flight response that is beyond rational thought processes. Continuous stress and anxiety linked to traumatic experiences can heavily influence the mindset of people, causing them to flee the situation they are in (Kidane & Stokmans, 2019; Kidane, 2018). Kidane (2021), thus, argues that the push and pull model does not explain why people continue to flee (secondary migration), despite the known dangers posed by the journey.

The push and pull model also fails to explain the growing role of digitalisation in migratory movement and human trafficking (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019). The increased availability of information should – if the push and pull theory was correct – give migrants and refugees a better information position to avoid entering situations that harm them. However, in contrast, we find that migrants and refugees, despite having information about risks associated with migratory journeys, are not avoiding such situations.

First, there is a need to better diagnose the source of the problem; how do we explain that fact that migrants and refugees are knowingly moving into situations that are harmful to them? For this, there is a need to reconsider our understanding of the processes that lead to

this situation. Such understanding is vital to help break the cycle of violence and attend to the victims in this situation, who at present remain largely out of sight.

Secondly, there is a need to reflect on the basis for policies that follow the push and pull model, which have not stopped people from moving and migrating, and becoming victims of human trafficking (Horsley & Gerken, 2022). Despite the gravity of this situation and the extreme violence of the torture perpetrated in this type of trafficking, research is scarce. It is also remarkable that the policies in place to deal with this situation focus on stopping the smugglers and traffickers to prevent refugees and migrants from entering Europe, rather than the urgent need to protect the rights of victims (Schäfer, Schlindwein, & Jakob, 2018; Shatz & Branco, 2019; Hayden, 2022). This is even more surprising given that the crimes committed are considered among the most heinous and egregious rights violations committed today.

Hence, it is argued that the link between migration, digital innovation and human trafficking for ransom cannot be explained by the push and pull theory, which has dominated the migration field. Accordingly, the policies based on push and pull theory need to be revisited. To elaborate on why this is so important, in the next section we look at how the framing of a problem is relevant to the solutions proposed. If the framing of a problem is wrong, then the policies formulated to address the problem are also likely to misfire.

Problem framing

When theories fail to explain a situation or phenomenon, the policies based on them are, at best, misguided and, at worst, exacerbate the situation that they are trying to solve. This section looks at the influence of problem framing through social processes on policy making and the framing of the migration ‘problem’.

The influence of problem framing on policy making

The way in which problems are understood is the result of social processes. The process of making sense of a complex situation is called framing. The framing of a problem does not determine the

existence of an issue, but the ways in which that issue is understood (Goffman, 1974; Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford 1986; Vdovychenko, 2019), and the potential solutions (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). This in turn depends on access to people relevant to an issue (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). The narration implies an understanding of a situation, which impacts on the way the problem is addressed by policymakers (Daviter, 2007).

The framing of an issue also affects agenda setting. Kingdon (1984) discusses how policy can change significantly, in a time-bound window of opportunity, when three streams align – the problem, policy and politics streams. The problem stream is the part where an issue is identified and defined (depending on how it is framed). Only if the problem is framed in the right way can the right solution be found (policy stream). And, if it is considered relevant in the politics and power dynamics of the day, it may be put on the agenda (politics stream). When all three streams come together, a policy window opens in which a policy change is possible.

The framing of an issue is not only important in the agenda-setting phase, but remains important in policy revisions (Daviter, 2007). When a policy problem is framed, a selection process takes place, (Dewulf & Bouwen, 2012). This selection involves dissecting the problem into various elements and selecting some, while leaving others aside or giving them less weight. The framing of a problem is affected by actors, including policy entrepreneurs, both governmental and non-governmental (Kingdon, 1984). Framing is also affected by problem brokers who use knowledge, values and emotions to shape the framing of the problem (Knaggard, 2015).

Different actors (including the media, politicians and others) are involved in framing processes, which produce collective action frames; such processes can require long periods of time (Benford & Snow, 2000). Problem framing affects the media, and the media in turn has an influence on how problems are understood. The empirical research of Gregoriou & Ras (2018) shows that human trafficking narratives in the media focus on certain *modus operandi* that position women as victims, particularly of sexual exploitation. This framing narrows the understanding of human trafficking to the *modus*

operandi reported, which can differ from what is actually taking place, such as in the case of human trafficking for ransom, thereby distorting the picture (Vdovychenko, 2019).

The problem, therefore, becomes how the framing and decision-making around the issue is presented in an agenda. This ties in well with Kingdon, who describes the agenda-setting process as dynamic, time-bound, situational and dependent on the policy networks that are engaging with the issue. Tversky and Kahneman (1986) have shown that decision-making processes are often not rational. While learning can take place in decision making, the base conditions for such learning are often lacking. For example, most of the problems that we face are unique, exist in variable environments and do not provide immediate feedback in relation to the decisions made. This means that the initial framing of an issue becomes the norm and the basis for decision making, and is likely to stay until another major policy shift takes place.

The framing of the migration ‘problem’

The classification of a condition in a particular category qualifies how it is understood as a problem in the public agenda. Kingdon gives an example that:

[...] classifying a condition into one category rather than another may define it as one kind of a problem or another. The lack of public transportation for handicapped people, for instance, can be classified as a transportation problem or as a civil rights problem, and the treatment of the subject is dramatically affected by the category.
(Kingdon, 1984, p. 198)

The classification of conditions occurring in the context of migration is contested. For several decades, the process of framing around migration, and aspects that are linked to it by politicians and the media, such as human trafficking, has been increasingly linked to security threats (Kicing, 2004). In recent years, this has included the perceived threat of terrorism. Abdou (2020) describes how polarised sides of the political ideological spectrum see migration as something out of the ordinary and something to be prevented or that is connected to misery and tragedy, which feeds into fear and alienation.

Vdovychenko (2019) argues that, in the area of migration, a policy window, such as described by Kingdon, began to open in the EU around 2013. She says that the window was triggered by an event in which a ship with more than 600 refugees on board sank near the coast of Lampedusa. More than 300 people, mostly Eritreans, drowned that day. The event received widespread political attention and featured prominently in the media (BBC, 2013; Davies, 2013; Horsti, 2017).

Analysing the documentary *It will be Chaos* (Luciano & Piscopo, 2018), Vdovychenko (2019) claims that the Lampedusa crisis can be seen as a focusing event, which opened a policy window. She points out that the framing of the problem, the wording chosen to address it, and the policy directions made available to address the problem were hotly contested and negotiated. In particular, the use of the term ‘illegal migrants’ as opposed to ‘refugees’ determined whether or not these people were considered to be deserving of help or not – governing the policy response. Smits and Karagianni (2019) state that, unfortunately, rather than framing this disaster in terms of the human right to life and, hence, the failure to protect refugees, it was framed as a crisis caused by the movement of ‘illegal’ migrants. They argue that since 2013, the issue of human trafficking of migrants and refugees has become part of a larger problem frame in which migration itself is seen as a crisis. In this framing of the problem, the very movement of people has been problematized.

Mawere, Van Reisen and van Stam (2019) highlight the dominant new language introduced in this agenda, such as ‘irregular’ and ‘illegal’ migration. The introduction of this language created a new frame, turning migration, which is a normal lifestyle in Africa, into a problem with negative connotations associated with being ‘irregular’ and ‘illegal’. This language diminishes the status of the lives of refugees and migrants, creating or exacerbating vulnerabilities, dehumanising the experience as ‘not normal’, and placing refugees and migrants ‘outside-the law’, as well as creating fear around their existence and movement among those in host communities (Mawere, Van Reisen & van Stam, 2019). Following Rorty (1998), the framing of mobility as a generic problem – with connotations of being undesirable,

outside-the law, dangerous and instilling insecurity and fear – may situate people on the move as being less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights. This impacts on whether or not issues like human trafficking are seen primarily as a human rights problem.



Figure 2.1. March for human rights for refugees and migrants in Brussels, September 2015

Source: Photograph: Han Soete, Solidaire (2015)

Schwarz's (2012) feelings-as-information theory explains how perceived feelings are also information and, as such, influence the judgement of people. Linking this with the question of whether a problem is regarded as a human rights problem, Rorty (1998) points out that perceiving a situation as a human rights problem requires *sympathy* and *security*. Sympathy requires knowledge of the situation of other people and the possibility of emotionally relating to them. Security relates to the need to feel safe, in order to have the space to consider any concerns that relate to the situation of other people. Rorty's argument is relevant to understanding how the infliction of severe human rights violations often has the effect of dehumanising the victim, undermining emotional engagement with, and sympathy for, the victim.

As seen from this (and the previous) section, the framing of a problem has a direct impact on the policies (solutions) formulated to address it. When the theories used to understand a problem are flawed, the resulting policies are likely to be ineffective. The framing of migration as an issue of push and pull involving ‘illegal’ migrants has led to the formulation of policies that focus on the creation of obstacles for people to move along migration routes, such as interceptions and returning people to where they came from. The idea that intercepting people on the migration routes deters them from moving onwards is overlooking alternative (and possibly better) ideas on how this issue could, or should, be addressed. The following section looks at the emergence of human trafficking for ransom in conjunction with the development of ICTs.

Black holes in the digital infrastructure

Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam and Ong’ayo (2019) observed that human trafficking is fuelled by black holes in the digital landscape.²² Using spatial imaginaries, they make the case that unequal access to ICTs starts with the very design of core infrastructure. As depicted in Figure 2.2, fibre optic submarine cables connect the African continent to Europe. About 99% of the total international data transmissions run through these cables (Bischof, Fontugne & Bustamante, 2018). All traffic that moves through these cables automatically travels through the centre, which is located in Europe or the United States, even if the information is transferred between nodes placed in another continent (Gueye & Mbaye, 2018). Developments in ICT, particularly the rise of the Internet and mobile phones, have led to a world in which people are more connected than ever before, which has led to the perception of a ubiquitous connected (and informed) world (Castells, 2011). In this digital structure, information circulates within a globalised social network (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong’ayo,

²² ‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see Glossary of Terms).

2019). With terms such as ‘global village’, ICTs are seen as something that innovate economies and solves social problems (Smart, Donner & Graham, 2016). However, as ICTs are the product of human invention, it is inevitable that the digital architecture of these inventions has certain social characteristics. While ICTs have enabled coordination at a high level and across borders, at the same time they are creating an increasing divide between those who are connected to the Internet and those who are not (Fuchs & Horak, 2008; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).



Figure 2.2. Submarine cable map

Source: Wikimedia (2015)

Castells (2000) argues that this creates a new social structure in which the elite profit and others get stuck in ‘black holes’ of informational capitalism. Such black holes are not just caused by lack of access to devices or connectivity, although this can play a role, but access can also be deliberately limited or denied. According to the Research and Evidence Facility (2020), (not) being able to make use of ICTs is an essential part of understanding the impact of technology on people on the move. They found that the number of mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in the Horn of Africa (51) is far lower than in sub-Saharan Africa (82) and the world (106). In particular, the number of subscribers in Eritrea is very low (20 per 100 people). In addition, the Research and Evidence Facility explains that the use of smartphones is limited in the Horn of Africa and that most people

with a mobile phone subscription make use of phones mainly, or only, for calling or text messaging (SMS).

In terms of Internet use, data provided by the World Bank (2021a) show that Eritrea has only 1% Internet usage. This means that hardly anyone in the country has access to the Internet. The main explanations for this are the Eritrean government's tight control over SIM card access and the extremely poor fibre-optic broadband infrastructure in the country (BBC, 2019; Research and Evidence Facility, 2020). Internet use in Ethiopia is 19%, in Libya 22%, and Sudan 31% – and it is not equally distributed (World Bank, 2021b). In addition, the Research and Evidence Facility (2020) explains that some countries in the Horn, such as Ethiopia and Sudan, are able to shut down the Internet when deemed necessary. Such Internet blackouts are frequent during exams, for example, but also at times of protest or conflict.

Within a black hole, people are not, or are barely, connected and depend on others for access (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo, 2019). Such actors are referred to as gatekeepers of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo (2019) describe how particularly youth living in a black hole may seek to leave their home in search of better opportunities and 'connectivity'. They are often attracted to nodes with a better information position and better access to connectivity. However, being in a black hole, they have very limited information about where to go and what routes are safe to take (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo, 2019).

The fact that unequal access to ICTs is associated with vulnerability, which can lead to exploitation, is a problem everywhere. For instance, not having access to a mobile/smart phone and the Internet is associated with greater risk of exposure to abuse among elderly. One author asked: "Are elderly in a cage, under a lockdown within a lockdown?" (Rina *et al.*, 2020). In the next section, the authors will further investigate empirical evidence on black holes in the digital landscape. Investigating the impact of reduced mobility under the COVID-19 lockdowns, researchers found that protecting vulnerable

elderly citizens who could be in a situation of neglect or abuse in New York (as elsewhere) was difficult due to lack of access to a phone:

However, such remote work can be challenging, as it may not be safe for victims to speak on the phone if they reside with the actual or potential perpetrator. The abuser may even prevent the older adult from having access to this technology. (Elman et al., 2020, p. 692)

This is similar to what Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz (2019) found in relation to the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya in the context of human trafficking for ransom. Using the network gatekeeping theory of Barzilai-Nahon (2008), these authors found that Eritrean refugees were more repressed than the most repressed category of ‘gated’ communities suggested by the theory (i.e., traditional gated). This was because not only did the Eritrean refugees have no access to, or freedom to distribute information, but in the context of human trafficking for ransom, were forced to distribute information (on their own torture) using mobile phones, as part of forced begging (for ransom). The authors suggest that the term ‘exploited gated’ be used for this group (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Ethnographic monitoring of black holes in the digital landscape

Black holes in the digital landscape are associated with social situations and are naturally unequal in terms of resources, which Bourdieu refers to as ‘capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986). This section looks at black holes in the digital infrastructure and how these place people, especially people on the move, in vulnerable situations, increasing the likelihood that they will fall victim to human trafficking and human rights violations. Using ethnographic monitoring the authors selected and compared key incidents from their data that lead to a general idea, from which one can abstract the existence of a black hole.

People seek information through connectivity

It could be assumed that people who are living in a black hole in the digital landscape are unaware of the need to connect. However, some ethnographic observations point to the desire of people to connect and of people making efforts to be digitally connected, even when

such connectivity is not readily available. An evening observation tour by one of the authors around Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo showed youth flocking to the compound's fences at night to pick up a WiFi signal from the university; apparently the youth had found ways of circumventing the password and restrictions to gain Internet access (Van Reisen, 2020a).

For her master's thesis, Smeets conducted a case study on Masvingo City, Zimbabwe, looking at the gatekeeping of information. She concluded from interviews that those having more digital access would have an information advantage, and those without similar access would be more vulnerable and prone to being exploited. A female media student she interviewed said that without access to information:

[...] you know nothing at all. People can take advantage of you just because you don't, you don't have information [... But with access] you can defend yourself, you know what is going on, and you can't be manipulated. (Smeets, 2020, p. 46)

In Masvingo City, the editor of the local newspaper added, as an explanation:

So what happens with those with less access to digital technology, that means that they are left out. They are disadvantaged, that means that they are more vulnerable to exploitation, all forms of exploitation. [...] information is a liberating tool because nobody can easily take advantage of you, [without information] you can't make rational decisions. (Smeets, 2020, p. 46)

Control over the flow of information is a way of controlling the narrative about what is going on in a particular situation. A testimony of a witness to an aid delivery in Darfur reported how an enterprising person made good use of technology:

In Darfur in 2009 I was part of a mission that took 35 trucks of food, medicine and other items to a location where there had been fighting and displacement. When we arrived we found a person who had set up public telephone service with a satellite telephone and a solar chargers. People could do reverse charge telephone calls with family and friends. There were just as many people in line for the telephone as there were for food and medicine. (Interviewee 3006, Resource person, Zoom-seminar, GAIC Research Group, May 2022; chat record held by MvR)

The barriers imposed by a two-year stringent shut-down of Internet connectivity during the war in Tigray (Ethiopia) were circumvented by moving phones to other states with connectivity, from where messages were up and downloaded, and screenshots were flashed between phones unconnected to the Internet using Bluetooth (Interviewee 3007, resource person, Zoom-seminar, GAIC Research Group, May 2022; chat record held by MvR; Interviewee 3009, resource person, conversation with Van Reisen, 4 May 2022).

The incidents reported here show that people are creatively and innovatively using alternatives to receive and distribute information, if and when they can.

Controlling information on mobile phones as a source of power

Focus group discussions held by Van Reisen and other researchers with an elderly population living in impoverished circumstances in Northern Uganda on the use of mobile phones gave an interesting perspective on the anxiety caused by not being able to control the information (Van Reisen, 2020b). The elderly participants reported being anxious over not being able to read the screens of their typically small (Nokia) feature phones due to deteriorating eyesight. They were clearly fearful of their lack of control over information, including digital payments made per phone, and missing out on other information. They also feared that other people would take advantage of the situation (Van Reisen, 2020b).

In her research in Zimbabwe, Smeets quotes a resource person who is knowledgeable about online media in remote areas in relation to the power of those with access to social media:

...those who have information can manipulate those who are less informed [...those] who are informed, they become more powerful (Smeets, 2020, p. 46).

Smeets (2020) also found that youth in remote areas with access to social media through their phone had relatively more power and independence than the elders of the community, because of the advanced information position they had on what was reported within the community, as well as outside on social media.

This example speaks to the more general principle that digital information distributes power, giving more power to young people, who can more easily access the information. This can upset traditional power structures in communities, in which elderly people would previously have had greater authority.

Controlling information to control a population

Gatekeeping is particularly relevant during times of conflict. Control over the flow of information is a way of controlling the narrative about what is going on in a particular situation. When crimes are perpetrated, black holes are purposefully created by removing access to the Internet and confiscating mobile phones. Restricting information prevents the media, international actors and policymakers from obtaining a detailed image of what is happening on the ground, including the perspectives of everyone involved. An example is how, during the war in Tigray, Internet access was shut off in the entire Tigray region for nearly two years. In collaboration with EEPA, the research team collected regular updates on the situation and first reported the black-out in Situation Report 11 in November 2020: “Phone and internet to the Mekelle and Tigray region remains closed off (EEPA, 2020).

Controlling phone and Internet traffic is a powerful tool for turning a location into a black hole and dominating the information-stream of what is going on in that place. In Situation Report 65, EEPA quoted a local from Tigray who described the situation in Tigray as follows:

[...] there is no telephone, no aid, no electricity, no freedom to movement even locally, no access to any external organization of any kind whatsoever in the border areas with Eritrea. Eritrean forces also denied access to the interim government in Tigray and the Ethiopian army staff to go past Adigrat town. (EEPA, 2021b)

The following account is given in Situation Report 75, published in March 2021, of the confiscation of mobile phones by Eritrean

soldiers in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, presumably to continue to tightly control all information channels:

Ethio-Forum reports that residents of Mekelle said that ENDF allied forces are confiscating their mobile phones. Especially residents found with pictures of Dr Debretsion, other TPLF officials and a flag of Tigray regional state in their mobile phones are intimidated and beaten whilst their phones are confiscated. According to the sources, Eritrean soldiers dressed in ENDF uniform are the main perpetrators of mobile phone confiscation. (EEPA, 2021c)

Similar tactics are also reported in other places in Ethiopia (Situation Report 163, July 2021):

The OLF [Oromo Liberation Front] added that the Eritrean troops were confiscating mobile phones, cash and looting private belongings from local civilians. (EEPA, 2021d)

This illustrates the fact that the existence of a black hole is not just dependent on factors such as lack of infrastructure, but also on deliberate policies of control over information. Control over mobile phones is a tool used by states to control the narrative about what is going on.

Controlling migrants and refugees by controlling mobile phones

The mobile phone is an indispensable feature of human trafficking for ransom. Taking control over mobile phones is often the first indicator of an (emergent) operation of a human trafficking network. A resource person reported on an incident in which Eritrean refugees in a refugee camp in Ethiopia were attacked:

I already asked one of our refugees in the new camp and he said that yesterday between 7pm and 8:30pm during Al Eshaa prayer, some of the Amharic people attacked the refugees and took their telephones after they beat them. This issue is happening 2 or 3 times a week and the committee of the refugees there has asked for help more than 10 times, but always the Federal Security promises them, but no action is taken at all. (Interviewee 3004, resource person, Signal communication with Van Reisen, April 2022, emphasis added)

The following testimony about the abduction of Eritrean refugees from camps in Tigray, Ethiopia, was published in EEPA Situation Report 56 on 15 January 2021:

Eritrean refugees in Tigray are taken to Shiraro, others to Badme. There are at least 10,000 refugees, and they are slowly taken to Eritrea. What happens with them in Eritrea, is not known. The refugees held in Shiraro and Badme are held by Eritrean soldiers. They have no food, and they are forced to contact their family to send money. However, the refugees are dependent on the Eritrean soldiers to be able to phone relatives. (EEPA, 2021a, emphasis added)

This testimony shows the transactional element of the use of phones:

The refugees held by Eritrean troops are using mobile phones from the Eritrean soldiers to contact relatives. These are Eritrean mobile phones. The soldiers are making a business out of this, so that they get paid for this 'service'. Soldiers take a part of this money, and in some cases all of it. (EEPA, 2021a)

In locations where the victims of human trafficking are held in captivity, human traffickers keep tight control over the use of digital technology. This often means having no access to a phone and, thus, not being able to access (to either receive or send) information. The main sources of information in these situations are the human traffickers themselves (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Moreover, refugees and migrants can be mistrustful of varied information sources. Smugglers and human traffickers bridge this gap by offering (filtered) information, creating a dependency by the one who wants to leave on the provider of information (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo, 2019). For human trafficking for ransom, which depends on the control of communication channels by human traffickers, this control over information is a key to their modus operandi.

The ethnographic monitoring in this section shows that information is a typical asset the control of which can lead to a more dominant social position. Hence, it can be seen that, as not everyone is equally connected, a social structure has been created by the Internet that benefits the ones who are better connected, while leaving others in

so-called ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Remoteness and cultural entropy

As seen from the previous section, black holes in the digital landscape leave people cut off from information and vulnerable to human trafficking. Remoteness is another concept developed to help understand areas that are cut off or remote. Anthropologist Edwin Ardener (1989) first developed the concept of remoteness in remote areas. For Ardener, remote areas are not those most far removed from “central” areas on the map, but areas that are not well “linked” (Ardener, 2012, p. 532) to the areas around them. Remoteness, as a concept, defines a place that may appear to be inaccessible to outsiders, but which, at the same time, is vulnerable and open, because people in these places do not control access. Remote areas, says Ardener, house all kinds of what the locals define as strangers. At the same time, from the outside, the people inhabiting remote locations suffer from stereotyping, not so much because of their geographical remoteness, but rather the conscious disconnection of “central” people from “remote” areas (Ardener, 2012, p. 521). Yet, despite the perceived disconnect, remote areas are constantly in touch with the outside world, and are “event-rich” (Ardener, 2012, p. 531).

Brachet and Scheele (2019) describe how stereotypes about remote areas from the outside world can also affect how locals see themselves. In the case of northern Chad, Brachet and Scheele assert that remoteness is, therefore, not only externally imposed, but also internally perpetuated. Negative stereotypes become accepted by locals, enabling them to profit off their reputation and giving them the ability to avoid government control. “Remoteness, in this sense, translates both as a structural vulnerability and a certain form of power – the power to make one’s self invisible, unpredictable and hence ungovernable” (Brachet & Scheele, 2019, pp. 168–169).

Saxer and Anderson (2019) add that connectivity has brought another dimension to remoteness. According to these authors, rather than being without connectivity, remote areas are: “usually shot through

with uneven forms of connectivity, wiring them to the world economy and into global politics and mediascape” (Saxer & Anderson, 2019, pp. 4–5). This creates different power dimensions and socio-spatial constellations. This connects with the concept of black holes, as places where digital connectivity is low and gatekeepers are in control of the information flows. Black holes, then, signify digital remoteness, which shapes the socio-spatial constellations inside them.

Remoteness also links to the concept of cultural entropy. Cultural entropy is the clash of values within a system, originally described within organisations (Barrett, 2010). Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere and Gebre-Egziabher (2019) describe cultural entropy as also occurring between the values of different stakeholders in the migration process. When cultural entropy is high, the clash in values can result in ineffective policies. In remote areas, the risk of differing values with those of the so-called central areas is likely to be higher, which may result in a more significant cultural entropy – leading to policies also becoming less effective in remote areas.

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

In human trafficking for ransom, being cut off keeps the victims remote from information exchange, from accountability mechanisms and unable to access justice and support, even when they are released. This can cause what the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) refers to as the re-victimisation of victims of human trafficking. According to UNODC this as “a significant problem” (UNODC, 2006, p. 140).

In the book *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond*, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2014) describe human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai as a ‘trafficking cycle’. These authors go beyond previous descriptions of how “victims become locked in a cycle of trafficking, extortion and violence without an exit” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 27). They argue that the process of human trafficking cannot be analysed in isolation, but should rather be seen as a process

of violence in which the victims are trapped before, during and after the trafficking event(s). This includes the human rights abuses that cause the victims to flee in the first place, and detention in transit, host or third countries.

Noting that most of the victims of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai were Eritrean refugees, these authors trace the human trafficking cycle back to Eritrea, where the refugees had fled forced labour in the form of Eritrea's indefinite national service (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). They describe how the victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were sold and resold, and how they did not receive adequate protection from authorities in, among other countries, Egypt and Israel, and were even deported, which led to re-victimisation (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Rozen, 2019). In addition, victims would often have to go through the process again, but now on the other end of the line – having a family member who had fallen victim to such trafficking, and would call them to beg for ransom. Paying ransom would lead to debt and even greater vulnerability (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). Even if the refugees eventually arrive in a situation where they receive protection, the process of family reunification exposes family members to risky paths associated with the vulnerable situation the family members are in, including human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Berends, Delecolle, Hagenberg, Trivellato & Stocker, 2019). Thus, the violence and lack of protection of the rights of the survivors creates further vulnerability at each stage.

All of these compounded events in the human trafficking cycle have led to the normalisation of violence. For example, Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) report that Eritrean refugees view it as normal to be put in prison, often for minor offenses. Rozen (2019) describes how refugees who are the victim of human trafficking for ransom do not always realise that they have been 'trafficked', and fail to disclose this in interviews with authorities or researchers. In addition, the payment of ransoms has also become normalised. In rational decision-making processes, as presumed by the push and pull model, the normalisation of violence is not taken into account. If where you come from is as

dangerous as where you are, and where you are going to is also dangerous, how do you weigh one danger against another?

When the human trafficking cycle is defined as such, it is not sufficient to look at what happens to victims during and immediate after the trafficking event, but also what happens leading up to it; and what happens within the communities that the victims are part of. The lack of protection of victims can lead to them again falling victim to human trafficking and other crimes. Adams (2011) notes that the protection of victims is, therefore, key to breaking the cycle of trafficking, but is often pushed aside in favour of a purely criminal approach to tackling human trafficking. The cycle referred to here is one in which the victim is more vulnerable to being trafficked again, once ‘free’, and from which it is difficult to escape for structural, legal, and policy reasons.

Conclusion

Theory matters, as it underpins what people think, what they do and how they act – and theory underpins policies as a scripted and agreed form of responding to a certain situation identified as a problem. Theories such as the push and pull theory of migration, on which the policies of the EU and international organisations are reliant, assume that refugees and migrants – including the victims of human trafficking – are in a position to make rational choices and have free access to information. However, this theory does not take into account how information streams are restricted, made unavailable, controlled or manipulated by ‘gatekeepers’. It also does not take into consideration the fact that sustaining high levels of trauma and continuous stress and fear can contribute to the decision to flee situations perceived as dangerous and to continue to move on (secondary migration), despite the risks involved.

In addition, which policy options are considered is mediated by the framing of the problem, and how the conditions referring to the problem are categorised – which is influenced by stakeholders and actors, including the media. Problems are, therefore, not neutral facts, but are, rather, constructed through social processes. Whether a

problem is recognised as such, is also determined by who can speak about it. This process of framing is all the more important, as problem framing creates conditions in which issues may be taken up on the public agenda. When a policy window emerges for issues to enter the agenda, such as those triggered by a focusing event, the framing of the event is particularly important in determining what policies may be considered to solve the problem. What information is available to whom, and who controls the disbursement of information, is of critical importance in this process. In addition, if the problem is analysed in isolation – e.g., only the act of trafficking, rather than the full cycle of human trafficking, which includes before, during and after the event – the analysis of the problem may be incomplete.

On this note, this chapter seeks to contribute to a more pluralistic approach to seek alternative explanatory frameworks to understand migration, in general, and human trafficking for ransom, in particular. The digital landscape gives unequal access to ICTs, leading to a digital divide between those who have access to ICTs and the Internet and those who do not. Furthermore, gatekeepers (which can be governments, but also non-governmental actors) can control access, for example, by shutting down the Internet or restricting access through infrastructure or price. This allows them to control the flow of information, giving those controlling the ICTs – the so-called ‘gatekeepers’ – a significant advantage.

Investigating the concept through ethnographic monitoring, it can be concluded that black holes in the digital landscape have four aspects:

- People seek (digital) information, even if they are not connected, or barely connected, and this information is important to them.
- The control over how information can be obtained in barely, or unconnected, situations can be a source of power.
- Those who have more power can control others by removing (access to) connectivity by shutting down the Internet or taking mobile phones.
- Migrants and refugees, who are already in a vulnerable situation, are at risk of finding themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation in which all communication is regulated by those in control, as a means of subjugation in order to exploit them.

Given the importance of technology and control over information in human trafficking for ransom, the concept of a 'black hole' can help explain how, and why, unequal information flows and restrictions on information by gatekeepers benefit the perpetrators of human trafficking for ransom. The human trafficking networks also serve as gatekeepers, controlling what information reaches people in vulnerable situations. Black holes in the digital landscape also prevent information from getting out. Therefore, it is difficult for anyone to obtain a clear picture of what is happening on the ground inside these areas. A lack of information and access isolates people, causes false information to proliferate, and increases the vulnerability of people to extortion and other crimes.

Black holes can also be described as 'remote areas', places that are disconnected from the 'centre'. This 'remoteness' contributes to vulnerability, while at the same time allowing people to remain invisible and, hence, ungovernable. Remoteness shields areas from government control. Stereotypes about people in remote areas can be internalised by locals, reinforcing their status (e.g., of people in Libya as criminals, operating outside the law). Human trafficking for ransom thrives in such places. At the same time, according to the principles of cultural entropy, the plurality of stakeholders and values can render policies ineffective.

Finally, it is important to understand human trafficking for ransom as a cycle. Seeing it as a cycle allows a broader perspective on the vulnerability of persons to human trafficking and a more nuanced understanding of what is driving it and what might help break the cycle. Such an understanding takes into account the cycle of violence accompanying the trafficking, from human rights abuses experienced in the country of origin, to the trafficking itself, and beyond, as well as the vulnerable economic situation of people on the move (e.g., debt, labour conditions due to illegal status) and lack of protection, also due to their illegality. These factors place migrants and refugees in a powerless position and can lead to re-victimisation.

Due to the dehumanisation of people in such situations, barriers to sympathy emerge and feelings of fear and danger are aroused, fuelled by narratives around security and terrorism. In human trafficking for

ransom, human beings are commoditised, stripped of their dignity and humanity. Following Rorty (1998), this generates a situation in which people in a black hole are regarded as less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights. If the framing of the problem is determined by such sentiments, and the policy agenda follows this frame, this explains why human rights are less of a consideration in the policies that have emerged to address the problem of human trafficking in Libya.

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Author contributions

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, and Anouk Smeets are the authors of several sections in this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen edited the overall text. Anouk Smeets drafted an early version of this chapter. Morgane Wirtz provided input for this chapter and provided background on the information presented in this chapter.

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Chapter 3

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

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Introduction

In human trafficking for ransom, everyone involved has skin in the game – most literally the victims of it, who carry the scars on their skin. Held in captivity, the victims are forced to beg for ransom while beaten or while hot plastic is dripped on their skin. The primary aim of this torture is to encourage the relatives of the victims – who are contacted by phone while the torture is taking place – to pay large sums of money to the traffickers. The skin of the victims carries, quite literally, the score of human trafficking for ransom for the rest of their lives. This is captured eloquently in the film *Under the Skin* (Deloget & Allegra, 2015).

This study is an explorative case study of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya, largely from an emic perspective. It was conducted as a series of interviews, mainly with survivors of human trafficking, but also with smugglers, translators, representatives of humanitarian organisations and others. The fieldwork was supplemented by a systematic literature review, which revealed that there has been little published on this topic. This research focused on Eritreans, as they constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

The relatives of the victims have ‘skin in the game’, as they must decide whether or not to pay the ransom, how to secure the safe release of their loved one, and how to deal with the repercussions of all of these events on their lives. The large sums of ransom paid by the families of the victims are financially devastating, as shown in the documentary *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013).

The skin in the game for the researchers is the impact of the traumatising content they are collecting and analysing, which is exacerbated by their inability to immediately help those who are sharing their stories. This kind of research can affect their mental health (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall & Limjerwala, 2014; Shannonhouse Barden, Jones, Gonzalez & Murphy, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). This gives rise to certain ethical considerations in relation to the extent to which the outcome of the research may be affected by the mental state of the researcher (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019; Kidane, 2021).

So, is such a topic researchable? This is the foundational question when considering the research design and methodology of such a study. In this chapter, the search to see how we can make this topic researchable is presented.

As a starting point, the researchers first reviewed the experiences of researchers engaged in similar work undertaken previously. In the following section, the challenges and ethical concerns associated with such research are explored. Subsequently, the research design chosen for this study is set out, taking into account the limitations of the setting and the objectives of the study. In the sections that follow, a detailed overview of how the data was collected and analysed is presented. The final section contains a consideration and assessment of how the researchers regulated their emotions during this research. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Is human trafficking for ransom researchable?

Experiences in previous research on human trafficking for ransom

The research available on human trafficking for ransom in Libya is limited, which is not surprising given the difficulties associated with the study of this practice (Surtees, 2014). The situation has a devastating impact on large groups of people – victims, survivors, their families and communities, as well as the perpetrators and the people who work for them. Human trafficking for ransom in Libya

has particularly affected refugees from Eritrea, and continues to affect them, even after they arrive in Europe or elsewhere (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Rozen, 2019; Mouton, Schoenmaeckers & Van Reisen, 2019; Schoenmaeckers, Al-Qasim & Zanzoretta, 2019; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2019b). While victims²³ are a primary source of information for research on human trafficking (Rijken, 2018), it is often difficult to physically reach victims; it is also challenging to gain their trust and interview them (Surtees, 2014).

Carrying out research in such a situation is difficult. From experience, it is relevant to say that no researcher is left emotionally untouched. Such research cannot be comprehensively carried out without a reflection on how the emotions of survivors and researchers play a role. Due to the emotions involved, questions must be asked prior to the research on how to avoid the re-traumatisation of respondents and secondary trauma to the researchers, their assistants, and translators (Kidane, 2021). Taleb (2018) explores how *Skin in the Game* is important for good academic work; how being engaged with the situation is necessary for an in-depth understanding and to make what is done ‘somehow’ meaningful – somehow, because the sense of powerlessness that those held in captivity feel is also an emotion that the researchers feel. Confronted with the devastating situation of the victims and survivors, questions about how to change this and what responsibility to take become very real.

How to regulate the amount of skin in the game that the researchers and the respondents have is challenging, particularly in a situation as serious as human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The mental state of all involved is critical to the success of the endeavour and to make decisions that do not compromise others. The researcher is very present in such research and how the researcher emotionally labours

²³ A ‘trafficking victim’ is defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power as: “‘Victims’ means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power” (UN General Assembly, 1985). See also Glossary of Terms.

through the information, interprets it, and develops the research based on it must be explicitly thought through, and reported, at each step.

The first time that the issue of Sinai trafficking was brought to the attention of two of the original researchers (Estefanos and Van Reisen) was at a conference held in Brussels in 2009. At this conference, a trusted person among Eritrean refugees, Father Mussie Zeraï, presented the problem to an audience that included Estefanos and Van Reisen (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). In 2010, when work began on this topic, the initial perspective was that human trafficking for ransom (then occurring in the Sinai) was not suitable for academic research. While at that time the researchers were not as aware of all the academic and ethical implications, it simply felt wrong to ‘academise’ a situation that was so deeply problematic and needed a practical response. However, the researchers learnt that, because of the egregious nature of the situation, journalists and politicians had difficulty believing that this situation could be real. This observation prompted the first attempts to conduct research that was rooted in academic rigour. The research prompted high-level visibility, and political and law-and-order anti-terrorist operations were carried out, which ultimately ended the situation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. This encouraged others to see the research as an acceptable and relevant way to prompt responses to address the situation.

As the situation has evolved, the *modus operandi* of human trafficking for ransom has expanded to Libya. This provoked the hypothesis that a larger set of drivers was fuelling this phenomenon. Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) explored this further and found that a hierarchically-led criminal operation was exploiting the situation in Eritrea in a systematic and structural way, and that the operations were expanding to Libya. This research was based on interviews with a wider set of people with a stake in the situation, including survivors

of human trafficking for ransom, migrants and refugees,²⁴ and resource persons knowledgeable about the situation.

In 2015 and 2016, Van Reisen, together with researcher Selam Kidane, conducted interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom who had relocated to refugee camps in North Ethiopia (Tigray) (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). When the researchers sought to identify survivors, trousers were lifted to show the scars on their skin. The survivors did not consent immediately to the research. Long discussions were held with them before they consented. The survivors raised lots of relevant issues and complained that they felt their voice had been taken away by the events – and by the interest of journalists and academics in their story – without any concrete benefit to them. Exploring their expectations further, the researchers found that there were three main concerns that were important to the survivors: they wanted to have a medical check-up (which they had not had, despite the serious torture experienced), they wanted their situation explained to the officials dealing with refugees in the camp, and they wanted justice.

In response to this clear expression of their interests and conditions for participating by the survivors, the researchers involved a medical physician in the research to assist the victims of torture; translated research findings in reports so that they could be considered by the authorities in the refugee camps; and sought ways to deliver the findings as relevant input for the organisations dealing with the prosecution of international crimes. The agency of the victims and those interviewed for the research is presented in the book that resulted from this study (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017).

So, is human trafficking for ransom researchable? From the experiences detailed above, the conclusion was drawn that the topic is researchable, but that it leads to a particular set of concerns that

²⁴ 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).

must be considered and addressed. Researching the situation in Libya, under COVID-19 restrictions, came with its own set of challenges. It required patience, reflection, and time to develop the right conditions for the research. The following section sets out the difficulties associated and the steps taken to address these.

Challenges of studying human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai

There are numerous challenges associated with researching human trafficking for ransom, and each one provokes questions and concerns. How does the research affect the safety of participants and researchers? What are the many ethical considerations relating to how testimonies are obtained, analysed, and used, and how to deal with these? How reliable are the testimonies obtained, and how should they be triangulated and analysed? What are the emotional implications for the participants and researchers, and what are their expectations of the research in terms of outcomes?

The earlier studies of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai were based on material obtained through conversations that journalist and researcher Meron Estefanos held with Eritrean refugees. Estefanos is a Swedish journalist of Eritrean descent; she speaks Tigrinya, the language that all Eritrean refugees can converse in. As a radio host, she was known to an audience of refugees from Eritrea. At a certain point she made the conscious decision to focus her radio programme solely on the issue of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai – until it stopped – as she felt devastated by the lack of understanding that this was really happening and the lack of interest and follow-up to make it stop.

In the Sinai, Eritrean refugees were held in isolated camps – often in underground rooms; they were given phones to contact relatives while they were tortured and forced to beg family members to pay large sums of ransom. The refugees often contacted Estefanos, as she was known for assisting Eritreans to find ways to collect these ransoms through her radio programme. Estefanos would obtain the phone numbers used to beg for the ransoms and follow up with refugees in secret conversations. She also visited the Sinai, which is

documented in the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013). In addition, she and researcher Van Reisen conducted additional interviews in places where survivors of human trafficking for ransom could be reached after the ordeal was over, in Egypt, Israel and Ethiopia.

As a methodology, it is rare to obtain an insight in real-time during a real-life situation – while a crime is being committed. The analysis of the extensive interview transcripts of Estefanos collected during her radio programme allowed for an in-depth understanding of the modus operandi through which the ransoms were collected from the victims who were detained in the Sinai torture houses (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014).

There were important ethical decisions involved in this methodology and the use of the transcripts of the phone calls. One consideration was that the facilitation of the collection of ransom in this way, facilitated this modus operandi to thrive and continue. Estefanos was well aware of this dilemma. In the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013), Estefanos explains that she understood this problem, but in the face of refugees begging her to help, she felt that she had no other choice than to respond to their call. She also explained that, in her understanding, the threat of being killed if the ransom was not paid was real. She drew the conclusion that, as she knew that people might be killed, she had a moral obligation to try and avoid this outcome by sharing the information she obtained from the victims with their family members.

In the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013), there is a scene in which survivors discuss how human trafficking for ransom can only be stopped if all families stop making the ransom payments. This is a heated conversation. The documentary shows the faces of those who are silent, and their expressions speak louder than words. They convey their doubts; describing how it is difficult, or even impossible, for families to not pay, knowing that this will result in more torture and the possible death of their loved one.

Estefanos did not explicitly ask for the consent of the victims and survivors who called her to use their testimonies for research, but she made it clear that the testimonies were being used to inform the

outside world of their ordeal in a systematic and organised manner. This was the basis for their reuse in the investigation. Estefanos believed that they wanted to break their isolation and were reaching out for support. A difficult ethical point is the dependency of a respondent held in isolated captivity on the research, as the researcher is the sole point of contact. There is a constant need to check the relationship, and the intentions of each person involved, and deliberately consider how the situation influences the information obtained.

Obviously, this state of affairs puts pressure on researchers to deliver more than an academic publication, and to obtain clarity on the use of the research findings to document the atrocities committed, to explore pathways to end the impunity of the perpetrators, and to deliver support and justice to the survivors. This gives the researchers ‘skin in the game’, as they are deliberately present in the research to reach these aims and facilitate greater understanding of the experiences of the survivors and of all involved.

Psychological support as a preventive strategy for secondary trauma among researchers

Survivors of horrendous practices, such as human trafficking for ransom, are at high risk of developing prolonged symptoms of trauma. Human trafficking for ransom is considered a ‘sensitive’ research area as, in one way or another, researching this topic threatens the participants in the study (Condomines & Hennequin, 2013).

As well as those who have been through these experiences, people who have not experienced them directly, but have learnt about or interacted with stories about the traumatic events, can also develop trauma symptoms. This phenomenon is known as secondary (or vicarious) trauma (Pearlman & MacIan, 1995). Researchers who investigate traumatic events are, therefore, vulnerable to trauma. Frequently, they might not be able to distance themselves from the traumatised person’s experiences, especially if they are carrying out qualitative research, in which they need to go deep into certain aspects

of the traumatic event and establish an empathic relationship with the survivor (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019).

Investigating how trauma can affect researchers is also relevant because, unlike healthcare professionals, they do not usually receive training to deal with trauma. Another problem is feelings of inadequacy, as it is not their role to assist victims and they often do not have the means or skills to do so, which can increase the distress of the researcher (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Connolly & Reilly, 2007). Thus, it might be that this population is more vulnerable to developing symptoms of (secondary) trauma after learning about a traumatic event than trained clinicians. In other words, defence mechanisms might be lacking in researchers to protect themselves from secondary trauma.

According to the United States National Institute of Mental Health, “a traumatic event is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that can affect someone emotionally and physically” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). As a result of a traumatic event, people can experience various reactions, including negative emotions, trouble concentrating, and repetitive thoughts about what happened. These reactions generally diminish with time. However, some people are affected for longer periods, which can have a negative impact on their everyday life. Prolonged symptoms of trauma are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most recent edition (DSM-V) groups the behavioural manifestation of trauma into four clusters: re-experiencing (recurrent memories, dreams and distress), avoidance (of elements that remind the person of the event), negative cognitions and moods (feelings and inabilities), and arousal (aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behaviour) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Much literature has been produced about the clinicians (counsellors, therapists, social workers, etc.) dealing with trauma (Arvay, 2001; Elwood, Mott, Lohr & Galovski, 2011). However, there are only a few studies that address the impact of traumatic experiences on researchers. The results of these studies support the potential for researchers to develop secondary trauma (Coles *et al.*, 2014;

Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). Nevertheless, as the articles are still small in number, much more information needs to be gathered.

It is anticipated that the research conducted for this book may provide an interesting perspective, as the key empirical chapters were based on the analysis of a single body of interviews. The interviews were conducted by three researchers, but the analysis team that contributed to the coding and labelling consisted of eight persons (including two of the researchers who conducted the interviews). Even though research on this subject is insufficient, the lead researchers from the broader study in which this chapter is inserted were aware of the risk of secondary trauma to those who would deal with the data collected for the research. Before going into this further, a brief contextualisation of the focus and direction of the study is necessary.

The research contributors

This book is based on the work of researchers under the Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western Communities (SDDI) research stream and external researchers. All of the researchers who contributed to this book are part of a research network that falls under the Globalization, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC) network. Most of the chapters (except chapters 6, 8 and 17) are based on the work of the SDDI research team.

The SDDI research builds on and is informed by research on trauma by Dr Selam Kidane, author of Chapter 8. The mixed method research for her chapter was carried out in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, located in Tigray (Ethiopia) in 2017–2018, with 103 respondents, all of Eritrean nationality. In this research, she measured levels of trauma, social and economic resilience, and social capital, before and after an intervention to reduce levels of trauma via an online app and videos; she also interviewed the participants. Dr Kidane is not part of the SDDI research stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles (PhD researcher at the School of Law of the University of Nottingham), author of Chapter 6, and Sara Creta (PhD researcher at

Dublin University), author of Chapter 17, also do not fall under the SDDI research stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 50 respondents from Eritrea in her chapter. The fieldwork was carried out over a 6-month period, from October 2019 to March 2020, in several locations in Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. The chapter of Sara Creta is the result of two years of fieldwork among Eritrean refugees in Libya and online from 2018–2020. She takes a multi-sited netnographic approach with multiple rounds of in-person and virtual discussion. All three authors are collaborating in the research network under GAIC.

The SDDI research stream looks at the social disruptions caused by digital innovation in non-Western communities. Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen is Principal Investigator of SDDI. The PhD research projects of Morgane Wirtz and Klara Smits fall under the SDDI stream. The SDDI research presented in this book received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee (REDC) of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences. All authors and contributors to this book, except for Selam Kidane, Sara Creta and Sara Palacios-Arapiles, fall under the guidelines and ethical approval of the SDDI stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles' contribution falls under the guidelines and ethical approval of the School of Law Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham.

In this chapter, the research methodology used by the authors and contributors from the SDDI research stream are explained in detail. The methodologies used by Sara Palacios-Arapiles (Chapter 6), Dr Selam Kidane (Chapter 8) and Sara Creta (Chapter 17) are not included; their methodologies are explained their individual chapters.

Research approach

A case study on Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom

This study is an explorative investigation of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya. A systematic review of the extant literature reveals that there has been little academic work published

on this topic. The study was performed as a case-study that zooms in on Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The reason for this focus is that the research in the literature demonstrates that Eritreans consistently constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom, particularly in the research on Sinai trafficking, which found that the majority of victims were from Eritrea (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). In addition, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) found Eritrean facilitators at the top of the human trafficking network, including on the route to Libya. It is, therefore, hypothesised that human trafficking for ransom may affect Eritreans more than others, and this demarcation may help obtain greater clarity about the *modus operandi*, which first came to attention in the Sinai in 2009 and is now seen in Libya.

The research design for this study has a comparative element. While the majority of interviews were conducted with Eritrean refugees, a number of interviews were carried out with refugees from other countries. In some chapters of this book, this allowed for the analysis of how the experiences of Eritrean people compare with the experiences of people from other countries. This comparison is carried out in relation to two principal topics to shed light on the differences and commonalities. The first topic is the experiences of sexual violence, which is known to be widespread in human trafficking for ransom, but also more generally in the Libyan context. The second is the experience of COVID-19, and subsequent border closures, which affected all people on the move, regardless of their nationality. A comparison is made, with the objective to be clear on the specific effects relating to human trafficking for ransom.

In this research, identifiers such as ‘Eritrean’ are self-identifications, mostly referring to the nationality that the interviewees self-identify with. Important differences related to ethnicity and age relate to how Eritreans identify themselves and there are differences in the extent to which being Eritrean is the most important identifier. The use of the term ‘Eritrean’ in this book is not intended as a reductionist category, but as a demarcation of the focus on the people included in this study.

The research was carried out as an ethnographic study, with the purpose of fostering an emic perspective of the situation; in other words to strive for an understanding from an insiders' perspective. Reed-Danahay describes 'autoethnographic space' as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (1997, p.9). For Butz and Besio, fieldwork is an 'autoethnographic space' (2009). The position of the researcher also has an impact on the research process and outcomes (Butz & Besio, 2009; Compaoré, 2017).

The choice of this research design is justified by the mere realisation that most of what is written on the situation of refugees and migrants in Libya does not involve them. In particular, recognition of those held in isolated captivity is lacking. Moreover, the dominant paradigm in Europe, which is set in assumptions that refugees are 'pulled' to Libya (and Europe) to find better lives and livelihoods, needs testing, as this current research aims to do. The push and pull theory, which is set in rational choice theory, can be tested using an insiders' perspective of how refugees and migrants view their world and what choices they make within the perceived options they have. Thus, this chapter is written from an emic perspective.

Participatory fieldwork and netnography

The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). To understand how human trafficking for ransom in Libya is experienced by its survivors, it seemed important to be on the spot where survivors could be met and to spend time with them. The researchers engaged with Eritrean refugee communities in different places, notably in Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, Ethiopia and Europe and, to the extent possible, directly in Libya. In Libya this engagement was often through social media, such as WhatsApp or Signal. Research was also undertaken in Eritrea through resource persons with contacts on the ground in relation to the situation in the country.

Zoom was also an important platform where the lead researchers and assistant researchers met regularly during the analysis of the fieldwork, as they were residing in different places and were unable

to travel during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the analysis was undertaken.

The research Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation

The methodology detailed in this chapter shows the collaborative effort 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 results of this study are presented in chapters 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16.

Research tasks

The researchers involved in this study conducted interviews, focus group meetings and fieldwork, and collected observations. The researchers and research assistants were also required to translate, transcribe, read and code the reports of victims. Such work requires a mental engagement with the situation. The material produced and analysed related to respondents, who went through terrifying experiences, a process that could affect the emotional wellbeing of the researchers and research assistants, as well as re-traumatising the respondents.²⁵

²⁵ The division of tasks was as follows. After performing the field research, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz transcribed interviews, receiving translation and other support by an international team composed of Sarra Achour, Whitney Atieno, Wejden Ben Aziza, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Wiem Ben Hamouda, Cyrille Bozon Seabe, Bryan Eryong, Kobe Goudo Désire, Francis Kinyua Gathua, Abir Menssi, and Anouk Smeets. In the coding/labelling phase, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz received the help of a team of researchers composed of Anouk Smeets, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Annelies Coessens, Sara Giancesello, Bruna Mikami, Lucy Murray and Letizia Storchi. Dion de Vries assisted with researching the human trafficking context in Libya. The mental health of the team of researchers and research assistants was given special attention during this period of data collection and analysis. Besides the support of the principal investigator Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen, Dr Mia Stokmans offered support ahead of the fieldwork and during the drafting of the research.

Mental health support to researchers

Particular care was taken in this research to protect the mental wellbeing of the research participants and the research team. Researcher Bruna Mikami began her participation in the research project as a research assistant, coding and labelling the interviews. Shortly after, as she is a trained clinician with professional experience as a clinical psychologist, she was invited to support the research team to help them to protect themselves against secondary trauma. As Mikami was already participating in the research, she was acting as a clinician/researcher and research assistant/subject at the same time; hence, it can be said that she was living the experience while also investigating the experience.

The team also benefited from advice from Dr Selam Kidane, who participated in the research at distance, and provided advice drawing on her experience as a psycho-social councillor, with particular experience in dealing with Eritrean refugees and survivors of human trafficking. In addition, the team benefited from the supervision of Dr Bénédicte Mouton, a trained psycho-social councillor, who advised Wirtz. This included preparation on how to approach the respondents and deal with concerns about after-care, as well as how to ensure a healthy environment for research.

None of the prior studies mentioned earlier in this chapter had researchers, trained as clinicians, working within the research team to support it with counselling. This is one of the main contributions of the method used and we believe it enhances the researchability of the topic.

Theoretical perspective and literature review

The research benefited from a systematic review of the literature on human trafficking for ransom in Libya, which was carried out by Piet Gotlieb and Eva Lorger (Chapter 4: *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature Review*). The methodology included a systematic review of the literature using a snowballing methodology, in which all the literature was checked through the references, and experts were asked to confirm that the literature was complete. The objective was to create a complete overview of the extant literature on human

trafficking for ransom, particularly in Libya. For this, the literature was analysed using a purposeful, closed coding-labelling overview, in which all of the literature was compared on key aspects, which were pre-defined by the research team.

The theoretical framework for the research is outlined in Chapter 2 (*Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*), which considers the concepts underpinning this book. While the different chapters focus on different elements of the research, and a limited set of elements of the theoretical framework may underpin the work documented in a particular chapter, it is all part of the overarching framework. This framework builds on the assumption that greater theoretical plurality is needed to understand human trafficking for ransom, and that this cannot be adequately explained by push and pull and related theories, which (incorrectly) assume that people on the move have all the information available to them to analyse the benefits and disadvantages of a decision. Moreover, the theory underestimates the relevance of the person's mindset and the psychological drivers of their decisions (Kidane, 2021).

The theoretical framework builds on the work of Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) on the human trafficking cycle and takes into account work carried out on the distribution of information, and its limitations, including work on 'black holes' in the digital landscape in migration situations (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2019b; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

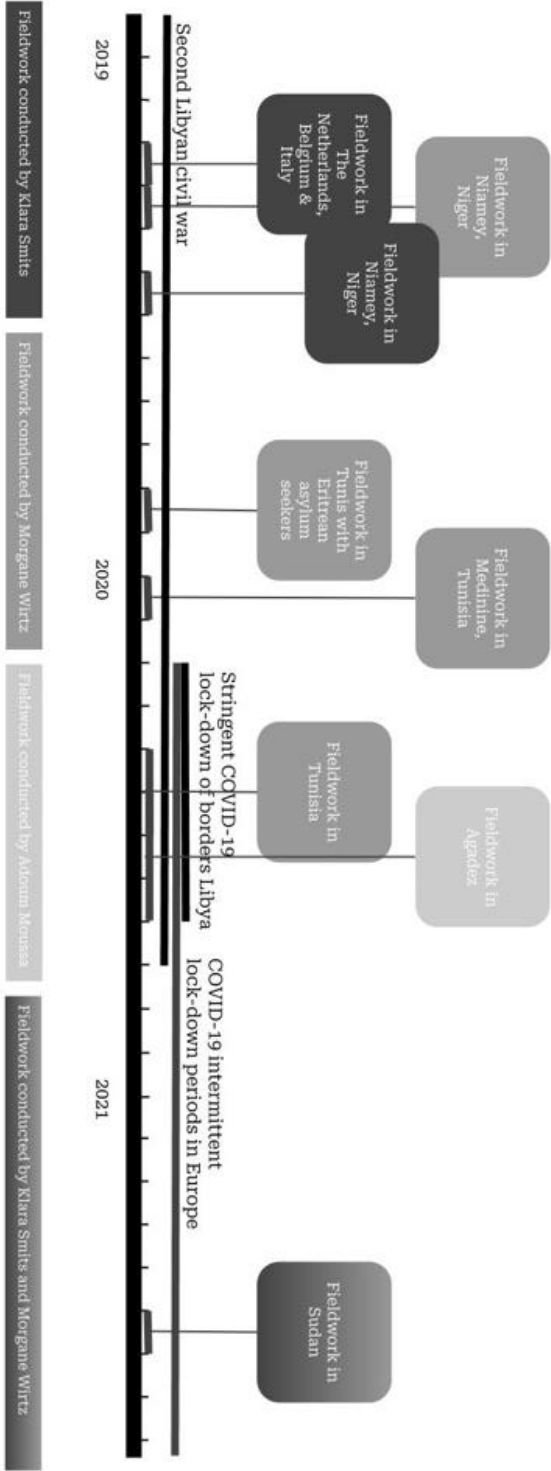
Timeline of the fieldwork

The preparation for the research started in March 2019, and Klara Smits started conducted interviews in Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy) in 2019. These were followed by interviews by Morgane Wirtz and Klara Smits in Niamey (in Niger), also in 2019. At the end of 2019 and in 2020, Morgane Wirtz conducted interviews during fieldwork carried out in Zarzis, Medinine, Sfax, Sousse, Tunis, Djerba, Kerkennah and Kelibia (in Tunisia). Adoum Moussa conducted interviews in Agadez (in Niger) in 2020. In 2021, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz conducted fieldwork in Sudan. Additional

interviews that were conducted for this research took place throughout the research period, up to 2022, in various countries.

During most of the fieldwork, the second Libyan war was taking place. In 2020, interviews in Tunisia and Agadez were carried out while COVID-19 lockdowns were in place in Libya and the region. COVID-19 restrictions were still in place during the fieldwork carried out by Smits and Wirtz in Sudan in 2021. Interviews by Van Reisen were also undertaken throughout the period in small focus group meetings, to investigate a particular theme that had emerged from the analysis in more detail.

Figure 3.1. Timeline of the SDDI research



Overview of respondents

The main SDDI research included 312 participants. A total of 213 interviews were held and 12 reports based on interviews were analysed. Some of the interviews were with more than one person at a time, including 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%). Some respondents were experts/resource persons and refugees/migrants; they were counted in both groups (but not double-counted in the total participants). 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.

Table 3.1. Nationality of respondents

Nationality of interviewee (migrants and refugees)	Number of interviewees
<i>Greater Horn of Africa</i>	
Sudan	1
Somalia	3
Eritrea	203
Ethiopia	11
<i>Total</i>	<i>218</i>
<i>West Africa</i>	
Gambia	2
Guinea	19
Côte d'Ivoire	10
Mali	1
Nigeria	2
Senegal	10
DRC	1
Cameroon	18
Tunisia	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>65</i>
Total all	283

The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Sweden and Tunisia. Some interviewees were interviewed in multiple locations; some online/unknown locations have been left out of the table. The majority of interviewees were in Tunisia (n=83), Sudan (n=73), Niger (n=54) and the Netherlands (n=48).

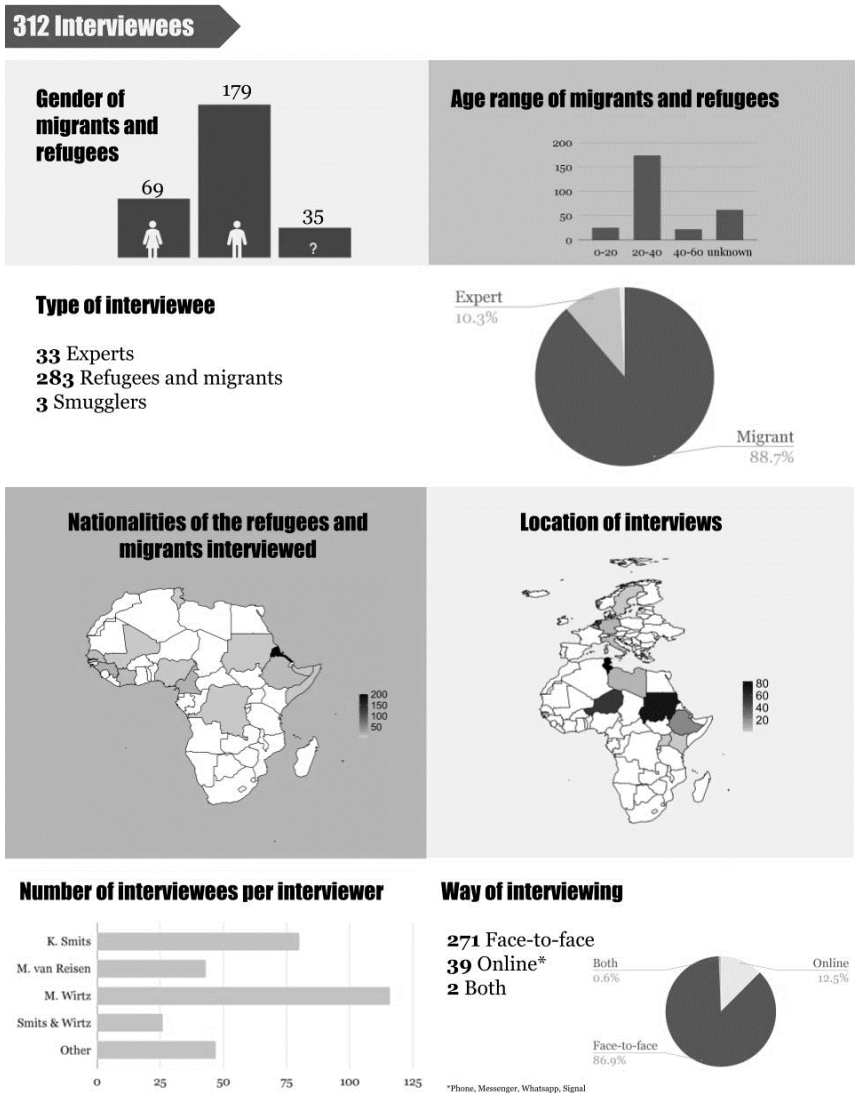
Table 3.2. Locations in which interviews took place*

Location in which the interview took place or interviewee was located (in online interviews)	Number of interviewees
Belgium	13
The Netherlands	48
Italy	5
Libya	7
Ethiopia	21
Niger	54
Tunisia	83
Sudan	73
Germany/UK	7
Kenya	2
Sweden	1
Unknown	1

* Some interviewees have been interviewed in multiple locations

The majority of the interviews were held by Wirtz, followed by Smits. Most of the interviews (271) were face-to-face, 39 were online/voice (WhatsApp, Signal, Zoom, call) and in 2 cases interviews were face-to-face as well as online. The interviews were held in English, French, Dutch, Tigrinya and Arabic. For interviews in Arabic and Tigrinya, translators were used. Most of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant. If the interview was not recorded, detailed notes were kept. After recording, the interviews were transcribed.

Figure 3.2. Overview of interview statistics²⁶



A total of 126 interviews were used for the initial coding/labelling process (mainly the interviews done by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits

²⁶ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

and Adoum Moussa). The remaining interviews were additionally analysed individually, or used for triangulation/confirmation and checking of specific elements of the research.

Locations and materials for SDDI research

The SDDI research made use of a variety of interviews, observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication. This included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs, and other information, collected and sent to us by resource persons in social media spaces and through personal communications, through participatory research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017). The physical locations in which interviews and observations took place were chosen because of their importance along the human trafficking trajectories of Eritrean refugees.

Location of fieldwork and information collection

Research material, which included interviews, but also continuous reports, videos, photographs, screenshots and messages, were collected in various locations throughout the research. Through the in-depth interviews and additional material, the researchers strived to gain insight into the situation of the refugees/migrants' on their journey from their country of origin, through Libya, to the (intermediate or final) destination. Therefore, material was collected in the Horn of Africa, North Africa and Europe.

In the Horn of Africa, research material was collected from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. In Eritrea, resource persons provided regular updates on the situation inside the country through messages and phone calls from within the country. The information was compared and analysed, and different sources of information were triangulated, to increase the reliability of the information. Material was also

obtained from Makeda Saba,²⁷ who shared information received from Eritrea collected for her research, for re-use by the research team.

The collection of material in Ethiopia from Eritrean refugees who had fled Eritrea allowed the research team to obtain information about the situation in Eritrea, as well as the conditions in Ethiopia – particularly after the start of the war in Tigray. Interviews were held with key resource persons from the Eritrean community who had escaped the refugee camps in Tigray after the start of the war. One of the key resource persons was included in the team and provided 12 reports based on interviews with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. A team of refugees provided six more full interviews from Ethiopia on the ongoing situation. In addition, Tigrayan resource persons provided information about the situation of Eritrean refugees, including messages, videos and photographs. In June 2021, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz conducted fieldwork in the East of Sudan, from which 20 interviews were analysed for the research. Furthermore, information was collected through resource persons in Sudan about the developing situation.

The SDDI researchers were able to conduct research within Libya through conversations with refugees residing in Libya who had access to secretly held mobile phones. Six interviews were held in such a way by the SDDI researchers, in the form of longitudinal conversations, which included calls, as well as the exchange of videos and photographs. These have been compared and analysed for this research. The conversations gave deep insights into the living conditions in the detention centres, the *modus operandi* of the human traffickers, and how conditions changed during the research period, including because of the war in Libya (e.g., when the forces of Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019), and the changes in the situation due to COVID-19.

²⁷ Makeda Saba is a researcher and expert on the Horn of Africa and has as published extensively about Eritrea.

Most of the interviews with Eritrean refugees were conducted in Niger. When evacuated from Libya through the Emergency *Transit Mechanism* (ETM), Eritreans and other refugees are housed in Niamey in Niger and in the refugee centre at Hamdallaye, 40 kilometres from Niamey. The refugees who were interviewed in Niamey had all recently experienced human trafficking and detention in Libya. The interviews enabled the researchers to obtain recent information about the trafficking routes and experiences of the refugees. Other interviews in Niger were conducted in Agadez, which is a hub for migration, mainly with people from West Africa, but also with smugglers, with the goal to look at the experiences of migrants on the routes to (and through) Libya and the impact of COVID-19 and border closures.

Besides evacuation from Niger, some refugees and migrants escape Libya to Tunisia. There, Morgane Wirtz conducted interviews with Eritreans and West African people focusing on human trafficking for ransom and sexual violence in Libya. Information was also collected in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This included interviews with Eritrean refugees who had been in Libya and had crossed the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, key informants gave testimony and material, including pictures, videos and documents, which were gathered for analysis. Several family members whose relatives were held in Libya were also interviewed. Beyond information about Libya, the Eritrean refugees in Europe also informed the SDDI researchers about the situation in Eritrea, intervention by Eritrean authorities in other countries (to surveil or control members of the diaspora), and the involvement of Eritrean traffickers in human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

Reuse of earlier material

Some of the research material used by the SDDI team was taken from previous research and reused in the current research. This includes interviews and observations by Morgane Wirtz from when she lived in Agadez, in northern Niger. In addition, interviews conducted in Ethiopia and Uganda between 2015 and 2016, which were used for the book *Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of*

the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017), were reused. The reused material was selected due to its relevance to the SDDI research on the trajectories of Eritrean refugees to Libya.

Documentaries and reports

Additional material was used to verify and triangulate the findings from the interviews, and to provide a deeper insight into the context. This included an analysis of 21 documentaries in relation to human trafficking for ransom, the situation in Eritrea and the situation in Libya (see list of Documentaries and Videos in References). In addition, the SDDI team continuously kept track of newly published and previous reports, books, news articles, social media posts and videos/photographs in relation to the topics analysed in this book. Not all of this material ended up being cited in the chapters, but all contributed to the understanding and analysis presented in this book.

Fieldwork preparation and conduct

This section describes the way in which the fieldwork was prepared and conducted and the material collected and brought together for further analysis.

Consent of research participants

Researching human trafficking for ransom in Libya, the team placed themselves in a position of gathering information and testimonies with the aim to then publish and disseminate the analysis as widely as possible. The researchers were in charge of how the process of publication or dissemination was undertaken. The respondents who agreed to participate and give their testimonies consented to this. This led to specific considerations by the respondents. For instance, a survivor from Libya hesitated for a long time to give her consent to the use of her testimony. She explained:

But, you know, I have a friend who also lives at the asylum seeker centre and who spoke with reporters. Then they published her testimony in the newspaper with her photo. But they got paid for it! You realise? They got paid. But that is her story!
(Informal conversation 1094, with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

To be as transparent as possible, all interviews were preceded by a discussion of the consent form. The participants were informed about who the researchers were, what data they were looking for, the purpose of the interview, and what was going to be done with the data. As mentioned above, the respondents were informed that their testimonies could be painful and that they could end the interview at any time. It was explained to the respondents that the interview would focus on their migratory journey and their current situation.

Dealing with the trauma of respondents

The majority of the interviewees met for the purpose of this research were traumatised. They had been through very difficult experiences. They were sequestered for months and years, sometimes underground or in containers without any light. They have seen people, including friends and relatives, die in front of them. Many have been close to death themselves. Some were locked up with dead bodies next to them. They were beaten, tied up with their hands and feet behind their backs, or upside down, burnt (including with hot plastic), electrocuted, sexually abused and raped.

In most cases, when respondents were interviewed, they were relatively safe. However, their situation was not settled. Many of them were not in Europe, which was their destination. This situation was running in a loop in their heads, like a refrain of failure. Most of them owed thousands of dollars to their families, who had paid the ransom for their release. Even if their family had not asked them to repay the money, they considered it their duty to do so. Initially, they had set out for Libya to help their families, not to become a burden. Many showed symptoms of PTSD (i.e., flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, increased arousal) (Kidane, 2021).

Over time and with preparation, the researchers learnt how to deal with such interviewees. Certain peculiar situations arose in these interviews. One interviewee had forgotten ten years of his life. The researchers realised that often when interviewees do not mention a long period of their migratory journey it is because something has happened that they have block out or prefer not to speak about.

Sometimes the researchers said nothing; sometimes they asked: “Do you want to talk about what happened between this period and that period?” Of course, sometimes the interviews unintentionally triggered memories that had been erased.

The ‘do no harm’ principle was at the heart of this work, and formed the very basis of the research. The team thoroughly thought through how to put in place mechanisms to ensure the maximum support, including: secure and secret interview locations and careful monitoring of the interviewee, making sure that they were aware of their rights, including the right to stop at any time and to walk away, as well as the right to refuse to answer any question. However, how can researchers be sure that they really do no harm?

The researchers endeavoured to ensure that the respondents were safe during the interviews, so that they could feel that they were speaking in a safe space. They were given refreshments, efforts were made to put them at ease, and they were often invited to take breaks. The team learnt that eating and drinking helped the interviewees a lot – and the researchers too. When interviewees showed signs of distress or fatigue, the researchers always asked them if they wanted to resume later or if they wanted to end the interview. Only once did the person answer yes to this question; this was on the second time that he was asked. This interviewee had headache. In Libya, a human trafficker had beaten his skull with a metal bar. Only one other interviewee changed her mind after agreeing to the interview. She was afraid that telling her story would be too traumatising.

Loss of hope by research participants

After many years of researching human trafficking in Libya, the authors of this book have noticed a certain weariness among migrants and refugees. What is the point of continuing to speak up, as the situation remains unchanged? This question was raised and debated many times at the start of interviews. “We are tired of talking,” was

repeated by several interviewees. At the beginning of a group interview, the Eritrean translator explained:

When we are in Libya, we are in contact with too many journalists. [...] We are in contact with them, but we don't get any solutions. When you are asking for us, if you can get our ideas, what solutions will you give us? [...] Maybe people ask questions, they take pictures, too many problems. We kill our pain for the people. But if you don't give us a solution, it will hurt too much, you know. That is why... But it is nothing. Just you came here. Okay. It is nothing. Maybe we will get a solution. We are always thinking: For tomorrow, another day, maybe we will get another thing for tomorrow. That is why you are welcome. But we are tired. We are giving up. (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The fact that, despite the articles and reports written, the situation has remained unchanged has led to a general incomprehension, which is shared by many migrants/refugees:

Look! I gave the number of big smugglers and I know the building where they are staying. I gave the information and I told them to track. I found everybody in Europe, in Geneva, I called, I tried to call, humanitarian, the protectors, to track the number of big smugglers. If, for example, I track your number, I can get where you are. So I can bomb you with drones. Those drones, sometimes they are bombing Al-Shabaab in Somalia, in Syria, ISIS [Islamic State] ... So why are they not bombing smugglers who are more dangerous than extremists? Al-Qaeda. They are more dangerous, the smugglers! (Interviewee 1098, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

The interviews that were conducted for this book were often punctuated with requests for help. Before starting to speak, several interviewees asked, “What will I gain from this?” At the end of the interview, migrants often asked for support. Here are examples of the answers given to the question asked at the end of each interview: “Is there something else you want to say?”

Yes. Me, I want you, when you stay here a long time, when you have a good place, I want you to ask UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] what happens to those people, because many people become crazy. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Me, I told you all of my story. I hope I will get an answer. I am waiting. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

I would like to help my family and my husband as well. If you can help me in any way, I would be grateful. Thank you. (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

I want to ask you about UNHCR, why? I want to know. Childhood protection, what is the meaning of this? The people in UNHCR also don't know. They send the message only. The case is ongoing. Ongoing for what? Going to Eritrea? (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

When the refugees asked for help that we were able to provide, we did so. We called non-government organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies on numerous occasions, until they answered the requests of migrants and refugees we met in Tunisia for medical help. We gave medicines when people asked for them. We gave hot meals when people said that they were hungry.

Some interviewees also contacted us after their interview to ask for help, such as in this message received on Messenger:

Hi! Really we have a big problem here in Zarzis. One of our brothers fell ill. It's his belly. He has been operated on twice but so far it has not been okay. Truly, IOM is no longer supporting him now. We need your help, please. (Interviewee 1095, interview with Wirtz, Messenger message, September 2021)

In other cases, migrants and refugees contacted us to talk about a situation or testify about their day-to-day situation. This was the case with people who contacted us while they were in detention centres. In those cases – when in contact with migrants/refugees living in detention centres in Libya – the exchanges can be frustrating for both the researcher and the migrant/refugee, as not much can be done about their situation:

KS: *We keep trying. We don't forget you.*

0010: *Any how we can try – many articles posted, but still no change.* (Interviewee 0010-1, interview with Smits, WhatsApp conversation, January 2019)

The researchers listened carefully to the interviewees' perceptions of the situation. The approach taken by the researchers was flexible and could be adapted to the conditions of the interviewee and the location of the interviews. The answers that people gave, were no doubt also shaped by those conditions.

The research team worked to ensure that all available mechanisms were in place to safeguard topics of key importance: security, privacy, and freedom to speak. In this way, the team attempted to balance considerations about what information gap exists and how to contribute to filling them. Most importantly, we asked: is the participant ready to tell their story, even if it is a difficult story to tell?

Conversations with minors

The researchers sometimes encountered minors when conducting research in the field. Although the researchers did not intend to interview minors, there were situations in which minors were inadvertently part of a focus group, as it became apparent after the interview had started that the participant was a minor. Assessing the dynamics on the ground, the researchers decided that the minors would be impacted negatively and that it would potentially be traumatising to exclude them from the conversation, but the interviews were immediately adapted to a more conversational level. Hence, although the interactions with the minors are counted as 'interviews' in the overviews, the researchers approached these interactions as conversations. In addition, the researchers would ensure that such conversations happened under the guardianship of a trusted person or persons.

In nine interviews that were re-used (8 in the Netherlands, 1 in Libya via WhatsApp), the research team took the approach to let a European minor (with permission and supervision of the guardian) to speak to Eritrean minors in open conversations. This was done with the permission of, and under supervision of, the minor's guardian (in the Libya case) and the school (in the Netherlands). The conversations were thoroughly prepared and followed up to ensure that the minors on both sides felt comfortable and heard and the

guardians were closely monitoring the interviews and the follow up. The purpose was to carry out an engagement at similar age level (the minors were all between 15-17 years old) after there had been a request from a minor to the research team be allowed to speak on what had happened to him/her.

Security

The topic of human trafficking for ransom carries a certain risk, both for the respondents, as well as for the research team. In order to minimise exposure to dangerous situations, a number of measures were taken, which were set out in a security protocol that the members of the research team were required to sign and follow. The security measures stipulated that interviews should be conducted in a safe location, and that precautions were taken in relation to communication about the location. The stipulations also included measures to limit the sharing of information on the specific activities of the research team. The team took advice from security specialists. The members of the team did not come across any particular issues during the research, or thereafter, and are (at time of writing) not aware of any exposure of respondents following their participation in the research.

Data analysis

For this study, the data was analysed using a coding and labelling process. This process, which Srivastava and Thomson (2009) refer to as 'Framework analysis', is composed of five steps.

Framework analysis

This section sets out the four steps that were taken to analyse the data.

Step 1: Familiarisation: In this phase, the researcher becomes familiar with the data collected (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This was done during the transcription phase.

Step 2: Identifying a thematic framework: In this phase, the researcher recognises emerging themes or issues in the data (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In this research, 50 labels were

designed to analyse the interviews, such as key dates of their journey, reason for leaving the country of origin, the subsequent place of residence (e.g., a refugee camp), border(s) crossed, payments made, name of locations, descriptions of locations, human rights abuses mentioned, sexual violence witnessed, smugglers/traffickers/chiefs of places mentioned, nationality of human traffickers, people working with human traffickers, interactions with humanitarian organisations, interactions with visitors, access to information, information produced, feelings mentioned, and so forth. These 50 labels were put into a table and on the basis of this table, other tables were produced, including: an overview of official and unofficial detention centres (see Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*), a list of human traffickers (see Chapter 11: *“You are the Ball – They are the Players”: The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*), and an overview of testimonies of sexual violence in Libya (see Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*).

Step 3: Indexing: In this step, researchers identify portions or sections of the data that correspond to a particular theme(s) (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In this phase, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz received the help of a team of researchers comprised of Anouk Smeets, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Annelies Coessens, Sara Giancesello, Bruna Mikami, Lucy Murray and Letizia Storch.

Step 4: Charting: In this phase, the data is lifted from its original textual context and placed in charts that consist of the headings and subheadings drawn during the thematic framework (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This phase was conducted at the same time as step three, with the same team of researchers.

Step 4: Mapping and interpretation: This involves the analysis of the key characteristics laid out in the charts (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

Coding-labelling strategies

The coding-labelling process was defined by three strategies:

Strategy 1: Purposive labelling: This is based on key labels identified as relevant for the research, such as, for instance, the location of camps, names of human traffickers (connection men), and information on the routes, as well as labels relevant to determine the *modus operandi*.

Strategy 2: Open labelling: This is based on the interviews. New labels were added if these appeared to be necessary to cover topics that were not in pre-determined labels (for instance, ‘violence against refugees and migrants residing in the city’, or ‘violence experienced after release’ or ‘refoulement from the Mediterranean Sea’). Once a label was added, the research assistants would go through the earlier interviews to find any information relevant to this label that they had missed.

Strategy 3: Axial labelling: This involves using the interviews for a particular research questions, which would be supported by a conceptual framework. The cells in the coding-labelling scheme were classified according to the axial labels, categorising the key concepts of the research question at hand.

During the writing process, priority was given to the quotes of Eritrean refugees and to the most illustrative of the themes and topics that came forward from the analysis. We also paid attention to the intelligibility of interviewees’ discourse out of its context when selecting a quote to use in the text. The context of the quotes given in the text clearly identify whether the quote is illustrative of a trend that was seen in some, most, or every interview, or whether it was an exception.

Data management

Before giving their consent to the interview, participants were all provided with information on data management. All of the data and metadata collected in this research have been stored on external hard drives and are password protected. The file containing personal details is kept password protected and separately to the file with the depersonalised data. The depersonalised data is only identifiable via codes known to the lead researchers. Different names and numbers

have been given to the interviewees to protect their identity. Some of the testimonies have been divided and attributed to different interview numbers so that the participants' journeys cannot be traced.

The members of the research team helping with the data analysis have all signed a confidentiality agreement that specifies that they are not to discuss the content of the research, nor were they allowed to store sensitive information. The members of the research team only had access to the depersonalised material. Communication containing sensitive information was conducted over protected and encrypted communication channels such as Signal and Protonmail.

Management of potentially traumatising experiences of the research team

Counselling support to researchers and assistants

Bruna Mikami was charged with the responsibility to follow up with and support the research-team in terms of how it was handling the trauma emerging in the research. Before starting, Mikami planned an outline for the intervention, based on behavioural analysis and, in particular, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Because of the innovative perspective that she was able to take, as an insider and listener, the lead researchers suggested that she write this section reflecting on this experience. All of the participants signed consent forms agreeing to the use of data gathered during Mikami's intervention for the writing of this section. Before starting, she emailed all of the participants (researchers and research assistants) with information regarding the intervention.

There were seven participants (eight including Mikami), who were members of the research team that Mikami counselled, which was dedicated to the coding and labelling of data collected from the victims of human trafficking in Libya. Some of the researchers were also responsible for interviewing the victims and transcribing their interviews. The interviews varied in terms of how graphic they were. However, during the process, all of the researchers became familiar, to some extent, with disturbing reports of torture, sexual abuse, food deprivation, extortion and other kinds of human rights violations.

Hence, there was a risk of the content of the interviews negatively affecting the researchers' emotional wellbeing.

Guided by the goals mentioned in the previous section, Mikami conducted 11 individual conversations (7 first meetings and 4 follow-ups) and 1 group meeting during the coding and labelling process. The first 11 individual conversations were directed towards understanding how each team member was feeling about the project and the content of the interviews, as well as understanding if they already had coping strategies. The follow-ups aimed to check in with those who wanted a follow up meeting and for them to give feedback on what was discussed in the first meeting. These one-on-one meetings aimed to provide a safe space for the participants to share anything related to the process and, if needed, ask for help. The group conversation was planned as a place for the participants to exchange coping strategies, so they could help each other, and to share any experiences they wanted to.

Mikami started with a first round of individual check-ins. She then talked to each team member to understand the impact of the content of the interviews on them. The team discussed how they were feeling, and which coping strategies they already used for stressful situations. She also recommended two mindfulness exercises (videos of guided meditations) for them to practice. After two weeks, she held a follow-up individual meeting with those who wanted to. Near the end of the year, Mikami led a meeting with the complete team to exchange experiences and coping strategies.

After each meeting, Mikami wrote notes including a summary of the main points of the conversations. These notes are the main source of data for this section. As stated in the previous sub-section, the chosen approach is exploratory and the sample size is relatively small. This intervention, therefore, did not follow a rigorous research methodology. Rather, the discussion of the results is inductive, in other words, it is focused on what the data manifests.

Results

Even though some negative emotions linked to the content of the interviews were reported, the researchers and their assistants did not report having any major problems that affected their overall wellbeing. Nevertheless, there are elements that emerged from the conversations that are worth mentioning and discussing, starting with the feelings participants reported and their perceptions of the impact of interviews on them. These will be presented in this sub-section.

Throughout the first session and follow-up with each participant, the researchers and their assistants reported how they perceived their feelings and their thoughts on the subject. Their experiences, although similar regarding their overall wellbeing, were diverse in the details. It is worth noting that, for this study, the number of times an element was mentioned is not the most important aspect of each particularity. Actually, any experience that participants found relevant to mention, except for those they asked not be included, even if only mentioned once by one participant, is significant for this exploration.

The participants listed some aspects that they saw as stressful or hard to deal with. One was not being able to take any immediate action to help the interviewees, which resulted in feelings of powerlessness. Another aspect that was seen as negative was that, as some interviewees were deeply impacted by their traumatising experiences, their reports were confused, and it was hard for the participants to untangle what was said. Furthermore, one participant stated that she was more affected by the interviewee's feelings than by the actual events.

Finally, some of the researchers reported that they felt strange at not being more emotionally affected by the interviewees' stories. One participant explained that she felt like she was not being empathetic enough. Although they did see this as negative to some extent, the researchers reporting this did not place any blame upon themselves, and they thought of some reasons for feeling this way. One of the factors some researchers believed had contributed to not feeling so much impact was that they were reading a transcription of the interviews, instead of talking to the victims directly. They explained

that not seeing their faces, hearing them talk or knowing their names made it easier to distance themselves from the stories. It was mentioned that the stories in the interviews reflected a reality very far from theirs, hence, it was hard to even imagine going through this kind of traumatic experience. However, one member of the research team who had direct contact with the interviewees said that re-reading the content made them remember the interviewee and their predicament, which was experienced as stressful at times.

One ameliorating factor mentioned was that a good proportion of the interviewees were already relatively safe at the time of the interview, and the researchers believe that this might have helped to reduce their feelings of powerlessness. Moreover, most of the researchers had dealt with disturbing content before and/or had taken preparatory courses before the start of the project. It was also mentioned that they were more impacted at the beginning of the research, but became accustomed to the content over time. Furthermore, some participants said that they believed that having a safe space with a trained clinician to talk about possible issues was comforting. Although they expressed that they were not deeply affected by the data, they assumed that knowing they had support if they needed it made them feel more confident. In addition, the coping strategies that each of them were already using were seen as helpful in reducing the stress during their work.

The research team shared their own coping strategies during the individual meetings and, later on, with the group in the final plenary session. Taking breaks from coding and labelling was the most mentioned strategy. Other cited tactics included physical exercise, previous preparation such as courses, the acceptance of feelings and limitations, avoidance and isolation, meditation, and remembering they had support and were not alone. Each participant had their own preferred strategies and felt that some strategies worked better than others, according to what they enjoyed more. They developed these strategies in different contexts through their experiences, such as in preparatory courses, yoga practices or psychotherapy. Therefore,

some were more familiar with the mindfulness exercises suggested than others, and some enjoyed them more than others.

During the plenary session, aside from sharing coping strategies, the researchers expressed that the support offered by Mikami, as a trained clinician, as well as by the other team members, as colleagues, was very important for them to feel safe and to remember that they were not alone. They agreed that the intervention was positive and they were thankful for having this resource during their participation in the research project.

Discussion of the regulation of emotions of the research team

Emerging from this study is the understanding of the identification of potential protective factors against secondary trauma among researchers, especially the provision of support as a prevention strategy. Protective factors are defined in American Psychological Association's dictionary as:

[...] a clearly defined behavior or constitutional (e.g., genetic), psychological, environmental, or other characteristic that is associated with a decreased probability that a particular disease or disorder will develop in an individual, that reduces the severity of an existing pathological condition, or that mitigates the effects of stress generally. (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022)

In the introduction, it was mentioned that the few studies that have investigated the possibility of secondary trauma among researchers suggest that there is a risk of this population developing trauma symptoms. This is because most of the participants in these studies reported being significantly affected by the traumatising experiences they investigated. The results of the current study are quite different: participants stated that the effect of the content of data that they were coding and labelling was limited.

Therefore, as opposed to the risk factors identified in previous studies, physical safety, limited personal contact with interviewees, adequate training and psychological support are identified as protective factors against secondary trauma for researchers. In this project, most of the research team members, with the exception of two, participated only in the coding and labelling of data, and were

not present in risky contexts for data collection, nor did they have direct contact with the interviewees. They believe that this helped to decrease the impact of the disturbing content with which they worked. However, such measures are not possible for researchers who need to collect data directly and work in the field. Thus, adequate training and psychological support seem to be relevant factors that need attention, as organisations and institutions can work towards providing these services for researchers at risk of developing secondary trauma. The present suggestion of exploring both of these factors adds to the recommendations of previous studies (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017).

While the results are contrasting, this does not mean that this study contradicts the risk of secondary trauma among researchers. It might be the case that there are factors that contributed to this difference in the outcomes. The cited studies, as well as literature on secondary trauma among clinicians, point to the existence of risk factors for researchers to develop trauma symptoms. Van der Merwe and Hunt (2019), for example, suggest that high levels of empathy and proximity to the victims of violence might increase the impact of traumatising stories on fieldworkers. Furthermore, participants of the studies by Whitt-Woosley and Sprang (2017), Shannonhouse *et al.* (2016), and Coles *et al.* (2014) also had in-person contact with victims of traumatising events. Most participants in the research group for the current project (with the exception of two, who were the main interviewers) did not have direct contact with the victims, which, according to participants' reports, contributed to their feeling of distance from their stories and realities.

Working in a high-risk setting is also a factor that increases the risk of secondary trauma, and even exposure to direct trauma, among researchers (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). This was not the case in this study. Participants were not working in a risky context where the interviewees were subjected to violence. In addition, most of the participants had preparation before starting the coding and labelling process. Lack of preparation is another factor

that can contribute to the development of secondary trauma, for both clinicians and researchers, whereas adequate training may decrease the negative psychological impact (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019).

Furthermore, participants from the study by Coles *et al.* (2014) stressed that they found support and debriefing important to make the work easier. However, they said that they often did not receive enough support from the organisations and institutions that they were associated with. The few studies on secondary trauma among researchers mentioned previously encourage the availability of emotional support for those who work with trauma (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). In the context of this project, psychological support was available from the beginning of the coding and labelling process. In addition to the check-in meetings, members were informed that they could ask for a meeting whenever necessary. As participants stated, although they believed they were dealing well with their work, the fact they had access to support made them feel more confident.

Lastly, another possible reason for team members to feel only slightly affected by the interviews is that all of them had previously developed coping strategies. Although some coping techniques that they mentioned, such as avoidance and isolation, might increase the risk of traumatisation (Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016), participants in this study reported that their coping strategies had a positive impact. Among their strategies, team members highlighted informal support from friends, family and colleagues. In the study by Coles *et al.* (2014), the researchers also described this kind of support as a resource for coping with stress from their work. However, the participants in this research mentioned that they could not disclose any details of the content of the data to their friends and relatives, due to the need for confidentiality. They stated that knowing that they had a space to talk to a clinician, who was also a member of the research team, was important, as they could discuss issues related to the confidential content, if they needed.

This participation by someone acting both as a clinician and participant is most likely not common in research teams. Hence, it is hard to put this forward specifically as a suggestion. Nevertheless, it can inspire some questions about supervision. For example: if a supervisor of the research project is trained to support the researchers whom he or she will supervise, can that protect those researchers from secondary trauma?

Being an open exploration with a small sample size, the present study is very limited in terms of providing substantial evidence on the subject. Therefore, recommendations for future studies include the use of a further defined methodology and samples that cover different situations and could explore the representativeness of the findings presented here. In addition, as expressed earlier, this section suggests further investigation into strategies for the prevention of secondary trauma in researchers.

Conclusion

This study is an explorative case study of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya, largely from an emic perspective. It was conducted as a series of interviews, mainly with survivors of human trafficking, but also with smugglers, translators, representatives of humanitarian organisations and others. The fieldwork was supplemented by a systematic literature review, which revealed that there has been little published on this topic. This research focused on Eritreans as they constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The individual chapters contain more details of the methodologies used for the specific chapters.

This chapter also looked at whether or not the highly traumatically charged situation of human trafficking for ransom is researchable. In order to investigate this question, an explorative look was taken at how the disturbing and traumatising experiences of the victims of human trafficking, might affect the researchers in touch with this content, as well as the outcomes of such research. It also looked at the ethics involved in relation to obtaining the real consent of the

survivors of this practice to their testimonies being used and the need to understand their interests and conditions for participating. Furthermore, the security and (data) privacy of both respondents and researchers needed to be carefully considered and protective measures taken to ensure that the 'do no harm' principle could be followed. This process required patience, reflection, and time.

This chapter identified the fact that researchers and research participants both have 'skin in the game'. Human trafficking for ransom is a topic that deeply affects the emotions of all involved. Accordingly, the particularities of this specific research team were identified, their perceptions and thoughts on the subject assessed, as well as the way they were dealing with their feelings. A research strategy was adopted to explicitly address the concerns associated with the emotional strain that the topic carries. The research team had to be conscious of the effect of the research on all the participants and regulate their own emotional challenges related to the pressures generated by the research.

Another challenge posed by this research was the risk of secondary trauma to the researchers. In this research, support was provided by a clinical psychologist – who was also part of the research team – to counter this risk. It was found that the availability of psychological support seems to have a preventive effect. This way, there is the possibility that researchers do not need to develop symptoms of trauma to seek a psychological service. Moreover, support offered by a professional clinical psychologist who is also involved in the project seems to be positive: the researcher and psychological supporter can discuss confidential content more openly and may be able to exchange similar experiences.

Hence, it is concluded that human trafficking for ransom is researchable, but that it leads to a particular set of concerns that must be considered and addressed to protect both the respondents who participate in the research (the victims and survivors of human trafficking for ransom) and the research team.

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Ethical clearance

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Contribution by authors

Mirjam Van Reisen is the author of several sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Morgane Wirtz is the author of several sections of the chapter and provided detailed input for the sections on the implementation of the research. Klara Smits is the author of several sections of this chapter and provided detailed background on the information presented in this chapter. Bruna Mikami presented the documentation of her research as part of this chapter and is the author of several sections of this chapter.

Author contributions

Mirjam Van Reisen is the author of several sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Morgane Wirtz is the author of several sections of the chapter and provided detailed input for the sections

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Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review

Eva Lorger & Piet Gotlieb

Introduction

Migrants and refugees²⁸ often depend on human smugglers to undertake their migration journey, making them extremely vulnerable (Meyer & Brewer, 2010). However, what often begins as smuggling turns into trafficking when migrants and refugees are asked for more money than originally agreed upon or are taken to a location against their will (Chapter 1: *Enslaved in a Black Hole: Eritreans in the Hands of Human Traffickers in Libya*). At this point, the smuggling involves hostage-taking and exploitation (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012).

The discussion around human trafficking is usually centred on either labour trafficking or sexual exploitation. However, in 2009 a new form of trafficking was seen in the Sinai desert in Egypt. Dubbed ‘Sinai trafficking’ or ‘trafficking for

First documented in the Sinai in 2009, in this form of human trafficking victims are extorted for ransom while being tortured on the phone to their relatives to motivate payment. Trafficking for ransom has also been documented in other places and seems to have arisen in conjunction with the global spread of mobile connectivity. Sinai trafficking ended in 2014, but appears to have morphed into trafficking for ransom in Libya. However, the practice is not as well documented in Libya – a gap which urgently needs to be filled to eradicate the practice, prevent its further spread and bring those responsible to justice.

²⁸ In this chapter the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeable in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

ransom’, this form of human trafficking entails the coerced displacement²⁹, sale, torture and extortion of victims (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Trafficking for ransom began with a convergence of events that negatively affected Eritreans, including the return of Eritreans from Italy (Van Reisen, 2014) and the indefinite extension of compulsory national service in Eritrea on the back of the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). Hence, the majority of victims of this form of trafficking, at that time, were Eritrean refugees.

This was the picture of Sinai trafficking, which was first observed in 2009 (but may have started earlier), which involved the trafficking, torture and holding for ransom of Eritrean refugees in the Sinai desert. Since then, trafficking for ransom has also emerged in other parts of the world, such as Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2019), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020) and Greece (Callaghan, 2019). In addition, as migration trajectories change, the practice has also spread to other African countries, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017), and Libya (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Heisterkamp, 2018; Al-Dayel, Anfinson & Anfinson, 2021). Moreover, aided by developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs), the *modus operandi* of the traffickers continues to evolve (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). These changes in setting and practices have meant that the legal definition of trafficking does not always apply. Hence, a challenging question is how human trafficking for ransom is to be included in the international legal framework (Brhane, 2015).

²⁹ ‘Coerced displacement’ refers to the kidnapping of individuals, as opposed to ‘forced (secondary) displacement’, which is displacement prompted by circumstances that force people to leave their place of origin or residence (see Glossary).

The definition of human trafficking for ransom is the subject of some debate, both in empirical and judicial arenas. This chapter investigates *how the description of human trafficking for ransom has developed in the extant literature since 2009*. For this, a systematic literature review was carried out. This chapter offers an overview of the developments in the realm of human trafficking for ransom as reported in the academic literature.

Methodology

The methodology detailed here, describes a part of the collaborative effort 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 literature review presented in this chapter was done by Piet Gotlieb and Eva Lorgier between April 2021 and September 2021. For the purpose of this review, searches were carried out in Web of Science and Google Scholar databases. We started with the Web of Science.³⁰

The list of articles obtained was scanned manually for relevance. Only articles that contributed to answering the research question and that

³⁰ The following Boolean string was used:

TOPIC: ("human trafficking" OR "kidnap" for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR money OR exaction OR payment)" OR "sinai trafficking" OR "trafficking for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR payment OR exaction OR money)" OR KFR OR "captivity for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR money OR exaction OR payment)" OR "capture for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR exaction OR money OR payment)" OR "abduct" for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR exaction OR money OR payment)" AND TOPIC: (refugee* OR *migrant* OR *migration) AND TOPIC: (ransom OR payment OR pay-off OR extortion OR blackmail OR exaction) NOT TOPIC: ("sex industry" OR prostitution OR "sex work*" OR "sex trafficking")

The timespan was 'All years' and the following databases were searched: WOS, KJD, MEDLINE, RSCI, SCIELO, using the search language 'Auto'.

were available in English were included. A list of four articles was used to perform a reference search, which yielded nine additional articles.

Next, a literature search was done using Google Scholar. We used ‘Sinai trafficking’ OR ‘trafficking for ransom’ as well as NOT ‘hospital’ as a search strategy. This yielded 30 relevant articles written in English, some of which overlapped with our previous searches. In addition, we included five books that we knew were relevant to our research question and performed a reference search for these as well. The second reference search provided nine additional articles, again, some overlapping with our previous searches.

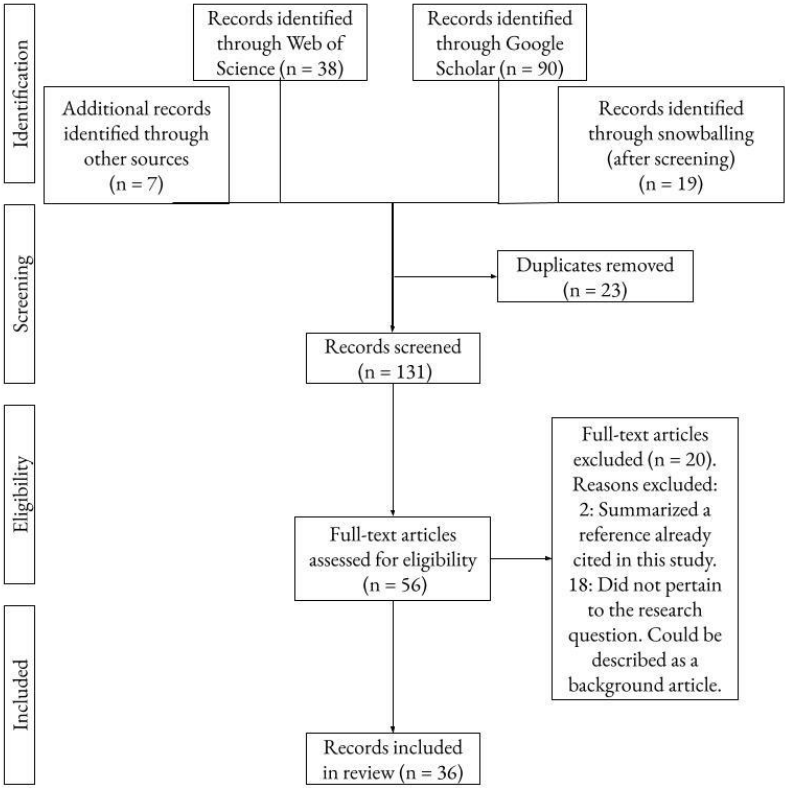


Figure 4.1. Flowchart of the selection process for the articles reviewed

This chapter is based on 36 articles and publications relating to the human trafficking of migrants and refugees for ransom that were selected at the end of the searches using the methodology described above. It provides an overview of the development of trafficking for ransom. The findings below are a summary of the selected articles and publications.

Description of human trafficking for ransom

‘Sinai trafficking’ is the synonym often used for human trafficking for ransom. The reference to Sinai relates to the geographical scope of the place where human trafficking for ransom was first described (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Historically, victims of trafficking for ransom were primarily trafficked to the Sinai desert (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014), lending Sinai trafficking its name.

Today, human trafficking for ransom is no longer understood to only occur in the Sinai desert. Around the same time that Sinai trafficking happened, similar practices were reported in South East Asia and Mexico (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018). So, the definition of human trafficking for ransom has evolved from describing a modus operandi associated with a particular location to a focus on the practices involved, in the understanding that these practices are occurring in various locations. Human trafficking for ransom is defined as:³¹

[...] a specific form of trafficking characterised by a combination of different forms of trafficking such as trafficking for slavery, and forced begging and in which [...] severe violence and torture is utilized to invigorate the extortion of ransom. (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015)

This definition of human trafficking for ransom does justice to the scope, scale and nature of the practices involved in trafficking for ransom.

³¹ See also Glossary of Terms.

Practices

Human trafficking for ransom involves the following practices: recruitment and kidnapping; sale and on-sale; extortion, torture and extortion through forced begging; and payment of ransoms. An overview of these practices, emerging from the literature, is discussed in this section.

Recruitment and kidnapping

The ways of seeking out migrants and refugees to be trafficked varies between locations. For instance, migrants crossing from Mexico (mostly Tabasco and Veracruz) can find themselves kidnapped while traveling by train or following a train track. Sometimes, they are approached by someone who claims to be either a smuggler who can take them to the United States border or a representative of a humanitarian organisation offering assistance. Either way, they are tricked into going with that person, who then uses the situation to extort money. At other times, they are kidnapped by force (Meyer & Brewer, 2010).

The description of recruitment and abduction in Africa can be distinguished between pre-2013, when research was concentrated on human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, and post-2013, when the destinations for abduction moved towards Libya.

Pre-2013

Prior to 2013, most of the articles about human trafficking for ransom in Africa described a similar way of recruiting victims. Weldehaimanot (2011) found that most Eritrean refugees sought out smugglers to be taken across the border – at that time to Egypt or Israel. The price and the method of payment was set beforehand. Then, the smugglers/traffickers³² broke their side of the contract by

³² The terms ‘smugglers’ and ‘traffickers’ are used interchangeably in this chapter in a non-legal way to describe practices, not to draw legal conclusions (see Glossary of Terms).

taking the migrants and refugees hostage and demanding a much larger payment than the one first agreed on.

Many migrants and refugees quoted in the literature reported that the price to be smuggled to Israel ranged from USD 2,500 to 3,000, but that this increased substantially once they arrived in the Sinai. The same is described by Mekonnen and Estefanos (2012), Jacobsen, Robinson, and Lijnders (2013), Ghebrai (2015), and Oette and Hovil (2017). Humphris (2013) described situations in which the family in the diaspora arranged and paid a smuggler to get their relative out of Eritrea, only to later find out that the relative had been kidnapped and extorted for ransom.

In other cases, migrants and refugees did not seek out smugglers, but were kidnapped before they reached the Sinai desert (Weldehaimanot, 2011) or were forced to travel there (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013). Humphris (2013) reported that individuals who were kidnapped were given the opportunity to pay more and be released in Sudan as opposed to the Sinai. However, no matter the payment, they were released in the Sinai. This resulted in many individuals being kidnapped by another trafficker in the Sinai all over again.

Due to their general knowledge of the dangers and abuses, many migrants and refugees were reported to avoid Israel. Therefore, the traffickers were turning to the refugee camps to recruit victims (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Some migrants and refugees were described as having been taken from the agricultural fields close to Shagarab, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee camp in Sudan (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012). In 2012, the UNHCR addressed the security issues in refugee camps in Sudan due to the high number of abductions of asylum seekers (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Humphris (2013) also described an incident in which Rashaida³³ abducted refugees on a Commissioner for Refugees (COR) bus on the way to Shagarab refugee camp. In another study

³³ The Rashaida (also called or Bani Rashid) are a tribe of ethnic Bedouin Arabs in the Horn of Africa (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashaida_people).

by Connell (2013), one interviewee described being kidnapped from Shagarab refugee camp and taken in a truck full of other refugees to a Bedouin outpost in the Sinai. Furthermore, Humphris (2013) says that there were also Eritreans who arranged the trafficking of fellow refugees from within the camp.

In addition, there have been reports of traffickers conspiring with Sudanese security forces and police (Ghebrai, 2015; Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim, 2017). These reports, as well as the bad conditions in the refugee camps, have led to a loss of trust and sense of security and safety among refugees within the camps, which has resulted in many of them fleeing to avoid being kidnapped. Unfortunately, for many, this was followed by abductions to the Sinai on their way to other cities. Again, some decided to pay smugglers, who turned against them (Ghebrai, 2015).

Brhane (2015) described different practices of trafficking for ransom of Eritreans used in different parts of the journey. The first part involved fleeing from Eritrea through Ethiopia and Sudan to Egypt. On this path, migrants passed through a chain of traffickers who extorted them for money before reaching the final kidnapper. After paying, they were either released or sold to another trafficker in the Sinai.

Post-2013

After 2013, Eritrean refugees starting taking an alternate route: from Eritrea to Ethiopia, Sudan and then Libya. This resulted in the spread of human trafficking for ransom on this route. Since the uprising in Libya in 2011, the country has largely been under the control of armed groups, which have taken over many detention centres used to house migrants and refugee and of which some are engaged in the trafficking business (Flynn, 2017; Al-Dayel, Anfinson, & Anfinson, 2021).

Another route involves Eritrea and Yemen. For Eritrean refugees to reach Yemen, they need to cross the Red Sea by boat. Traffickers pay the boat crew around USD 133 for a refugee, who they kidnap and sell on to another trafficker. After the passing from trafficker to

trafficker, refugees are taken to large camps where they are tortured and extorted for ransom (Brhane, 2015).

Detailed literature on recruitment post-2013 is limited. Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) provide an empirical study of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. They found that refugees are kept in warehouses, “abused and commoditised, sold and extorted for ransom” (p. 261). The authors classify the situation in Libya as “slave-like” and qualify the Eritrean refugees among them as a “particularly repressed gated community” (p. 290).

Van Reisen and Al-Qasim (2017) note that both pre- and post-2013, unaccompanied minors from Eritrea were/are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking for ransom. The authors state that Eritrean minors often flee due to threat of conscription into the national service and the fragmentation of families. As they are underaged and without resources, this group are often without alternatives, argue the authors.

Extortion

In almost all cases of human trafficking for ransom described in the literature, victims are taken to special places that serve the purpose of keeping the refugees from escaping. Weldehaimanot (2011) reports that victims are chained and searched for a phone or an address book to determine whether or not they have family members abroad who can pay their ransom. Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) describe the women as being separated from the men, and ill or pregnant women being separated from the healthy women and women who are not pregnant. Sometimes, there is an Eritrean who works as a translator, telling the victims to call their families and ask for money.

The literature describes victims being forced to call their relatives or friends to beg for money to be released. The traffickers are described as using various methods to convince relatives to pay, such as shooting in the air with a gun (Weldehaimanot, 2011) or physically torturing them so that their relatives can hear their screams (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Victims’ relatives go to extensive lengths to

obtain money for their release. According to Lijnders and Robinson (2013), relatives often have to sell their belongings (such as jewellery, livestock, or even their house) or resort to begging. If they cannot pay the ransom amount demanded, victims are tortured further and even killed (Ghebrai, 2015; Goor, 2018). Furthermore, the victims may have their organs removed to settle the ransom through organ trafficking, although this is unconfirmed (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Sometimes, family members cannot pay. In this case, the literature describes a ransom negotiator as coming to assist, by acting as a concerned friend whose job it is to convince them to pay (Wille, Al-Fakih, Coogole & Human Rights Watch, 2014). The death of hostages due to their injuries or murder is not uncommon. This does not stop the traffickers from collecting money. Many relatives end up paying ransom for victims who have already died or who die later due to unsafe release (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson (2021) describe how the victims can end up in two kinds of detention centres in Libya (often both): the official sites that are controlled by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and the unofficial centres controlled by traffickers. Despite the DCIM proclaiming the humane treatment of refugees in official centres, horrible human rights violations are committed in both places, according to the authors. The refugees are then often trafficked in various ways. They are either extorted for ransom, sold in slave markets (if they cannot pay the ransom, or even if they have already paid the ransom), or sold to the next extorter (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021).

Treatment of victims: conditions of captivity and torture

The abusive treatment of victims of human trafficking for ransom includes beating, electrocution, drowning, burning, hanging and amputation, (gang) rape and forced pregnancy (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012), punching, slapping, kicking, and whipping (Lijnders, 2012), hanging by hands, burning with melted plastic (Connell, 2013), burning with cigarette butts or heated rubber and metal (Van Reisen, & Rijken), and tying male genitals with a string attached to a full water bottle (Wille *et al.*, 2014). Acts of torture with

the purpose of humiliation and degradation have been reported by several survivors of human trafficking. Lijnders (2012), for instance, reports that refugees are buried in the sand, hung by hands or legs, burned with hot iron bars, and exposed to the sun for prolonged periods of time. They can be denied access to water (Rozen, 2017) and food, as well as forced to take drugs (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018). Poor hygiene and the outbreak of disease is common in camps (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020). Mekonnen and Estefanos (2012) describe victims being chained and left in open camps where there is no water or bathroom. Furthermore, some victims are made to work for the duration of their captivity and women are used as sex slaves (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) report victims being suspended from the ceiling, gasoline poured on them and set on fire, or forced to stand in the desert heat for a long time. Some were urinated on or had their fingernails cut off. Women are often raped, metal pipes inserted into their vagina or anus, their genitalia and breasts burned, and stripped naked and their buttocks whipped. Men and children are also raped (Goor, 2018).

Discrimination between victims was also reported. Firstly, victims who manage to pay the ransom amount are moved to a better location, where they are occasionally able to go outside, according to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020). According to some literature, Christian Eritreans and Ethiopians are kidnapped and extorted more often than other nationalities and religions, and Eritreans and some Ethiopians are exposed to harsher torture and violence than others (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken, 2012). Furthermore, Eritreans are thought to have more money and, therefore, are extorted for larger ransoms (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Muslim victims are treated better than others and extorted for smaller amounts. They receive opportunities to work for their kidnappers, usually as an interpreter, and sometimes even have the chance to escape. Christian women are sometimes made to convert to Islam (Yohannes, 2021). Similarly, in Libya the amount of ransom money is decided based on the victim's nationality and ethnicity. If the individual is ascribed a higher value, s/he is put into one of the official

centres or handled by more established armed groups (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021).

Payment

The studies included in this literature review report a wide range of ransom amounts, ranging from USD 1,000 to USD 50,000. They also all report a rise in the ransom amounts demanded over the years. In the Sinai, Connell (2013) says that ransoms were set to around USD 3,500–5,000 in 2009, rising to USD 30,000 by 2012; Heisterkamp (2018) reports Sinai ransoms to be as high as USD 50,000. According to Weldehaimanot (2011), in the Sinai, Eritreans and Ethiopians paid more than victims from other countries, such as those from Sudan. Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) found that Ethiopians were often forced by the traffickers selling them to lie that they were Eritreans, so that their price would increase.

The literature describes payments as being made in various ways. In most cases, the payments were made by hand or transferred to people working with the traffickers in different urban centres (e.g., Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, Khartoum, and locations in Saudi Arabia). The money is, therefore, not taken to the place where the victim is held (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013). For victims in Yemen, the money is transferred through international cash transfer agencies in Haradh. Some relatives pay the ransom through the *hawala* system is a system outside the formal banking system in which money is exchanged to keep parallel accounts in different monetary geographies (usually between hard and soft currencies) without the money being physically transferred to the actual destiny. As the system is informal, transfers are difficult to track. This is the preferred method of payment and, according to one report, some refugees are treated better if they use it (Wille *et al.*, 2014).

Organ trafficking

When Sinai trafficking was first uncovered, news outlets reported organ trafficking as a motive (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). However, it has not been conclusively confirmed that organ trafficking is not part of human trafficking for ransom. Organ removal could

potentially be linked to (or part of) human trafficking for ransom, especially when victims are unable to pay the required ransom (Lijnders, 2012) or as a threat to encourage the payment of ransoms (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012).

Human trafficking networks

Involvement of officials from Eritrea

In the first articles about Sinai trafficking, the involvement of Eritrean refugees as making up the majority of victims was discussed (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The realisation that Sinai trafficking involved particularly Eritrean refugees was not immediately clear, but in subsequent descriptions the overwhelming number of Eritrean victims of this type of trafficking was described (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). The dire human rights situation in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Goor, 2018; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017), the indefinite military service (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017), and the limited migration options for Eritreans were identified as having created the perfect environment for Eritreans to be targeted as victims (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Multiple sources specify a link between Eritrea and Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similarly, in the context of human trafficking for ransom expanding geographically, refugees are the primary targets due to their vulnerability (e.g., Horzum, 2017). In a progression from the earlier literature, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) link human trafficking for ransom to human trafficking networks that originate in Eritrea, targeting and affecting Eritrean refugees disproportionately. The evidence for the involvement of Eritrean top officials initially emerged in the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Reports, which describe in detail the involvement of Eritrean General Manjus in the network set up to traffic Eritrean refugees (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). Being in control of the route from within

Eritrea across the (closed) border with Sudan,³⁴ the traffickers make wide use of their privileges (to cross roadblocks and the border) and means (such as cars for transportation):

... the creation of a widespread illicit internal and cross-border black market, together with stringent controls on the movement of people, has created an environment in which human trafficking and smuggling were able to flourish and became embedded in the 'system'. (Van Reisen, 2017, p. 3)

Van Reisen (2017) concludes that there is:

... evidence that arms smuggling routes and networks from Eritrea were used for the implementation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and that the Eritrea regime controlled the arms/trafficking operation. There is strong evidence that the trafficking networks are linked directly to the Eritrean military. (Van Reisen, 2017, p. 3)

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 (2011) and Resolution 1973 (2011) have identified human traffickers operating in Libya and imposed individual targeted sanctions, including on two human traffickers from Eritrea. Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) describe how the trafficking network was established by an Eritrean by the name of Abderaza or Abdulrazak, who set up the trafficking route to Libya as early as 2005 (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). The network made use of the diplomatic and other capabilities of the Eritrean state to do so (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Other agents and handlers

The literature review for this study mainly covered articles that spoke in detail about agents during the time when trafficking for ransom went through the Sinai desert. The vast majority of articles reported the traffickers to be ethnic Rashaida, who live between the border of Eritrea and Sudan. According to Lijnders and Robinson (2013), many Rashaida work in camel pastoralism. This means that the often travel

³⁴ It is extremely difficult for Eritreans to obtain an exit visa and there is a shoot on sight policy at the border for those who cross without one (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

across borders and to Egypt, as the demand for camel meat is high there; hence, they have regular cross-border access. Furthermore, many Rashaida possess more than one citizenship, allowing them to travel easily and giving them the opportunity to engage in smuggling, which can turn into trafficking.

According to Humphris (2013), many refugees were also kidnapped by the police at the borders. In Sudan, various agents engaged in kidnapping and selling Eritreans to the Rashaida during the time of Sinai trafficking. Local Sudanese people abducted victims who were looking for refugee camps, while Sudanese authorities and police received bribes from traffickers. Furthermore, Eritreans collaborated with the kidnappers, working as translators or engaging in torture (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013).

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) conclude that the Rashaida in eastern Sudan “were operating directly under the authority of General Manjus” (p. 57) and allege that there was an agreement between General Manjus and an unnamed Rashaida leader. These authors also refer to an office of Manjus in eastern Sudan, to which the Rashaida directly reported. This office oversaw transactions in relation to refugees from Eritrea in eastern Sudan and collected intelligence (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

A small amount of literature is available on the agents involved in the trafficking routes that have (re-)opened to Libya since Sinai trafficking ceased in 2014³⁵ (see Wille *et al.*, 2014; Brhane, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

³⁵ “Even though the anti-terrorism activities in North Sinai led to actions close to the encampments of the kidnappers, no effective actions were taken to free the hostages (until the fourth quarter of 2014, when so-called ‘torture-houses’ in the Rafa area in North Sinai were destroyed)” (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

Trauma of victims

Primary trauma

The literature on trafficking for ransom shows that the resulting trauma can be severe. Such trauma can be physical or emotional, as a consequence of the torture endured while being trafficked for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) give a detailed overview of the trauma resulting from human trafficking for ransom based on data collected in a systematic inventory carried out with victims of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. This research was carried out in 2015 and 2016 among victims of Sinai trafficking in the refugee camps of Shemelba, May Ayni, Adi Harish and Hitsats in Tigray, in Ethiopia.

The most obvious visible form of trauma as a result of trafficking for ransom is the physical trauma suffered by the victims. In this category, an estimated 24% of refugees have endured severe physical and psychological trauma, with 59% suffering severe malnutrition (Rozen, 2017). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017, pp. 286–291) provide an exhaustive list of physical trauma, distinguishing between trauma sustained on the way to the Sinai, during detention in the Sinai, and after being released or leaving the Sinai. These authors also list the forms of trauma reported by Sinai survivors, in which all of the 28 interviewees reported that they often experienced food and water deprivation, a torture practice referred to as ‘head banging’, and being beaten (Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017, p. 295). Sexual violence was also reported including sadistic acts, such as ordered rape between hostages, rape in front of family members, or ordered rape by family members. Men and boys are among the victims of such rape (Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017, p. 290).

For those who survive, physical injuries can serve as a way to communicate the unspeakable things that happened to them during the trafficking experience (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) also report physical and chronic complaints by the survivors, extending several years after their release. Often times, the medical situation of survivors is left unattended.

Survivors can suffer psychological trauma, often amounting to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) report high levels of post-traumatic stress among 35 survivors of Sinai trafficking, measured using the Impact of Event Scale. Other studies have also reported a prevalence of high levels of post-traumatic stress among survivors of human trafficking for ransom (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020; Siman-Tov, Bodas, Wang, Alkan, & Adini, 2019). Individuals suffering from mental trauma often report experiencing nightmares (Wille *et al.*, 2014). The degree to which a victim of trafficking for ransom suffers trauma is more strongly correlated with the duration of the stressful event, rather than the prevalence of such events (Siman-Tov *et al.*, 2019). In addition to PTSD, research shows that victims can suffer a loss of certain beliefs and identity as a result of torture (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017).

Secondary and collective trauma

In addition to the trauma of victims, trauma can be experienced by a community as a whole, as secondary trauma or collective trauma. Trauma can be labelled as collective trauma if it affects the group identity, damages bonds and impairs the sense of community, as described by Kidane and Van Reisen (2017). Collective trauma deeply affects the culture of that community (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Kidane, 2021). This is certainly the case among Eritreans, who are the primary victims of trafficking for ransom.

As previously mentioned, ICTs impact on trafficking for ransom in a variety of ways, including the creation of so-called ‘secondary victims’ who suffer secondary trauma (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Secondary victims are those who have not directly suffered torture at the hands of traffickers, but who have witnessed these practices applied to their loved ones through audio calls, videos or livestreaming. Although secondary victims have not directly experienced torture, the impact of this shared experience, enabled by ICTs, is great. In addition, traffickers create secondary trauma by damaging family structures (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). This can

happen as a result of, for example, coerced displacement³⁶ or the stigma that surrounds victims of trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012).

These different types and levels of trauma converge to fundamentally destroy the spirit of the community in the diaspora and the country of origin (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). The torture practices employed in trafficking for ransom are designed to impoverish and disempower victims (Mawere, 2019), because greater suffering by the victims equals greater profits for the traffickers. Secondary victims are, through desperation, forced to share the trauma with their community, as they cannot pay the excessive amounts of ransom on their own (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Using ICTs, trauma can not only be spread through a community, but in Eritrea, social media and radio broadcasting have meant that this form of trauma has impact on nearly all Eritreans (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). So, as ICTs develop, so does trafficking for ransom and the trauma suffered, as ICTs enable the trauma to be collectivised and shared by the whole community (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Secondary and collective trauma are exacerbated by the lack of support from the governments of host countries and countries of origin, the international community and the media. This is certainly the case for Eritreans, who have been the primary victims of trafficking for ransom. Eritreans feel ignored and neglected as a result of inaction on behalf of the media, the government and the international community (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Moreover, the fate awaiting the refugees who survived the torture camps is often not care and compassion; in reality, survivors are often denied access to care and, instead, faced with border shootings in Egypt, or detention in Israel, as Israel's policy has been to see all irregular immigrants as illegal (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Moreover, many

³⁶ 'Coerced displacement' in this context refers to the kidnapping of individuals from within Eritrea or refugee camps to be trafficked for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

are returned to third countries or their country of origin through refoulement or voluntary return programmes, including to Eritrea (Rozen, 2019; Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz, 2019). Authors Pijnenburg and Rijken (2019) note that as victims of human trafficking in Libya appear underreported, they may be part of the group of vulnerable migrants and refugees returned by international organisations. As Mekonnen and Sereke (2017) point out, the international community has a legal obligation to protect victims of human trafficking, which it is failing dismally to uphold.

Prosecution and delivery of justice

The victims of trafficking for ransom are looking for justice in response to the serious harm that they have suffered – not only in psychological and physical senses, but also in a legal sense. As explored previously, trauma care is difficult to obtain for most trauma survivors. However, from a legal perspective, much of the necessary legal framework does in fact exist on a national level, according to Brhane (2015). The difficulty lies in the inclusivity of international legislation, as well as the ability and willingness of national governments to prevent, suppress and punish the perpetrators of human trafficking (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Brhane, 2015; Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017).

On a national level, governments have a responsibility to prevent, protect and prosecute human traffickers (referred to as 3Ps), as set out in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol) (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017; Horzum, 2017). The forms of exploitation mentioned in the Trafficking Protocol include sexual exploitation, slavery or similar practices to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs (Horzum, 2017).

Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) argue that human trafficking for ransom involves forced begging, which falls under the Protocol. The practice of trafficking for ransom could constitute a crime against humanity under Article 7(2)(c) of the Rome Statute, given the element of slavery and the link between human trafficking for ransom and

government complicity (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). Moreover, torture and slavery are a violation of *Jus Cogens* norms, which means that a state can be held responsible for the violation even if they are not party to a convention concerning the violation (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). The international community can, and should, intervene in instances of crimes against humanity or violations of *Jus Cogens*.

An alternative to state responsibility is to prosecute individuals for their responsibility in trafficking for ransom. Problems regarding the practicalities of this matter include the elusiveness of the individuals most responsible (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017). However, should such a person be found, the legal process is relatively simple (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017). First, individual criminal responsibility arises from Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) with regards to enslavement. The next question is whether or not the person in question is the most responsible person. Lastly, a prosecutorial forum must be chosen, which is likely to be the ICC, a national foreign court or a court in the national jurisdiction of the victim of human trafficking for ransom under the passive personality principle (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017).

Despite this national and international responsibility to protect, prevent and prosecute, the literature emphasises that most victims do not receive legal justice within any of the relevant jurisdictions, especially at the national level. This is mainly due to the lack of implementation of the 3Ps at a national level. As established previously, government officials in Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt are complicit in instances of trafficking for ransom, making investigation and prosecution exponentially harder in these jurisdictions (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In addition, receiving countries often do not provide the care they are legally obliged to provide to human trafficking victims. For example, refugees and victims of trafficking for ransom are detained in Israel under a 2012 amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law of 1954 that allows the detention of all who cross the border irregularly (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken,

2012) – and these people are seldom identified as victims of human trafficking (Rozen, 2019).

Thus, government complicity and international inaction are the most obstructive factors in access to legal justice for victims of trafficking for ransom. Even if the international legal framework is applicable, as some scholars argue (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012), this does not mean it is applied. Some scholars recommend expanding Article III of the Trafficking Protocol (Brhane, 2015), but where government action is missing, this would not have any immediate effect.

In line with this observation and the legal obligations established in this section, academics and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made numerous recommendations to governments and the international community to remedy the situation. Some of the most important recommendations include the expansion of resources to fight and persecute human trafficking, the investigation of the responsibility of government officials, halting the refoulement of victims of trafficking for ransom from Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya, the identification of victims of human trafficking for ransom and the provision of (mental) healthcare to victims (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017; Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Rozen, 2019).

Unintended effects of ICTs

The impact of ICTs on trafficking for ransom is difficult to overstate. As ICTs have developed, so too has trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). This is largely due to the way that ICTs are spreading rapidly and the impact they continue to have in communities around the world. This process is described in the research of Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans and Mawere (2019). Historically, imperialism had shaped the world to serve the hegemonies that dominate the global economy, with imperial powers extracting resources from less developed countries. The world's digital infrastructure has followed a similar pattern of development (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo,

2019). Although attempts have been made to provide more access to ICTs in the developing world, many communities remain unconnected and disempowered. Scholars assert that the information society is made up of nodes between which information travels. As a result, in places where nodes are few and far between, so-called 'black holes' in the digital landscape occur (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo, 2019). The occurrence of black holes is widening the digital divide, which is increasingly pointed to as one of the key factors enabling human trafficking for ransom to emerge around the world at almost the same time (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Communities in these black holes are disempowered in four distinct ways, leading them to be more susceptible to human trafficking and especially trafficking for ransom. First, Eritreans seeking to flee Eritrea have limited access to information about the migration routes (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Secondly, this situation is not merely caused by a lack of access to information due to black holes; in Eritrea, the government controls the media and information flows such that information about migration options is heavily restricted (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019) (see Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*). Thirdly, refugees are further constrained in their mobility because the use of ICTs can make them visible to the regime (Chonka & Haile, 2020). Fourthly, Eritreans attempting to migrate are susceptible to misinformation when accessing ICTs, potentially putting them in dangerous situations along the migration journey (Chonka & Haile, 2020). Thus, information about migration options is lacking, at best, and dangerous, at worst.

Consequently, refugees are dependent on human smugglers to provide them with the information they need to undertake the migration journey. Due to this culmination of difficulties faced by refugees, the smugglers and traffickers become the gatekeepers of information and the refugees a 'gated' community (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). The added difficulty in this instance is the inability of refugees to produce and distribute information (Van

Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). As Van Reisen and her colleagues point out, this disempowers refugees in two ways. Firstly, Eritreans are unable to disseminate information about migratory options (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019); or, if they are under the control of a human trafficking network, they are limited in how they can communicate their suffering to the outside world. Secondly, they are forced to communicate as part of a strategy to get them to begging from relatives. This comes at great risk, as victims face gruesome punishments and torture (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) propose the term ‘exploited gated’ to describe those subject to these practices, which are forced upon an involuntary gated community.

An additional factor contributing to the difficulties faced by refugees in a trafficking situation is the relationship that the ICTs facilitate between victims and traffickers (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In a face-to-face situation between traffickers and victims, the development of a potential relationship could possibly allow victims relatively more power to negotiate. However, given the nature of human trafficking organisations as geographically dispersed and shadowy, ICTs enable those at the top of the organisation to remain anonymous, making any form of negotiation less likely (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In a case when the Eritrean person trafficked was known to the top of the Eritrean human trafficking network, the person was actually released following the intervention of relatives (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim, 2017:63).

The lack of access to ICTs by refugees creates an imbalance in political power, both in relation to the state of Eritrea, in the case of Eritrean refugees, and in relation to smugglers and traffickers, in general (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In relation to the gatekeepers, the gated suffer a severe disparity in political power, because they experience no autonomy (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). This is largely a result of the aforementioned factors, with victims not being able to receive or distribute information. So,

access to ICTs is unequally distributed between traffickers and victims, and the gatekeepers and gated.

Traffickers make extensive use of ICTs for various purposes. First and foremost, ICTs have increased the ransom amounts demanded by traffickers through the use of phones to communicate the suffering of their victims to family members (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020; Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012; Connell, 2013; Goor, 2018; Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). Hearing the suffering of a loved one motivates the collection of money for the payment of their ransom. Traffickers obtain the number of a contact at the beginning of the journey, as smugglers ask for one valuable piece of information – the phone number, address and name of a friend or relative (Meyer & Brewer, 2010; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Since 2016, traffickers have started to shift from audio calls of the victim while being tortured to visual livestreams of the events as they happen (Van Esseveld, 2019).

ICTs are used by traffickers and victims alike to collectivise the suffering endured by victims in an attempt to raise the ransom amount. Most ‘secondary victims’ – those receiving the phone call or livestream – are unable to raise the ransom amount on their own. Hence, they share the suffering with others in an attempt to appeal for help to raise more money. This has worked to the advantage of human traffickers as it has enabled them to increase ransom amounts (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Buck & Van Reisen, 2017).

In addition, traffickers use ICTs for the purposes of organising their operations. This includes coordinating with their associates and other traffickers, communicating with migrants and refugees, networking, and collecting ransom through digital transfers (Van Esseveld, 2019; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019) (Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). In addition, ICTs allow traffickers to maintain their anonymity (Van Esseveld, 2019) through the use of codes exchanged between traffickers, mediators and those being trafficked (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Despite the relative lack of access to ICTs by migrants and refugees, they do often carry mobile devices and use them for various purposes. ICTs can be used to find family members and access support (Van Esseveld, 2019). In addition, mobile devices are used to contact smugglers to transport them to the desired destination (Van Esseveld, 2019). Moreover, mobile devices can store photos of the migrant/refugee's life, as a way to remain connected with their origins (Van Esseveld, 2019).

Documentation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai

Although the literature review for this chapter aimed to include all available literature on human trafficking for ransom, literature on situations other than those that occurred in the Sinai are limited. As can be seen from the methodology, the authors not only included terms such as 'ransom' and 'human trafficking', but also broader terms such as extortion, kidnapping, and a combination of such alternative terms. Particularly with regards to Libya, there have been a number of non-academic reports on human trafficking for ransom. However, it appears that there is not (yet) extensive academic research and documentation on human trafficking for ransom. There are some articles that assess the situation in Libya, which have been included in this review, but the vast majority of articles on human trafficking for ransom are related to the Sinai. The literature suggests that study of human trafficking for ransom in situations other than Sinai is not systematic and incomplete, and there is a need for solid academic engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to understand how the description of human trafficking for ransom has evolved. Prior research on trafficking focused primarily on trafficking for labour or sex trafficking, and mostly excludes trafficking for ransom, which is a fairly new phenomenon. Most of the extant literature on human trafficking for ransom relates to the events that took place in

the Sinai desert from 2009 to approximately 2013.³⁷ So far, the situation in other locations, including Libya, has not been covered in great detail. Only a few academic works were found that explicitly focus on this topic. Despite attempts to further analyse the references of these articles through snowballing techniques, the authors of this chapter were not successful in finding more articles.

Trafficking for ransom is reported to have first been seen around 2009 in the Sinai desert in Egypt. People fleeing their countries and crossing the desert found themselves exploited when their understanding with smugglers to take them across the border turned into a new situation and they were abducted, held against their will, tortured and extorted for ransom. The emergence of this new form of trafficking – known as trafficking for ransom – runs parallel to the development of globally connected ICTs. These innovations in ICT have enabled traffickers to run well-organised criminal networks on an international scale, as these networks rely on good communication among themselves, with other agents colluding with them, and with the families of those extorted for ransom, who are forced to pay vast amounts to save their family member from torture and possible death. Furthermore, ICTs also enable traffickers to receive, or coordinate to receive, payment in a more or less untraceable way.

The extortion described in the literature has been successful due to the inhumane, dehumanising and humiliating torture techniques used, and their portrayal through ICTs to motivate victims and their families to collect money as fast as they possibly can. The amounts paid as ransom differ between locations, as well as according to the nationality of the victim. Because of this major variability, it is hard to determine the average ransom from the available literature. One thing is clear, however, ransom amounts are increasing, becoming more and more difficult for family members to collect. Furthermore, ransoms often have to be paid more than once, as victims are passed from trafficker to trafficker, each demanding their share.

³⁷ Although Sinai trafficking did not end until 2014.

This form of human trafficking ends in death for many, and others are almost always left with some form of trauma, resulting in physical and psychological issues. The psychological trauma is affecting entire families and communities through secondary and collective trauma. In the case of Eritrea, the entire diaspora has been affected by secondary and collective trauma, fundamentally altering what it means to be Eritrean. Eritrean refugees make perfect victims, as they often leave their country without documentation and have no protection from their own country.

Human trafficking for ransom has evolved through international criminal networks that include, among others, top Eritrean military officials, Eritrean smugglers, and smugglers and traffickers from other countries like Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. These networks prey on Eritrean refugees and their families. The acknowledgement and identification of victims and perpetrators is a first step to obtaining justice and providing victims with the medical and psychological care that they need, as well as legal protection.

This review shows that human trafficking for ransom in Libya is an understudied area in the understanding of these practices. The scarce documentation suggests that human trafficking for ransom is taking place with impunity. It is urgent to understand the development and practice of human trafficking for ransom in Libya and to study how this *modus operandi* is evolving, and who the perpetrators are. Human trafficking for ransom constitutes an egregious crime. It must be a priority for the international community to eradicate it and to ensure it is not carried out with impunity.

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Author contributions

Eva Lorger and Piet Gotlieb are each the author of several sections of this chapter. They performed the literature review and documentation together. The text was edited by Mirjam Van Reisen and Klara Smits.

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The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya³⁸

Morgane Wirtz, Dion Ferdi de Vries & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction: Crossing the desert is not just a job

I enjoyed this trip to Agadez. In a fortnight, I had more opportunities to travel out of the city than when I lived here. The problem is that the bandits in the bush are a real threat to the whites. So we are forbidden to leave the town. But this time we had to go out because of the filming. Accompanied by an escort, I was able to see part of the desert that stretches for thousands of kilometres around my host town. I understood the adrenaline and joy that smugglers and traffickers feel when they set out to conquer this untapped land. Playground. Anything can happen. Anything goes. Nature's message is clear: "I am stronger than you". (Fieldwork diary, Morgane Wirtz, 2 March 2021)

In Libya, there is a history of smuggling people and goods across the desert. The movement of people has become illegal officially, while being tolerated, and even cultivated, in practice. This has contributed to the rise of human trafficking for ransom. In addition, Europe's migration policies, which have failed to curb migration, have made the practice of trafficking in persons more profitable. This chapter presents the history and context in Libya, which has created fertile ground for the proliferation of human trafficking for ransom.

The smuggling – of goods and people – across the Sahara is a tradition that has spanned centuries. It is the idea of wanting to curb this practice that is more recent. The same is true for human trafficking. However, in recent times, a new and brutal form of human trafficking has emerged – human trafficking for ransom. First documented in

³⁸ 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.

the Sinai in 2009, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) describe this new form of human trafficking, in which the victims are tortured for ransom using ICTs to broadcast the torture to relatives to ensure payment, 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. (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 23)

These authors note that Eritreans appear to be particularly vulnerable to this form of trafficking: “This situation seems to have had particularly negative consequences for migrants and refugees coming from the Horn of Africa, particularly from Eritrea, as Eritreans constitute a particularly vulnerable category of migrants” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, p. 87).

In their publication, *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond*, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2014) picture Berhane on the cover, an Eritrean refugee who Estefanos³⁹ had interviewed while he was held in captivity for ransom in the Sinai. Berhane had paid a ransom of USD 40,000 and, following his release, was taken to an official detention centre – prison – in Egypt. He was subsequently deported to Ethiopia and moved to a refugee camp for Eritrean refugees in North Ethiopia (Tigray). Berhane then escaped through Sudan and Libya and found himself on the boat that sank near Lampedusa in 2013. He swam. Estefanos found him on the island where a battle was going on over control of the refugees between different law and order agencies in Italy and the Eritrean embassy/Peoples’ Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party in Eritrea, the very

³⁹ Meron Estefanos is a human rights activist, journalist, and radio presenter based in Sweden, who came into contact with Eritrean victims of human trafficking for ransom when they contacted her through her radio programme on Radio Erena (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).

regime from which Berhane was fleeing in the first place (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).

Although Sinai trafficking ceased in 2014 (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015), for various reasons (including the return of Egyptian forces to the peninsula to fight terrorism and the building of a fence in the Sinai between Egypt and Israel, which prevented migrants and refugee from entering Israel), the practice is now seen in Libya – and this phenomenon is on the rise. In 2017, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim identified that after Sinai trafficking stopped, it expanded to Libya. They wrote: “There are indications that the same network of smugglers and human traffickers⁴⁰ are involved in the organisation of this new trade, including key coordinators” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017, p. 74). These authors expressed concern about the emergence of a criminal culture, including militias, terrorist organisations and criminal organisations engaging with the refugees (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017), and there are concerns that the European Union (EU) is exacerbating this through funding aimed at the externalisation of its migration policies (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017; see also Tewolde-Berhan, Plaut, & Smits, 2017; Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017).

This point is also raised by Morone (2020) who shows that the economic crisis, the war, and the containment policy driven by the EU have worsened the situation of African migrants in Libya. Morone shows that, paradoxically, European policies to contain migration have led to more African migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Morone, 2020). Malakooti (2019) shows that the system of migrant detention, which on the surface is dedicated to

⁴⁰ The term ‘smuggler’ is used to refer to someone who is paid to organise an illegal journey. A trafficker is also paid to organise an illegal journey, but the purpose is to exploit the migrant or refugee (the legal elements of trafficking are “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” see <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>). These terms are used interchangeably in this chapter in a non-legal way to describe practices, not to draw legal conclusions (see Glossary of Terms).

containing migrants within African territory, is linked to the smuggling dynamics in Libya:

The increased risk of arbitrary detention has also led to the formation of more transnational networks, with migrants attempting to move from the Sabel to Italy within one network, as a way of avoiding detention in Libya. (Malakooti, 2019, p. 6)

In this chapter, these different sources are gathered and combined with interviews and observations from the authors to set the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. This research has a particular spatio-temporal quality, being located in a particular area (Libya, in the context of a relationship with the world outside) and time-period (2017–2021, with a relationship with what remains in people’s minds from earlier times).

The research presented investigates the question: *What is the context (current and historic) of human trafficking for ransom in Libya?* This question is formulated to situate current human trafficking practices in Libya in a time and place, acknowledging the fact that these practices emerge and settle in a history and are perpetrated by particular actors. As such, this chapter provides a bird’s eye overview of the situation, before we zoom in on the details of human trafficking for ransom in Libya in subsequent chapters.

The next section introduces the methodology employed for research presented in this chapter. This is followed by the findings. Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Methodology

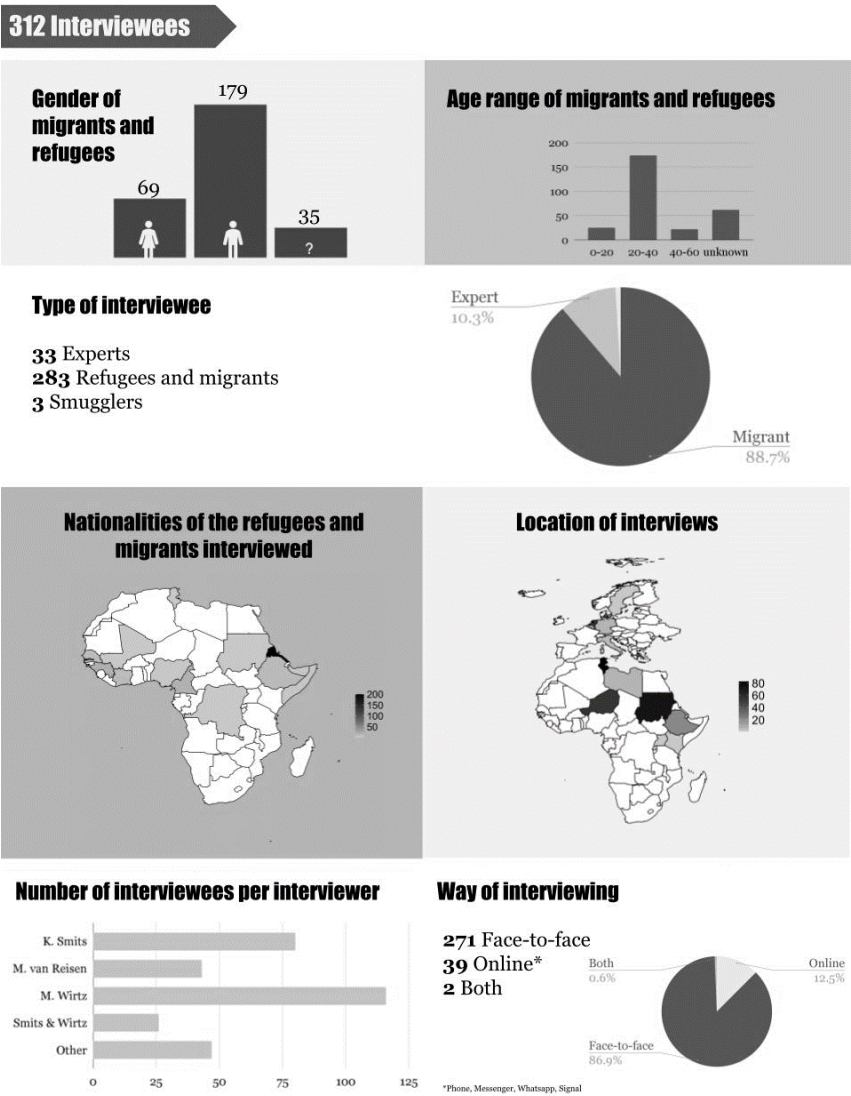
The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning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

an overview of the situation to describe the context in which the events studied in this book are situated.

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 for the purposes of this chapter. 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 with more than one person at a time, including 11 focus group interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. Of the respondents interviewed, 33 were expert/resource persons and 3 were smugglers (two of which were still engaged in smuggling at the time of their interview). The remaining 283 respondents, or 89%, were refugees and migrants. Of the refugees and migrants, 128 had been trafficked in Libya. Two-thirds of the refugees and migrants who were interviewed were aged between 20 and 40 years. The majority of the interviewees (n=203) were of Eritrean nationality. Others 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 5.1. Overview of interview statistics⁴¹



To situate the development of human trafficking for ransom in Libya in a historical context, the first part of this chapter is based on a desk review of publications by academics, experts and leading

⁴¹ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the total number of interviewees.

humanitarian organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organisations. Using keywords such as ‘human trafficking’, ‘slavery’, ‘smuggling’, AND ‘Libya’, sources were identified on Google Scholar (academic) and Google (non-academic). After the identification of the first set of articles and books on slavery in Libya, the economy of human trafficking and smuggling and the recent history of Libya, other publications were selected using the snowballing method. This analysis was started by Dion de Vries between May and August 2020 and supplemented by the other authors in 2022. Of the interviews analysed for this chapter, the focus was on the interviews with refugees and migrants (n=119) who have been through Libya. The interviews conducted with Eritrean refugees in 2015 by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) and Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017) were also reused for this chapter, when these helped to understand the history of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

A fertile ground: Historic context

Thirteen centuries of uninterrupted trade in people

The historian and anthropologist Tidiane N'Diaye states that the Arab raids in sub-Saharan Africa began in 652, when, in a treaty, the Emir and General Abdallah ben Saïd imposed the forced annual delivery of 360 slaves on the Nubians (who lived in what is currently north Sudan and south Egypt). This uninterrupted trade spanned about 13 centuries, with the raids ended at the beginning of the 20th Century (N'Diaye, 2008):

The slave traders transported their ‘prey’ to the Arab-Muslim world in thousands of caravans via the Sahara desert. This crossing was done with camels and required a perfect knowledge of the natural resources of this vastness. There were certainly enough water points and wells for commercial caravans. But for captive transports, the ordeal was most horrific. It required a stopover to refresh these unfortunate people, so that they could recover their strength and look presentable, and be sold at the best price. (N'Diaye, 2008, p. 189 [own translation])

N'Diaye argues that the long years of Arab drain on sub-Saharan Africa created Arab racism towards ‘black’ Africans. Eric Williams

writes “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (Williams, 1944). N’Diaye wrote: “The Arabic word *abid* (or *abd*), which meant slave, became from the eighth century onwards more or less synonymous with ‘Black’” (N’Diaye, 2008, p. 66 [own translation]).

This history of slavery is also discussed by other authors. Denham, Clapperton and Oudney explored Fezzan in southern Libya between 1822 and 1824:

The depth of the well at Meshroo is from sixteen to twenty feet: the water good, and free from saline impregnations: the ground around is strewn with human skeletons, the slaves who have arrived, exhausted with thirst and fatigue. (Denham, Clapperton & Oudney, 1828, p. 124)

Denham *et al.* describe the horrific scene they encountered as follows:

Every few miles a skeleton was seen through the whole day; some were partially covered with sand, others with only a small mound, formed by the wind. (Denham *et al.*, 1828, p. 124).

This picture is not dissimilar to the situation today, with slavery firmly in existence in modern day Libya (see Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya* and Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*).

From 1959–2011: Refugees and migrants as pawn

Since the discovery of oil in Libya in 1959, the country has attracted foreign workers. The majority of them consider Libya to be a country in which they can work and send remittances to their families. This increased in the early 1990s, when Muammar Gaddafi set his sights on Pan-Africanism and became involved with different international organisations to foster development and integration in Africa. He welcomed thousands of African migrants to work and live in Libya. Between 1998 and 2007, African nationals were allowed to enter without a visa (Malakooti, 2019).

In the early 2000s, Libya experienced an economic boom. Foreign residents arrived in large numbers. Bullying and racist violence

worsened, work permits became difficult to acquire and the criminalisation of people from sub-Saharan Africa increased. By 2005, around 1.3 to 1.8 million refugees and migrants lived and worked in Libya, which, at the time, had only around 5.5 million inhabitants (Tsourapas, 2017). The number of people who decided to cross the Mediterranean Sea started to increase. Truong and Gasper state that the Libyan government realised, after the international sanctions on Libya were lifted in 1999, that migration could be a good entry point for negotiations. Denying migrants full legal status allowed the Libyan government to grant African migrants a minimum level of legitimacy, but little protection, and meant that they could be easily deported (Truong & Gasper, 2011).

The Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS's) regional policy of free movement of people, to which Libya belonged at the time, was in contrast to the increasingly stricter border controls and regulations established in Libya's cooperation with the European Union. The result was that a practice of tolerating free movement, including for seasonal labour needs, was combined with an increasingly impossible administrative set of requirements that created an 'illegal' sphere for all people on the move, pushing the facilitation of movement underground, economically enabled by bribes and extortion payments taken from migrants and refugees (Brachet 2010). Eaton (2018), Hüsken (2017) and Micallef (2017) explain that the activities of smugglers were tolerated by the government of Gaddafi. Brachet refers to this as 'remoteness', in which people live in and out of spaces and roles, defined by different sets of rules; in other words, 'remote' from policies and laws of the government:

Remoteness, in this sense, translates both a structural vulnerability and a certain form of power – the power to make one's self invisible, unpredictable and hence ungovernable. (Brachet, 2010, pp. 168–169)

In a system of divide and rule, certain families, tribes and favoured groups had better access to smuggling activities than others (Micallef, 2017; Eaton, 2018). Moreover, tolerating the passage of a limited number of people across the Mediterranean Sea created political

influence with European states (Truong & Gasper, 2011; Eaton, 2018). Under Gaddafi, smugglers operated in networks, which were already well established and well-connected outside Libya, to smuggling hubs like Khartoum in Sudan, Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Nairobi in Kenya and Asmara in Eritrea (Hüsken, 2017; Micallef, 2017).

According to various sources, the famous Eritrean human trafficker Ismael Abderaza Saleh/Abdurazak Esmail started his smuggling and trafficking activities in Libya around 2005/2006 (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). A report published by Sahan Foundation and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) states that:

In addition to collecting money for the transfer of migrants and refugees across Libya and the Mediterranean, Esmail collects roughly [US] \$4,000 for releasing migrants and refugees who may have been captured and placed in various detention centres, and providing them passage to Italy. (Sahan Foundation & IGAD ISSP, 2016, p. 19)

Hence, it appears that a complex system of human trafficking was already operational in Libya in 2006. This time-point is consistent with an interview held in 2016 on the start of Sinai trafficking, which sets the origin of it in the planning of Eritrean and/or Sudanese weapons convoys heading to the Sinai in 2006 or 2007. According to the interviewee, the convoys were covered with Eritrean refugees, to make sure that drones would not detect the arms. It was then discovered that the extortion of human beings for ransom was ‘good business’ (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). Van Reisen and Estefanos suggest that this operation was extended to the human trafficking of Eritreans to Libya and that this operation was led by Ismael Abderaza Saleh (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

By 2007, Libya, which was “one of the preferred routes chosen by migrants to reach Europe”, had “ceased to become a safe place for migrants” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, p. 87). This was due to a series of bilateral agreements signed between Libya and Italy, with a view to making the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea much more difficult. The situation particularly affected Eritrean refugees, as

“smugglers’ favourite people”, because Eritreans know very well that “if they go back to their country, it is over for them” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, p. 87). Smugglers know that Eritreans are “a good deal for them” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, p. 87).

Italy and Libya worked together to make the passage through the Mediterranean Sea more complicated, notably through the Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya signed in August 2008 (Camera dei Deputati Italia, 2008; Ronzitti, 2009). With the aim of ‘combating illegal immigration’, the Italian authorities tried to control the migratory flows from Libya to the Mediterranean Sea. In parallel with these policies, Libya has also worked on controlling its land borders. In 2012, Libya signed agreements on security and joint border control with Algeria, Niger, Chad and Sudan. In the following years, sand walls were erected on the border with Algeria and Niger (Carayol & Gagnol, 2021).

Tightening a web that would render people on the move ‘illegal’, even though the Libyan economy needed migrants, Libya imposed stricter requirements concerning visas for almost all foreigners after 2007. In 2010, a law was enacted stating that illegal migrants will be condemned to forced labour in jail or a fine of 1,000 Libyan dinars, before being expelled from Libyan territory (Malakooti, 2019). Ill treatment and torture were already being reported by migrants in detention centres (Amnesty International, 2010). By 2009, Human Right Watch reported that detainees were being sold from detention centres into forced labour conditions or released directly into the hands of smugglers, “who would take them into custody, demand more money from their families, and take them once again to the cities along the coast” (Human Right Watch, 2009).

At the same time, Italy and Libya worked together to make the passage across the Mediterranean Sea more complicated, notably through the agreements of 30 August 2008 (Camera dei Deputati Italia, 2008). With the aim of combating ‘illegal immigration’, the Italian authorities controlled the migratory flows from Libya to the Mediterranean Sea and, in several cases, boats overloaded with

migrants, mainly from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, were intercepted at sea by the Italian authorities and sent back to Libya (Human Rights Watch, 2009). In 2009, one of these refoulements was brought to the European Court of Human Rights. It concerned the interception of three boats, carrying 200 migrants. The Italian authorities intercepted them off Lampedusa and returned them to Libya without identifying the migrants or informing them of their final destination. Known as the ‘Hirsi ruling’, the case led to a judgement of the Court against the practice, delivered on 23 February 2012. Considering that the situation in Somalia and Eritrea poses serious problems of insecurity, the Court observed that “according to the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and Human Rights Watch, individuals forcibly repatriated to Eritrea face being tortured and detained in inhuman conditions merely for having left the country irregularly” (European Court of Human Rights, 2012).

The Court found that the Italian authorities failed to register the concerned individuals properly and that the procedure lacked an adequate analysis of their personal situation, thus violating Article 4 of Protocol No. 4 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits the collective expulsion of foreigners. The Court added that Italy had also violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits inhumane and degrading treatment, by intercepting vessels on the high seas and then handing over migrants to the Libyan authorities, where they “risked being subjected to ill-treatment in the requesting country” (European Court of Human Rights, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012, pp. 87–88).

In his last years in power, Muammar Gaddafi increasingly used migration as a tool to pressure Europe for his own ends. In 2010, Gaddafi warned Europe that it would turn ‘black’ unless it got more serious about migration (BBC, 2010). “We don’t know what will happen, what will be the reaction of the white and Christian Europeans faced with this influx of starving and ignorant Africans”, Gaddafi stated (BBC, 2010).

In February 2011, the first demonstrations against Gaddafi's regime broke out. The violent repression of the revolutionaries by forces loyal to Gaddafi led to a civil war. In March, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 authorising volunteer countries to intervene in Libya. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began its international military intervention. According to Micallef (2017), Gaddafi responded to NATO's bombings partly by releasing human smugglers from prison. The researcher adds that Libyan security personnel became directly involved in smuggling by rounding up African migrants and sending them on large fishing vessels to cross the Mediterranean, in a last attempt to blackmail Europe (Micallef, 2017). In 2011, the number of illegal border crossings spiked to 64,300, compared to 4,500 in 2010 (Tsourapas, 2017).

2011 onwards: War as a breeding ground for human trafficking

In 2011, with the fall of Gaddafi, the country saw a rise in attacks and violence perpetrated against people on the move. In the first months of the war in Libya, it is estimated that more than 400,000 Libyans and 750,000 foreigners fled the country (Morone, 2016). 'Black' people from sub-Saharan countries were hunted down and accused of being mercenaries in the pay of certain factions involved in the conflict. Sub-Saharan Africans were subjected to lynching, arbitrary arrest, murder and public hanging (Bensaad, 2012). The human rights situation worsened. Schmoll (2020, p. 65) writes: "Whereas before the civil war, only a few of the women encountered had been raped, rape seems to have become systematic in Libya from that year [2011] onwards" [own translation].

With the departure of Gaddafi, armed groups rose up to fill the power vacuum and protect their communities. These armed groups took over the tasks and institutions usually assumed by a government, such as security and law enforcement, in the areas they controlled. As factions have taken over these tasks and institutions, the line between state and non-state actors in Libya has blurred. According to Eaton

(2018), in order to preserve their local legitimacy, armed groups rarely seek to extort revenue from local residents:

Rather, they seek to generate revenues from clandestine or illicit activities likely to have fewer ramifications for their local reputation. Smuggling is an ideal business in this respect. (Eaton, 2018, p. 21)

Since the beginning of the conflict in Libya, a war economy has developed in which armed groups fight for access and control of smuggling routes, oil and gas infrastructure, state entities, border posts, transportation infrastructure, and key import and export nodes (Eaton, 2018). Expanding human smuggling and trafficking is only one part of this growing war economy in Libya, which, according to Shaw and Mangan (2014) is comprised of four parts: weapons, migrants, drugs, and smuggled goods. Eaton estimates that the revenue generated by human smuggling in 2016 (for overland travel and the crossing of the Mediterranean) was around USD 978 million, which is equivalent to 3.4% of Libya's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015 (Eaton, 2018).

One way for armed groups to generate income is, for example, to charge smugglers for each migrant they allow to pass through the territory they control. Another way is to become directly involved in human smuggling and trafficking activities. Others turn to the establishment and maintenance of migrant detention centres to sell the incarcerated migrants and refugees to human smugglers and traffickers (this is developed in the next section) (Malakooti, 2019). Kidnapping for ransom has become commonplace in Libya and targets Libyans and foreigners. In 2016, a Libyan citizen was released after having paid a ransom of USD 1.4 million (Eaton, 2018).

As it is the armed groups that control the official detention centres, and as these groups are also linked to the Libyan Coast Guard, the memorandum of understanding signed between Libya and Italy in 2017 (for the interception of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea) has in fact opened up a new revenue stream for the armed groups. Armed groups can now make money by letting smugglers work on their territory or by arresting migrants and selling them (directly on the

beach or from detention centres) to smugglers or human traffickers (Contreras, 2016; Eaton, 2018; Malakooti, 2019).

In 2014, the conflict in Libya was at its peak. In Tripoli, the Misrata militias resurrected the former General National Congress (GNC), while the House of Representatives moved to Tobruk in the east of the country near the border with Egypt, under the protection of the Libyan National Army (LNA), headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. By the end of 2014, the number of armed groups operating in Libya was estimated at around 1,600 (compared to 300 in 2011) (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021). The Libyan conflict led to increased interconnectivity between armed groups, smuggling and human trafficking groups, and terrorist groups, like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or Daesh), which emerged in the country after the 2011 revolution (UNSMIL & OHCHR, 2016).

On 17 December 2015, the United Nations sponsored the Libyan Political Agreement, in an attempt to bring political unity and stability to Libya. Through the agreement, the Government of National Accord (GNA) was internationally recognised, as was the Higher Council of State and the elected House of Representatives (Sawani, 2020; United Nations Security Council, 2015). However, foreign-backed armed groups remained in strong positions. The climate of insecurity led to the development of jihadist factions in the country. Haftar owes his success in the east of the country largely to his fight against the Islamic State between 2014 and 2018. Also in 2016, the jihadists lost control of the town of Sirte, after heavy fighting with Misrata forces, affiliated to the Government of National Union (Wintour, 2016).

Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017) describe how Eritrean refugees were abducted by armed gangs, possibly ISIS, in Libya, with testimonies gathered from interviews conducted in 2015. Given their extremely vulnerable position, Eritrean refugees have little option but to pay what is referred to as the 'ransom' for crossing the Sahara desert to be released by the traffickers (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 169). Refugees describe how during the journey, which is arranged by 'facilitators', they come in contact with police at check

points, armed militia, and soldiers, and they find it hard to know who is on which side or representing which authority:

People saw us as we left and first we were found by Libyan police. I don't know which side they are on. I'm not sure if they are part of the government or the opposition, but they found us anyway. (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 171)

This group of refugees was then abducted and taken to what appears to be ISIS controlled areas, where they were split into Christians and Muslims. Around that time, in 2014, refugees reported that ISIS was stationed “to abduct people who cross the Sahara” (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 172). According to these authors, refugees identify the Eritrean Ismael Abderaza Saleh as “the head of the human trafficking organisation in Libya” (Van Reisen and Estefanos, 2017, p. 173), who set up shop in Libya in around 2005. Other people working for him are involved in the day-to-day business, such as the Eritrean trafficker Kidane (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

Between 2014 and 2019, there was growing conflict between the east and west of the country. With the country split into essentially two governments, both of which asserted their claim to power through the support of factions, tribes, militias and armed groups, institutions and resources were up for grabs. To make matters even more difficult, foreign involvement in the civil war has been more prominent since 2019, despite a UN arms embargo. At first foreign involvement was mainly disguised under the claim that intervention was necessary to stop the spread of Islamic extremism, as ISIS had started to take hold in Libya. However, Libya's natural resources and strategic location led to foreign actors establishing their sphere of influence (Badi, 2020; Trauthig, 2020; UNSMIL, 2020).

The Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar received much of its military strength from mercenaries and foreign backers such as Egypt, Russia, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, as well as political support from France. The GNA was backed by Turkey, Qatar and Italy. Important clashes took place in spring 2019.

Due to Turkey's increased involvement since 2020, the scales have been tipped in the GNA's favour, as the LNA was pushed back from

Tripoli and other strategic towns were retaken. Despite losing control over these areas, the LNA remains a powerful entity in the rest of Libya (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

Unity in Libya continues to be fragile. The ceasefire between the warring parties has led to the formation of an interim government. The UN-backed peace process has led to Libya's first unified government since 2014, meant to see the country through until elections, which were initially planned for December 2021 (Middle East Eye, 2021).

Since March 2022, there have been two governments in Libya, which are opposed and continue to fight each other: the government of Abdul Hamid al-Dbeibeh, who is the prime minister in Tripoli, and the government of Fathi Bashagha, established in Sirte and supported by Khalifa Haftar. The first assures that he will not give up his position until elections are held. The second assures that he will organise the elections once in power. Other armed groups continue to hold sway in other parts of the country. During the summer of 2022, clashes erupted regularly in Tripoli between several armed groups (Tallès, 2022).

The armed conflict in Libya, which has been going on for more than 10 years, has greatly impacted on the situation of migrants and refugees in Libya. Migrants and refugees have become collateral victims of the war (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*). Several official detention centres holding migrants and refugees have even been targeted by bombings (Amnesty International, 2019; Wintour, 2019). Some migrants and refugees have been forced to take up arms (see Chapter 13). According to Morone (2020), the Libyan conflict and the ensuing economic crisis have also fed human trafficking, in the sense that migrants who had previously seen Libya as a place of work have started to look at it as a land of transit to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe. The proliferation of weapons and the accessibility of certain drugs are also elements of the Libyan conflict that have favoured the development of human trafficking for ransom.

Outlawing migration

Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, which defines the term ‘refugee’ and outlines the rights of refugees, as well as the legal obligations of states to provide protection (UNHCR, 2011). Nor has Libya established a formal framework for the admission, protection or welfare of asylum seekers or refugees. Hence, the UNHCR operates in Libya without full official recognition by the authorities.

Entry into Libya without an official permit is punishable by a fine and indefinite hard labour. Therefore, migrants and refugees who move around the country without a visa are liable to be arrested at any time and incarcerated in a detention centre. There are no guidelines on how long migrants should be detained or on what conditions they can be released (Malakooti, 2019). The distance between the regulations on the one hand and the reality on the ground is what Brachet (2010) refers to as ‘remoteness’. As those in charge of the policies are not present on the ground, the reality in the lived situation is totally different from what the policies intend to achieve.

In this sense, the result of the externalisation of the European policy is the opposite of what it intends to do, namely, to prevent people from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Due to this policy, smugglers and traffickers have had to come up with new routes to avoid authorities, which are often more dangerous, making refugees more vulnerable. To avoid a confrontation with the police, smugglers go deep into the desert, increasing the risk. Accidents and the abandoning of migrants in the Sahara desert have become more frequent. A smuggler interviewed by Wirtz for an earlier publication explained:

We created a new road. In the past, it was used by drug traffickers. This road is so far away from everything that if you have a breakdown here, you're sure to die. There are only gazelles there. Sometimes you are even afraid of running over them. It would cause problems for the car. (Wirtz, 2017)

His colleague added, bitterly:

Four months ago, we had a puncture. We couldn't get the tyre off and by the time we got help, nine people had died from lack of water. (Wirtz, 2017)

When they see the security forces, some drivers prefer to abandon their 'commodities' than be caught red-handed in smuggling (Wirtz, 2019). To avoid being abandoned in the Sahara, many migrants pay for their journey only after they have arrived at their destination. As migrants do not usually take money with them when crossing the Sahara (because it would be stolen by drivers or by bandits), it can take some time after their arrival at their destination before the money is sent by their relatives to the smugglers. Delays in payment are common. But, as a smuggler interviewed by Wirtz in 2017 stated, drivers don't have time to waste:

Once in Libya, passengers have to pay. If they don't, it's like a crime. We have taken so many risks! I put them in a room and lock it until they give me the money. They can only go out when it's really too hot. After three or four days, they will definitely suffer from the heat. They will give the money. (Wirtz, 2017)

Despite the strict regulations, which make people on the move more vulnerable and mean that they have less protection, migrants and refugees continue to enter Libya. The security crisis in Libya did not immediately lead to an economic crisis. In 2012, Libya recorded a staggering 86.8% growth in GDP (World Bank, 2022) and, hence, continued to attract sub-Saharan migrants, who came to Libya to work as part of circular migration. Others considered Libya as a transit country on the way to Europe. The smuggling networks continued to develop and became organised at the international level. At the end of 2011, Syrian refugees started to arrive in Libya, from where they also crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. From 2013, some smugglers start to advertise their services on social media (Malakooti, 2019). As a result, the number of arrivals in Italy increased (UNHCR, 2016).

In 2012, collaboration between the Italian government and Libya on border control resumed and detention centres were (re)opened in Khoms, Benghazi, Gharyan, Sabha, Tripoli and Zawiyah (Morone,

2016). The Libyan Department for Combating Illegal Migration (under the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration [DCIM]) was created. Under the Ministry of the Interior, the mission of the DCIM is to oversee detention centres and to integrate militia-run centres into the state system. The DCIM, which is administratively in charge of the official detention centres, has little oversight on the ground, given that the centres are remote and far from Tripoli where the DCIM officials have their offices (Malakooti, 2019). Malakooti found that:

Given the power and influence of armed groups in Libya today, it is impossible for the detention centres, even the official ones, to operate effectively without the support or buy-in of armed groups. (Malakooti, 2019, p. 6)

On 3 October 2013, 366 migrants died off Lampedusa. Italy set up Operation Mare Nostrum, through which the Italian navy became involved in controlling the Mediterranean Sea, identifying and arresting smugglers and rescuing migrants and refugees in distress at sea (which does not mean that once rescued they are brought to Italy). However, it was criticised for the costs involved and the idea emerged that the sea rescues were a pulling migrants to Italy, knowing that they would be saved by the Italians. Hence, a year after it started, Italy abandoned this initiative. As soon as the Italian government abandoned Operation Mare Nostrum, the number of deaths at sea increased (Camilli & Paynter, 2021). In 2021, 3,231 people were reported to have died or disappeared while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2022).

On 2 February 2017, a new memorandum of understanding was signed between Italy and Libya. In this agreement, the mechanism of interception of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea was reactivated (as in 2009–2010). However, the deportations are no longer carried out by Italy – which was found to be illegal by the European Court of Human Rights – but directly by the Libyan Coast Guard (trained and equipped by Italy). In 2018, Italy closed its ports to humanitarian ships that rescue migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. When asked why

migrants and refugees are still drowning, Carola Rackete, captain of the civil rescue vessel Sea-Watch 3, answered as follows:

European Union wants them to drown, to scare those who might attempt to cross. They drown because Europe denies them access to any safe routes and leaves them no options other than to risk their lives at sea. (Rackete, 2020)

Migrants and refugees refer to those decisions as the ‘closure of the Mediterranean Sea’. As with all migration policies, this has had a direct impact on them.

Micallef (2019) notes that the impact of the closure of the Mediterranean Sea and other anti-migration measures, like border controls and crackdowns on smuggling, have led to a broken migration system. Whereas, before, profit could be extracted from the movement of migrants and refugees, now criminal actors are increasingly turning to extortion. “Ransoming, in particular, appears to be on the rise as a result of a shift in modus operandi, with smugglers now seeking to extract greater profit through extortion, as the smuggling business proper becomes more challenging” (Micallef, 2019, p. 3). This has had a direct impact on the experiences of migrants and refugees in Libya, and the time they spend there.

Migrants and refugees in Libya today: Findings from the interviews

As can be seen from the previous section, the historic context in Libya, the conflict since the fall of Gaddafi, and Europe’s (and Libya’s) migration policies have created fertile ground for human trafficking. The realisation of the relevance of the history of the slave trade in Libya is present in the perceptions of the people on the move to Libya. This perception was confirmed in the interviews conducted for this research. This section contains excerpts from the interviews conducted with Eritrean refugees and others.

Perception of migrants in Libya

The thirteen century-long slave trade of sub-Saharan African people by Arabs can still be felt in North Africa. Migrants and refugees –

particularly from sub-Saharan Africa – are considered by many Arabs to be inferior. This can sometimes justify their inhumane treatment in the eyes of smugglers.

For example, some smugglers in Agadez from the Tuareg and Tubus ethnic groups stated that the ‘passengers’, those who come from the coastal countries, were inferior to them (Observation, Wirtz, Agadez, 2018). Often, these people were denigrated because of their lack of knowledge of the desert. This perception can be seen in the following quote by an ex-smuggler, explaining what happens to migrants and refugees abandoned by their driver in the desert:

They [the migrants] don't know that you shouldn't walk the desert. When you're out of water, you must stay in one place. Don't lose hope, hold on to hope. If you keep this hope, perhaps God will send someone to save your life. That's how they die. They walk off, in a row. Then it's over, they're dead. (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018)⁴²

Migrants and refugees, particularly if they have black skin, face different forms of racism. A Somali man, talking about Libyan smugglers, shared the following:

They don't care about your religion! If you are praying with God, they say: "Why are you praying with God? You are black, God doesn't know you." (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

A young Gambian man recalled the following:

Inside the country [Libya], if you are walking like this, as you are a black man, if they see you they all know you are a stranger. Some people are insulting you. Some people will throw you stones; many, many things like that. Some people also will have understood these people are people they can use for work. Some people will pay you. Some people may give you work, but after, when the work is finished, they will not pay you. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

⁴² This interview was also published in the documentary Tegahdez Agadez (Wirtz, 2019).

Not being paid for work performed is a common experience for migrants and refugees in Libya. Several interviewees explained that they had been treated like, or called, slaves. A man, who had been imprisoned in Tajoura detention centre, recalled the following:

Every morning when someone comes there, he says: We need five eubayd”, which means 5 slaves. “I need five slaves.” Everybody that is hearing that one, they are feeling angry. (Interviewee 1199, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

An Eritrean man described how he had been treated in Kufra, Southeast Libya:

They forced me to work with Libyan people in a garden for six months, without getting money. I was not working for a salary. I was working during the day and during the night I was sleeping in the hall with the other people. He said that if I was not going to work, he would hit me. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As described in the previous section, slavery is part of the historical context of Libya. Nowadays, it is still common to meet migrants or refugees, like the Eritrean man quoted above, who have been forced into slavery.

Blocking movement in Libya

The migrants and refugees also have an awareness of how policies are affecting them and creating certain realities, on which they comment in the interviews. The policies aimed at discouraging migrants and refugees from traveling in northern Africa and Libya's neighbouring countries have had a major impact on human trafficking. As movement itself has been pushed into the realm of illegality, migrants and refugees have become even more vulnerable. It is not possible for them to turn to law enforcement officials if they face abuse by smugglers, traffickers or others. Therefore, they remain hidden and their problems invisible. Journalist Sara Creta explained:

Migration is like a movement of people. The link is: as soon as you make this a crime, and you use detention, you increase smugglers, you increase trafficking. Because now these people, all of a sudden, are outside of the community. If they are

outside, anything could happen to them. Before, this was a community where the migrants were still sort of within. In some cases it might be smuggling, but not yet trafficking. (Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Smugglers working in Agadez, Niger, saw human trafficking for ransom starting in west-south Libya after law 036-2015 was implemented in Niger (Interviewees 1079 & 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2019). Since then, any form of trade in migration has been repressed in Niger. Smugglers are hunted by security forces. As explained above, smugglers abandon their passengers in the Sahara if they fear being arrested. Migrants and refugees now prefer to pay once they have arrived at their destination. For many people in Agadez, this explains the proliferation of ‘credit houses’⁴³ in southwest Libya. ‘Credit houses’, or human traffickers’ houses, are places in which migrants are locked until they pay for their trip. A smuggler explained:

If after three days, the driver doesn't get his money, he takes [the migrant]. There are ghettos [credit houses] where you can bring people. [The chiefs of those places] will give you the money, the rest is not your problem. [...] Now it is between the chief of the ghetto and the migrant. He likes it or not, his parents will pay the money. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

Further, the same smuggler specifies:

The credit houses started when they started banning crossings to Libya. This is in 2016, late 2016. That's when the credit houses started to set up everywhere, in Sabha, in Bani Walid. Because since they closed the borders, there is no more passage to Libya. That's when the credit houses started. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

Over time, the modus operandi applied in the credit houses became very similar to what is applied in human traffickers (ware)houses, as described by Eritrean refugees. Some human traffickers have also

⁴³ See more on the term ‘credit house’ in the Glossary of Terms.

realised that migrants do not have to be in debt to lock them up and hold them for ransom. An ex-smuggler in Agadez explained:

How to betray migrants? You take the migrants and their money [here, in Agadez]. And then, you call someone there [in Libya], someone who puts migrants in [credit houses] and who sell migrants. You always have his number. You call him. And you say: “A driver is going to bring you people. They have not paid yet. They will pay at the destination [once in Libya]. He answers: “Well, anyway, send them to me. If there are people who have not paid, they will pay. Send them here”. So, this is the story of [credit houses]. This is how the story of manipulating people started. Smugglers started this. And it is smugglers from here who started this. (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018)⁴⁴

The same smuggler stated “Nobody can stop migration; migration is a right” (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018).⁴⁵

Libyan Coast Guard feeding human traffickers

Attempts by Europe and the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent people from crossing the Mediterranean Sea – referred to as the ‘closure of the Mediterranean Sea’ – have had direct consequences for migrants and refugees. A 30-year-old Eritrean man described his attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in winter 2018. He explains how the push back to Libya drives migrants and refugees back into the hands of the human trafficking organisations:

After two days we entered the Mediterranean Sea to go to Italy. Almost four hours. When I am going, I forget all the problems of the store [human trafficker’s house]. I have hope. I will see the sea. Maybe tomorrow, I will enter Italy. I will change my life. Also, I will help my sister and my brother. Also, there are many people in Eritrea, I will help them because I know the way. After four hours, we saw the boat of Italia. Everybody was happy. It was far. That is why one person called the telephone. The connection man had given us a telephone. [He had said:] “When you see the boat from Italy, call them to ask for help”. The driver of the boat called Italy.

⁴⁴ This interview was also published in the documentary Teghadez Agadez (Wirtz, 2019).

⁴⁵ This interview was also published in the documentary Teghadez Agadez (Wirtz, 2019).

But the Italian people called for Libyan soldiers [Libyan Coast Guard], because they cannot enter the international water of Libya. That is why they call Libya. They took all the people. Really at that time, all the people need to die. Really. Because when you are caught, again you will be sold. All the people are thinking [about the fact that] there are many, many connection men⁴⁶ in Libya. The Libyan connection men when they catch you in the sea, they will sell you again. That is why all the people are afraid. Some people want to enter the water. They want to kill themselves because they don't want to see that bad life again. So, when caught, we returned back to Libya. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

An Eritrean teenager described a similar experience, but he added that some of the passengers in the boat were directly sold to human traffickers from the wharf:

We tried to enter the Mediterranean Sea. [...] In a boat. Almost 270 people. One boat. All Eritreans. Maybe a few were Ethiopian. After going for seven hours, we were cut by the Libyan Coast Guard. We were brought back to Libya. When I was on the ground of the ship, even when we were returned, I'm thinking that I have reached Italy. [I was in the bottom of the ship], I couldn't see, even the Libyan Coast Guard or the Italian ship. When I reach the ground, I'm expected that I had reached Italy. Unfortunately, I saw some guards from Libya. After that, separately, 30 people were brought back to Qasr bin Ghashir [detention centre]. Unfortunately, 38 persons from us, they were kidnapped by the Libyan Coast Guard. Actually, we don't know what happened to them. [...] Actually, we think that maybe they are kidnapped, but we don't have an idea but, sometimes they do things like this. Some are going back to the detention centre and some people are kidnapped in order to take money from them. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

⁴⁶ In this context, the term 'connection men' is used by migrants and refugees to refer to the person at the top of the network in which they are trafficked (see Glossary of Terms).

A Nigerian man who was interviewed in the south of Tunisia described in detail the collaboration that sometimes exists between the rescue teams, the Libyan Coast Guard and human traffickers:

That was on 25 November 2018, he organised pushing one boat. That was a Sunday. [...] Unfortunately, we couldn't confirm [make the crossing]. Our boat had a problem in the Mediterranean Sea. We journeyed for like 12 hours in the Mediterranean Sea. Even an NGO came. Because we called them. They came with a helicopter. They threw life jackets to us. All of us we received a tube, this motorcycle tube. I can say that everybody was protected. We still have life jackets. So our boat had a problem. So, by the grace of God, nobody died in the boat. Even, there was a woman that came with her baby, like one-year-old baby. And six-year-old daughter. So, by the grace of God, nobody died in that boat. So, we called the rescue. The rescue [boat] came. They threw the life jackets. When we were waiting even the water rescue [boat] came, they parked on one side and they watched us – though it was not the rescue ship. They were there looking at us. They were waiting for the main rescue ship to come. Unfortunately, our boat had a problem. Our boat broke up. So, everybody, most of the women were crying, all of that. So, we were there, waiting. Because our captain he was about to drive to meet the ship that was parked there. But all of a sudden, the Libyan Coast Guard came. They arrested us and they brought us back to Libya, to the main city of Khoms. And we had to stay there. That was on Tuesday. We were rescued on a Tuesday. We stayed there, from Tuesday to Friday. We were in pandemonium in that particular place. We had to stay there. So the Libyans, the wicked Libyans, they decided that they will release us, but they will release us like, five by five in number. Not knowing that they have planned to sell everybody to those stupid, to those wicked Asma boys⁴⁷ [human traffickers]. (Interviewee 1030, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Those testimonies – which are only the testimonies of the survivors – show how laws, adopted far away, can have a direct and decisive impact on the life of migrants and refugees. They are the testimonies of drowned hopes, following the closure of the Mediterranean Sea.

⁴⁷ ‘Asma boys’ is a term mainly used by migrants from West Africa to refer to armed people who kidnap migrants and refugees in the streets.

Push backs feeding human trafficking

The ‘closure’ of the Mediterranean Sea has not only led to more deaths, but it has also meant that escaping from Libya is more difficult. A human trafficking cycle has emerged, with migrants being arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard at sea, imprisoned in DCIM detention centres, and from there either sold to human traffickers or released and asked to pay again to cross the Mediterranean Sea (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*). For the three Eritrean refugees quoted below, the closure of the Mediterranean Sea had prompted human traffickers to increase human right abuses and extortion:

In 2015, 2016, it was fine to cross the Mediterranean [Sea], but after that, the chance was very small. The Mediterranean was closed. [...] That is why the smugglers, the traffickers, they don't want to send you if you have paid one time. You will pay one time, they will sell you. You will pay three times... Life is like that. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

As well as prices increasing, refugees are being sold and resold:

Before 2016, every Libyan smuggling worker did not know anything. The Eritrean smugglers [were] paid by dinars. Now everything is known. So, if one Libyan catches you, he wants from you USD 8,000, USD 10,000. Even if you pay, he can sell you [again]. [...] First, we discuss with the smuggler, USD 3,800. After that, when they send us to Sabratha, they try to send a thief. Then the thief asks us for more money. Then the thief says, don't worry, I will out you [let you out]. Just pay USD 1,700 USD. So, you pay USD 1,700. And then the thief again asks us for USD 5,000. That's in Sabratha. Just like a ball. We are a ball, those smugglers are the players. (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Even those who have paid large sums do not always survive:

There are people who paid, raised money [ranging] from about 10,000 to 20,000 [US] dollars, yet they couldn't make it alive. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The majority of interviews with migrants and refugees conducted for this book were carried out between 2019 and 2021. As time passed, the researcher observed that it became more common for refugees to

report being resold or re-kidnapped and forced to pay the ransom several times.

Migrants and refugees as collateral damage in the civil war

As mentioned in the literature review, the war in Libya has had a great impact on migrants and refugees. The clashes that took place in the spring of 2019 left a mark on the minds of African migrants and refugees. Some of them have ideas about the engagement of Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan conflict, and they have positive and negative feelings about this. Some of them stated that Haftar's troops had 'liberated' them. A Senegalese woman interviewed in Agadez a few months after her return from Libya explained:

President Khalifa Haftar [...] is the best president for Libya. Since he started to take over the country, the life of migrants is getting better. He has reduced the suffering. Whenever he finds a prison, he breaks it. (Interviewee 4001, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

Some detainees described being released from human trafficking warehouses in Bani Walid by the troops of Haftar. A Senegalese man shared the following:

Yes, Haftar's army, they came there and broke the whole prison, then we went out. Everyone ran. We entered the village. We had no shoes. When I came out, I only had a pair of slim panties. [...] They came to break all the prisons. Then we were taken out. There were 150 of us. (Interviewee 4002, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

Another migrant who was waiting to be returned to Senegal explained that Haftar's troops liberated him from Tariq al Matar detention centre:

We stayed there for four months like that, the flight for Senegal didn't come. Then Haftar's people came and broke the prison of Tariq al Matar. They broke the whole prison, then they let us out, then I came back to Tripoli. (Interviewee 4003, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

However, from the point of view of this research, whether or not the troops of Khalifa Haftar have a policy of freeing migrants and refugees from the hands of human traffickers remains speculation.

Conflict providing a push towards Europe

The insecurity in Libya, intensified by the conflict, is pushing more people to take the dangerous journey to Europe over the Mediterranean Sea. A Guinean man, who attempted the crossing of the Sea in October 2019, explained:

I was there. It was hard for us, that's why we say we're going to try our luck to leave Libya. [...] Because there we were stuck. Haftar took the plane up to come and bomb. There were deaths, so many deaths, that I can't stay there now. I left there. I asked the Africans who knows a good network to leave, they gave me the number of an Arab in Zuwarah. I contacted the Arab. He asked us for 2,000 Libyan dinars [USD 405] [to cross the Mediterranean Sea]. (Interviewee 1045, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Others fled to neighbouring countries, like this Cameroonian man living in Tunis:

After everything that happened, the war that started there... the problems with Khalifa Haftar and with the explosions... So we found ourselves in Tunisia quickly. There we worked a bit. If I was in Tripoli [there would be] the troubles of the war every day and night. Always explosions. I'm a bit traumatised. I took the road to Tunisia. (Interviewee 1036, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

When asked what the impact of peace on migration in Libya would be, a smuggler interviewed in Agadez answered as follows:

If there is peace, the credit houses [human traffickers' holding places] at the level of Libya will stop. There are kidnappings because there is no peace. Everybody is free and controls at home [on his territory]. That's why it continues and why they continue to kidnap people, because there is no government, nothing. But if there is peace, I hope that all the credit houses will be closed. (Interviewee 1080, personal communication with Moussa, face-to-face, 14 October 2020)

The insecurity, the proliferation of armed groups and their empowerment to fight against illegal migration have actually led to more and more people trapped in the human trafficking cycle. Bani Walid is now nicknamed the 'ghost city' by migrants. No one will ever know how many bodies have fallen in the desert and in the sea.

Discussion

In an attempt to control the ‘migration crisis’, Europe has externalised its borders. The Libyan Coast Guard is arresting migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean Sea to bring them back to Libya where they are incarcerated in detention centres or sold to human traffickers. An interviewee for this chapter explained that some of the boat passengers preferred to die in the water than to be brought back to Libya (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Similar testimonies have been published in various press articles (Carretero, 2019; Medina, 2019).

Publications by academics, experts and leading NGOs denounce the forced returns to Libya, which they say are fuelling human trafficking (Contreras, 2016; Creta, 2021; Hayden, 2022). It has been demonstrated by the testimonies given for this chapter that the Libyan Coast Guard collaborates with the smugglers/traffickers; as they are in charge of intercepting migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, they are in a position to ‘conduct business’ by letting smugglers/traffickers work in their territory or by selling the migrants and refugees they have intercepted to the traffickers (Contreras, 2016; Eaton, 2018; Malakooti, 2019).

As well as the externalisation of Europe’s borders, the containment policies in Libya’s neighbouring countries have also had an impact on human trafficking. The fact that in 2016, for example, the Sudanese government started deporting Eritrean refugees to Eritrea has led to Eritreans taking the route to Libya or Egypt, where they risk falling into the hands of human traffickers (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). In Niger, Wirtz observed how the adoption of law 036/2015 repressing any form of trade in migration has criminalised an activity that previously took place under the supervision of the authorities. Smugglers who take convoys of migrants to Libya are now severely repressed (Wirtz, 2017). The smugglers testifying in this chapter explained how this has contributed to the proliferation of ‘credit houses’ in Libya. Migrants and refugees are now travelling in complete illegality, which has made them even more vulnerable. As

they have no legal status in Libya, they cannot turn to law enforcement if they face abuse of any kind. Hence, they remain hidden.

The Libyan civil war has also fuelled human trafficking, with the proliferation of armed groups, which include the facilitation of the activities of human traffickers in their business model. Migrants and refugees encountered for the purpose of this book have explained how the war has impacted on their migration journey. However, a limitation of the research is that most of the migrants and refugees interviewed had travelled through areas controlled by the UN-backed government, whereas the information obtained from Haftar backed areas is scarce. Hence, any analysis of the impact of the war on migration would be entirely speculative.

For the UN's special rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, by indirectly participating in bringing people back to Libya, the EU could be complicit in crimes against humanity under international law:

If European countries are paying Libya to deliberately prevent migrants from reaching the safety of European jurisdiction, we're talking about complicity in crimes against humanity because these people are knowingly being sent back to camps governed by rape, torture and murder. (Hodal, 2018)

Brachet (2010) calls the intricate interplay between the legal structures and agreements, which frame certain situations as more or less 'legal', and what is actually happening on the ground as 'remoteness'. He suggests that through this concept we can obtain a better grasp of the actual consequences or unintended effects of the policies in terms of what happens on the ground. This requires an anthropological in-depth study of the situation (Brachet, 2010). It is clear from this research that the policies designed to stop migration are not having the intended effect and, due to 'remoteness', are not being applied on the ground.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to give the spatio-temporal context (current and historic) of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, from

an external perspective, and set the background for the chapters to come, which present a more emic point of view. And, as can be seen from this chapter, in Libya, the past is not past. After their travel in North Africa in 1828, Denham, Clapperton and Oudney wrote:

The horrid consequences of the slave trade were strongly brought to our mind, and although its horrors are not equal to those of the European trade, still they are sufficient to call us every sympathy, and rouse up every spark of humanity.
(Denham, Clapperton & Oudney, 1828, p. 124)

If a journalist could picture the area around some wells in the Sahara or enter a human trafficker's house, we can assume they might find something similar to what these explorers saw two centuries ago.

Hence, to understand smuggling and trafficking in Libya, it is important to remember that people have been earning a living from crossing the Sahara for centuries. It is only in recent years that external actors like the EU have sought to regulate or curb this practice. In addition, the slave trade in sub-Saharan African people by Arabs spans thirteen centuries. This has left a mark on the culture, with sub-Saharan African's perceive by Arabs as the 'other'.

Attempts to outlaw migration on the Central Mediterranean route, while they may have curbed the number of people risking their lives on the route, have increased human trafficking activities and the vulnerability of migrants and refugees. Several interviewees explained that the 'credit houses' appeared only after the criminalisation of smuggling. People on the move are now circulating illegally and have no access to the police or to justice.

In addition, the closure of the Mediterranean Sea has also increased the dangerousness of this migration path. According to the testimonies presented in this chapter, the Libyan Coast Guard intercepts migrants and refugees at sea and brings them back to Libya. This situation is perceived to be feeding human trafficking for ransom because, as detailed in Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, migrants and refugees are sold to human traffickers, either directly by the Libyan Coast Guard or by the guards working in the official detention centres. Having been returned to

Libya, most seek to leave again. This means that, sooner or later, they will return to a smuggler or human trafficker to facilitate the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. This can be referred as the human trafficking cycle, a term first coined in 2014. The situation is exacerbated by the current civil war in Libya, with refugees becoming collateral victims or forced to flee clashes (see Chapter 14: “*Dead-dead*”: *Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*).

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Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz is the author of several sections in this chapter and provided a first edit of the final version. Dion Ferdi de Vries provided an early draft of this chapter and authored several sections in this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen provided input and edited the overall text.

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Chapter 6

Enslaved by their Own Government: Indefinite National Service in Eritrea⁴⁸

Sara Palacios-Arapiles

Introduction

This book, to which the present chapter is a contribution, looks at human trafficking for ransom in Libya, with a focus on Eritreans. Although people from various nationalities fall victim to human trafficking for ransom, in the Horn of Africa, Eritreans seem to make up the vast majority. In understanding why this is so, it is important to look at the situation in Eritrea that is causing them to flee. While many factors have been identified as driving the exodus from Eritrea (see Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*), the main driver identified by refugees is compulsory conscription into Eritrea's indefinite national service.

Eritreans are currently forcefully conscripted into national service, which is indefinite and requires them to engage in tasks that are beyond a 'purely military character'. These include economic development activities, work for private companies and even domestic work for their superiors, for which they receive little or no pay. Deserting or evading national service is heavily punished and refugees describe being tortured and detained in inhumane conditions. The control exercised over conscripts deprives them of their individual liberty and autonomy, leaving many in a state of 'false consciousness', even years after having left Eritrea. This enables the government to exercise powers 'attaching to the right of ownership' over them. This chapter finds that this level of control constitutes slavery under international law.

⁴⁸ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

Compulsory conscription is at the heart of Eritrea's national structure. What was originally prescribed by law to be a 6-month period of military training followed by 12 months of "active military service and development tasks in military forces" (Proclamation No. 82/1995, Art. 8, State of Eritrea, 1995) was extended indefinitely in May 2002 under the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC) (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; Kibreab, 2009; 2013; 2017a; 2017b; Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2013). With the WYDC, President Isaias Afwerki, the head of the Eritrean state,⁴⁹ transformed the statutory 18-month national service into an indefinite and open-ended conscription for anyone – male or female – officially from the age of 18 to 40,⁵⁰ but in practice this extends much longer (up to 57 for men and 47 for women) (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; Landinfo, 2015; Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2009), and citizens may also be conscripted before reaching the lower age limit.

Van Reisen, Saba and Smits (2019) point out that, for Eritreans in Eritrea, "[t]here is no alternative to national service" (p. 125). Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995), which regulates national service,⁵¹ does not allow for conscientious objection or

⁴⁹ Eritrea is ruled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ); no other political party has been allowed since Eritrea gained independence in 1991. The Constitution, which was ratified in 1997, has never entered into force. The country has been described as a "highly centralized, authoritarian regime under the control of President Isaias Afwerki" (US Department of State, 2019a); as well as a "dictatorial regime" (Court of Amsterdam, 2016), a "totalitarian" state (Higher Administrative Courts of Hessen, Hamburg; Münster, and Saarland, as cited in Palacios-Arapiles 2022a), and an "authoritarian" state (German Federal Government, 2019). In this sense, the terms 'Eritrea,' 'government', 'country', 'state', 'PFDJ' and 'Isaias Afwerki' are used interchangeably in this chapter to denote the Eritrean political system.

⁵⁰ Art. 8 of Proclamation No. 82/1995 on national service states that "all Eritreans citizens from the age of 18 to 40 years have the compulsory duty of performing Active national service" (State of Eritrea, 1995).

⁵¹ The terminology favoured and used by the author in other contributions is 'military/national service programme' or its acronym 'MNSP'. However, to keep consistent with the terminology of the present edited volume, in this chapter the author uses the term 'national service'.

alternative service (UN Human Rights Council, 2014; 2015; US Department of State, 2019b; Amnesty International, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2009; 2021; UNHCR, 2011). Nor does it permit exemptions, except for former freedom fighters (see Art. 12, Proclamation No. 82) and “citizens who suffer from disability such as invalidity, blindness, physiological derangement” (Art. 14(5)).⁵² However, the former group (i.e., former freedom fighters), as well as those who have already been discharged or completed national service, are subject to compulsory service in the national reserve army, officially until they reach the age of 50 (Art. 23(2)), but, in reality, this can be much longer. Members of the reserve army are required to accept calls for mobilisation and military training; to that end, they must be “ready physically and mentally in all circumstances” (Art. 25). Besides the reserve army, the People’s Army, or so-called ‘militia’, was created in March 2012 as an extension of national service. It is made up of citizens in their sixties and seventies, who are also required to undertake additional military training and accept mobilisation at any time (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

While some national service conscripts are assigned to military roles in the army, others perform civilian duties in the administration, ministries, schools, hospitals, and judiciary (UN Human Rights Council, 2014; 2016). These assignments or postings are determined by the government, often based on its own demands and needs, rather than people’s capabilities or choices (UN Human Rights Council,

⁵² Proclamation No.11/1991 (State of Eritrea, 1991), which regulated national service prior to the promulgation of Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995), included among the citizens exempt from national service married women and single mothers. Although Proclamation No. 82/1995 removed these exemptions, “many married women and single mothers continue to be *de facto* exempted, *at the discretion of recruiting officers* [emphasis added]” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; see also Mekonnen, 2009). For instance, according to citizens living in the city of Keren in Eritrea, married women were conscripted in May 2015 (Palacios-Arapiles, 2015). A female draftee whom the author interviewed in November 2019 said that she was forced to continue in national service after marriage, without pay, as a form of punishment for getting married without obtaining official permission from her superiors (FGD 2, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face to face, November 2019).

2016; Amnesty International, 2013). Members of the government and senior military officers also use national service conscripts, and sometimes members of the militia, to work on private construction sites, farms, mining operations, infrastructure projects, and enterprises owned and operated by the military and PFDJ elite, as well as to provide manual labour for the government's development programmes (UN Human Rights Council, 2014; 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Stevis-Gridneff, 2020; Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019; Amnesty International, 2013). In addition, the government 'lends' national service conscripts to foreign companies operating in Eritrea (Tesfagorgis, Hagos, Zere & Mekonnen, 2018; Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019). In that sense, national service in Eritrea is much broader than military service, as it encompasses work in the civil and private sectors and extends indefinitely.

Following a two-year long investigation into violations of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea) found that national service constitutes slavery under the terms of the 1926 Slavery Convention (UN Human Rights Council, 2016). Having analysed the aspects of national service that satisfy the definitional threshold of slavery, the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea concluded that national service serves primarily to: (i) "boost the economic development of the nation, profit state-endorsed enterprises"; and (ii) "maintain control over the Eritrean population in a manner inconsistent with international law" (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 234). The control is described in a social, economic and political sense as well as relating to people's autonomy and liberty.

Several authoritative pronouncements on national service have adhered to the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea's finding on control, although in isolation from its context, i.e., *slavery*. Notably, the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) Committee of Experts – the body mandated to examine the compliance of states with international labour standards and legal instruments – subscribes to the Commission's finding that national service serves "to maintain control over the Eritrean population" (ILO, 2018). This finding has

also been endorsed by a number of asylum courts in Europe. The United Kingdom (UK) Upper Tribunal Immigration and Asylum Chamber (UK Upper Tribunal), in its latest Country Guidance on Eritrea,⁵³ held that the available evidence strongly suggests that the policy imperatives of the Eritrean government are driven “by domestic concerns about the maintenance of control and regulation of their own population” (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016, para. 367). Similarly, the Swedish Migration Court of Appeal, in a guiding decision of 2017,⁵⁴ highlighted the “Eritrean government’s desire to control National Service conscripts” (Migration Court of Appeal, 2017). While bypassing its meaning in law, the UK Upper Tribunal and the Swedish Migration Court of Appeal attached significance to the Eritrean government’s control over conscripts to conclude that draft evaders and deserters should be granted refugee status (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a). In sharp contrast, several Higher Administrative Courts in Germany have relied on the same two findings of the Commission of Inquiry (stated above), including the government’s control over the population, to refuse Eritrean applications for refugee status (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a).

In the literature, there is also a certain level of consensus that the government exercises control over national service conscripts. For instance, according to Kibreab, national service “has enabled the government to keep tens of thousands of Eritreans in perpetual control and exploitation” (Kibreab, 2013, p. 363). In the view of Tronvoll and Mekonnen, the objective of the PFDJ “was to develop a mass party organisation which through its structure was able to

⁵³ In the UK, Country Guidance case law is used as a tool in determining refugee status. It provides authoritative guidance on the situation in a particular country or region, which needs to be considered by the asylum decision-makers in the UK until fresh evidence demonstrates that the country conditions have changed (Joshi, 2020; Thomas, 2008).

⁵⁴ Unlike in the UK, in Sweden, the Migration Court of Appeal (which is the court of last resort for asylum matters) does not issue Country Guidance. Rather, it issues guiding decisions, which provide guidance on legal issues, but not on the situation in a particular country, to lower courts and the Migration Agency (Stern, 2013).

mobilise and control all citizens and societal activity in the country” (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014, p. 73). Van Reisen, Saba and Smits have also underlined the “high degree of control” exercised by President Afwerki over the lives of Eritreans in national service (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019, p. 137).

While there appears to be agreement on the presence of control over national service conscripts, what this really means from a normative point of view is not clear from the foregoing sources. This chapter focuses on this point. It is guided by the following research question: *To what extent does the control exercised over conscripts in national service in Eritrea reach the level of slavery under international law?*

Following this introduction, the next section presents the research methods employed in the research for this chapter. This is followed by a conceptual discussion of the meaning of slavery under international law and the element of control (versus ownership), based primarily on the jurisprudence of international tribunals and courts pertaining to cases of slavery. The chapter then turns to a discussion of how national service in Eritrea has been described as forced labour, but not slavery, in multiple sources and why a proper application of the legal definition of slavery to the Eritrean context is important. The meaning of the two factual elements in the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea’s passage discussed above are then unpacked. First, the use of national service labour for the country’s economic development is examined; the author argues that this, among other factors, makes national service fall under the category of *forced labour*, contrary to international labour legal instruments. In the subsequent section, primary data collected from national service draft evaders and deserters, supplemented by institutional and human rights organisations reports, is presented and analysed to determine whether the level of control exercised over national service conscripts is indicative of *slavery*. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Methodology

This chapter is part of a socio-legal doctoral research project analysing the elements and patterns of slavery in Eritrea’s national service in

terms that are meaningful to asylum decision-makers and refugee law practitioners and scholars (see UK Research and Innovation, n.d.; Palacios-Arapiles, 2021). The analysis draws on data from both primary and secondary sources. Diverse methods of data collection were used, including a desk review and fieldwork.

The desk review encompassed scholarly literature, reports of government entities, international and non-governmental organisations, as well as legal sources. The latter included international legal instruments, Eritrean domestic law, and judicial decisions on Eritrean asylum applications by various European courts. It also included a review of the case law from regional and international courts and tribunals pertaining to slavery. Although there is insufficient space in this chapter to provide a full account of this case law, the author has carried out an exhaustive analysis of existing judgments on slavery in order to identify patterns and draw conclusions.

The fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 50 respondents from Eritrea; it was carried out over a 6-month period, from October 2019 to March 2020, in several locations in Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.⁵⁵ All of the interviews and FGDs were conducted in person in English, with translations in Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Saho, or Arabic when required. All were recorded (except for one at the request of the respondent), transcribed, and subsequently analysed. Respondents were invited to participate in the research using the snowball sampling technique and by directly contacting refugee service providers and trusted members of different Eritrean communities. As Eritrea is a multi-faith and multi-ethnic society,

⁵⁵ The fieldwork research was conducted in compliance with the University of Nottingham's *Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics* (<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicservices/documents/academic-misconduct/code-of-research-conduct-and-research-ethics-version-6-2016.pdf>) and was approved by School of Law Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham.

respondents were from various ethnic groups, including Bilen, Jeberti,⁵⁶ Kunama, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrinya, as well as from Muslim and Christian backgrounds. While most of the respondents were men (40), some women (10) were also interviewed. This was important to take account of any religious, ethnic and gender differences there could be in the way that national service is implemented. Due to ethical considerations, only adults were interviewed.

All of the respondents had either deserted or evaded national service and most had subsequently been granted either refugee status or complementary forms of protection in one of the countries referred to in the previous paragraph.⁵⁷ A few were still in the asylum seeking process, while a group in Switzerland was denied international protection owing to a change in policy towards Eritrean asylum applications (see Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a; UN Human Rights Council, 2020; 2019; 2018). The sample does not claim to be representative, but it typifies features common shared by most Eritreans affected by national service. The data gathered from the respondents is consistent with the testimonies reported by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; 2016) and the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea (e.g., UN Human Rights Council, 2022; 2019; 2018; 2014; 2013). The data are also aligned with reports of non-governmental human rights organisations, most notably Amnesty International (e.g., 2015; 2013) and Human Rights Watch (e.g., 2019; 2009). Owing to government restrictions on independent research in the country, these sources also rely on interviews with

⁵⁶ Jeberti is not officially recognised as a separate ethnic group in Eritrea, although this group makes a persistent claim for such recognition. Insofar as respondents from that group identified themselves as Jeberti, as a distinct ethnic group, the author considers them as belonging to the Jeberti ethnic group.

⁵⁷ In relation to these differences, the author has argued elsewhere that during the process of interpreting the definition of a refugee and applying it to the context of national service in Eritrea, the definition is subject to varying interpretations, as a result of which the treatment of similarly situated Eritrean asylum applications differs from one European country to another (see Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a).

Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers. Due to security and ethical considerations, data remains anonymous.

As the following sections illustrate, the data gathered from the interviews indicate that Eritreans have been subjected to a high degree of control by the Eritrean government, as a result of which even feelings and thoughts are commonly concealed. With that in mind, some of the questions that the author asked had to be unpacked or simplified, as will be shown. In addition, the author engaged in a trust-building process during the interviews and FGDs, so as not to be regarded as an ‘authority’ figure, which could make the respondents feel pressured or coerced to respond. To that end, the author also explained thoroughly the information contained in the consent form, in particular that participation was entirely voluntary, could be terminated at any point, and that a complaint mechanism was in place should they have any concerns or complaints about how the research was conducted. Furthermore, the author continuously highlighted throughout the conversations the importance of the respondent’s personal views and own thoughts. All things considered, this allowed many of the respondents to speak at ease and, on some occasions, helped them to (re)gain agency and self-confidence. After the interviews and FGDs, some respondents reported feeling relieved after expressing themselves.

The following sections present the results of the desk review and the findings of the fieldwork.

The definition of slavery: Ownership vs control

Slavery is defined in Art. 1(1) of the 1926 Slavery Convention, which reads: “Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (League of Nations, 1926).⁵⁸ From the language of this definition, it

⁵⁸ This definition is replicated in the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (as conceptually distinct from ‘institutions and practices similar to slavery’

would appear that slavery requires the ‘ownership’ of a person, that is, that slavery can only exist if a person is legally owned. However, despite claims to the contrary by Kibreab (2009) and various asylum courts in Europe (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b; 2021), which will be discussed in the next section, this is not necessarily the case. Such an interpretation does not correspond with the wording of the 1926 definition, which refers to “*powers attaching to* [emphasis added] the right of ownership” (League of Nations, 1926) as opposed to ownership *per se*.⁵⁹ This narrow interpretation of slavery as dependent on ownership also departs normatively from how the definition of slavery has been interpreted and applied by international courts of law and tribunals, which, as the following discussion shows, have taken a very different approach.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was the first international tribunal to pronounce on the meaning of the 1926 definition of slavery. It did so in the *Kunarac* case, which dealt with commanders of the Bosnian Serb Army, who for months held Bosnian Muslim women in captivity, subjected them to repeated rape, and compelled them to perform household chores. In this case, the ICTY Appeals Chamber held that the “traditional concept of slavery, [...] often referred to as ‘chattel slavery’, has evolved to encompass various contemporary forms of slavery which are also based on the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership” (ICTY Appeals Chamber, 2002, para. 117). It then observed that:

[...] the law does not know of a “right of ownership over a person”. Article 1(1) of the 1926 Slavery Convention speaks more guardedly “of a person over whom any or

– also referred to as ‘servile status’ – such as ‘serfdom’ or ‘debt bondage’) (UN ECOSOC, 1956), and in the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court under the name ‘enslavement’ (UN General Assembly, 1998).

⁵⁹ “Powers attaching to” is expressed in the French version of the Convention as “*les attributs*” and in the Spanish version as “*los atributos*”. Therefore, as Allain explains, the slavery definition “does not speak of a right of ownership, but of exercising the attributes of the right of ownership without necessarily exercising a legal right of ownership” (Allain, 2009, p. 262; see also Allain, 2017).

all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” That language is to be preferred. (ICTY Appeals Chamber, 2002, para. 118; see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b)

The ICTY Trial Chamber enumerated relevant factors that are indicative of the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person, i.e., indicia of slavery. These, which were subsequently upheld by the Appeals Chamber, include: (i) “restriction or control of an individual’s autonomy”; (ii) “restriction or control of [someone’s] movement”, including “measures taken to prevent or deter escape”; (iii) “restriction or control of [...] freedom of choice”; (iv) “control of physical environment”; (v) “psychological control” or “oppression”; (vi) “force, threat of force[,] coercion”, “fear of violence, deception or false promises”; (vii) “duration”; (viii) “assertion of exclusivity”; (ix) “subjection to cruel treatment and abuse”; (x) “control of sexuality”; (xi) “*forced labour* [emphasis added]”; (xii) “the abuse of power”; (xiii) “the victim’s position of vulnerability”; (xiv) “detention or captivity”; and (xv) “socio-economic conditions” (ICTY Trial Chamber, 2001, paras. 542–543).

In dealing with cases of slavery, several international and hybrid courts, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), the Extraordinary African Chambers in Senegal, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice, have endorsed the ICTY’s interpretation of the definition of slavery discussed above (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b). In doing so, these courts have similarly held that legal ownership over people is not required to satisfy the legal definition of slavery; instead, a factual determination must be made in light of the above factors to establish whether or not a particular phenomenon constitutes slavery (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b).⁶⁰ For its part, the European Court of

⁶⁰ Importantly, these tribunals and courts have made it clear that not all of the above factors or indicia of slavery need to be met for a phenomenon to qualify as slavery;

Human Rights (ECtHR), although it first interpreted that slavery requires the exercise of a “genuine right of legal ownership” over a person in *Siliadin v France* (2005), it removed the requirement of ‘legal ownership’ in later judgments, namely, *Rantsev v Cyprus and Russia* (2010) and *M. and Others v Italy and Bulgaria* (2012) (Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; Stoyanova, 2020; see also Allain, 2010).

The ECCC’s interpretation and application of the legal definition of slavery in the *Duch* case is instructive. Under the Khmer Rouge Regime,⁶¹ Prey Sâr Prison (previously known as ‘S-24’) and Security Prison 21 (commonly referred to as ‘S-21’) were used as a re-education camp and a torture and execution centre, respectively, mostly for those seen as enemies of the Regime. In determining whether the condition of inmates in those facilities rose to the level of slavery, the Trial Chamber first replicated a passage of the Pre-Trial Chamber’s Decision that had identified some of the indicia of slavery:

Certain detainees at S21 and Prey Sâr were forced to work. Strict control and constructive ownership was exercised over all aspects of their lives by: limiting their movement and physical environment; taking measures to prevent and deter their escape; and subjecting them to cruel treatment and abuse. As a result of these acts, detainees were stripped of their free will. (ECCC Trial Chamber, 2010, para. 225)

On the lack of free will, for instance, one of the detainees at S-24 described her condition as not having “rights or freedom”, and not being permitted “to make any decision by herself” or “to contest or challenge anything” (ECCC Trial Chamber, 2010, para. 228). The evidence put before the Chamber also showed that the main purpose of S-24 was to “reform and re-educate combatants and farming rice to supply Office S-21 and its branches”; a fact that was supported by the accused, who described it as “to have them work hard for the

and that the ICTY’s list of indicia of slavery is not exhaustive (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b).

⁶¹ ‘Khmer Rouge’ is the name commonly used to refer to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).

benefit of the [Communist Party of Kampuchea], for the production of rice”, and to make them “learn to follow the superior and not to be rude or not to oppose the Party in any case whatsoever” (para. 226).⁶² Unlike S-24, the overall purpose of S-21 was extermination, although a small number of detainees at S-21 were also forced to farm rice. Having analysed the facts, the Trial Chamber concluded that “total power and control” had been exercised over the S-24 detainees as well as over the group of detainees at S-21 who had been selected for forced labour, finding that their forced labour coupled with their detention amounted to slavery (para. 346).

The above verdict was subsequently upheld by the ECCC Supreme Court Chamber on appeal. While the Trial Chamber had only made positive findings on slavery with regard to the detainees assigned to work, the Supreme Court Chamber clarified that the Trial Chamber had not considered forced labour as an essential or necessary element of the legal definition of slavery, and that “no factor was singled out by the Trial Chamber as being of greater relative importance for establishing [slavery]” – forced labour being “merely one factor to be considered among several [others]”⁶³ (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 125). Proceeding with its legal analysis, the Supreme Court Chamber echoed the *Kumarac* Appeal judgment in that the concept of slavery centred on ownership “is not coterminous with ‘chattel slavery’” (para. 155). It observed that the ownership of a human being through the legal system rarely occurs in present times; rather, the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership “is usually possible only within the margins of criminal activity and/or in the situation of *failing or deficient state systems* [emphasis added]” (para. 155).

⁶² The evidence also showed that the Communist Party of Kampuchea used the term “element” to refer to the detainees whom the Party suspected of being enemies. The accused agreed with this and added that “elements” were detained and subjected to forced labour “like [an] animal so that they cannot oppose or fight against the Party” (ECCC Trial Chamber, 2010, para. 227).

⁶³ Here, the Chamber was referring to *Kumarac’s* factors indicative of slavery.

The Supreme Court Chamber went on to explain that slavery “necessarily implies the presence of *behavioural aspects of* [emphasis added] ownership” and, therefore, in going through the checklist of factual indicators of slavery, to which it referred as a “multi-factor analytical approach”:

[A] Chamber must above all identify the indicia of “ownership”, that is, facts pointing to the victim being reduced to a commodity, such that the person is an object of “enjoyment of possession”; that she or he can be used (for example, for sexual purposes); economically exploited; consumed (for purposes of organ harvesting, for example); and ultimately disposed of. (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 156)

The Supreme Court Chamber added that:

Clearly, the exercise over a person of powers attaching to ownership requires a substantial degree of control [emphasis added] over the victim. There is no enslavement, however, where the control has an objective other than enabling the exercise of the powers attaching to ownership. (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 156)

Consistent with the above analysis, the Supreme Court Chamber noted that the overall purpose of exercising control over the S-24 detainees and the small group of detainees at S-21 subjected to forced labour was not to bring about their death – as was the case for the majority at S-21 – but to reform and re-educate them and to farm rice for the Khmer Rouge Regime. The Supreme Court Chamber added that there was no evidence of Office S-21 receiving “some gain from the totality of S-21 detainees or otherwise treating them as [a] commodity” (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 166). Instead, the objective behind the imprisonment and mistreatment of the S-21 detainees (other than the group selected for forced labour) was their extermination, not the exercise of the powers attaching to ownership over them.⁶⁴ This further explains why the Supreme Court

⁶⁴ Actually, the group of S-21 detainees used for forced labour enjoyed better conditions than the rest at S-21 and “notably, survived” (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 166).

Chamber agreed with the Trial Chamber in limiting its finding on slavery only to those detainees at S-21 who had been subjected to forced labour and to the detainees at S-4, because only those detainees were treated as a commodity in order to accrue some gain.⁶⁵ Even if the farming of rice (that is, forced labour) was not present, slavery would still remain, as the gain does – in detaining and reforming the said detainees, the Regime sought to eliminate all real or perceived adversaries of the Party.

Importantly, the exercise of control over a person is not restricted to physical control, that is, a person does not need to be deprived of liberty or autonomy by physical fences to fall within the definition of slavery. For instance, in the case of *Sesay*, deprivation of liberty was achieved in different ways. Hundreds of civilians, including men, women, and children, were abducted from several villages in Sierra Leone by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Following their abduction, some were forced to engage in military training, while others were forced to engage in domestic labour, labour in diamond mines or farms, and the mobilisation of arms, ammunition, food, and any other loads according to the necessities and orders of the AFRC/RUF fighters (SCSL Trial Chamber, 2009). These civilians were not physically confined, instead their movement and labour were controlled through violence⁶⁶ and the threat of physical violence and/or death. They were also controlled by means of deception. A large group was taken to AFRC/RUF camps and told that they were not allowed to move freely outside the confines of the camps for their own protection. They were made to believe that “if they escaped they would meet certain death at the hands of the enemy” (para. 1325). The SCSL Trial Chamber was of the view that this “fear-based

⁶⁵ Importantly, the Court pointed out that such gain does “not need to be monetary” (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 157).

⁶⁶ Civilians who attempted to escape or committed other perceived breaches of the AFRC/RUF rules were beaten or killed. There were also checkpoints, for instance, surrounding mining sites to prevent their escape.

manipulation” – which even misled some civilians to seek ‘safety’ in the camps – “was intended to control the population”, including their movement, so that they could “use them as forced labour in furtherance of the RUF war efforts” (para. 1325). Consequently, the Trial Chamber made positive findings on slavery, including with regard to the civilians forced to undergo military training, which it considered as constituting forced labour.⁶⁷ In a later case – *Taylor* – the SCSL Appeals Chamber similarly found that slavery was committed against civilians “to achieve the RUF/AFRC’s military and political goals, specifically in order to support and sustain the RUF/AFRC and enhance its military capacity and operations” (SCSL Appeals Chamber, 2013, para. 271).

In all of the cases in which it dealt with slavery, the SCSL Trial Chamber has considered that deprivation of liberty also covers situations in which the victims are “unable to leave as they would have nowhere else to go and feared for their lives” (SCSL Trial Chamber, 2007, para. 709; 2009, para. 161; 2012, para. 420). This consideration draws from the *Kunarac* case, in which the ICTY made positive findings on slavery, notwithstanding the fact that the door of the place where some of the victims were kept was left open on some occasions. According to the ICTY Trial Chamber, the victims were nonetheless “psychologically unable to leave, as they would have had nowhere to go had they attempted to flee [and] were also aware of the risks involved if they were re-captured” (ICTY Trial Chamber, 2001, para. 750). These verdicts have been cited with approval by the ICC Trial Chamber (2019, para. 952; 2021, para. 2713). In doing so, the Chamber observed that deprivation of liberty “may take various forms”, including “situations in which the victims may not have been physically confined” (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021, para. 2713), and, therefore, special consideration must be given to “the subjective

⁶⁷ The Chamber found that such military training constituted forced labour, as “it was a preparatory step to forcing these civilians to the front lines of the RUF’s military efforts or to becoming the bodyguards of the RUF Commanders” (SCSL Trial Chamber, 2009, para. 1487).

nature of such deprivation, that is, the person's perception of his or her situation as well as his or her reasonable fear" (ICC Trial Chamber, 2014, para. 977).

For instance, in the *Ongwen* case, the ICC Trial Chamber found that fighters of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) had subjected hundreds of civilians to slavery in Northern Uganda in the early 2000s. Victims were not physically restrained, instead they lived in the bush under (intermittent) guard. One of the testimonies said: "you are like a prisoner, and every now and then you will be guarded" (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021, para. 1344). Besides violence and threats of violence and/or death made to prevent their escape, some of the victims were led to believe that if they escaped, the government soldiers or other civilians would catch them and kill them, which in turn created a situation of dependence on the LRA fighters for their survival.⁶⁸ Also, those who were forced to remain in the LRA as soldiers were given false or negative information about life outside of the LRA, including preventing them from obtaining information through public radio or broadcasts. Some testimonies show the effect that such manipulation and, more generally, the control under which they lived, had on them. A few of them, for instance, stated that they were not forced, while others did not try to escape believing that the LRA protected them from the enemy (for a detailed discussion, see Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b), something that the author has coined as 'false consciousness' (discussed further below, in the penultimate section). The ICC Trial Chamber found this to be an expression of the general system of control that existed to ensure their obedience to the LRA (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021).

As noted earlier, the ECCC Supreme Court Chamber spelt out some examples/forms of powers attaching to the right of ownership, namely, the enjoyment, use, economic exploitation, consumption, or

⁶⁸ In some instances, LRA fighters released some of the victims from their control, which reinforced the ICC Trial Chamber's finding on slavery, considering that it was an "indication that [the victims] were constrained and could not leave of their own choice" (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021, para. 2196).

disposal of a person (ECCC Supreme Court Chamber, 2012, para. 156). Likewise, in the *Katanga* case (also drawing on *Kunarac*), the ICC Trial Chamber stressed that powers attaching to the right of ownership “may take many forms”, holding that these must be construed as “the use, enjoyment, and disposal of a person who is *regarded as* [emphasis added] a property by placing him or her in a situation of dependence which entails his or her deprivation of any form of autonomy” (ICC Trial Chamber, 2014, para. 975; see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b). This passage was cited approvingly by the Extraordinary African Chambers in Senegal in the case against Hissein Habré, former Head of State of Chad (Extraordinary African Chambers, 2016).

In a similar fashion, the IACtHR, in *Trabajadores de la Hacienda Brasil Verde v Brasil*, observed that, within a phenomenon of slavery, ‘ownership’ should be understood as control over a person that “considerably reduces their autonomy” or that “results in the person’s loss of their own will”⁶⁹ (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2016, para. 271). The IACtHR held that, in that sense, the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership should be construed as “control exercised over a person in a manner that significantly restricts or deprives that person of their individual liberty, with the intent to exploit them through the use, management, benefit, transfer, or divestment of that person”⁷⁰ (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2016, para. 271).

Other examples of powers attaching to the right of ownership include “purchasing, selling, lending or bartering” a person (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021, para. 2711; see also Palacios-Arapiles 2022b), although the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership “need not entail a commercial transaction” (ICC Trial Chamber, 2021, para. 2713; 2019, para. 952; 2014, para. 976; SCSL Trial Chamber, 2007, para. 709; 2012, para. 420; ICTY Trial Judgment,

⁶⁹ Translated from Spanish.

⁷⁰ Translated from Spanish.

2001, para. 542; see also Palacios-Arapiles 2022b). As the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea puts it, victims of slavery in “[...] Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, and in the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s [...] [were] not bought and sold on an open market” (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 223).

According to Jean Allain, a leading scholar on the law of slavery who has analysed the case law pertaining to slavery in great detail (including some of the cases discussed in this section), slavery should be understood as the ability to control a person as they would possess a thing. In Allain’s words, “[o]wnership implies such a background relationship of control” (Allain, 2017, p. 39; see also Allain, 2012a). According to Anthony Honoré, when a person is subjected to slavery, that person is unable to exercise their natural capacities, as they are in a “state of unlimited subordination to another individual” (cited in Allain, 2017, p. 39). Both Allain and Honoré are among the scholars who contributed to the *Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery* (Research Network on the Legal Parameters of Slavery, 2012), which aims to provide an understanding of how the 1926 slavery definition is applicable to contemporary situations. Drawing on their contributions, these guidelines illustrate that control over a person may also manifest in more abstract ways, such as forging a new identity by compelling the person to adopt a new religion, language, or place of residence.

In sum, the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person translates as the exercise of a substantial degree of control that restricts or deprives a person of their individual liberty and/or autonomy, or that results in the person’s loss of own will. Such a level of control enables the slaveholder to, for instance, use, enjoy, benefit, economically exploit, dispose of, transfer, lend, and/or divest a person at their whim, with the intent to accrue some gain. The control exercised is not restricted to physical control; it may be exerted through violence, threat of violence, coercion, deception, or even through more abstract means.

Forced labour, but not slavery?

In a seminal article, now more than a decade ago, Gaim Kibreab aptly described how national service in Eritrea falls within the definition of forced labour in international law (Kibreab, 2009), set forth in Art. 2(1) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention No. 29 (ILO, 1930).⁷¹ He did so after claiming, albeit superficially, that the relationship between the Eritrean state and Eritrean conscripts “is not one of ownership”, thereby discarding the notion that Eritrea’s national service could be considered slavery. However, as illustrated in the previous section, Kibreab’s claim is at odds with the wording of the definition of slavery in international law and, furthermore, departs normatively from how this definition is interpreted and applied by international courts and tribunals (see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a; 2022b; 2021). Despite such crucial shortcoming, it is worth delving into Kibreab’s analysis of forced labour in Eritrea, as it led to a paradigm shift from understanding Eritrea’s national service as compulsory military service to state-imposed forced labour.

Turning to the analysis of forced labour, Kibreab first unpacked the elements of the definition of forced labour in Art. 2(1) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, including: (i) the involuntary nature of the work and (ii) the exaction of work or service “under the menace of any penalty”, to reflect how national service involves these two key elements of forced labour. Kibreab then analysed the prescribed exceptions or exclusions to forced labour listed in Art. 2(2) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, including: Art. 2(2)(a) work or service “of a purely military character” that is “exacted in virtue of compulsory military service laws”; (b) work or service “that forms part of the normal civic obligations of the citizens [...]”;⁷² (d) “work

⁷¹ The European Court of Human Rights has taken this definition as a starting point for its interpretation of the prohibition of forced labour under Art. 4(2) of the European Convention on Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights, 2022).

⁷² Note, Kibreab did not discuss Art. 2(2)(c): “any work or service exacted from any person as a consequence of a conviction in a court of law...”.

or service exacted in cases of emergency”, such as war, calamity, or any circumstance endangering the existence or the well-being of the population; and (e) “minor communal services performed by the members of the community in the direct interest of the said community”, provided that they have “the right to be consulted in regard to the need for such services”. In doing so, he convincingly shows how national service falls outside the permitted exemptions to the definition of forced labour.

According to Kibreab, the extended obligations imposed on Eritrean conscripts go far beyond work or service of a “purely military character”, or what is considered to be “normal civic obligations” or “minor communal services” (Kibreab, 2009). In relation to work or service of a “purely military character”, Kibreab more specifically shows that the work demanded from Eritrean conscripts, as per Proclamation No. 82/1995, is used for the purposes of political education, mobilisation, *economic development*, discipline, and fostering national identity and unity – and is, hence, not for purely military purposes. As for “work or service exacted in cases of emergency”, he argues that, despite subsequent border disputes, the state of emergency in Eritrea ceased when the country signed a peace agreement with Ethiopia in December 2000,⁷³ after the 1998–2000 border conflict, and that, in any case, recourse to forced labour in cases of emergency cannot be extended indefinitely (Kibreab, 2009). This argument is even more relevant today, as Eritrea and Ethiopia ended the dispute over the border between the two countries by means of signing a new peace agreement in July 2018.

Apart from the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2016), country reports on Eritrea have made no attempt to assess whether or not the circumstances that characterise

⁷³ This is known as the Algiers Peace Agreement. It is important to note that a state of emergency was never formally proclaimed in Eritrea; it was a *de facto* state of emergency. Mekonnen argues that it did not end with the aforementioned Agreement, but with the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities between the Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed on 18 June 2000 (Mekonnen, 2006).

Eritrean national service qualify as slavery. Instead, they focus on assessing it as forced labour, predominantly since 2009, the year in which Kibreab published the article discussed above. In its 100-page report *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea*, Human Rights Watch (2009) makes no mention of slavery, restricting its analysis to forced labour, which cites Kibreab's 2009 article. Similarly, since 2008, the annual World Reports by Human Rights Watch (except for the 2009 issue) contain a section on forced labour in the pages dedicated to Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, n.d.; 2022; 2021). Reports by Amnesty International describe national service as amounting to forced labour in violation of international law, but make no reference to slavery (Amnesty International, 2015; 2013). Since 2009, the US State Department's yearly country reports on human rights practices in Eritrea have included a section on forced labour in national service, but they do not contain any separate section on slavery, nor make any mention of it (US Department of State, n.d.). In addition, ILO's Committee of Experts has consistently maintained that Eritrea's national service constitutes forced labour, as it meets the definition set forth in the 1930 Forced Labour Convention and does not fall under any of its permitted exceptions⁷⁴ – however, it has never assessed whether or not national service meets the definitional criteria of slavery. This is possibly because ILO's mandate is restricted to a set of international labour instruments, which the 1926 Slavery Convention is not part of (ILO, n.d.).

The latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Eritrea* (which were first published in 2009 and last revised in 2011), drawing strongly on ILO conventions and materials and Kibreab's 2009 article, highlight relevant factors that make national service fall under the definition of forced labour (UNHCR, 2011). Intervening as a third party in the court proceeding leading to the latest Country Guidance on Eritrea by the UK Upper Tribunal, UNHCR expressed its wish to update its own Guidelines

⁷⁴ For a discussion of this, see the following section.

on Eritrea (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016),⁷⁵ however, these have not yet been revised, at least to date. In this proceeding, UNHCR invited the UK Upper Tribunal to find whether the (re)assignment to national service duties would constitute a breach of the prohibition on servitude or the prohibition on forced labour under Art. 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016). While the latter provision also prohibits slavery, the UNHCR's request remained silent on that.

Similarly, in their respective country of origin information reports on Eritrea, the former European Asylum Support Office⁷⁶ (EASO, 2019; 2016; 2015), as well as various national immigration authorities (see e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; 2017; UK Home Office, 2021; Danish Immigration Service & Danish Refugee Council, 2020; Landinfo, 2015), cite various sources that describe national service as forced labour, including Kibreab's 2009 article (EASO, 2016; 2015; Landinfo, 2015). However, among these reports, only three cite *one* source (each) referring to national service as slavery, although without any further assessment.⁷⁷

In the context of refugee status determination, various national courts in Europe – notably the UK Upper Tribunal (2016), the Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (2018), and the Administrative Court in Malmö, Sweden (2018) – have stated that national service in Eritrea constitutes forced labour. In a similar manner to Kibreab's (flawed) reasoning, the UK Upper Tribunal held that national service, while satisfying the legal criteria of forced labour, cannot constitute

⁷⁵ UNHCR added that before updating its Eligibility Guidelines on Eritrea it “would ideally wish to have full information based on full access to the country” (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016, para. 34).

⁷⁶ The European Union Agency for Asylum replaced EASO in January 2022.

⁷⁷ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council (2020, p. 22) cited a statement by Father Mussie Zerai, an Eritrean Catholic priest and the Chair of the Habeshia Agency, the UK Home Office (2021, p. 36), in turn, cited the 2020 Danish Report, while the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, p. 33).

slavery insofar as Eritrean law does not allow for the “ownership” of people (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; 2022b). The UK Upper Tribunal, thus, interpreted legal ownership over a person as the *sine qua non* of slavery. The Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (2018) and some courts in Germany, namely, the Higher Administrative Court of Hamburg (2021) and the Administrative Court of Gießen (2020), have adhered to the UK Upper Tribunal’s interpretation of slavery in national service at face value (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022b).⁷⁸ It is important to note that, while the UK Upper Tribunal (2016) considered the (re-)assignment to a forced labour system as a harm serious enough to qualify for refugee status, the Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (2018) conversely ruled that, as the right not to be subjected to forced labour is a derogable right – unlike slavery, from which no derogation is permissible – it does not qualify for international protection, *per se*, nor it does protect against removal to Eritrea. To support its argument, it further maintained that national service needs to be understood in the context of the “Eritrean socialist economic system” and the government doctrine of “self-reliance” (Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland, 2018, para. 6.1.5.2). The Higher Administrative Court of Hamburg (2021) and the Administrative Court of Gießen (2020) selectively relied on the latter judgement to reach the same restrictive outcome (see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; 2022a).

The literature on Eritrea’s national service, except for recent contributions by the author of this chapter (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a; 2021), has continued to restrict its assessment to forced labour. The most recent example is Van Reisen, Saba and Smits’ chapter ‘Sons of Isaias’: Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea’ (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019; see also Saleh Mohammad, 2017).

⁷⁸ More problematic is the approach of said German courts, which have ruled that the civilian duties in national service fall within the meaning of a “normal civic obligation” and, therefore, cannot be considered to constitute forced labour (Higher Administrative Court of Hamburg, 2021; Administrative Court of Gießen, 2020).

Although the title refers to slavery, the chapter's research question confined itself to answering the question of whether or not national service constitutes forced labour. The question remains, therefore, as to whether or not what seems undoubtedly to be forced labour, also amounts to slavery. This observation does not ignore the fact that some commentators, including Kibreab, have described forced labour in national service as a “form of modern slavery” (Freedom United, 2022; War Resisters' International, 2020; Duncan Lewis, 2020; Walk Free, 2018; Kibreab, 2009) or a “slavery-like” condition (ILO, 2015b; Kibreab, 2009), in what seems to be an (unnecessary) attempt to ‘upgrade’ Eritrea’s national service to a more serious practice. Yet, such terms have been used rhetorically, but not factually and/or legally, to mean slavery. For instance, Kibreab considered the use of the term ‘slavery’ by Adhanom Gebremariam, a former Eritrean Ambassador and member of the dissident group G-15 (a group of 15 senior government officials who publicly criticised Isaias Afwerki in 2001, resulting in the enforced disappearance of 11 of them), to refer to national service, as a ‘metaphor’ (Kibreab, 2009, p. 49).⁷⁹

The terms ‘modern slavery’ or ‘slavery-like practice’ are increasingly used by international organisations, some scholars, and the public, more generally, to refer to different proscribed practices, such as ‘slavery’, ‘servitude’, ‘institutions and practices similar to slavery’, ‘forced labour’, and ‘human trafficking’. However, all of these practices are conceptually distinct and regulated under different international conventions (Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; 2022a; 2022b; Allain, 2017; Stoyanova, 2017).⁸⁰ Bringing together different legal

⁷⁹ In 2002, Adhanom Gebremariam wrote an essay (in Tigrinya) entitled *The Warsay-Yikaalo Campaign: A Campaign of Slavery*. The use of the word ‘slavery’ to refer to national service after the WYDC may not be accidental, or a metaphor, as Kibreab put it (Kibreab, 2009), given Gebremariam’s knowledge of the national service’s machinery from the inside (Gebremariam, 2002).

⁸⁰ At the international level, ‘slavery’ is defined in the 1926 Slavery Convention; ‘institutions and practices similar to slavery’ are defined and regulated in the 1956

categories under a single umbrella term leads to conceptual ambiguity and confusion (Bunting & Quirk, 2017; see also Allain, 2012b), while courts must make judgments within the definitional limits of each of them separately.⁸¹ Furthermore, as the author has argued elsewhere, the term ‘modern slavery’ contributes to the erroneous belief that slavery belongs to the past only; it creates an unhelpful old/modern dichotomy, which risks construing slavery as confined exclusively to chattel slavery, i.e., the ‘ownership’ of people (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a; 2022b). This, as discussed earlier, has been the preferred interpretation of some asylum courts, which has led, in some cases, to international protection for Eritreans being unduly denied (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a).⁸²

The clear articulation and distinction between forced labour and slavery is important not only in the context of refugee status determination, but also in contexts of conflict, such as the ongoing one in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, in which many national service conscripts, including children, have been forced to participate (Respondent no. 35, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, February 2020; see also UN Human Rights Council, 2022). Unlike forced labour, which is permitted under the 1930 Forced Labour Convention (Art. 2(2)(d)) in cases of emergency – such as in the event of war – although with limitations, slavery remains prohibited in

Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery; ‘forced or compulsory labour’ is defined under the 1930 Forced Labour Convention; and ‘human trafficking’ is defined in the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. None of these conventions refers to the term ‘modern slavery’.

⁸¹ According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), this over-broad approach (that is, the use of the term ‘modern slavery’ to refer to different forms of exploitation) could actually “lead to a dilution of work against slavery and reduce its effectiveness in achieving the objective of eliminating the phenomenon” (OHCHR, 2002, p. 4).

⁸² This misinterpretation of slavery also ignores other historical realities of slavery, which were not characterised by the legal ownership of people (see e.g., Quirk 2006; Schwarz & Nicholson, 2020).

wartime (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2005; Palacios-Arapiles, 2021). And, irrespective of the foregoing, it is important that slavery is called slavery – not watered down by terms such as ‘modern slavery’ or construed as a different legal category based on incorrect interpretations.

Forced labour for the purpose of economic development

As prefaced earlier, national service in Eritrea differs from compulsory military service in other countries due to its extended obligations and indefinite nature, as well as the fact that its goal is to strengthen the government’s economic growth (see e.g., ILO, 2021; Landinfo, 2015; UNHCR, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2009; Kibreab, 2009). As established by Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995), the statutory 18 months of national service includes “active military service and *development tasks* [emphasis added] in military forces” (Art. 8, State of Eritrea, 1995). Furthermore, pursuant to this Proclamation, national service was intended, among other things, to “create a new generation characterised by love of work, discipline, ready to participate and serve in the *reconstruction of the nation* [emphasis added]” and to “*develop [...] the economy of the nation* [emphasis added] by investing in development work of [the Eritrean] people as a potential wealth” (Art. 5, State of Eritrea, 1995).

The use of national service as a means of economic development has been reinforced by Isaias Afwerki on various occasions. Soon after the introduction of the WYDC, in October 2002, Afwerki spelt out publicly the objectives of national service, including contributing to the “country’s growth and development” (Kibreab, 2009, p. 45). In addition to this claim, Afwerki pointed out that safeguarding national security is not, and has never been, the main aim of national service, not even when it started (Kibreab, 2009), which further highlights the

fact that the rationale behind it is not purely military.⁸³ He reiterated similar views in a 2008 interview with Al Jazeera, in which he said:

[...] we have been in a state of war for the last ten years. We have been forced to mobilize the majority of the young ... And we're using that resource to put in place a solid foundation for the economy of our country. (cited in UN Human Rights Council, 2016, para. 208)

Since 2009, the Eritrean government has repeatedly stated in its reports to the ILO Committee of Experts that the work done by national service conscripts focuses on public reforestation, dams, roads, soil and water conservation, as well as reconstruction projects and food security programmes (ILO, 2019; 2018; 2015c; 2011; 2009).

The government's repeated reference to the use of conscripts for economic development purposes further reinforces Afwerki's conception of national service discussed above. The government's assertions are confirmed by data gathered by the author of this chapter from national service deserters in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Besides military duties, some of the respondents were assigned to work as labourers on farms, on construction sites belonging to the government, at mining sites, at the Port of Massawa, and even in the houses of their superiors. In other cases, the respondents were assigned to work in the civil service, including in ministries, the judiciary, schools, government departments, and administrative bodies. In a 2015 documentary

⁸³ In parallel with this, and inconsistent with his statements above, Isaias Afwerki and the Eritrea government have, over the years, argued that the factual situation in Eritrea is characterised as a "no war, no peace" situation. This, in their view, amounts to an emergency situation which justifies national service in its current form. However, while "work or service exacted in cases of emergency" falls outside the definition of forced labour set forth in the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, the ILO organs interpret this exemption as applying only in restricted circumstances confined to *genuine* cases of emergency (ILO, 2018; 2010). In ILO's view, national service in Eritrea cannot benefit from this exemption, because it has been in force for decades (ILO, 2019; 2010). This interpretation by ILO has been endorsed by national courts, including the UK Upper Tribunal (2016) and the Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (2018), in their judicial decisions on Eritrean asylum applications (see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2021).

(Eritrea Embassy Media, 2015), interlocutors from various colleges in Eritrea similarly underlined the use of national service conscripts, including students at Sawa Military Training Camp,⁸⁴ for national development purposes. The public sectors that benefit from national service labour, as portrayed in the documentary, are education, health, environment conservation, tourism, infrastructure, and agriculture. Dr Estifanos Hailemariam, the Dean of the College of Business and Social Science, particularly referred to the use of “slave force” in Eritrea as a means of sustainably developing the country (Eritrea Embassy Media, 2015).

Recently, the government used national service conscripts in a road project in Eritrea, funded through the European Union (EU) Emergency Trust Fund for Africa,⁸⁵ which profited from the quasi-free labour exacted from conscripts. This account was confirmed by data elicited from a respondent in Sweden who fled Eritrea in 2019 (Respondent no. 49, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, February 2020). This project aims to rehabilitate the main arterial roads along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border to reconnect the two countries following the peace agreement signed in July 2018 and to provide Ethiopia with access to Eritrea’s port (European Commission, n.d.). Ironically, Eritrean conscripts are used for a public works project from which they will not be able to benefit, as their exit from the country is not permitted.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Sawa is a military camp located in the southwest of Eritrea where the Warsai Yikealo Secondary School is located. Since 2003, students have been obliged to complete the last year of secondary school at Sawa while receiving military training.

⁸⁵ The resources currently allocated to Eritrea through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa amount to EUR 36,457,284, among which EUR 15,000,000 contributed to the road project (European Commission, n.d.).

⁸⁶ One of the main aims of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa is to create “incentives for private entrepreneurship” in Eritrea (European Commission, n.d.). However, since 2006, enterprises owned by private citizens and individual entrepreneurs “were banned from the construction industry in Eritrea as part of the government’s crackdown on the private sector” (Kibreab, 2009, p. 62; see also Saleh Mohammad, 2017).

Foreign companies operating in Eritrea also make use of national service conscripts. For instance, there is strong evidence to suggest that most manual labour in foreign mining projects in Eritrea is provided by conscripts, which provides the government with direct economic benefits (Tesfagorgis, Hagos, Zere & Mekonnen, 2018).⁸⁷ According to testimonies collected by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, the amounts paid by foreign companies through the Eritrean government to remunerate conscripts are kept by the government, which only pays them national service wages (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

Due to the broad scope of national service, which encompasses ordinary public works that are not of a purely military nature as well as work in the private sector, various UN bodies, including the ILO Committee of Experts (ILO, 2021; 2019; 2016), UNHCR (2011), the Commission of Inquiry and the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2016; 2015; 2014), and a number of national courts in relation to asylum decisions (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland, 2018) have aptly held that national service exceeds military purposes. As articulated by these bodies and courts, as well as other commentators, such work constitutes forced labour under the 1930 Forced Labour Convention and does not fall within the exceptions or exclusions contained in this Convention (ILO, 2019; 2018; 2016; 2015; UNHCR, 2011; UN Human Rights Council, 2016; 2015; UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland, 2018; Kibreab, 2009;

⁸⁷ For instance, national service conscripts are forced to work at the Bisha mine in Eritrea, formerly operated by the subcontractors of the Canadian company Nevsun Resources Ltd, whose shares are now mostly owned by the China-based company, Zijin Mining Group Co. Ltd. Nevsun, when operating the mine, used to pay royalties and taxes to the Eritrean treasury (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). In February 2020, the Supreme Court of Canada allowed claims of crimes against humanity, *slavery*, forced labour, and torture to go forward against Nevsun for the use of national service labour. The Supreme Court of Canada, however, did not pronounce on the merits of the case, as the parties reached a settlement in October 2020 (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021).

Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019).⁸⁸ It bears repeating that Art. 2(2)(a) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention excludes from the definition of forced labour work or service that is exacted for the purpose of compulsory military service only to the extent that such work is “of a purely military character” (ILO, 1930). In the words of ILO, the term “purely” aims specifically at preventing the requisitioning of conscripts for the performance of *public works* (ILO, 2018; 2016; 2015a).⁸⁹ ILO’s position in this respect is strengthened by Art. 1(b) of the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention No. 105, which prohibits the use of forced or compulsory labour “as a method of mobilizing and *using labour for purposes of economic development* [emphasis added]” (ILO, 1957).

It is worth pointing out that the language employed by some human rights reports on Eritrea has recently changed to denote forced labour instead of military service only. For instance, the US Department of State omitted the subsection on ‘Child Soldiers’ from the 2019 and 2020 reports on human rights practices in Eritrea, moving most of the content previously contained within this section into the sections ‘Prohibition of Child Labor’ and ‘Minimum Age for Employment’ (Asylum Research Centre, 2021). While the “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict” is considered a “worst form of child labour”, the latter comprises a broader spectrum of practices, such as slavery, forced labour, or debt bondage, to name a few (Art. 3, ILO 1999). Not being purely military, the work and

⁸⁸ Various courts in Germany have explicitly endorsed the fact that Eritrea’s national service is used for economic development purposes, but without interpreting such feature as indicative of forced labour (for a discussion on this, see Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a).

⁸⁹ While, initially, Art. 1(2) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention allowed recourse to forced or compulsory labour during a transitional period “for public purposes only and as an exceptional measure” (ILO, 1930), Art. 7 of the Protocol of 2014 to the 1930 Forced Labour Convention deleted that provision (ILO, 2014). However, the initial provision only allowed the use of work for public purposes for a limited period and in exceptional circumstances.

services required of some children in Eritrea clearly fit better under the broader category of child labour.

Notwithstanding the observations discussed above, the Eritrean government asserts that national service is compatible with the requirements of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, of which it has been party to since 2000. For instance, it has argued on several occasions that national service falls under “normal civic obligations”, which are not considered to be forced labour as per Art. 2(2)(b) of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention (ILO, 2018; 2016; 2015a). Contrary to the government’s assertions, ILO maintains that national service falls outside this exception. According to ILO, the broad range of work that conscripts in Eritrea are required to perform, together with the duration, scope, and objectives of national service, means that it goes beyond the scope of “normal civic obligations” in Art. 2(2)(b) (ILO, 2018; see also UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland, 2018; UNHCR, 2011). ILO’s position in this regard is, in the UK Upper Tribunal’s words, reinforced by the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, according to which national service “is a way of controlling the population” (UK Upper Tribunal, 2016, para. 423). It is this element of control to which this chapter now turns.

Control over Eritrean national service conscripts

The following passage, which is taken from a report by the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, is one of many that refer to the exercise of control over national service conscripts by the Eritrean government: “[c]onscripts are at the mercy of their superiors, who exercise control and command over their subordinates without restriction in a way” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, para. 1518). As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, there appears to be no doubt that members of the Eritrean political and military structure exercise control over national service conscripts. The analysis that is lacking from the sources other than the Commission of Inquiry is whether or not such control is indicative of slavery.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea concluded its analysis of slavery in Eritrea by stating that national service is used: (i) for the purposes of the country/government's economic development, and (ii) to control the population. In reaching this conclusion, the Commission analysed the factors that make national service satisfy the definitional threshold of slavery, using as an analytical framework *Kumara's* list of indicia of slavery discussed earlier (UN Human Rights Council, 2016; see also Palacios-Arapiles, 2021). A detailed discussion on each of the factors that indicate the existence of slavery in national service goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the analysis that now follows centres on some of the practices that enable the Eritrean government to exercise powers attaching to the right of ownership over national service conscripts. The discussion is by no means exhaustive, but the reader will gain a good grasp of how the control exercised over conscripts deprives them of their individual liberty and autonomy.

In Eritrea, national service starts in secondary school. In 2003, the education system was integrated into the WYDC and, since then, students in 12th grade – the final year of high school in Eritrea – combine academic work with a compulsory six months of military training, which both take place at Sawa Military Training Camp (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019).⁹⁰ Students at Sawa have military status; they are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence and subject to military discipline (Child Soldiers International, 2012; see also Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019; 2021). Only the respondents who passed the so-called 'matriculation exam', which is the final exam following 12th grade, could undertake either

⁹⁰ Prior to the WYDC, in addition to round-ups, deception also appeared to be used for conscription purposes. Hirt and Saleh Mohammad underscore that, in 1998, Isaias Afwerki announced on the State Television an "environmental campaign"; citizens who had been demobilised were called back to participate in that campaign, which also included "reforestation efforts". In their view, this was a hidden mobilisation, timed to take place just before the border conflict with Ethiopia erupted (Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2013). Those who were conscripted into the national service at that time have, to date, not been demobilised.

vocational training or higher education, depending on their grades. The courses that students enrolled in, however, were chosen by the government, based on available places and the government's *own needs* at the time. One of the respondents said: "I was among the lucky ones, as the government chose for me what I really wanted to study" (Respondent no. 12, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019). In 2006, the government closed the only accredited university in the country – the University of Asmara.⁹¹ The closure took place when university students started to pose a threat to the government (see e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2001), and represents an attempt to eliminate all real or perceived opponents to the PFDJ. According to a former conscript who was assigned to work at the Ministry of Information, he and his colleagues were obliged to adapt news before making it public. He used the example of a shooting at a university in the United States years ago and being required to publish that universities were life-threatening places in order to justify the official closure of the University of Asmara, conveying the message that the closure was meant to protect students (Respondent no. 12, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019).

According to Art. 14 (4) of Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995), "[t]he student will be awarded with a Certificate, Diploma or Degree only upon completion of Active National Service". As national service is indefinite, none of the respondents in this study had received a diploma or certificate after completion of secondary school, vocational training, or higher education in Eritrea (see also UNHCR, 2018). In the author's view, this creates a situation of dependence on the government, as fleeing the country would mean starting from scratch.

Vocational training and higher education in Eritrea also include military training. After the completion of their studies, respondents

⁹¹ Since then, secondary school graduates with good grades go to one of the countries' colleges, which offer study programmes of two or four years; while graduates with lower grades may be offered vocational training, either inside Sawa or centres outside Sawa (Landinfo, 2015).

continued to be subject to national service and were deployed to a national service destination, which did not necessarily match their studies. The ones who did not pass the matriculation exam, or who for other reasons dropped out of school, were deployed to a military destination, at which they were also required to undertake tasks in public and/or private works. All of the former conscripts whom the author interviewed had no choice as to the role they were assigned, either military, civilian, or in the private sector, nor did they have the right to refuse to undertake the work assigned to them. In this sense, conscripts are deprived of a life characterised by one's own chosen ends, which are instead determined by the government according to its necessities.

Furthermore, respondents had no right to choose the place of deployment. Except for one case, all of the deserters interviewed were deployed far from their homes and families, sometimes in remote locations, isolated from their previous social relationships. In this respect, the data gathered from the respondents is consistent with the reports of the Commission on Inquiry on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2016, 2015) and the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2014), as well as the reports of human rights organisations (see e.g., Amnesty International, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2009; 2019). In Sawa and in other national service destinations, the use of other languages apart from Tigrinya is generally not tolerated. According to Hirt and Saleh Mohammad, the government, which is dominated by people of Tigrinya ethnicity, “use their language as a tool of domination in the administration and the military” (Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2013, p. 149). Non-Tigrinya respondents said that using languages other than Tigrinya raised suspicions that they were planning activities against the government or to flee; thus, they refrained from using their own language. Both, Muslim and Christian respondents said that religious observance was not permitted during their respective deployments, which is also consistent with the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2016; 2015) and the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea (see e.g., UN Human Rights Council, 2021; 2014). All of these things point to people being deprived of their own identity and

compelled to assimilate into a national identity, which is indeed one of the goals of national service under Art. 5 of Proclamation No. 82/1995 (State of Eritrea, 1995). Moreover, in Eritrea there is limited access to official identity documents; the issuance of these documents is tied to people's perceived loyalty to the PFDJ. This creates numerous obstacles in relation to proving one's identity outside Eritrea (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021), which strengthens people's dependence on the government.

National service conscripts, both at military and civil destinations, work for little (or no) pay, which, according to respondents, including those assigned to qualified jobs, is inadequate to meet basic living costs (see also UN Human Rights Council, 2022; 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019),⁹² and makes it difficult to have a family (Respondent no. 1, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019; see also UN Human Rights Council, 2014). Families may be given ration coupons upon certifying that family members of draft age are duly serving in national service. Without these coupons, families cannot shop in the government owned shops and other shops are not affordable (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021). Furthermore, the food that conscripts in military posts receive is of an inadequate quantity and poor in nutritional value. The majority said that they were given only lentils, either once or twice a day, and a cup of tea without milk or sugar in the morning, sometimes together with a piece of bread,⁹³ which is in line with country information (see e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2019;

⁹² Art. 22(1) of Proclamation No. 89/1996 states that “[t]he citizen who upon termination of military training enters into a 12-months of active national service is entitled to pocket money” (State of Eritrea, 1996); whether or not national service conscripts receive this money, and when, is discretionary and arbitrary. In addition, members of the reserve army are not entitled to remuneration, even during the training or mobilisation periods, only to free food and clothes (Proclamation No. 82/1995, Art. 32, State of Eritrea, 1995).

⁹³ *Ades*, which means lentils in the Tigrinya and Tigre languages, was among the most repeated words during the interviews. One of the respondents highlighted that it was not actually a proper dish of lentils, but rather water with a few lentils (Respondent no. 6, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019).

UN Human Rights Council, 2015, 2014). National service conscripts are prevented from engaging in other income-generating activities. Only those who have completed national service are eligible for a business licence; however, none of the respondents in this study had ever witnessed the issuance of certificates of completion. All of this creates a situation of dependence on the PFDJ for survival, notwithstanding the fact that they receive very little.

National service conscripts, other than those in Sawa, or other military camps, and prisons, are not physically confined, but their movement is restricted and dictated by the government. Conscripts often work longer than a year before they are granted leave,⁹⁴ which consists of a permit that allows travel only to the family's place of residence for a limited period of time, which usually ranges from a few weeks to a month. For this, conscripts are issued with a special or temporary pass paper (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021). Otherwise, movement within the country is generally not permitted.⁹⁵

Some respondents said that they knew only their hometown and their place of deployment; while others said they only remember having seen their father three to five times in their life. Returning late at the end of permitted leave, even by a day, or absence without official permission, is severely punished (see e.g., UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Punishment often takes place in front of peers to dissuade others from committing similar 'offences'. A respondent, for example, explained that he was subjected to the method of torture known as the 'helicopter' – a drawing of which can be found in the 2015 report of the Commission on Inquiry – for spending a couple of hours in a place close to his military unit, for which he did not obtain prior permission. He said that he was left in the 'helicopter' position for hours, bleeding, while surrounded by his peers, who were ordered not to untie him (Respondent no. 18, interview with Palacios-

⁹⁴ Leave is granted at the discretion of superiors. One of the respondents said that he was only granted leave after about four years of deployment (Respondent no. 40, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, February 2020).

⁹⁵ The country is full of checkpoints and people are also subject to sporadic checks.

Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019). Respondents were asked if they had ever tried to use someone else's travel pass to move within Eritrea, a question that created confusion for most respondents, and had to be better explained. It became apparent that it was a scenario they had never imagined, because of the risks involved if they were caught.

Deserting or evading national service and exiting the country without permission are considered criminal offences. In addition to imprisonment for “attempting to” or “escaping abroad” to avoid national service (offences that carry two and five years' imprisonment, respectively, and three years' imprisonment for self-infliction of unfitness for service), Proclamation No. 82/1995 sets out further penalties for those who escape abroad to avoid national service. These include (life) suspension of the right to own land, to obtain an exit visa, and to work (Proclamation No. 82/1995, Art. 37, State of Eritrea, 1995; UNHCR, 2011).⁹⁶ Besides the penalties imposed under Proclamation No. 82/1995, the 1991 Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea (which up to now remains in force),⁹⁷ also covers military violations. These include, among other things, the evasion or failure to (re)enlist, desertion, and failure to return after an authorised period of absence. The attached penalties range from 6 months to 15 years imprisonment (Proclamation No. 4/1991, Arts. 296–305, State of Eritrea, 1991), and the punishment for desertion ranges from five years to life imprisonment, or even the death penalty in times of mobilisation (Proclamation No. 4/1991, Art. 300(2)) – such as at present, as a consequence of Eritrea's involvement in the conflict in Tigray.

⁹⁶ In stipulating all these penalties, Proclamation No. 82/1995 refers to “avoidance”, without distinguishing between draft evasion and desertion. Therefore, pursuant to the 1995 Proclamation's legal provisions, and as far as penalties are concerned, draft evaders and deserters fall within the same category of persons (State of Eritrea, 1995).

⁹⁷ Although made public in May 2015, the 2015 Penal Code has not entered into force yet (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; see also UN Human Rights Council, 2016; Goitom, 2016).

In practice, avoiding national service is not only punished by the above statutory penalties, but also by arbitrary and extrajudicial forms of punishment, often of a life-threatening nature, without recourse to a court of law. Such punishments have been extensively reported to include inhumane prison conditions,⁹⁸ which, as some of the respondents indicated, can result in death in detention,⁹⁹ as well as enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial executions, the punishment of relatives, and ‘shoot-to-kill’ operations at the border to deter exit from the country (UN Human Rights Council, 2020; 2018; 2016; 2015; 2014; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2017; UK Upper Tribunal, 2016; UNHCR, 2011; see also Danish Immigration Service & Danish Refugee Council, 2020; EASO, 2019).

In the diaspora, in addition to being subjected to surveillance by the Eritrean government (Bozzini, 2015), those who require consular assistance from an Eritrean diplomatic mission (such as identity documents for family reunification) are obliged to sign a self-incriminatory letter (the so-called ‘regret from’), whereby they apologise for having committed a crime by failing to fulfil their national service obligations and accept any punishment in return (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; Buyse, Van Reisen & Van Soomeren, 2017). They are also compelled to pay the so-called ‘2% diaspora income tax’ (Mekonnen & Palacios-Arapiles, 2021; Buyse, Van Reisen & Van Soomeren, 2017), which, according to Human Rights Watch, is used by the government “to consolidate its control

⁹⁸ The documentary by Frontline (Williams, 2021), the first of this kind, includes footage and videos taken from a hidden camera inside Eritrea, including prisons.

⁹⁹ One of the respondents described being detained in a cell with no window and which was very crowded, to the extent that there was not even enough space for all to lay down, so they had to sleep in turns. He explained that when he arrived at that prison, he thought he had been taken to a psychiatric hospital, as all of the inmates were naked, which made him think that the inmates had serious mental problems. He soon found out that it was due to the high temperature there, as a result of which many died. As the rise in the number of deaths appeared to be untenable, the prison guard made a small hole in the wall of the cell so that they could get a bit of fresh air; but still inmates continued to die, according to the respondent (Respondent no. 4, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019).

over the diaspora population by denying politically suspect individuals essential documents” (cited in UK Upper Tribunal, 2011, para. 62).

According to Hirt and Saleh Mohammad (2013), national service in Eritrea has resulted in the emergence of a society that is functioning in ‘abnormal’ ways, a situation that they describe as “social anomie”. They use this sociological term to refer to a situation in which private norms and values are incompatible or cannot be reconciled with the demands and norms of the government. As illustrated above, the government is preventing citizens from achieving their aspirations, including realising personal, education and career ambitions, establishing a family, or even sustaining themselves and their families. Fulfilling such aspirations is only possible by committing the offence of fleeing the country, under threat of detention, physical punishment, extrajudicial killing, and/or reprisals against relatives – not through legitimate means (Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2013). In this sense, Hirt and Saleh Mohammad (2013) argue that, in Eritrea, citizens cannot live according to general norms and values without breaching the laws of the government. This featured prominently in most of the interviews conducted for this research. Many of the respondents said that, to Isaias Afwerki, they are criminals, and not deserving to be ‘Eritreans’.

National service in its current form has now been in place for two decades, as a result of which some of the practices and norms of the government, while incompatible with people’s own values, as Hirt and Saleh Mohammad (2013) claim, appear to have been internalised. The findings of this research strongly depart from Kibreab’s view that Eritrean refugees and, more specifically, asylum-seekers “may have an incentive to overstate their plight” and “the extent of human rights violations associated with [national service]” (Kibreab, 2009, p. 50). Instead, the findings of this research indicate the opposite – they point to the ‘false consciousness’ of national service deserters and draft evaders, which renders them unable to fully understand and, consequently, articulate their own lived experiences. This, as explained earlier in this chapter, is a characteristic feature of people

who have been subjected to slavery. False consciousness describes the situation when people are unable to recognise oppression and exploitation because of the prevalence of views and practices that normalise and legitimise the existence of such oppressive situations. It refers to a systematically distorted and misleading understanding of a dire situation and dominant social relations in the consciousness of the subordinate class. It is often caused by lack of reflection and/or insufficient information, fostered by the dominant class to exert dominance over their subordinates.¹⁰⁰

In Eritrea, people are given negative or false information about life outside the country. The private press is banned and the domestic media is controlled by the government (Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019). The few private newspapers that existed in the country were forced to close in 2001 and 18 journalists working for the private media were detained incommunicado without trial (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014).¹⁰¹ In addition, access to the Internet is severely restricted. A former conscript who worked in one of the ministries said he only knew about Facebook after he fled the country about five years ago (Respondent no. 1, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019). While some hotels and cafés (mainly in Asmara) provide Wi-Fi, none of the respondents in this research had ever accessed it. The data gathered from the respondents indicates that connecting to Wi-Fi, or even being around areas where it is accessible, raises suspicions that you are conspiring against the government or planning illicit activities, such as leaving the country. The fear of arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention, thus, curtails freedom of expression and access to information. Accordingly, Eritrea is the only reality known to most of its citizens,

¹⁰⁰ While the concept of ‘false consciousness’ was first developed in the context of social relations under capitalism (Lukács, 1971), it has been extended to other contemporary contexts of oppression on the basis of, e.g., gender, ethnicity, and race.

¹⁰¹ While some have died in custody, the whereabouts of the others is still unknown (Amnesty International, 2021).

which allows the government to systematically mislead them to perpetuate control and exploitation. According to some respondents in Denmark and Switzerland, Hollywood and Hindi movies were the only information they had about the ‘outside’ world while in Eritrea. Moreover, as stated above, the Ministry of Information adapts news to mislead the public.

Lacking an understanding of the wider world, Eritrean citizens internalise concepts and ideas about the world provided (only) by the government. As Thompson explains, this “can affect the ways that individuals come to bypass attempts at rational thinking and instead rely automatically upon the normative concepts that they have internalised” (Thompson, 2015, p. 455). When the author asked the respondents what type of protection (i.e., refugee status, complementary form of protection, or none)¹⁰² they think they deserve according to their personal circumstances – regardless of the status they held – the majority of them were unable to express their views or thoughts, indicating that such a response should come from the respective migration authority. The answer to the follow-up question was the same; this time they were asked to imagine that they were the asylum decision-maker in charge of their application and, therefore, had the authority to decide on it. Many of them struggled to envision such a hypothetical scenario and were still unable to give a response based on their own thoughts. A similar scenario occurred when the author asked them how they felt about having to carry a weapon, and how they would have acted if they were given the option to either carry it or not. Most of them found it very difficult to imagine a life with choices (or even feelings), and simply responded that they were forced to do it, highlighting that thinking of how they felt about it is not an option in Eritrea. In relation to those questions, some respondents indicated that Afwerki ‘controlled their minds’ to the extent that they were unable to think for themselves.

¹⁰² Explanations were given as to what each of those statuses mean and entail.

In addition, some questions, in particular “how many hours per day did you work while in national service”, or “did you encounter any particular issue while in national service”, did not elicit a straightforward response, reflecting the respondents’ distorted understanding of their own situation. A respondent, to the first question, initially answered “about six hours”. The author then asked him what he used to do in his free time, to which he responded that he had to work for military commanders at their houses, collect wood and perform other manual labour, and be always ready for any order at any time. The author further asked him how many hours per day he used to sleep, to which he explained that sleeping hours may range from very few hours to none, as at night, he used to guard checkpoints or be woken up for military training. To the question “how many days per week did you usually have off” he said “none”. The respondent initially referred to six hours to denote only heavy military work, believing that ‘work’ only fits within that category (Respondent no. 4, interview with Palacios-Arapiles, face-to-face, November 2019). With regard to the second question (“did you encounter any particular issue while in national service”), many of the respondents, although they had been subjected to torture in Eritrea, did not mention it at first. Torture and corporal punishment being the rule and not the exception in Eritrea, appeared to be normalised among the respondents to the extent that they did not flag it as a particular issue.

The data discussed above, which exemplifies countless individual stories, suggests that the government subjects national service conscripts to substantial degree of control in a manner that deprives them of any form of autonomy and individual liberty. It also shows that national service conscripts are stripped of a will of their own. They live according to norms and concepts that are the product of manipulative or distorting external forces (i.e., the PFDJ), which leaves them in a state of ‘false consciousness’, even years after having left the country. All of this enable the government to exercise powers attaching to the right of ownership over them. As shown in the preceding section, the gains that the government accrues from this include economic growth (which is enjoyed by the PFDJ), securing

the PFDJ's political power, and more recently, furthering Eritrea's war efforts in Tigray.

Other chapters in this book use Barzilai-Nahon's theory of 'gatekeeping' (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) to explore how the lives of Eritreans are gated during their migration trajectories by actors such as human traffickers, refugee agencies, and asylum decision-makers, which are referred to as 'gatekeepers'. The author of this chapter argues that the degree to which Eritreans are 'gated' in their journeys is exacerbated by the control that they have previously endured in Eritrea by the state and President Isaias Afwerki¹⁰³ – who can be considered the first and main gatekeeper in their lives – which certainly makes them more vulnerable to subsequent gatekeepers.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that most sources, ranging from scholarly contributions and reports of government entities and international and non-governmental organisations to asylum jurisprudence, either make negative findings about *slavery* in national service in Eritrea, based on the fact that Eritrean law does not allow for the ownership of people, or do not make any attempt to inquire about slavery. The latter is most probably because 'chattel slavery', i.e., the legal ownership of a human being, is regarded by some as the definitive benchmark and leads to the erroneous belief that slavery only belongs to the past. However, this chapter has aptly illustrated that this is not the case.

The legal definition of slavery, which is found in the 1926 Slavery Convention, also covers *de facto* slavery, that is, situations in which a

¹⁰³ This is based on the author's own observations over many years of work with Eritrean communities in the diaspora.

¹⁰⁴ The Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, in its report to the Human Rights Council of 2020, stated that "[a] failure to take into account the rehabilitation needs of vulnerable [Eritrean] asylum seekers [...] may influence their ability to present their claims in a coherent manner" (UN Human Rights Council, 2020).

person is not legally owned. It defines slavery as the exercise of “any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership” over a person, as opposed to actual ‘ownership’. This definition has been consistently interpreted by various international courts and tribunals as the exercise of a substantial degree of control over a person that deprives him or her of their individual liberty and/or autonomy. Interestingly, most of the sources on national service agree that the Eritrean government exercises control over the Eritrean population, although they overlook what this really means. This chapter has unpacked its meaning from a normative point of view.

This chapter first discussed the fact that national service in Eritrea is used, among other things, to strengthen and develop the economy of the country. It showed that many sources have largely relied on the use of national service labour for the country’s economic development to describe it as *forced labour*. Drawing on primary and secondary data, this chapter then showed how the government exercises control over conscripts. Both factual elements combined have an autonomous meaning in international law – *slavery*. While some courts in Germany and Switzerland appear to rely on the Eritrean economy being a “socialist economic system” (Palacios-Arapiles, 2022a) to justify the use of forced labour in the country, it has become clear that this is not an element to consider in the analysis of either forced labour or slavery. Furthermore, as this chapter has shown, such claim is factually wrong – the Eritrean government benefits from foreign investment and funding from the EU, among other sources.

Finally, the chapter problematized the extent to which the lives of Eritreans are not characterised by a will of their own. As a result, many have developed a ‘false consciousness’ that makes it difficult for Eritrean refugees to understand and, consequently, articulate their experiences in Eritrea. As discussed in other chapters (particularly Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*), this contributes to their vulnerability to human trafficking. Furthermore, the repression of key aspects of their identity, such as language and free speech, as well as the government’s

control over access to information, affects their status as ‘gated’, both while in Eritrea and during their journeys on the migration routes from Eritrea to Libya.

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Author contributions

Sara Palacios-Arapiles is the sole author of this chapter.

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Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking

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Introduction

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

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.

¹⁰⁵ 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).¹⁰⁶

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.¹⁰⁷ 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?*

¹⁰⁶ In 2018, Human Rights Watch found that 12% of the population of Eritrea had fled abroad (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

¹⁰⁷ 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).

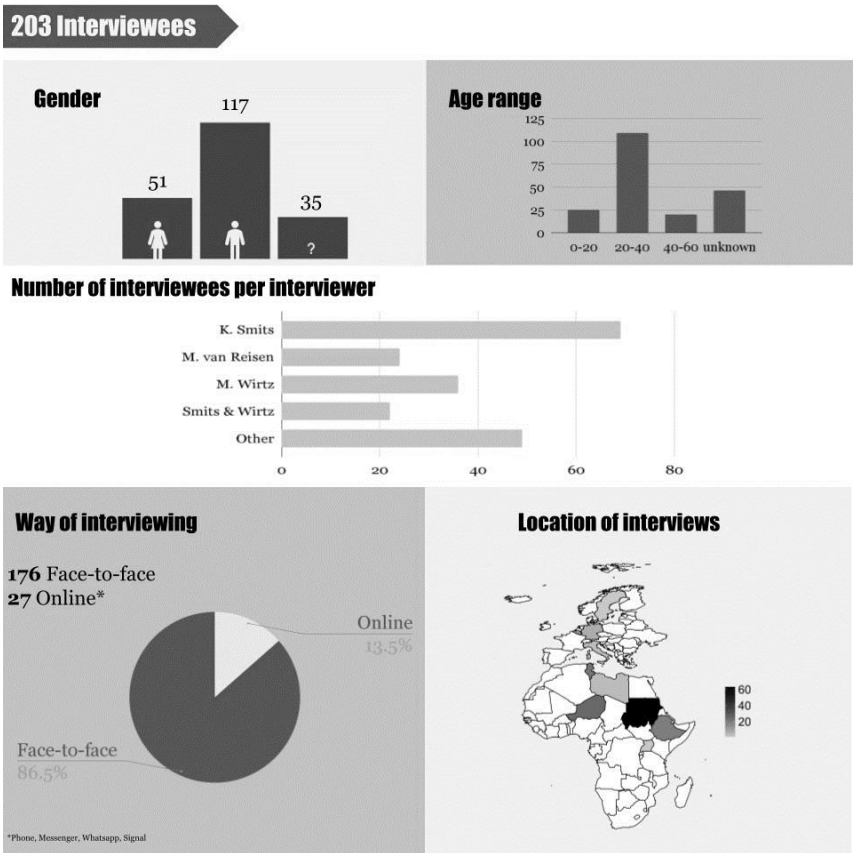
This chapter builds on previous research to examine how the circumstances under which Eritreans live in Eritrea and the circumstances that cause them to flee are tied to vulnerability to human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It assesses Eritrea as a 'black hole' in the digital landscape, where information 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.

¹⁰⁸ 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 statistics¹⁰⁹



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

¹⁰⁹ 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 cafés, 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 robocalls¹¹⁰ 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.

¹¹⁰ 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.

Leaving Eritrea

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

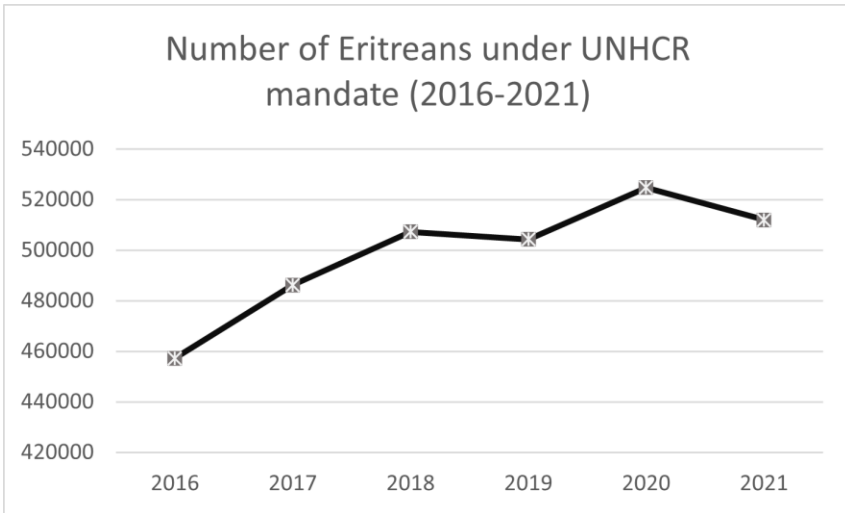


Figure 7.2. Number of refugees from Eritrea registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees worldwide (2016–2021)

(Source: Created using UNHCR data, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=en7Cx>)

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 interviewees¹¹¹ explained that they bounced between

¹¹¹ 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 official 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 1,200¹¹²]. We were a group of six persons. I am from Asmara. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

¹¹² 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 and 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).¹¹³

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

¹¹³ 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 card¹¹⁴ 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 293 at 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)

¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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)

¹¹⁵ 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 Ombajer. 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],¹¹⁶ 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 disproportionately 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

¹¹⁶ 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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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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TRUST Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea

*Selam Kidane*¹¹⁷

Introduction

The experiences that push refugees out of their home countries into places of asylum have the potential to be extremely traumatising. Whether it is political violence, extreme state repression, or civil war, the devastating consequences for individuals and communities does not take much imagination to grasp. These periods of upheaval often result in the dislocation of people, who are forced to flee their homes in search of security and prospects (George, 2012). The narratives of all conflicts – be it in Eritrea, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Darfur, or Syria – tell the same story: that the impact of displacement is often far greater

In the absence of therapeutic support, traumatised refugees fail to grasp the opportunities presented to them and often continue to flee to new destinations, despite the risks involved. There is a need for mental health support to be provided to refugees for them to be able to recover from trauma and function socially and economically. This study found that TRUST – a Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy delivered through smart phones – reduced the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increased socio-economic resilience among highly-mobile and highly-traumatised communities, such as Eritrean refugees.

than the number killed and injured (Kidane, 2021). In addition, as conflicts tend to rage, without viable lasting solutions, the crisis for

¹¹⁷ The author is grateful Dr Mia Stokmans, who provided technical support and implemented the statistical analysis of the study.

refugees can drag on for decades, leaving them traumatised and without a permanent home (Salehyan, 2007).

While the link between trauma, conflict and the outflow of refugees is obvious, there is still a gap in our understanding of the implications of trauma for refugees and their long-term prospects and, consequently, trauma support is seldom provided to them. This is despite the fact that the flow of refugees has been on the international agenda for many years (Teitelbaum, 1984). Psychotherapy is often not a priority in the initial stages of a disaster response, with many providers prioritising resources away from psychotherapy, which is considered to be impossible or costly to provide (Gelbach & Davis, 2007).

In the absence of therapeutic support, traumatised refugees fail to grasp opportunities presented to them and often continue to flee to new destinations, despite the risks (Schwarz, 2011). With the aim of exploring the feasibility of delivering cost effective and highly contextualised mental health support to address high levels of trauma in the emergency context of refugee camps, this research looked at the delivery of trauma support to Eritrean refugees in a refugee camp in Ethiopia.

The need for mental health support for Eritrean refugees

High prevalence of PTSD among Eritrean refugees

Eritrean refugees have been making headlines, both because of the sheer number leaving the country, as well as the enormous risks they have been taking in the process. The violence being perpetrated against Eritreans has been recorded in a report by the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in Eritrea, which investigated the human rights violations in Eritrea, concluding that these crimes could potentially amount to “crimes against humanity” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 449). The report called for accountability on behalf of the millions of Eritreans victims and their families who have suffered atrocities at the hands of the Eritrean government, including conscription into indefinite national service (which includes forced labour) and the systematic use of

extrajudicial killing, torture, and rape (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Against the backdrop of the harrowing violations documented by the report against groups and individuals in Eritrea, it is not difficult to foresee the devastating traumatic impact on victims.

The COI states that the regime of President Isaias Afwerki has perpetrated violations “on a scope and scale seldom witnessed elsewhere” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 13). In addition, it was found that the government is using extreme surveillance and censorship, creating a culture of fear in order to curb all forms of dissent, even at the level of thought. As a result of this surveillance, Eritreans live in constant fear of detention, arbitrary arrest, disappearance, torture, and even death. This surveillance culture has also resulted in an atmosphere of mistrust and, hence, self-censorship across communities and even within families (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

The report also highlights that forced conscription into the indefinite national service is trapping an entire generation of men and women, making families destitute as result. This is causing Eritreans, including underage children, to leave the country. Women face additional challenges in national service in the form of gender-based violence: “Sexual violence against women and girls is widespread and indeed notorious in military training camps. [...] Furthermore, the enforced domestic service of women and girls who are also sexually abused in these camps amounts to sexual slavery” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 13). In addition, the report also identified that Eritrean officials frequent use beating and rape as a way to inflict physical and psychological pain, to obtain confessions or information, and to punish, intimidate or coerce detainees and conscripts.

Regarding the mass exodus of Eritreans fleeing their country, the COI report makes it clear that the root cause is inside the country. It states that: “Faced with a seemingly hopeless situation they [Eritreans] feel powerless to change, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans are fleeing their country”, despite the fact that “Eritreans who attempt to leave the country are seen as traitors”, and that “the government has implemented a shoot-to-kill policy in border areas to

prevent people from fleeing” (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 6).

Many researchers have found that these journeys entail enormous risks and hazards along the various routes to destinations deemed ‘safe’ (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014; Connel, 2012; Hotline for Migrant Workers, 2011). Many of the refugees are young (sometimes minors) and are often avoiding the indefinite national service. They leave either after they have been forcefully recruited or to avoid impending forced conscription (Kibreab, 2009; Van Reisen, Saba & Smits, 2019).

Unfortunately, the predicament of Eritreans has become entrenched, and the impact on the population is enormous. While not everyone in Eritrea has direct experience of imprisonment, torture, sexual exploitation or rape, everyone lives in fear and knows someone in prison or has been tortured, raped or sexually assaulted (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Hepner, 2009). As a result, Eritreans live in a general atmosphere of uncertainty, repression, and hopelessness (Kidane, 2015).

Collective trauma among refugees

In addition to causing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in individuals, the impact of political violence can also extend to whole communities and society at large in the form of collective trauma. Collective trauma is a condition that refers to population-wide shared injury to the sociocultural context (Saul, 2014). Traumatic experiences, such as the ones faced by Eritreans refugees, can be perceived as collective when they affect several people who have a sense of belonging to one another and when the fearful and painful events they faced have left a mark on their collective awareness and memory (Kidane, 2021). This makes trauma a social construct, impacting not only on the past (or present) identity of survivors, but also on their future identity (Pastor, 2004).

Taking a collective approach in conceptualising trauma is an important element of the contextualisation needed. When considering trauma healing for refugees, contextualising interventions

at the collective level is crucial to account for the fact that, in addition to individual trauma, many of them are also suffering from collective trauma (Kidane & Van Reisen 2017). In addition, the cultures that refugees come from are also sometimes collectivistic (Suh & Lee 2020). This adaptation is as important as the language and cultural contextualisation, and is a distinct departure from the Eurocentric model of PTSD treatment, which focuses on individual trauma and, hence, raises issues about the veracity of these ‘universal’ psychological interventions, mainly developed in Western contexts (Kidane 2021). Trauma healing should not focus only on addressing individual trauma and symptoms of PTSD, but include the rehabilitation of survivors and processing of collective memories.

Spiralling mental health problems due to unaddressed trauma

The sheer number of people who leave Eritrea has placed the country among the top refugee producing nations in the world. Reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) outline that in the first 10 months of 2014, the numbers arriving in Europe nearly tripled, from 13,000 the previous year to 37,000 (UNHCR, 2014). In 2014 and 2015, roughly 40,000 Eritreans made the extremely hazardous Mediterranean crossing to arrive in Italy (Lanni, 2016). In 2014, around 5,000 Eritreans fled their country every month; this is a significant population movement for a small country of 6 million and it earned Eritrea the title of one of the top generators of refugees (UNHCR, 2014). After Syrians, Eritreans made up the largest group of those entering Europe to seek refuge. In 2016, UNHCR reported that 52,000 people had escaped Eritrea, and by 2018 estimated that about 12% of the total population had been pushed out, many of them escaping indefinite national service (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

These refugees include separated children, vulnerable women with young children, and a vast number of vulnerable young men fleeing to the nearest refugee camp, with some moving further in the region or to Europe. Those who succeed in crossing the Mediterranean Sea have survived dangerous journeys across the inhospitable Sahara desert and the unpredictable Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2014;

Hotline for Migrant Workers, 2011). The number of refugees, as well as the risks they take, have been a cause of concern to many, who keep asking why so many are leaving Eritrea (e.g., BBC, 2015; Kingsley, 2015; O'Brien, 2015; Economist, 2013). In answer, many lament Eritrea's dramatic plummet from being held as a beacon of hope to many (Babu, Babu & Wilson, 2002; Kibreab, 2009), to its current state as the place from where tens of thousands flee, often taking unimaginable risks (Kibreab, 2015). Some note that the "desperate situation" in the refugee camps is contributing to the urge to continue to move, taking the risks they do (Brhane, 2016).

In addition to individual and collective violence (Amnesty International, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2009), in Eritrea there is extreme political repression and inhumane treatment, including torture perpetrated against ordinary citizens, experiences that are known to pose psychological risks (Modvig & Jaranson, 2004), including traumatic threat to the integrity of the self (Chapman & Gavrin, 1999). Many people exposed to traumatic stress will experience stress responses including avoidance, various forms of sleep disturbances, hyperarousal and hypervigilance and may engage in behaviour akin to anticipation of further risks (Chrousos & Gold, 1992; Tsigos & Chrousos, 2002). Repeated or constant activation of the stress response in the body and brain, known as allostatic load (McEwen, 2003), corresponding to post-traumatic stress, creates a state of fear, hopelessness and even horror in response to the threat of injury or death (Yehuda, 2002). In a recent report, Haynes (2022) confirmed, using Freedom of Information requests, that five unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) aged 14 to 25 had died by suicide between 2018 and 2022 in the United Kingdom. Four out of the five were a group of friends who were all young men from Eritrea (Taylor 2019). Although there were many indicators of deteriorating mental health in the young men (Haynes, 2022) there is nothing to indicate that they were able to access services that matched their needs, including language and cultural specialism.

Contextualised support

Much of our understanding of conflict-induced migration is focused on the economic consequences, such as poverty, inequality, economic restructuring and pressures on development – and these things are often considered to be the ‘root causes’ of such migration (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1991). Failure to develop and deliver effective support to individuals and groups exposed to traumatic stress and with symptoms of PTSD presents a significant constraint on recovery and rehabilitation (Gelbach & Davis, 2007).

In addition to the scarcity of mental health services, there is the additional challenge of contextualising services both historically and socio-culturally to the target population (Stammel, 2019). There is research outlining examples of situations where culturally inappropriate services delivered in emergency contexts had detrimental impacts; for instance, Kosovar survivors of gender-based violence in Albania were subjected to publicly disclosing their predicament, which resulted in honour killings (Wessells, 2009). In another example, during the long history of violence in Sri Lanka, women who participated in therapeutic programmes after losing male relatives were ostracised (Argenti-Pillen, 2013).

The feasibility of providing culturally sensitive and resource effective mental health support to refugees in emergency and disaster contexts (often refugee camps and centres for internally displaced people), and particularly the feasibility of providing trauma support interventions, is, therefore, a pertinent subject that transcends both the service provision and policy development aspects of refugee support. This research focuses on trauma as a defining feature of the experiences of refugees. As mentioned above the devastation entailed in the refugee-producing process, ranging from individual experiences of harassment, persecution, inhumane treatment and torture, as well as collective experiences of terrorising and mass killings, are known to result in persistent symptoms that damage the victim in many ways, including damaging their self-esteem and their trust in others, leading many to experience changes to their very identity (Barudy, 1989). There are studies that indicate a high prevalence of depression and

PTSD in refugee communities, affecting 40 to 70% of the population (Baingana, 2003). This is indicative of how political conflicts and the associated violence that cause refugees to flee their homes can lead to mental illness, with debilitating effects (Silove, Ekblad & Mollica, 2000).

On top of blighting the lives of individual victims, these experiences have implications for the wider community. Collective trauma often results in whole communities succumbing to detrimental maladaptation affecting their long-term wellbeing. A study in Cambodia, found that following the violence of the civil war in the 1960s that led to the devastating Khmer Rouge rule, which decimated the social fabric of the society, there was a high prevalence of psychiatric symptoms among Cambodian refugees, even 10 years after the events (Boehnlein *et al.*, 2004). Similar results were found in a survey of 993 adult participants from the largest Cambodian internally displaced person (IDP) camp on the Thailand-Cambodia border, where 80% of the participants were identified as feeling depressed and were experiencing somatic complaints, despite good access to medical care (Mollica *et al.*, 1999). In a Mayan village in Guatemala it was observed that everyone was experiencing an overwhelming sense of guilt coupled with a host of psychological difficulties comprising fear, depression, loss, abandonment, despair, humiliation, anger and solitude. In addition, many experienced a shattering of their faith in God. The population was subject to a genocidal campaign from 1981 to 1983, which resulted in the massacre of 600 people, mostly by Guatemalan troops. The situation led to people passively retreating to conformity with mistrust, incubating a cycle of vulnerability that continued to threaten recovery long after the events had taken place (Manz, 2002).

Resource limitations

The availability of an adequately trained workforce that is able to deliver therapy in languages that are accessible and with the required awareness of the cultural, social and political contexts is limited. This is so, even in well-resourced setting, and much more so in refugee camps and settlements (Kidane, 2021). The difficulties associated

with delivering appropriate trauma support are not limited to availability and content. Even if there were ample resources and enough will to provide the services that refugees need for processing complex individual and collective trauma, there are additional considerations that might make delivery complicated. For instance, in addition to the content, of trauma processing therapy, considerations should also be given to delivery approaches and the practicalities of ‘traditional psychotherapy’.

The delivery of therapy is further complicated by the high mobility of refugee communities, as many individuals and groups might be on the move, either because they have been prevented from settling or because they feel unsafe (their traumatised state of mind can also contribute to feelings of being unsafe). Without accessing support for their trauma, refugees are prone to keep moving in search of safety, while traditional trauma support modalities require them to settle in order to access trauma support. Given these complexities it is not surprising that neither advances in practice, research and policies nor the availability of many theoretical models and approaches have been able to address traumatic stress among refugees; most refugees who experience traumatic difficulties and who, hence, have complex needs for mental health support, never receive the appropriate level of care and provision, as a result of the complexity of their needs and the scarcity of resources for meeting such needs (Silove, Ventevogel & Rees, 2017). Given the number of refugees on the move and their potential levels of trauma, the challenge for society – and particularly for those seeking a more equitable society – is to be able to deliver the much required assistance within the realistic means of society, and to do this effectively.

In recognition of the resourcing difficulties, organisations such as WHO have looked at implementing less resource intensive approaches, such as self-help. WHO has developed a self-help guide, *Self-Help Plus (SH+)*, in an effort to overcome the challenges of finding the number of suitably trained professions required to deliver trauma support to refugees (Epping-Jordan *et al.*, 2016). SH+ is based on the third-wave cognitive behavioural therapy, acceptance and

commitment therapy (ACT), which focuses on enhancing psychological flexibility. This adapted version of ACT was audio recorded over five sessions and is delivered with an accompanying manual. A trial of SH+ with Ugandan refugees in South Sudan found that the intervention was effective in reducing psychological distress (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda & Lillis, 2006).

SH+ and other self-help guides have the potential to solve the human resources challenge involved in delivering trauma therapy to refugees. However, as outlined above, there are other challenges to be overcome, including the high mobility of the target population and, while it is a useful adaptation, the delivery on (analogue) audio does not make the intervention as mobile as the target communities. Using information and communication technology (ICT) to assist delivery can enable effectiveness under these circumstances. This is a particularly attractive option given the prevalence of smart phones and the fact that Eritrean refugees already use these phones to access useful and trusted information from fellow refugees, as well as official sources such as media outlets (Kidane, 2016).

Research question

Despite the prevalence of PTSD among refugees, we need to exercise caution when drawing conclusions about PTSD in people on the move. We should not assume the presence of PTSD, as there are confounding variables in the chain of events leading to disorders and suicides and vivid and painful memories of the past can fall within the range of normal responses to adverse contexts (Summerfield, 1995; 1996). Nonetheless, we need to be mindful of the evidence linking exposure to conflict and atrocities and symptoms of mental illness including PTSD (Pederson, 2002).

With this in mind, it is also clear that refugees are generally unable to access the level of mental health support they require, either in their first point of refuge (displacements camps and refugee camps across their national borders), or in their 'more secure' final destinations where one would expect more understanding and better resources. This lack of support is a more complex issue than simply resourcing,

it also includes the difficulties associated with understanding the context of trauma and traumatisation that pushes refugees out of their homes. When working with traumatised refugees, the historical context becomes imperative, in addition to lingual and cultural adaptations, which are crucial in contextualising therapeutic approaches (Dixon, Ahles & Marques, 2016; Bass *et al.*, 2013).

Hence, this research looks at the possibility of delivering a self-help tool that allows refugees in low resource settings to address and manage the stress caused by trauma. A programme was developed for the delivery of trauma support to refugees via mobile phones, which have been shown to be a trusted and integral part of the lives of many refugees. As fully outlined in Kidane (2021), this programme consisted of a six-session intervention known as Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST), which was designed to overcome the challenges with expertise and logistics inherent in refugee camps. TRUST, which addresses both individual and collective trauma, is simultaneously based on self-help techniques from Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, an approach that has been particularly effective in the integration of traumatic memories in PTSD (Shapiro, 1989), including among refugees (Mooren, De Jong, Kleber & Ruvic, 2003). In recognition of its effectiveness, the World Health Organization (WHO) has approved EMDR as a top-level evidence-based therapy (WHO, 2013).

This study explored the effectiveness of TRUST in reducing levels of traumatic stress and collective trauma among Eritrean refugees in refugee camps in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. It addressed the question: *Will a short self-help trauma intervention delivered using ICT have an impact on reducing post-traumatic stress (PTS) and enhancing resilience in the high trauma and low resource contexts of young Eritrean refugees?*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ This study has been previously published in Kidane, S. (2021). *Trauma, collective trauma and refugee trajectories in the digital era: Development of the Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST)*. African Books Collective

Research design

The core consideration of the research conducted between 2017 and 2018 relates to the development and delivery of a trauma intervention that reduces trauma levels (both collective and individual) and enhances the perception of refugees of their social and economic resilience (Kidane, 2021). A shorter version of the Impact of Events Scale (IES-S) that was adapted for the context, the Internet Social Capital Scale (ISCS), and the Social and Economic Resilience Scale (SER) were the tools used to measure trauma, collective trauma and socio-economic resilience. The construction and reliability of these instruments is fully outlined in Kidane 2021. Here it is sufficient to say that all three instruments used were highly reliable.

The conceptual framework (illustrated in Figure 8.1) highlights the relationship between traumatic stress (indicator of individual trauma), social capital (used here to indicate collective trauma) and socio-economic resilience (an indicator of perceptions of social and economic resilience) in the pre- and post-intervention phases. Pre-intervention, all three variables are independent of each other, however, post-trauma intervention levels of trauma become a mediating variable impacting on both social capital (collective trauma) and social and economic resilience, due to changes in self-efficacy as well as agency.

The research design was experimental to establish the effectiveness of an intervention in the real-life context of two refugee camps in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. In a real-life context not all variables can be controlled; instead the researchers are responsive to the environment and mindful of the contextual specificities, documenting them meticulously (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). One such consideration was the fact that there was no control group that received ‘no intervention’. This was due to the fact that it was considered unethical to leave a group of people who had been identified as having experienced traumatic events without assistance in an environment in which there is very little other support available. Instead, we had a group that received a short intervention and a group

that received the full intervention. Another example of reactive adaptation was the shift of the delivery platform from an application (app) that required reliable Internet access (24COMS) to delivery via a Bluetooth app (SHAREit), which was more effective in the context and was in fact introduced to the researchers by the refugees, who had been using it to share material among themselves.

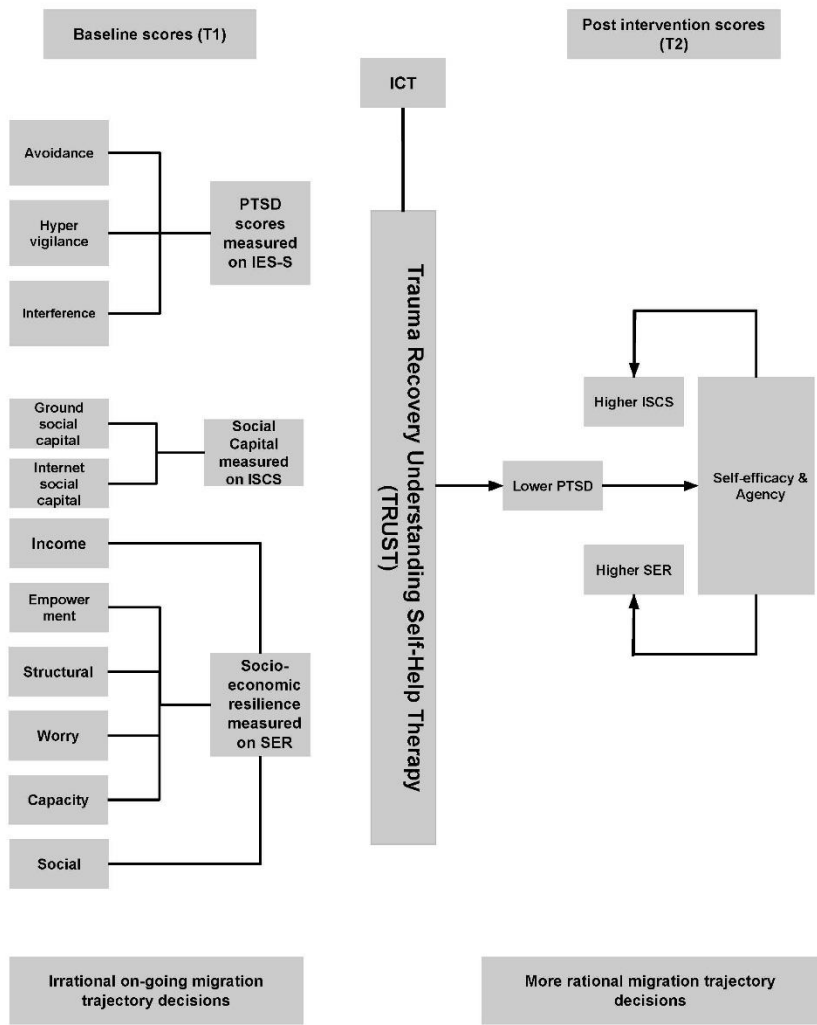


Figure 8.1. Conceptual framework (Kidane, 2021)

Another example concerns the provision of phone cards, which were given to all participants. Initially, phone cards were supposed to be in consideration of the cost of accessing the videos and downloading the app. However, downloads were not always needed, as videos were mostly accessed via the Bluetooth application, nonetheless, we decided to not remove the promised reimbursement. Subsequently the phone cards became an incentive that encouraged participants to maintain engagement.

The TRUST intervention

The TRUST intervention is based on a self-help programme, which is delivered in six steps. The concepts in TRUST were adapted from Shapiro's (2012) self-help book which introduces the understanding, coping and reintegration skills incorporated into TRUST with the addition of collective healing.

The first two sessions of TRUST are focused on providing psychoeducation that enables participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of trauma and its impact on the functioning of the brain. This is followed by three skills sessions to enable participants to cope better with the symptoms of traumatic stress. The final session provides reintegration opportunities to enable them to contribute to the addressing trauma in their communities.

TRUST is delivered via ICTs to address the challenges of posed by the high mobility of the target community and the dearth of suitably trained and qualified therapists who speak the language. Each session is facilitated by a video recording from a therapist who briefs and guides participants on the content of the session and demonstrates techniques; the videos are then uploaded onto a platform (like Vimeo or YouTube) that is password locked and only made available to registered participants who have accessed the sessions in the set order. There are also opportunities to send text questions and remarks.

Hypotheses

The effectiveness of the TRUST intervention delivered via ICT was tested by comparing the shorter version (psycho-education

component) of TRUST with the full programme. The hypotheses to be tested were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: In the pre-test we expect to see a negative correlation between post-traumatic stress (measured on IES-Short) and the components of:

- Social and economic resilience (except worriedness, as high values on that scale indicate more worry)
- Social capital (ISCS, scores online and offline)

Hypothesis 2: The full TRUST programme will produce better results than the shorter version (which delivers psycho-education alone), including:

- Reductions in post-traumatic stress
- Increases in the scores of social and economic resilience
- Increases in social capital (both online and offline)

Hypothesis 3: Livelihood support will:

- Decrease levels post-traumatic stress
- Increase social and economic resilience (except worriedness, as high values on that scale indicate more worry)
- Increase the components of social capital (both online and offline)

Participants

For this study, 103 participants were selected using purposive sampling approaches, the selection was based on the research team's intimate understanding of the population and their lives in the camps. Participants were then randomly assigned to receive either the short or a full version of TRUST. As some of the participants also received livelihood support available from charities in the camp, four groups were established: (1) participants who received the short version of TRUST and livelihood support, (2) participants who received the full version of TRUST and livelihood support (3) participants who received just the short version of TRUST, and (4) participants who

received just the full version of TRUST. Table 8.1 outlines the distribution of participants across the four groups.

**Table 8.1. Research participants and intervention groups (N=103)
(Kidane, 2021)**

Intervention	2-videos group	7-videos group	Total
With livelihood support	14	18	32
Without livelihood support	36	35	71
Total	50	53	103

Research instruments

Three psychometric tests were used: Impact of Events Scale (IES), Social and Economic Resilience Scale (SER) and Internet Social Capital Scale, and all three tests were adapted for use in the context, as detailed by Kidane (2021). All three scales had a high degree of internal consistency and were reliable for use in this research.

IES is the one of the most widely used self-reported measure of PTSD. The short self-reporting scale was developed in 1979, as a tool for assessing the degree of symptomatic response to a specific traumatic experience that took place in the previous seven days (Horowitz, Wilner & Alvarez, 1979). To ensure fitness for use with highly mobile communities, it was decided to develop a shorter version (Kidane, 2021). To ensure the validity of this short version, the three constructs of the IES (intrusion, avoidance and hyperarousal) were all included (as suggested by Thoresen *et al.*, 2010). The adapted scale of IES-S was found to have strong consistency as detailed in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2. Mean and standard deviation of IES-Short items

	Mean		Standard deviation	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Other things kept making me think about it.	3.583	3.085	1.4985	1.4418
I had waves of strong feelings about it.	3.359	2.936	1.5266	1.4051
I stayed away from reminders of it.	3.825	2.574	1.3535	1.4027
I tried not to talk about it.	3.417	2.649	1.5116	1.4421
I had trouble falling asleep.	2.777	2.521	1.4137	1.4348
I had trouble concentrating.	3.068	2.404	1.5033	1.4242
Reminders of it caused me to have physical reactions, such as sweating, trouble breathing, nausea, or a pounding heart.	3.000	2.628	1.5780	1.5861

The Social and Economic Resilience Scale (SER) was developed and initially used in a related, but different research in Uganda (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Malole & Vallejo, 2019). For this research adaptations were carried out to ensure effectiveness in the current context (Kidane, 2021). Statistical analysis was carried out to ensure that the test had satisfactory internal consistency as detailed in (kidane2021). A summary of the key statistics for SER are given in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3 Summary of SER-S statistics (Kidane, 2021)

		Number of items included	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Income	Pre- test	4	2.05	0.98	0.858	-0.123
	Post- test	4	2.16	0.99	0.620	-0.480
Empower- ment	Pre- test	3	3.05	0.88	-0.267	-0.640
	Post- test	3	3.54	1.11	-0.373	-0.905
Trust in the system	Pre- test	3	3.15	0.88	-0.370	-0.403
	Post- test	3	3.64	1.04	-0.502	-0.445
Worried- ness	Pre- test	4	3.53	0.77	-0.344	-0.132
	Post- test	4	3.30	1.05	-0.074	-0.905
Capacity	Pre- test	3	2.93	0.98	-0.215	-0.691
	Post- test	3	3.51	1.21	-0.287	-1.061

The other scale that was used was the Internet Social Capital Scale (ISCS), selected for its dual use of measuring social capital both on the ground and online (Williams, 2006). Measuring social capital was important, as various studies have been consistent in their findings that chronic civil war can deplete social capital (Kawachi &

Subramanian, 2006; Wind & Komproe, 2012) and this has a lot of commonalities with collective trauma. Indeed, loss of social capital has also been used to measure collective trauma (Somasundaram, 2014). Similar to SER and IES, ISCS was also shown to have satisfactory internal consistency for use (Kidane, 2021). Table 8.4 outlines some of these key findings.

Table 8.4. Key statistics of ISCS (online and offline) (Kidane, 2021)

		Number of items	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewedness	Kurtosis
Social capital online	Pre-test	11	2.64	1.01	-0.115	-0.990
	Post-test	11	3.07	1.35	-0.271	-1.261
Social capital offline	Pre-test	11	2.75	0.72	-0.302	-0.357
	Post-test	11	3.30	1.09	-0.303	-0.923

Procedures

Participants were briefed in a joint meeting and then invited to consider and consent explicitly. Before being randomly divided into the two main groups, interviews were carried out to collect demographic details, ascertain the availability of livelihood support, and confirm the presence of traumatic experiences. Each participant was then assisted to complete all three psychometric tests for the baseline pre-test scores. The lead researcher carried out all three assessments with all the participants to ensure consistency and to assess the participants’ vulnerabilities and risk.

Research assistants then released videos to participants in accordance with their grouping and interspaced to ensure completion of all tasks for each session.

Six weeks post intervention, participants were invited for a second interview using the same psychometric tests as in the first interview. In addition, participants were invited to group discussions to give

them an opportunity to talk about their experiences and to thank them for their participation.

Results

Correlation between individual traumatic stress, collective trauma, and social and economic resilience in the pre-test

The analysis of the correlation between the individual traumatic stress, collective trauma, and social and economic resilience, and across the data gathered for each of the scales, prior to administering TRUST (pre-test), indicates a negative correlation between post-traumatic stress and all components of social and economic resilience, except worriedness (as expected in the hypothesis) (outlined in Table 8.5). There was also a negative correlation between post-traumatic stress and social capital (an indicator of collective trauma), in particular with social capital on the ground (as opposed to online social capital).

Table 8.5. Correlation between PTSD, SER and ISCS scores

		Correlation	Significance
SER	Income	-0.280**	< 0.01
	Empowerment	-0.343**	< 0.01
	Worriedness	0.487**	< 0.01
	Trust in the system	-0.192	0.052
	Capability	-0.269**	< 0.01
	Social embeddedness	-0.252*	0.010
ISCS	Offline	-0.187	0.058
	Online	-0.068	0.495

The effectiveness of TRUST was examined by comparing the two versions as well as the impact on each of the livelihood support groups using MANOVA (multivariant analysis of variance). The first

and second measurements gave a within factor while the livelihood support category 2x2x2 MANOVA gave us a between factor analysis.

Is TRUST effective at reducing traumatic stress?

The results of the IES-S scores are indicative that post-traumatic stress levels changed between the first and second measurement ($F(1.90) = 64.594, p < 0.01$). Moreover, the interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1.90) = 91.80, p < 0.01$), indicating that TRUST did bring down the levels of trauma, as measured on the IES-S.

Inspection of the estimated means indicate that those who received seven videos of TRUST (i.e., the full programme) reported less post-traumatic stress during the second measurement, than those who received the shorter version with two videos.

Can TRUST enhance social and economic resilience?

The 2x2x2 repeated-measure MANOVAs were intended to show the impact of TRUST on the various elements of the SER-S (subscales).

On the subscale concerned with 'income', the results show that the perception of income did not change between the first and second measurement ($F(1.91) = 0.358, p < 0.551$), indicating that the perception of income did not change during the research. However, interestingly, the interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1.91) = 15.084, p < 0.01$), indicating that there was a difference in the perception of income between the 2-video and the 7-video conditions. The estimated means indicate that those who received seven videos of TRUST reported higher income scores and those who received two videos during the second measurement. There are two possible explanations for this: firstly, the fact that people who received the full version of TRUST had more positive assessment of their prospects and, secondly, the people who received the full version of TRUST also received more phone cards (due to the fact they had to engage for longer) and this was considered as additional income. More interestingly, the interaction between time*livelihood support was not significant ($F(1.91) = 1.112, p = 0.294$), indicating the fact that livelihood support did not alter the participants' perception of their income. Finally, the (three-way) interaction

time*TRUST*livelihood was not significant ($F(1.91) = 0.842$, $p=0.361$). This indicates that being in receipt of both livelihood support and TRUST does not result in a multiplier effect.

For 'empowerment', the results are indicative of the fact that the main effect of time is significant ($F(1.91) = 17.662$, $p<0.01$). This signifies that the scores for empowerment changed during the research period. The interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1.91) = 42.344$, $p<0.01$), indicating that there was a difference in the scores for empowerment across the two groups; the (2-video and 7-video). The estimated means show that those who received the full seven videos of TRUST reported higher levels of empowerment than those who received only two videos. Meanwhile, the result for the interaction time*livelihood support is not significant ($F(1.91) = 0.069$, $p=0.793$), neither is the three-way interaction time*TRUST*livelihood ($F(1.91) = 1.921$, $p=0.169$).

The results for the subscale 'trust in the system' indicate that the main effect of time is significant ($F(1.91) = 23.480$, $p<0.01$), signifying that the scores for trust in the system changed during the research period. The findings also indicate that during the research period the scores for reliance on the system did not change equally for the 2-video and 7-video conditions. The estimated means indicate that those who received seven videos of TRUST reported higher scores for trust in the system. The two-way interaction time*livelihood support and the three-way interaction time*TRUST*livelihood are not significant ($F(1.91) = 1.983$, $p=0.162$; $F(1.91) = 0.311$, $p=0.579$, respectively).

Similar to the above, for the subscale 'worriedness', the results indicate that the main effect of time is significant ($F(1.91) = 5.090$, $p=0.026$); hence, overall, the scores for worriedness changed during the research. The interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1.91) = 13.438$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the scores for worriedness did not change equally for the 2-video and 7-video conditions. The estimated means show that those in receipt of seven videos of TRUST reported less worry. The two-way interaction time*livelihood support and the three-way interaction time*TRUST*livelihood are not significant ($F(1.91) = 0.368$, $p=0.545$; $F(1.91) = 0.644$, $p=0.424$, respectively).

For the subscale ‘capability’, the results indicate that the main effect of time is significant ($F(1,91) = 21.708, p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that, overall, the scores for capability changed during the research period. Moreover, the interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1,91) = 69.565, p < 0.01$), indicating that the scores for capability did not change equally for the 2-video and 7-video conditions. Similar to the rest of the scores, the estimated means indicate that those who received all seven TRUST videos reported higher capability. Once again, the two-way interaction time*livelihood support and the three-way interaction time*TRUST*livelihood are not significant ($F(1,91) = 0.644, p = 0.424$; $F(1,91) = 0.644, p = 0.424$, respectively).

Finally, for the subscale ‘social embeddedness’, the results indicate that the main effect of time is significant ($F(1,91) = 9.105, p < 0.01$). This indicates that, overall, the scores for social embeddedness changed during the research. In addition, the interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1,91) = 22.474, p < 0.01$), which indicates that the scores for social embeddedness did not change equally for the 2-video and 7-video conditions. The estimated means indicate that those who received the full seven video version of TRUST reported higher social scores. As with the other scores, the two-way interaction time*livelihood support and the three-way interaction time*TRUST*livelihood are not significant ($F(1,91) = 0.808, p = 0.371$; $F(1,91) = 0.091, p = 0.763$, respectively).

Across the board, it seems that livelihood support, which was expected to result in better outcomes for those who were in receipt of the TRUST intervention, did not result in significant differences for any of the SER scores, showing no significant differences in participants’ perceptions of their social and economic resilience. Significantly, the estimated means show that those who were in receipt of the full seven videos of TRUST reported positive outcomes on all components of the social and economic resilience scale after completion of the programme.

Can TRUST improve social capital (reduce collective trauma)?

As mentioned above, social capital scores on ISCS were used to indicate levels of collective trauma. The 2x2x2 repeated measure MANOVA analysis indicates that the main effect of time was significant, and this was the case for both the online and offline contexts. TRUST was indicated to have the effect of enhancing social capital scores (therefore, reducing collective trauma), both inside the refugee camps and across the online networks that participants accessed.

For online social capital scores, the results were indicative of a significant main effect of time ($F(1.90) = 14.859$, $p < 0.01$), social capital online changed during the research period. However, while the interaction time*TRUST was significant ($F(1.90) = 32.203$, $p < 0.01$), the change in social capital online was not equal for the 2-video and 7-video conditions. The estimated means indicate that those in receipt of the full seven videos of TRUST reported higher social capital scores. Similar to the other scores the results for the interactions time*livelihood support and time*TRUST*livelihood were not significant ($F(1.90) = 0.675$, $p = 0.413$; $F(1.90) = 2.719$, $p = 0.103$, respectively), indicating that livelihood support does not seem to have any impact on social capital, as measured on ISCS.

For offline (on the grounds in the camps) social capital, the results here also show a significant main effect of time ($F(1.90) = 55.409$, $p < 0.01$) and, hence, overall, social capital offline changed during the research period. The interaction time*TRUST is significant ($F(1.90) = 82.733$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that during the research period change in social capital offline was not equal for the 2-video and 7-video conditions, with those who received seven videos reporting higher social capital offline. In addition, the results for the interactions time*livelihood support and time*TRUST*livelihood are not significant ($F(1.90) = 0.359$, $p = 0.551$; $F(1.91) = 1.109$, $p = 0.295$, respectively).

Table 8.6 gives a summary of the effect of TRUST on traumatic stress (IES-Short), the various elements of social and economic resilience (SER), and social capital (ISCS). The partial eta-square results can be

interpreted as the percentage of variance in the change between the first (pre-TRUST) and second (post-TRUST) measurement, plus the associated error variance (Pierce, Block & Aguinis, 2004). From these results it can be said that TRUST has a particularly strong effect on post-traumatic stress, capability (on the SER), and social capital offline (ISCS) and, hence, we can conclude that TRUST reduced trauma and enhanced participants' perceptions of their capability (self-efficacy and agency) and social capital.

Table 8.6. Summary of results for the effect of TRUST

		F value	Partial eta-square
IES-Short		$F(1.90) = 91.80, p < 0.01$	0.505
SER	Income	$F(1.91) = 15.084, p < 0.01$	0.142
	Empowerment	$F(1.91) = 42.344, p < 0.01$	0.318
	Worriedness	$F(1.91) = 13.438, p < 0.01$	0.129
	System	$F(1.91) = 38.632, p < 0.01$	0.298
	Capability	$F(1.91) = 69.565, p < 0.01$	0.433
	Social embeddedness	$F(1.91) = 22.474, p < 0.01$	0.198
Social capital (ISCS)	Offline	$F(1.90) = 82.733, p < 0.01$	0.479
	Online	$F(1.90) = 32.203, p < 0.01$	0.264

Discussion and conclusion

The main aim of this research was to see if TRUST, a short-self-help trauma intervention, could be delivered effectively using ICT – having an impact on reducing post-traumatic stress and enhancing resilience – in highly-mobile and highly-traumatised communities, such as Eritrean refugees living in impoverished refugee camps where there is little support available. In addition, we also wanted to see if the different components of TRUST (i.e., the psycho-education

alone, as compared to the full version) could be delivered to the same effect of lowering trauma levels and enhancing social and economic resilience, as well as social capital (reduction of collective trauma).

Clearly, despite the short length of 'TRUST' as an intervention (especially when considering the complex nature of the traumatic experiences detailed), as well as the complexities associated with delivering effective therapy through ICT, the results do indicate lower levels of traumatic stress with the associated benefits of enhanced social and economic resilience and lower levels of collective trauma indicators. This indicates that treating PTSD has positive impacts on mental health, perceptions of social and economic status, and community-wide relationships (social capital). Managing the symptoms of traumatic stress, through a self-help therapy seems to have enhanced participants' self-efficacy in coping. This is the "core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects by one's actions" and "plays a key role in stress reactions and quality of coping in threatening situations" (Benight & Bandura, 2004, p. 113). As individuals with low self-efficacy perceive challenges as dangerous and full of risk of failure, enhancing self-efficacy through self-help can be a significant component in building resilience to trauma (Bandura, 1997) – which seems to be the key achievement of 'TRUST'. The approach used focused on helping survivors of atrocities with extremely traumatic experiences to gain an understanding of their symptoms and then learn some basic skills to enable them to cope with symptoms resulting from these experiences. 'TRUST' also enabled participants to reconnect better with their communities, as resourceful members with high self-efficacy and a new set of key knowledge, understanding and skills that can help them and their communities.

The research also found that, the full 7-video intervention was more effective than the 2-video psycho-education session. 'TRUST' is a three-phased intervention, the first two videos, received by every participant, incorporated only the phase concerned with educating participants about trauma and its impacts. The remaining two phases are contained in the subsequent five videos; these videos resourced

participants to cope with their symptoms, followed by the reintegration phase of equipping them with everyday skills for good quality interactions within their community. The full intervention was consistently shown to be better at reducing PTSD and bringing about associated improvements in SER and social capital (ISCS). Much of the traumatic stress in the camps can be described as complex, it occurred due to prolonged exposure to highly traumatic events of political violence that were perpetrated throughout the lives of the participants. Literature on trauma treatment is fairly consistent on the efficacy of the phase-oriented approach taken in developing TRUST for treating complex trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006; Brown, Schefflin & Hammond, 1998; Courtois, Ford & Cloitre, 2009; Ford, Courtois, Steele, Van der Hart & Nijenhuis, 2005; Van der Hart, Nijenhuis & Steele, 2006).

It was rather surprising that, neither trauma levels, nor the associated benefits of enhanced social and economic wellbeing, or social capital were affected by the availability or otherwise of the kind of livelihood support that was available in the camps. This is surprising in light of the link between resources and trauma. The conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) states individuals strive to garner, retain and protect their resources. Furthermore, the theory predicts that stress will occur following loss of resources, threat of resources loss, or indeed failure or obstruction to gain resources following a significant resource investment. Post disaster studies have found resource loss to be a key predictor of psychological distress (Benight, Swift, Sanger, Smith & Zeppelin, 1999). Studies of conflict and disaster also support the conservation of resource theory assertion that resource loss is likely to contribute to longer-term cycles of loss that hamper recovery (King, King, Foy, Keane & Fairbank, 1999; Kaniasty & Norris, 1995). However in the case of the participants of this study, livelihood support did not seem to be impacted on, as expected. This might be related to the extremely limited nature of the support available in the camps, leading participants to not perceive it as contributing to their resilience/prospects. There were also issues related to the process in which support was provided, which does not take the situation of refugees into account (NGOs often tend to select

the most destitute refugees and focus on supporting those individuals, rather than empowering whole communities to share and manage resources, thereby supporting the most vulnerable holistically). The lack of understanding of the level of support required by those considered most vulnerable (including mental health support) ultimately works against the collective by introducing selection and targeting of the very limited resources to very few members (selected for their vulnerability, inadvertently incentivising ongoing vulnerability), leaving individuals without the support of others, and the community without crucial agency to support its most vulnerable. Where trauma and collective trauma are issues of concern, livelihood support needs to be provided in a way that includes meeting the mental health needs of refugees and their communities.

Having said all of this, delivering TRUST was not without its challenges, and the main challenge concerned the infrastructure for delivering therapy via ICT. The lack of Internet connectivity curtailed delivery as initially envisaged and created a situation in which participants felt alone and were at risk of losing motivation at crucial points of the process (Kidane 2021). This is a serious matter that warrants closer attention for anyone interested in delivering therapy via ICTs in places where connectivity cannot be guaranteed.

The results of this study fully attest to the psychosocial improvements due to TRUST, a carefully contextualised, self-help therapy designed to be delivered in low human and financial resources settings, such as refugee camps and similar settings. However, given that one of the most significant adaptations was to deliver the therapy with the assistance of ICTs, and given the challenges experienced due to the lack of reliable connectivity, it is important that future research focuses on the implications of not having connectivity and, hence, the loss of interactive support and coaching while addressing highly traumatic memories through self-help techniques.

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Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from Tilburg University REC2017/16; REDC # 2020n13; REDC# 2020/01 3a; REDC 2020.139.

Author contributions

Selam Kidane is the sole author of this chapter.

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Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking¹¹⁹

Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction: From the Sinai to Libya

The phenomenon of human trafficking for ransom first came to light in the Sinai desert in Egypt in 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). This practice involved collecting ransoms from migrants and refugees¹²⁰ while torturing them on the phone to family members to ‘encourage’ them to pay. The victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were mainly Eritrean – 95%, according to an estimate published by Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2012; also see Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

‘Sinai trafficking’, as it came to be known, ceased for various

The trafficking trajectories taken by Eritreans to Libya are highly organised by a network of actors across the Horn of Africa. The practices described by the refugees and migrants who have taken these perilous journeys include recruitment by deception, fraud and force. Payments are extracted using torture while victims are detained in ‘warehouses’ and ‘stores’. The purpose of these practices is clearly to exploit people who are vulnerable for financial gain and force them to engage in begging. This chapter argues that the practice satisfies the elements of the crime of human trafficking and that fulfils the elements that constitute human trafficking for ransom.

¹¹⁹ 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.

¹²⁰ 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).

reasons in 2014 (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). However, trafficking for ransom – using the same modus operandi as documented in Sinai trafficking – has emerged in (and on the road to) Libya (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b). Human trafficking for ransom in Libya was first mentioned in a journal article in 2015 (Reitano, 2015) and in more detail in 2017 (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b). The similarity between it and Sinai trafficking raises questions about whether or not some of the actors and networks from Sinai trafficking may have already been in place in Libya by the time reports on Sinai trafficking were first made and relocated the business after the lucrative trade in the Sinai dried up (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b).

The expansion of human trafficking for ransom, from the relatively narrow location in the Sinai to the coverage of an entire region, might have been predicted. As far back as 2014, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) described how the routes, financial implications and presence of perpetrators had expanded in the North African region – and Europe – as human trafficking for ransom is lucrative and largely perpetrated with impunity. In order to counter this crime, it is first necessary to understand the modus operandi. The following section explores the gaps in the literature on human trafficking in Libya, focusing on the routes and the operations on those routes. It also sets out the research questions. This is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and, lastly, a brief conclusion.

Documentation of human trafficking routes

While the routes used in Sinai trafficking have been described extensively (see, for example, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017), only a few publications have described the trafficking routes of Eritreans to Libya. Reitano (2015, p. 9) noted that from 2012 to 2015 ‘people smuggling’ in the region had become a structured and systematic phenomenon, but he also noted that more research was needed:

[There is] a chronic absence of either data or more qualitative assessments that would allow a better understanding of the nature of the drivers and motivations of migrants,

the routes of transit or the role of facilitators, or even the scale of the flow. (Reitano, 2015, p. 9)

A report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) specifically identifies human trafficking networks operating from the Horn of Africa to Libya and involving Eritrean refugees.

As well as there being only a few publications on the trafficking routes to Libya, there are also lots of gaps in the description of these routes. For instance, Hajer is mentioned as a key transit hub in Sudan near the capital of Khartoum, from which mainly Eritreans are transported to Libya, but its precise location is not determined. The report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) identifies this as the last point before refugees leave to Libya. Davy (2017) describes some of the key entry points on the border from Ethiopia to Sudan, namely, the towns of Metemma (in the Amhara region) and Humera (in the Tigray region). Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017b) describe routes from Sudan to Libya and briefly touch upon new routes to Libya from Sudan via Egypt, but these are not described in detail.

The operations on the route are also not described in any detail in the extant literature. Davy (2017) says that the drivers who transport people to Libya travel over the sand to avoid authorities and that refugees have reported encountering armed groups, which are referred to as Chadian or Egyptian. Kuschminder (2021) reports an increase in the amounts of ransom being collected from Eritrean refugees in Libya, but does not provide details about the routes that Eritreans use to cross the Sahara before entering Libya.

The degree of organisation of the routes from Eritrea through Sudan and other countries into Libya is also the subject of discussion. Ayalew found that:

[...] unlike the official narratives, smuggling in these particular transition nodes [border towns such as Teseney and Kassala] lacks a centralized leadership or hierarchy. Certain 'pilots' and their connectors facilitate refugee journeys across a certain distance using specific skills needed to transit to specific locations. (Ayalew, 2018, p. 6)

Conversely, the report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) stresses that the drivers “appear to be in close communication with each other, coordinating their operations and highlighting the seamless connections between the logisticians of the human smuggling trade across national borders in the Horn and North Africa” (p. 22). In the *Routledge Handbook of Human Trafficking*, Van Reisen *et al.* (2018) emphasise the collusion between trafficking networks, authorities, law enforcement and military apparatus in the organisation of the routes. Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017), Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017a), and Van Reisen *et al.* (2018) describe a high level of criminal organisation involving top military officials, such as the Eritrean General Manjus, among others. This is also confirmed by United Nations (UN) Security Council Monitoring Reports (UN Security Council, 2011; 2013; 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). They identify a practice of human trafficking for ransom linked to other international crimes, such as the illicit cross-border trade in arms and people.

Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans and Mawere (2019) identify digital communication, and the control of it, as a key factor driving new forms of human trafficking of Eritrean refugees, enabled by ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape. As technological innovations are introduced, the power differential between potential victims and perpetrators of human trafficking increases, and this can be regarded as a factor in the rapid expansion and globalisation of human trafficking. Kidane (2021) has described the reliance of Eritrean refugees on digital communication; in the refugee camps she investigated in Ethiopia, she identified that a large number of Eritrean refugees had access to some kind of digital communication. To refugees trapped in a ‘black hole’ in the digital landscape – a location in which connectivity and access to information is restricted or controlled – a mobile phone is not just a tool for convenience and entertainment, but it “become[s] a trusted and integral part of the lives of refugees scattered across many geographical areas, keeping families in contact and transferring cash and information across various locations” (Kidane, 2021, p. 23).

There is confusion in relation to the terminology used to describe the phenomenon in the literature. Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit (UN, 2000; see also UN Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Human trafficking *for ransom* is further defined as the abduction, torture, extortion and/or killing of victims who are forced to beg to extract ransoms for their release (Van Reisen Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).¹²¹ While the definitions of these terms – human trafficking and human trafficking for ransom – are fairly clear, their application in practices is varied.

Reitano (2015) and Ayalew (2018) refer to the practice as ‘smuggling’, while Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) and Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017a) refer to it as ‘human trafficking for ransom’. Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) interviewed 34 Eritrean refugees in Italy who arrived between 2016 and 2017, but said that they were unable to detect ‘trafficking routes’. These authors found that there was no active recruitment, deception or coercion of those interviewed at the time when they started their journey to Libya:

None of the respondents spoke of being actively recruited, that is approached and convinced to migrate, by smugglers or traffickers for migrating to Libya. From these respondents, it is evident that there was no deception nor coercion in the recruitment and planning of the migration, and hence it would be difficult to consider these migrants as victims of trafficking. (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 218)

Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) conclude that refugees in Libya are, therefore, not victims of human trafficking, but rather of kidnapping and extortion, which they describe as a crime against humanity.

Other authors, such as Belloni (2016), describe Eritrean refugees in similar situations to those described by Kuschminder and

¹²¹ For more details on the definition of these terms see Glossary of Terms.

Triandafyllidou, including encouragement from the community to migrate onwards from Sudan and Ethiopia and large-scale planning in which everyone in a community or refugee camp plans to leave. In addition, these authors say that Eritrean refugees are, to a certain extent, aware of the dangers before setting off to Libya (Belloni, 2016; Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020); therefore, they question the degree of ‘deception’ involved in the recruitment.

However, the findings of Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) appear to contradict the UN Security Council Resolutions, which have condemned the human trafficking of “hundreds of thousands of people” in Libya (see, for example, UN Security Council, 2015; 2018; 2020; 2021a; 2021b) and the findings of the UN, which has identified human traffickers, including from Eritrea, as perpetrators of these crimes (Jaura, 2018). The UN has imposed sanctions on six individuals in relation to this (UN Security Council, 2018). Subsequently, several arrests of perpetrators of human trafficking, which have also been named in other publications on this phenomenon, have been reported in the media (Ezega, 2020; Sayed, 2020; Girma & Hayden, 2021).

Mechanisms for the protection and rehabilitation of trafficking victims naturally rest upon the proper classification of the nature of the events and the determination of whether or not these constitute transnational crimes. Hence, it is important to identify whether the practices in, and on route, to Libya, constitute human trafficking.

Dearey (2018) argues that in order to identify victims of human trafficking, it is important to investigate the perpetrators and understand the level of organisation involved. This can be difficult, as victims may be reluctant, or afraid, to share their experiences. In relation to the reception of refugees in Israel, Rozen (2019) found that victims often have problems in presenting their experiences to the authorities and, therefore, their status as a victim of human trafficking is often overlooked. Hence, whether or not the phenomenon under study can or should be qualified as human trafficking is a relevant question.

It is clear that a more detailed description and understanding of the routes, modalities and facilitators of human trafficking for ransom in Libya is urgently needed to enable classification of the phenomenon. In order to contribute to this debate, the present study represents a case study of the routes that Eritrean refugees take into Libya. It examines the main routes by which Eritrean refugees travel from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, how, and by whom these journeys are facilitated, and the modus operandi on these routes. As well as the routes, this chapter looks at how the journey is initiated, whether or not extortion and torture for ransom occur on these journeys, the conditions while on route through the desert to Libya, the role of ICT during the journey, and the organisation of the networks responsible for the transportation of Eritrean refugees along these routes.

The main research question is: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya and does the practice constitute human trafficking?*

This is answered through the following sub-questions:

Sub-Q.1: *How are the journeys of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya initiated?*

Sub-Q.2: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya?*

Sub-Q.3: *What are the conditions on the route?*

Sub-Q.4: *How are payments made, where and to whom, and under what conditions?*

Sub-Q.5: *How are these routes organised (facilitators, networks, collusion of authorities) and what is the involvement of Eritreans (including Eritrean authorities) in this organisation?*

The next section presents the methodology used to answer these questions.

Methodology

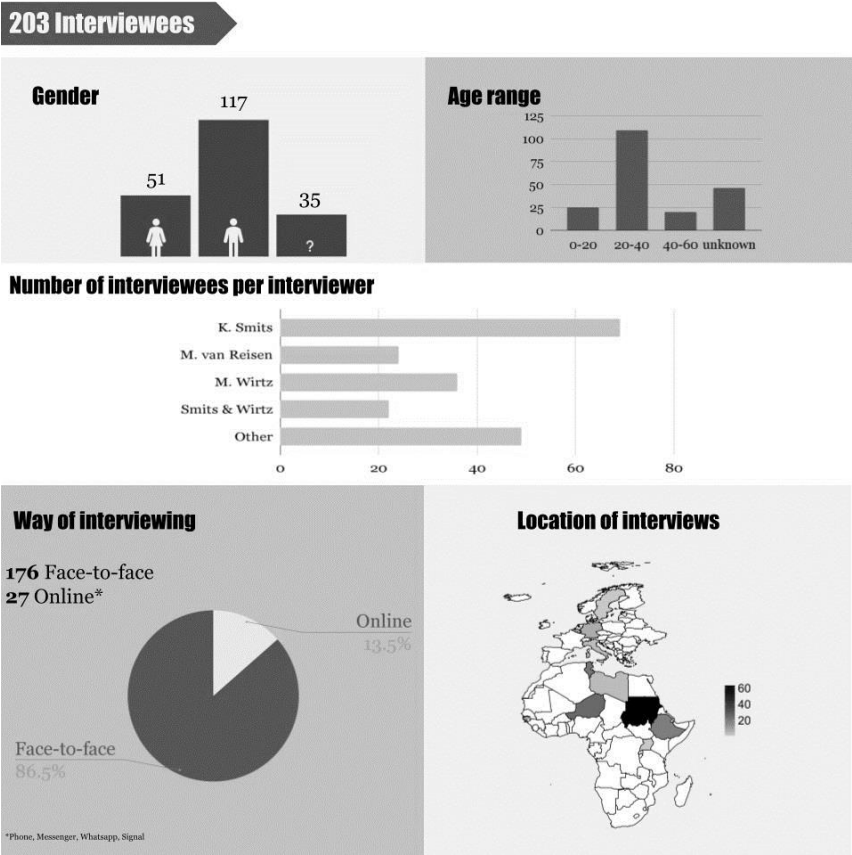
The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning 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 descriptive and explorative case study investigates the routes and trajectories taken by Eritrean refugees, fleeing Eritrea and the Horn of Africa during the period starting from around the mid-2000s up to 2021. 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) and, as a means of comparison, interviews a Sudanese participant (n=4), Somali participants (n=5) and a resource (n=1) person familiar with the journeys of Eritrean refugees. The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online.

The interviews were analysed using a coding-labelling strategy, focusing on the routes, facilitators, events and *modus operandi* reported on the trajectory from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya. A coding-labelling table was constructed to identify all locations, borders crossed, occurrences at these locations and payments made. The interviewees were also asked about the identities of the persons who transported them.

Figure 9.1. Overview of interview statistics¹²²



¹²² Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

The findings of this research are presented in the following sections: initiating the journey and the recruitment process; the routes to Libya; the conditions in the desert; the payments made, to whom, where and under what conditions; and the organisation of the trade, including the network, complicity of authorities and involvement of Eritreans.

The start of the journey

The next section presents the findings on the circumstances at the start of the journey to Libya. This research looked at trajectories from Ethiopia or Sudan (the segments of the journey from Eritrea or Somalia are not included in this study).

Initiating the journey

Many of the interviewees in this research reported initiating the journey to Libya themselves, in that they contacted someone to arrange their journey or took some other step to commence the journey.

He [the connection man] took me in a car to Khartoum. There I made contact with an Eritrean connection man. His name is Aman. I didn't pay him. We agreed that I will pay 1600 USD once arrived in the store in Libya. (Interviewee 1007, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In Sudan, you can find simply [find someone to take you to Libya], because you are talking. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

However, the word 'initiation' may require further interrogation as it may hide a more complex reality. 'Initiation' by the migrants and refugees may be the result of circumstances designed to leave few or no other options.

All of the interviewees who reported planning to leave for Libya said that they had begun to think about this in the refugee camps in

Ethiopia and Sudan, or in urban areas in Sudan;¹²³ none of the interviewees for this book said they had made any such plan in Eritrea, when they were preoccupied with the challenge of leaving the country safely. Many refugees are prompted to leave from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, as the circumstance in these host countries is perceived as hostile and difficult. Particularly in Sudan, interviewees explained that the situation is impossible:

[...] After I came to Sudan, the situation was even worse. They ask you for identification and if you don't have the identification, they just arrest you, so finally I decided to leave. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2020)

Interviewees also described other reasons for moving to Libya, including fear of being forcibly returned to Eritrea, the inability to provide for their family, and fear of Eritrean government operatives.¹²⁴

Moreover, a refugee who reports having 'initiated' a journey may have been compelled, misled, or deceived and during the journey may be abducted or sold (on). For example, a middle-aged Eritrean man explained:

[I found a smuggler] Just by people, asking. For the desert and for the sea, [he wanted] 4,400 [US] dollar. For all. [...] I entered straight to Bani Walid [in

¹²³ This description is correct for the period researched. After 2020, the situation for Eritrean refugees in urban areas in Ethiopia deteriorated and this may have impacted on the numbers leaving to Libya from urban areas (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, phone call, October 2021). Also refugee camps in Ethiopia were severely affected by the war in Tigray; two camps were destroyed in the war and the remaining two camps are suffering severely under war conditions, with little if any supplies reaching the camps (Schlein, 2021). Refugees have been relocated to other camps and some have left or tried to leave to other countries, including Libya.

¹²⁴ From 2020 to the time of writing, conditions for Eritrean refugees all over Ethiopia severely worsened, due to the presence of Eritrean intelligence, security and agents in Ethiopia, who keep watch on the Eritrean population, as well as the hate spread against Tigrinya-speaking populations in the context of the war against Tigray (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, phone call, October 2021). This has increased fear among the Eritrean population.

Libya. [...] *I was locked up underground for 4 months, not seeing outside, anything. He wanted another payment. He asked for 12,000 [US] dollar. I paid 4,400, then he want another time, [USD] 8,000.* (Interviewee 0012, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Another interviewee explained that the amount to be paid was changed when he arrived in Libya:

I found [a smuggler] by friends. Those friends want to cross the desert, so I want to go with them. They tell us that the money is [USD] 3,800. But in Libya, they changed the number [that we had to pay]. [We paid] 3,800. And they take us to another place. And they ask us [USD] 1,700. The last, they sold us and they asked us [USD] 5,000. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

These quotes illustrate the experiences of most of the interviewees. Even though the journey may have been entered into willingly, the details of what would then happen during the course of the journey, especially in Libya, were not part of that agreement. In addition, some interviewees stated that promises were made about Libya, such as:

The smuggler told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe. (Interviewee 5003-2, Interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Hence, how the circumstances are perceived needs to be factored in when the start of a journey is being categorised in terms of a ‘decision’, ‘initiation of a journey’ or a ‘plan’.

Perceptions of Libya before departing

Many of the Eritreans interviewed revealed that they were somewhat aware of the dangers involved before they commenced their journey to Libya. The following conversation was held with a young Eritrean woman in the east of Sudan, living in an urban area, who had recently attempted to leave to Libya with a group.

5003-1: I heard that there are many dangerous things on the road to Libya and in Libya itself, but at that time, I was not thinking about all these problems when I decided to go. [...] I heard that the Libyans deal with people in a very tough way. Some detain people and some beat them. And I also heard that the sea is very

difficult, that people die there. [...] I heard that the Libyans haven't got respect for people, especially for girls and especially for foreigners.

KS & MW: So, when you decided to go to Libya and you heard that, was there anything you did to protect yourself?

5003-1: No. [...] No-one was thinking about those things. The main thing is how we can leave. I have not thought for a long time. Just, I heard that one girl from Wedsherify had reached Italy. The girls here are depending on the stories from Europe, people who are successful in reaching Europe, who are writing on social media or calling... So, we are thinking about when we reach it [Europe], not about the journey. (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Even though the interviewee in the previous excerpt was aware of the dangers ahead in Libya, her objective was to reach Europe, spurred on by others who had succeeded in achieving this. Most of the research participants knew before leaving for Libya that they were embarking on a perilous journey. However, this did not prevent them from leaving, because, as one Eritrean refugee stated before returning to Libya for another attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea:

Instead of living for nothing, you have to die for something. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Knowledge of the dangerous situation in Libya did not prevent this refugee from traveling to Libya. This raises another question: How do Eritrean refugees form their perceptions on the situation in Libya? This research found that most of the Eritrean refugees obtain their information from social networks, both offline and online, if and when they have access, as well as through Bluetooth shared by others. The information they access comes mostly from relatives or friends whom they trust. Refugees also obtain information about the routes from other refugees by word of mouth. In Eastern Sudan, at the border with Eritrea, interviewee 5003-1 showed that she was well informed about the weather conditions in the Mediterranean Sea. She explained:

Two days ago, I was in the office of UNHCR. I heard someone speaking with the group: 'Now the road to Libya is very good, the sea is very good these days.' [We

talk about] what happens if we can go. (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Her mother added:

Youth and girls here chat, and they chat with people in Europe – on Facebook, and such. Those people also told them: 'Now the road is good, the sea is good...' People chat everywhere, in coffee places... This is one of the main issues everywhere, in Wedsheryi, in Kassala. (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

It is interesting to note that when refugees leave for Libya they usually do not inform their relatives. Departures are often quick and unprepared. Migrants and refugees simply grab an opportunity to leave when presented. A refugee in Belgium narrated the following:

I attended a refugee community meeting. The situation made me very angry. I left. I did not tell my husband or my children. I only called them when I had reached Khartoum. Then I went on to Libya. I only spoke to them when I reached Belgium. (Interviewee 3010, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, February 2016)

Her husband, who was interviewed in the refugee camp in Tigray, shared the following:

She was very upset and the next day she left. She didn't tell me. I have been looking after the four children. The baby is very small. She wanted to arrange a better life for the family. She was courageous. (Interviewee 3011, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, July 2015)

The refugee related that there was an agent operating in the camp who assisted her on the journey. Parents are also told by others that their children should leave to Libya:

My neighbour is a big woman, but all the time she speaks to my mother: "Your daughter must go to Libya to work, to Khartoum, anywhere. Here [in the east of Sudan] the situation is very bad and you live in a very bad situation". (Interviewee 5003-4, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

There is a wide social network that facilitates and encourages moving in the direction of Libya, compounded by circumstances in host countries, which are experienced as negative. Even though refugees understand that the situation in Libya is very dangerous, this information does not appear to have much influence on the initiation of the journey.

The role of facilitators

Facilitators play a key role when the journey begins and refugees are sometimes able to compare prices and discuss some details of the initial arrangements:

All Eritreans, they want to go to Europe, so you are talking. Who is the best, who is expensive, something, something. And [my connection man], he is an Asmara man. Thus, I'm going to [my connection man]. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Another interviewee added:

0017: Just I saw the picture [of my connection man], just the photo. I met him one time. [...] We met one time to discuss how to [do the journey], about money, how to pay the money and how to secure your life. He talked about his work.

KS: And what did he tell you about the money? How did he say you should pay?

0017: Okay, I said to the connection man, we can pay with Eritrean money. Because we have no outside money. (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face July 2019)

The contact with facilitators is organised via trusted contacts. Sometimes people simply tag along with friends who also want to go to Libya:

I found [a connection man] through friends. Those friends want to cross the desert, so I wanted to go with them. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The communication with a facilitator is easily arranged and there are no disincentives at that point to establishing such a connection.

Information about the routes to Libya and pressure to move to Libya is often presented as though it is chatter in the community, but can

come directly from traffickers (or smugglers) themselves, as explained in the following excerpt:

For example, some of those working with the connection man came to the area of the office of the refugees in Wedsberify camp. They are speaking with the people: still you are here, you will be here for a very long time. But, you have another solution – you can go to Libya. (Interviewee 5003-4, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Thus, what appears to be information coming from members of a trusted community may in fact be from recruiters for the traffickers, tied to the trafficking networks in Libya. The information includes assessments of the conditions on the road, such as ‘the road is good now’, but also promises about how the journey will be paid:

The connection man told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe. (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

A doctor and refugee in Hamdayet reception centre in Sudan stated:

[...] they say “it’s easy getting through this in Sudan [to Libya], and it’s really cheap, so you can go easily” – they tell the young people, and they believe them. (Interviewee 5013, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Traffickers can also contact refugees directly. An Eritrean woman explained:

I decided I wanted to go to Europe. The connection man collect and gather people on their own and they contact you and distribute [people into cars]. (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

There are many intermediaries in Sudan, who are part of the recruitment of refugees for the trafficking networks. Most of the Eritrean refugees interviewed found a connection to a trafficker to Libya in Khartoum. Traffickers are often found in the community, as Eritreans talk among each other and have their connections (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

The recruitment of refugees also takes place in refugee camps. Often these recruiters have inserted themselves into the communities and are part of where the refugees go to church or take part in other activities:

There are smugglers working, but in another way. They are doing something for our children like washing their brains. They are speaking about Libya: "It is a very nice country, you will lose your age [youth] here in Wedsberify". We are suffering from this now, many of our children want to leave now. (Interviewee 5003, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The smuggler told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe. [...] He knows us in the church in Kassala. We know the roads and all the people here in the church. (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Intermediaries are perceived as a threat by some refugees. A mother who was interviewed said that parents have a difficult time preventing their children from embarking on the dangerous journey to Libya, because of the influence of intermediaries, who are very influential. Furthermore, in Sudan, many fear being kidnapped by the Rashaida.¹²⁵ Information about them is prevalent in the refugee communities in Sudan. A woman living in Um Rakuba refugee camp, on the eastern border of Sudan, explained:

We hear about this. There are a lot of people doing [advertisements for migration to Libya]. But I don't know them, we don't know who they are. They are from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea. We also sometimes hear about Rashaida. They come here. And also, sometimes, the old people tell us: "Keep your children, maybe they are going to kidnap your child". (Interviewee 5028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The traffickers also make use of people who want to travel to act as contact persons for others. These people are promised that they can

¹²⁵ The Rashaida are a tribe of ethnic Bedouin Arabs in the Horn of Africa (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashaida_people).

travel for free, if they collect several other people. Multiple interviewees testified to this practice:

In Shagarab, I found my friends and I found my near family [relatives]. ... So I spoke to one smuggler to bring me to Khartoum. I have no money, so I made a collection of people to send me to Khartoum. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

There was one Eritrean boy, he came with us. He wanted to go to Libya. He planned everything and we felt that he is with us [so trusted him]. He was on the bus and controlled us. [...] The smuggler dealt with this boy as free. If he brings 9 or 10 others, he can go free. (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Another form of recruitment is by involving relatives in other countries. In a case in which a girl was facilitated by human traffickers to travel from Addis Ababa to Kenya, the facilitation had been arranged by her own mother in Europe:

My sister left with friends with the help of facilitators. Our mother initiated the journey and had contact with the facilitators and she told us that those people will give you some help and she told us to stay close to them. (Interviewee 7016, interview with [researcher]¹²⁶, face-to-face, August 2022)

As shown in this section, the refugees sometimes take the initiative to find a trafficker and, at other times, the trafficker finds them – either directly or through intermediaries. The traffickers use a combination of tools, such as social media, spreading the word in refugee camps, or word of mouth through refugees or intermediaries, to recruit people, creating networks and trust. How this is set up is highly adaptable to different places and moments in time.

Kidnapping in Sudan and Ethiopia to Libya

Several interviewees for this book reported that they were abducted in Sudan or Ethiopia and then trafficked to Libya. We refer to kidnapping here as a situation in which a person is transported when

¹²⁶ Name withheld due to security concerns.

they had no intention to leave a place and did not articulate any wish to do so. Three interviewees in this research stated that they were kidnapped from Sudan to Libya.¹²⁷ The kidnappings took place in August 2016, February 2017, and in an unspecified month in 2017. One interviewee reported having a family member who was kidnapped from Ethiopia to Libya in 2021 (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, September 2021). Two other interviewees stated that they had been kidnapped or witnessed kidnapping to the Sinai desert: one reported being kidnapped and taken to the Sinai desert in 2011 (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019), the other saw her sister being kidnapped in around 2012 (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). In addition, another interviewee in this group (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021) experienced at least two direct failed kidnappings of her and her mother and siblings. The interviewee did not specify the date, but it was between 2010 and 2012:

I remember that they were trying to kidnap us. I went with my mother, sister and brother, we had the donkey, we were on the road. We heard someone near us say "there are four 'people'" [he used local dialect slang, 'cartona']. Then when my mother heard that, she spoke with the guy with the donkey and told him to stop here. We tried to leave, the guy with the donkey was very angry. It looked like he agreed with the guy trying to kidnap us. But we escaped fast from that area. (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

In Arabic and Tigrinya, a 'cartona' refers to a person who has an empty head ('empty carton'), who is 'crazy'. As she was warned, the family was able to escape being abducted (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).

Another interviewee explained that most trafficking to Libya is carried out in the same way as kidnapping to the Sinai was carried out. In relation to Sinai trafficking, at first, people wanted to go to Israel

¹²⁷ Interviewees 1187 & 1011, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019; Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019

and started the journey voluntarily, but later realised that they were part of a trafficking operation. Eventually, people were abducted and kidnapped to the Sinai even though they had no intention to leave at all:

At first, we heard about the kidnapping outside the [refugee] camps [in Sudan] for the people who wanted to leave the camps by themselves. At first. But then, we heard about it inside the camp. At first they targeted people who wanted to leave, and some left – it was their choice. The smugglers were targeting those people. But for us, we are poor people and we don't have money to leave the camps. We didn't expect people to target us, because we haven't got anything. Despite this, they started to kidnap us [to Sinai] as well after that. (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Refugees from Eritrea often ended up in the Sinai and Israel, even though they had not intended to go there. A resource person testified as follows:

Refugees were just ending up in Sinai and in Israel. They clearly stated that their dreams and aspirations when they left Eritrea were to settle somewhere in Africa. But then they were taken somewhere else, and they just ended up where they were. This was not the result of any decision-making or planning process. Where they found themselves was dictated by circumstances. (Interviewee 3013, interview with Van Reisen, Face-to-Face, August 2022)

At the border of Sudan, in particular, tribes, including some members who identify as themselves Beni-Amer and Rashaida, are involved in smuggling and trafficking activities – of both goods and people. An interviewee confirmed this, in his story of kidnapping to the Sinai:

When we entered Kassala [Eastern Sudan], the Rashaidas, working in illegal ways, kidnapped us. All the people hold guns. They have knives. That is why I could not do anything. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to face, April 2019)

Another interviewee saw her sister kidnapped and taken to the Sinai:

I saw her with my eyes, they kidnapped her. They give her spray and then they took her. They were Rashaida. Five Rashaida came, with the driver. With the spray, you

fall asleep. (Interviewee 5003, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2021)

Kidnapping to the Sinai does not appear to happen anymore.¹²⁸ Although the Rashaida still appear to play a role in the smuggling and trafficking networks today, especially in relation to extortion in Sudan, which will be covered later in this chapter, their role is not as large or as open as it appeared to be in Sinai trafficking.

Three interviewees were kidnapped from Sudan to Libya. They had no intention of going to Libya, but were forced to and were ultimately trafficked for ransom. One interviewee described how he was kidnapped while working on a small farm in Sudan in February 2017:

There are many smugglers. They passed us [...] Shooting guns. We were afraid, but we were working. Then, at 9:30 p.m., suddenly the smugglers came. They kidnapped us with my friend [...]. We left all our things in that hut. Even midway, I tried to escape from them. We tried to hide from them, but they had guns. They were many. They took us. (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019)

He described these specific kidnappers as Rashaida and Sudanese (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019). The interviewee said that he was not aware where they were going:

Some people said that we were going to Khartoum. Some people said we were going to Libya. We were afraid. For me, I was really, really afraid. Because I didn't have any plan to go to Libya. "Where are we going? Are we going to Libya? Are we going to Khartoum? Or what?" I was really confused. ... When they told me we are going to Libya, I lost hope. I lost hope. (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons, 2019)

The interviewee's friend who was kidnapped with him died in a car accident in the Sahara desert. They were not allowed to give him a

¹²⁸ Sinai trafficking ceased in about 2014, with the last known recorded incident in 2015 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

burial (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019).

Another interviewee was kidnapped from Kassala in Sudan in 2016 and brought straight from there to Libya:

0010: When we arrive in Sudan, we were caught by the traffickers there [Kassala]. And they asked for money. In Kassala.

KS: Did they catch all three of you?

0010: Yeah. All three.

KS: How much money did they want?

0010: They were asking for 13,000 of Sudanese [Sudanese pounds, equivalent to about USD 2,125 in 2016¹²⁹].

KS: These were also Sudanese people?

0010: They were Sudanese people. After that we paid to enter Khartoum. Unfortunately, they took us to the Libyan traffickers. They put us in the smuggler's hands. [...] From Kassala they were Sudanese [drivers], then we reached maybe the Libyan lands, after that they were Libyan [drivers]. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

In the excerpt above, the interviewee was caught, asked to pay money, but was then directly, and against his will, sold to traffickers who took him to Libya.

Interviewee 1011 described his long journey – how he was kidnapped from Kassala in the east of Sudan and taken to the Sinai, then imprisoned in Egypt and deported to Ethiopia. He finally made his way to Khartoum. There, in 2016, disaster struck again:

In Khartoum, I started working with an electrician. One day, when I finished work, a policeman caught me on the way home. He sold me to another person. That one is a Sudanese. On 7 August 2016, he took me to Libya through a group of other

¹²⁹ The exchange rate used throughout this chapter was calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

persons. In Bani Walid, he sold me to a guy called Kidane. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In these reports of abduction from Sudan to Libya, the kidnappers are Sudanese. One interviewee referred to a Sudanese police officer. Once in Libya, the interviewees were sold or transferred to Aziz (who is presumed to be Sudanese), Kidane (Eritrean) and Wedi Babu (Eritrean)¹³⁰ (for more on the head traffickers, see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

One interviewee, who was not personally a victim of kidnapping, said that the Sudanese authorities were involved in the kidnappings to Libya, working under an agreement with the Eritrean human trafficking organisation(s):

0004: *Some of them are smugglers, but some force you and take you to Libya.*

KS: *How do they kidnap people?*

0004: *The police stop you and they take you. But the Eritreans have made an agreement with them before that, and then they take you [from the police]. From the police station, they [the Eritrean traffickers] bring you to the cars. The traffickers have their own police officers that they work with.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The kidnapping and sale of people is reported by interviewees 5003-1, 5003-2 and 5003-3 (Focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). One interviewee specifically explained that she overheard her landlord speaking of this:

[...] we changed our house in Shagarab [refugee camp in Eastern Sudan]. We rented a new house. One day, I heard the owner when he spoke on the telephone. He was speaking about selling some girl. I was very surprised about that. When he got off the phone, I asked him, “What did you say about that?” He was very angry. He spoke with my mother: “Your girl is listening to me”. So my mother was also very

¹³⁰ Note, these names were given in the interviews and are alleged traffickers. The author makes no comment on whether or not they are in fact human traffickers, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

angry with me. She said, “This way, this guy will not allow us to continue here in this house, so please be quiet and don’t speak with him again”. (Interviewee 5003-3, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Kidnapping as political retribution

One interviewee reported that a family member of his was kidnapped from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and taken to Libya directly to be tortured for ransom. The interviewee was forced to pay this ransom (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons). He describes how he was in touch with his family member, who was trying to find education in the city in order to make a living, and explicitly arranged that he would stay in Addis Ababa. Then, he received a phone call:

Then suddenly, a bit over a week later, I got the call that he was in Libya. They let me hear his voice for a few seconds. The whole time he was there, they let me hear him twice. [...] I understood that he was captured by [human traffickers]. [...] He [the intermediary] said that “I shouldn’t make this political” – that way, he let me know that it was because of my opposition to the regime in Eritrea that my [family member] was there now. [...] I came to the conclusion that Libya, at the moment, also is a prison camp for the Eritrean government. (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons)

The interviewee, who had been targeted before due to his political activism against the Eritrean government from within the diaspora, thus realised that his family member, had been kidnapped and held for ransom in Libya as retribution for his activism. The kidnapping occurred in 2021, a time when the influence of Eritrean intelligence in Addis Ababa was high (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, face-to-face, October 2021). The interviewee later learnt that the person who had called him to warn him not to make the situation political, the intermediary, had been killed.

The routes to Libya

The journey from the Horn of Africa to Libya for Eritrean refugees can be roughly divided into two parts: the journey to Sudan and the

journey from Sudan to Libya. Once in Libya, the aim is to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

Ethiopia to Khartoum, Sudan (gateway to Libya)

For this part of the journey – from Ethiopia to Sudan – the interviewees reported starting from Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray or cities such as Mekelle and Addis Ababa. Most crossings by the interviewees were made around the Ethiopian border towns of Humera and Metemma. When Eritreans cross over into Sudan directly from Eritrea, they travel from the refugee camps or the border area in Eastern Sudan to Khartoum.



Figure 9.2. Map of border towns Humera and Metemma used to cross from Ethiopia to Sudan

(Source: Created by Klara Smits using FreeVectorMaps.com)

Interviewees reported using a combination of cars and journeys on foot to move from Ethiopia to Sudan. The payments for the crossing are made in Ethiopian birr or US dollars. Those who facilitate the journey are often called ‘connection men’ by the interviewees. Some refugees were taken to Sudan and stayed there for a few months, and

even years, before embarking to Libya. However, there were also some who reported that their facilitator for the Ethiopia-to-Sudan leg of the journey was connected to the trafficking networks in Libya.

From Metemma [in Ethiopia], I was going by foot. In the night, I started by foot. In the morning I reached Sudan. After, I went to Al-Qadarif, then Wad Madani, and then Khartoum. [My connection man] has somebody working in Khartoum. I made contact with him. I told him: "I want to go to Libya". I agreed with the connection man to pay USD 3,500 for the Sahara and the sea. But when I arrived in Libya, in Bani Walid, I met another connection man, Kidane, who is a big connection man and who knows all the people. His network goes from Eritrea to Europe – he said I have to pay USD 7,000. I agreed from Sudan to Italy to pay USD 3,500. He beat me. (Interviewee 1009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many of the Eritrean interviewees said they used ‘connection men’ as agents or middlemen, and that these were usually Eritrean or Ethiopian, to facilitate the crossing from Ethiopia to Sudan. During this part of the journey, interviewees reported being beaten and tortured to extract or speed up payment. Hajer was mentioned by nine interviewees as the stop where the payment is made; from there they travelled on to Khartoum:

We arrived in Hajer. I stayed in Hajer almost one month [and] three weeks because I could not pay the money quickly. The owner of that place is Bereket. The people working there are Eritrean. It is Eritrean people who were beating us. There are people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia there. I paid the money in Hajer. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewee quoted above mentioned that Eritrean people are working in Hajer. Some other interviewees mentioned that Sudanese are also present in Hajer and involved in the payment of money there. More information about Hajer will be presented later in this chapter, in the section on payment and torture for ransom.

Khartoum to Libya ('the desert')

The journey to Libya often starts from Khartoum (Sudan). The refugees are transported in small groups to a collection point to wait to travel across the Sahara desert with a larger group. Omdurman,

which is across the river Nile from Khartoum, is often mentioned as a central collection point, where people may stay for up to a week. From there, they travel on through the desert in pickup trucks or Lorries. One of the interviewees explained:

Refugees in Khartoum are collected in cars/pickups and brought to a place where they are put in trucks with many people, 800 persons in 6 Lorries, 30–32 people in pickups. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

He added that a Sudanese man drove the Lorry to the Libyan border where a Libyan driving a pickup took over. Hence, when arriving at the border with Libya, a transfer takes place: refugees change cars and drivers – often from a Sudanese driver to a Libyan driver.

We spent five days in the lorry driven by a Sudanese. After the truck, you come with the small car, at the border of Libya. There were 1,400 persons waiting at the border because of fighting with other people. The small cars [pickups] take 30–32 people. He would beat us. During the time when we were waiting, the car was not coming. Some people went back. [Crossing the desert took] two days by car speed. High speed. The driver was Libyan. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Kufra is a key Libyan city where the distribution of refugees takes place (more detailed information on locations in Libya can be found in Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*).

Some interviewees reported making payment and being tortured in Kufra; several other interviewees paid the money for their journey in Kufra without mentioning being tortured. Of the people who specified what they paid, most either paid what they agreed upon or had not made any agreement upfront. One interviewee had to pay a second time, and a larger amount than what they had paid the first time (USD 5,500) (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Others said that they did not pay there, but were taken to Brak Shati, Bani Walid, Shwayrif, or another location where people are brought for the purpose of payment and/or extortion.

After that, the interviewees reported that people are moved to a location close to the sea, like Sabratha, Misrata or Zawiyah.

Whereas Sudan is the place where most connections are made and deals struck regarding payment, the actual facilitation of those payments happens in Libya. The city of Kufra often functions as the first point of entry and is also the place where the interviewees report that they pay for the travel through the desert, or are directly distributed to other traffickers.

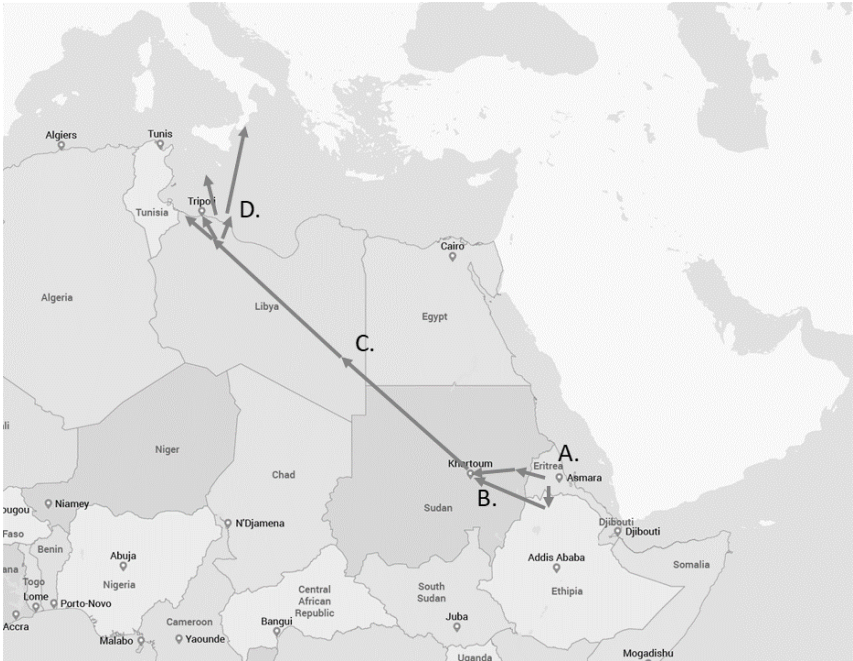


Figure 9.3. Trajectories taken by Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia to Sudan and Libya

(Source: Created by Klara Smits using FreeVectorMaps.com)

Variations in the routes

There are variations on the main routes. For instance, an Eritrean interviewee reported that he had travelled to Libya from Egypt in a group, and had received the assistance of Eritrean facilitators:

After that, I went to Khartoum. I stayed almost five months in Khartoum. I was working during the day. After that, I went to Egypt by car with almost 20 people.

It was a pickup. My connection man was Eritrean. [...] I went to Assouan in Egypt. The trip took four/five days. Assouan is the place where I paid the money. I paid USD 650. [...] From Cairo, I started on the way to Libya. An Eritrean connection man took me in charge. I agreed with [him to pay] from Egypt to Italy: USD 3,000. (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Other Eritreans reach Libya after they have been deported from Israel to Rwanda or Uganda as a ‘third country option’:

In 2017, I moved from Israel to Uganda by plane. I didn’t get papers to travel in Israel; that is why I left Israel. Because from Israel, they cannot deport me to Eritrea, that is why they deport me to Uganda. It is the immigration service of Israel that deported me there. The government of Israel does not give you a refugee card. (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many Eritrean refugees fled to Israel before the border fence was erected in 2013.¹³¹ Several interviewees explained that they had accepted deportation to a third country. Unfortunately, they found that the protection measures in the third country promised to them by the Israeli government were not in place:

I stayed only one week in Uganda, in Kampala. I was in a hotel. The government of Israel will pay money for one week in a hotel. That is why. After that, I got somebody, a connection man to bring me to South Sudan. (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Another interviewee said:

Forced to leave! Without anything, without money, without anything. And so I came out of Israel to Uganda. Without anything. I signed the paper. They told me they will pay for the hotel rent in Uganda, Kampala. They told me to stay in Uganda. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

¹³¹ In 2013, a border fence was largely completed in the Sinai desert along the border between Egypt and Israel, making it difficult of refugees to enter Israel from the Sinai.

Among the interviewees, there were several who had been to South Sudan, either from Ethiopia or via Uganda, as part of their journey:

I came out of Israel to Rwanda, then to Uganda, Kampala, then to South Sudan, Juba, Khartoum, Libya, Mediterranean, Italy, and then here [in destination country]. (Interviewee 0003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Other routes used by refugees from Eritrea are not covered in this chapter. For example, some of those refugees take the southern migration route towards South Africa instead, or to Yemen in order to reach Saudi Arabia. Those routes all present their own unique and acute challenges, but they are beyond the scope of this book.

Conditions on route across the desert

Transport

The journey through the Sahara desert may last from days to months. Refugees usually do not know the name of the driver, and drivers may change throughout the journey. The drivers may be of different nationalities; some interviewees stated that from Sudan to the Libyan border their driver was Sudanese, but once in Libya the driver was Libyan (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

The cars that the refugees travel in are tightly packed in order to maximise the use of space. Most interviewees described the cars as pickup trucks, while some also spent parts of their journey in a Lorry. They reported that small pickup trucks were loaded with 30 to 60 people. An Eritrean woman travelling from Sudan, to Kufra (Libya) through the Sahara desert recounted there were so many passengers in the pick-up truck that people fainted. There was “no room to breathe” (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020). Another shared the following:

They put you in something like a pickup to carry you in the desert. From the desert they get a big car, like a big car that has a back. They put the people there. They take something big to cover the people. Like a big sheet of plastic [...] So the cars are going. In that car we were about a hundred plus... But I don't know exactly the

number because the car... We were very, very full of people there. Women, men... We were very, very full there. Even kids are there. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Refugees recalled the journey as tough, and were often without food, water or blankets for days:

In the Sahara, we stayed three months. Even that situation, I never imagined in my life. Never. At that time, I didn't think that I would survive. For four days they left us alone in the desert, without food, without blankets. We were begging them: "Please, please, please", many times, but they didn't care. They hit us. They spoke bad words in Arabic. Even we had a car accident in the Sahara. My friend, his name was Mohammed, he died there. He died. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face to-face, November 2019)

The drivers are described as reckless and driving fast. The majority of the interviewees mentioned that, in the Sahara, drivers did not stop if someone fell out of the vehicle and that the unlucky ones were left to die in the desert. One interviewee explained that they take the drug hashish so they can keep going, and they only stop when they want to:

[...] We can see other people, they are dead, because 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)

Interviewees emphasised that the drivers do not care about people falling out of the vehicle. Some interviewees mentioned spotting dead refugees left in the desert:

When we were travelling with the car in the Sahara, we saw a lot of bodies. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

One interviewee stated that many "call the desert an open grave, where people die" (Interviewee 6003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Those who are transported in Lorries face a different problem:

It was very difficult in the truck. If the truck stopped, it was hard. It was very difficult, because it was a crowded truck. If there was wind, we could breathe better. But if the car stopped, it was very difficult. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Refugees reported sleeping under the vehicles at night:

It's complete desert, there is nothing that you can even drink and you just spend the days sleeping under cars. There is no description of it. (Interviewee 1051, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Drivers need to bring enough fuel and be able to repair the vehicle if it breaks down. If the vehicle cannot be repaired, all those on board rely on other vehicles to take them along. If this does not happen, they die.

Unfortunately, the vehicle my nephew left in broke down in the desert. When they broke down, they had no breakdown service or anything, until they all died there. Even the driver died. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

Once on the road to Libya, the refugees suddenly find themselves cut off from the world, without really knowing where they are, how long the route will take, or what the conditions will be. In some cases, the drivers force them to cover themselves while in the vehicle. The journey to Libya through the desert is rough and hazardous. The extreme heat, crowdedness, violence and accidents cause deaths along the way. On this part of the journey, travelling in an unknown territory, the autonomy of refugees is very limited, as described in the next section.

Drivers are in control

Once on the road, the drivers are in control of the refugees.

It is the Sabara. The desert is empty. Then, they put us in some place. Some others who are talking in Arabic tell them to tell us where we are going. [They say:] "We are going to Libya. We are taking responsibility for you. You are under our control". (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Once in the Sahara, migrants and refugees depend on the drivers' skill to get through the vagaries of the desert alive. The drivers can also be violent.

They [the drivers] torture you on the way. [...] on the way so many things happened; for example, there were people dying, our compatriots were dying, and when we told them, they just threw them, drop them from the car. They didn't do any burial rites for them, and, also, so many problems were happening to women, even rape. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

We didn't get water. There was too much sun. Some people died in the desert. The driver was hitting anyone who spoke too loud. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Water given to the refugees by drivers was often described as either too little or diluted with gasoline in order to prevent people from drinking substantial amounts:

Even they mixed the water with gas oil [...], because you cannot drink more. You can drink just small amounts. They can do that. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Most of the drivers gave us water. Just something to eat. But not enough for a long journey. (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, August 2019)

Women are exposed to sexual assault by drivers when travelling through the Sahara. A thorough analysis of the magnitude of this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of this chapter and is presented in Chapter 15: *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*.

Bandits and armed groups in the desert

In the desert, competing groups fight for control over the refugees:

There are many traffickers in the desert. Those who have survived the fight, will take [what they want]. They fight over who gets to take the refugees. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Six interviewees reported experiencing (attempted) kidnapping by Chadian armed groups in the Sahara desert.¹³² Of these six, four interviewees were indeed ‘stolen’ by the Chadian armed groups and two were successfully ‘defended’ by their traffickers. One interviewee explained the kind of violence that happens during such episodes:

One time they [traffickers who were transporting him across the desert] are fighting with Chad [Chadian armed groups]. They had many guns with them; many soldiers were fighting. When the smugglers [armed men] from Chad came, they were fighting for a little bit, maybe three hours. We were in there at the time, they were fighting. After that they [traffickers transporting him across the desert] were defended by the Libyans. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The Chadian armed groups kidnap refugees in order to sell them to human traffickers. The traffickers Aziz (presumed Sudanese) and Abduselam¹³³ from Eritrea are mentioned in this context (see also Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*):

The Chadians work with Aziz and Abduselam. In the Sahara, when we entered, the Chadian soldiers caught us and sold us. They do that! The Chadians, they travel in the whole Sahara. They will catch you and bring you to the human traffickers. This is mandatory. This is their job in the Sahara. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 29 June 2020)

The Chadian soldiers catch every person, every human. They ask all the people: “which connection man¹³⁴ are you going to?” “I am on my way to Aziz”, for example. If you say that you are going to Aziz, they want money from Aziz. [...]

¹³² These six are interviewees 1023, 1027, 1054, 1059, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019–June 2020; and interviewees 0010, 0016, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019.

¹³³ Note, these names were given in the interviews and are alleged traffickers. The author makes no comment on whether or not they are in fact human traffickers, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

¹³⁴ Here the ‘connection man’ refers to the top of the trafficking network and is used as a code to identify and sort migrants (see Glossary of Terms).

They wear the soldier uniform. And this is why every person knows them. They move around the Sahara. All the Chadians, they move around the Sahara because of the selling and buying of people. [...] Also the Chadians, they work with the connection men. They have full details. Also the Chadian soldiers, first of all, they work for their country and secondly they work for their profit. If they don't have any work to do, they collect people coming from Sudan or from Libya at the border of Libya and at the border of Sudan. (Interviewee 1056, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Other actors may also be encountered during the trip, who may try and bargain with the driver to get something, such as sex, from the migrants and refugees on board:

They try to speak to us or sometimes to 'trade' [sexual favours], you understand. [...] At that time in my journey. The connection man, my connection man, discussed with the thief person. He wanted to give them money. But after, that they stopped everything [it did not happen]. (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Drivers bring weapons with them. These weapons are also used to threaten refugees when, for example, drivers see (police or army) patrols and believe they will be arrested or killed:

In other words, they are afraid. So they threaten the refugees with a gun to get down. (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018)

Control over access to phones

From the interviews it emerged that even before embarking on the road to Libya, refugees can lose their phones to traffickers operating between Ethiopia and Sudan (e.g., Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019) or to Sudanese police (e.g., Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). However, in Khartoum, it is possible to again gain access to means of communication, after they separate from the smugglers/traffickers.

Once the refugees are on the road to Libya, the drivers may be in charge of communication with their families. One interviewee reported a smuggler instructing him as follows:

When the driver picks up the migrants to take them to Libya, when he arrives, he says: "Now, give your brothers' numbers, I'll tell him we've arrived". The migrants give the number, the driver calls. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

On the road to Libya, through the Sahara desert, or at the first transit point, the interviewees reported losing their phones. Most refugees know that this is likely to happen and, therefore, do not take one on the journey, or they are told by the trafficker not to bring it.

I haven't got a telephone from here [Khartoum to Libya], but my friend has a phone. But [for me], I expected to give the phone to the connection man. Because he told us when you go, you will not go with the phone. (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

This means that the refugees are not able to record details of their journey and are not able to call anyone, or otherwise receive or send information. Not having any means of communication or verification of their location, the refugees depend on the driver to tell them where they are, and this is usually only done once the traffickers have reached the place where the refugees have to pay. The refugee's family generally want to have confirmation that the refugee has indeed arrived before they pay the agreed amount for the journey (or the ransom), explained one interviewee. However, he also explains that this system can be exploited by the traffickers:

This year, many people are paying in Sudan for their journey. They say to their family: "we have arrived, so pay [USD] 6,500 for Sahara and sea", but they have not yet started [the journey to Libya]. Sometimes they say you are at the coast, and the boat is coming in 3–4 days, so better you pay quick, but actually you are [not yet at the coast]. (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone interview, November 2021)

This shows how loss of a telephone on route to, and inside of, Libya leads to a loss of control, including a loss of control over communication and payment, making the refugees vulnerable to

being deceived, abused and extorted. The first time they are able to call their families is when they are under the control of human traffickers (for ransom) to ask for payment to be made.

A key feature of human trafficking for ransom is that the extortion is conducted by phone, and the victim does not control the communication on the phone; the perpetrators of the extortion control what is communicated, when and to whom. Hence, the victims can be understood as a gated community – the gatekeepers are the human traffickers – and human trafficking for ransom takes place in what are known as ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape. This is elaborated on in Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*.

Payments for the journey

This section sets out the amounts paid for the different legs of the journey and where, torture and extortion on route in places like Hajer in Sudan, and, finally, payments made for crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Amounts paid and where

The majority of the interviewees paid for each part of their journey separately. Payments for other parts of the journey were also reported, mostly in relation to escaping from Eritrea, which many interviewees did by foot. Most of the interviewees made the journey from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya through a facilitator, and some agreed on a price before setting out, although this price often changed along the way.

For most interviewees, the journey from Ethiopia to Sudan – if they made this journey – was paid separately. However, some interviewees also indicated that they paid for the entire journey, the sea and the desert, once they arrived in Libya:

First I entered Sudan [starting from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia], and then he [the connection man/smuggler] sent me to Libya. When I entered Libya, I paid for

Ethiopia to Sudan. For Sudan, and for Libya, [I paid] together. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

We pay in Libya. He [the smuggler] pays for travelling, for everything, he is paying for us. And, again, when we reached Libya they locked us in a room and asked us for the money. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Table 9.1 shows the range of payments made by interviewees for each stage of the journey to and inside Libya, as well as the average payment. Payments for the other parts of the journey are made part by part, or in some cases as a package deal. Some refugees had to pay more than once, as they were kidnapped and extorted multiple times. Others paid for ‘the desert’ and ‘the sea’ together. For the purpose of this table, those amounts were split.

Table 9.1. Payments mentioned by the interviewees (2013–2019)

Journey segment	Payment made (range)	Average payment
Ethiopia to Khartoum (Sudan)	USD 200–4,700	USD 1,640
Khartoum to Libya (‘the desert’)	USD 1,200–3,800	USD 2,055
While in Libya (total ransoms paid)*	USD 1,500–7,500	USD 4,095
Libya to Europe (‘the sea’)	USD 1,500–5,500	USD 2,358

Note: These data indicate the agreed amounts and additional amounts reported over the time period 2013–2019. The payments were prices paid for the journey. Payments that were made together for more than one part were split for the purpose of this table. The amounts have been calculated in USD, although some payments were made in Ethiopian birr or Sudanese pounds.

* This amount represents the additional money people had to pay beyond agreed amounts or payments directly tied to their journey.

When embarking on the journey, refugees are given a code to identify who they should pay. This code is the name of the top level trafficker who organises the overall journey. These names are used along the route by those who are in charge of you during the journey to sort you into groups. It goes like this:

When I entered Bani Walid, the connection man waited for me there. In one compound they have four stores. Every connection man who will see you: “You are connection man from who in Sudan?” When you tell the name, he will take you. All of them are from Eritrea. My connection man was called Welid. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In general, payments were not made upfront, but only upon arrival in Libya (or another stopover on the route, such as Hajer). At these points, the refugees were asked to call their family to arrange payment. Some interviewees gave the phone numbers of a relative to the trafficker upon leaving Sudan, as a kind of ‘guarantee’, but others gave a number only in Libya, explaining:

You cannot [give the phone number of your family] like that, because if you gave him a number at that time [when you are still in Khartoum], he can do anything to you. So in Libya, they ask us a phone number and he can connect with your family. (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Having those phone numbers functions as a guarantee for the traffickers that they will get paid.

Payment and torture in Hajer in Sudan

In some cases, trafficking for ransom takes place on the routes to Libya, particularly in Sudan. Most of the extortion takes place in Hajer

(also called Hajer), the coordinates of which are hard to establish with certainty. An interviewee for this book confirmed that it is close to Khartoum, and that it is in the desert:

Some of the smugglers captured us and kept us in Hajer. I remember the name Hajer, nearby to Khartoum. Hajer is a very desert place. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Many of the interviewees reported having passed through Hajer for the initial payment of their crossing from Ethiopia to Sudan. No interviewee stated that they paid for their journey to Libya here. Most arrive in Hajer from Ethiopia, although some of interviewees who have been to Hajer came directly from Eritrea.

A total of 13 interviewees named Hajer as a place where they were held on their journey. For other interviewees, it is likely that they were also held in Hajer, based on the description given, but they did not know the name of the place. The ransom payments made in Hajer ranged from USD 1,000 to 1,900, with most paying around USD 1,600. The earliest mention of being held in Hajer by the interviewees was in 2014 (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019) and 2015 (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019), but the rest of the interviewees were there in 2016 and 2017.¹³⁵ Interviewees that paid quickly usually stayed there a few days. Those that did not pay immediately were there for around two-three months. Three interviewees were kidnapped and taken to Hajer, meaning that they did not have an arrangement to be taken to Sudan by anyone, as they were making their way to Sudan by foot without a facilitator. Conditions in Hajer are described as crowded:

I stayed two months in Hajer, the time to pay the money. In Hajer, we were 20/30 people together in a small room. They were beating the others, but not me because I was paying the money they requested. (Interviewee 1015, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

¹³⁵ Interviewees 0002, 0013, 0014, 0018, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March–July 2019) and interviewees 1003, 1008, 1012, 1013, 1015, 1024, 1054, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019 – June 2020)

Of the 13 interviewees who named Hajer, 7 reported being tortured to extract payment. The other 6 paid quickly and were able to avoid being tortured. It, therefore, appears that torture occurs in Hajer only when payments are not made quickly. In Hajer, torture to extract payment follows the same *modus operandi* as the one used in Libya: family members are called while victims are being tortured to encourage the family to pay:

There is a camp where the people who can't pay the money, they go to prison. So, I stayed in Hajer prison almost two months, to pay the money. We had no water to wash ourselves or to wash our clothes. We did not have enough food. A lot of people were ill. Some people hit your hands, hit your legs. Too many problems in Hajer. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

They say, do you have family who can pay? You must pay 1,600 [US] dollars. I said "ohh..." – I called them [his family]. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Relatives sell their possessions to pay the ransom amounts:

I stayed almost two months and two weeks in Hajer, because nobody paid for me. When I stayed there, nobody paid me money. That is why I called my family. My family sold houses and animals. They sold them. After, they sent me the money so that I could pay the USD 1,700. While I was calling my family to ask them to send me the money, I was beaten. (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In addition, possessions are stolen from people in Hajer. Multiple interviewees reported this. Even after paying the money, possessions can still be stolen before reaching Khartoum:

In Hajer, I paid the money. I stayed two days and, after that, I reached Khartoum. We were a hundred in a truck to Khartoum. In the car and on the road they beat us, when we were tired. There was no water. They searched all of our body. If you have something in your pocket they will take it. I took ID and refugee cards. They left that. They took everything else: documents, pictures of family, money, cell phone, watch. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Two interviewees were kidnapped for ransom in other places in Sudan. One interviewee was held by traffickers in Kassala. The

kidnappers were Sudanese, and asked for 13,000 Sudanese pounds (approximately USD 2,125). Afterwards, this interviewee was sold and taken directly to Libya (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). Another interviewee was kidnapped by Rashaida and held captive in ‘Hafir’ in Sudan:

We asked the nomadic people if it was Sudan. They informed us we were in Hafir. After that, we weren't afraid. We were in Sudan. There is no military in Sudan. But before we reached the village, the Rashaida caught us. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

This interviewee reported that members of his group were tortured by being left in the heat and beaten with a plastic stick. They had to call their family to pay 1,050 Eritrean nakfa (approximately USD 70).

Paying to cross ‘the sea’

Libya is not perceived as an end destination by Eritrean refugees. Even though their initial objective may be to reach ‘the desert’ (Libya), their end objective is to reach ‘the sea’ – the crossing to Europe. This part of the journey is sometimes negotiated in tandem with crossing the Sahara desert; the refugees in those cases agree to pay for ‘the desert’ and ‘the sea’. The interviewees are expected to pay when they get to Libya. One interviewee shared the following:

KS: How much did he want for your journey over the desert?

0012: For the desert and for the sea, 4,400 [US] dollars. For all.

KS: Did they say to pay that in Libya?

0012: Yes.

KS: Did you call your family for the money?

0012: Yes.

KS: Where did you go in Libya?

0012: Bani Walid. I entered straight to Bani Walid. (Interviewee 0012, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Another interviewee added:

Only for desert, the price was USD 1,600. After I paid for the desert, I paid for the sea – it was USD 2,200. When you enter Libya, you pay the money. (Interviewee 1007, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Although some refugees end up paying what they agreed upon, the payments are always accompanied by the threat of torture or actual torture. In addition, the prices agreed upon may arbitrarily change in favour of the traffickers, or refugees may have to pay again to another trafficker. Therefore, the line between payments and ransoms is thin. Interviewees frequently indicate being ‘sold’ after they pay:

In Shwayrif, I paid for the sea. The man is Libyan, but he works with an Eritrean smuggler in Khartoum. First, we paid the money to an Eritrean: USD 2,200. After that, a Libyan and an Eritrean were fighting about money. The Libyan fights with an Eritrean smuggler. So, he cut the line. If he cut the line, we are with the Libyan people. Another man took us, a Libyan. We paid another time for the Libyan, to take us to the sea. Another USD 2,200. [...] He sold us. We went to Bani Walid again. So we paid for the sea again USD 3,300. After that, he sent us to the sea. But police caught us on the road to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

We agreed on USD 3,800 to go from Sudan to Italy. I arrived in Bani Walid. I was in a store¹³⁶ [place used by the traffickers to hold and sort people]. The chief of that store is Welid. He is Eritrean. I paid him two times because the first connection man, Alex, took the money in Bani Walid. After that, Welid said I have to pay again. Walid asked me 3800 USD. (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In Libya, payments are extorted while refugees are tortured, or threatened with torture:

From the Sahara we immediately arrived in Kufra. They brought us to a very crowded warehouse with many persons from different smugglers. I stayed there two

¹³⁶ 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).

months. They were beating me. We had no food and no water. People were beaten there because of money. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

A Somali refugee interviewed was one of the quickest to arrange the payment – he paid after just five days, but he was still tortured and they refused to release him even though payment had been made:

[...] they are beating, using electric shocks to you until you pay the money. Sometimes they are making us work as a slave in their farms. You pay money... Someone like me, I paid immediately, but the problem... My family, they sold their house. Immediately. I told them, they saw the video call where they are using electric shocks to me and the guns to me. And after that, we sold our house. They pay money for me, everything within five days and after that they refused to release me. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One interviewee paid for the ‘sea’ part of the journey upon arrival in Italy. He paid for the three stages of the journey mentioned here – once in Hajer, once in Libya and once in Italy.

0002: I had to pay in Khartoum. And once in Italy, again

KS: How much did you pay in Italy?

0002: [USD] 2,300

KS: So in total you paid... [USD] 1,700 in Hajer, [USD] 3,000 in Libya and [USD] 2,300 in Italy, so you paid three times. (Interviewee 0002 interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

More information about the extraction of payments and ransoms under torture can be found in Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*. Most of those interviewees for this chapter did not make it to the Mediterranean Sea, or if they did, were returned by Libyan Coast Guard when they tried to cross.

The organisation of trafficking to Libya

Interconnected networks

An interviewee for this book suggested that the networks that traffic people to Libya are indeed interconnected, although this may not always be obvious to the refugees:

The big names have a very good network, starting from Ethiopia. They collect people from camps and cities. They bring them to Hajer to pay for Ethiopia to Sudan. Then they take you to Khartoum and leave you there. After that, you can find a house. You can continue with the same network or change to another smuggler. (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021)

Other interviewees confirmed that they did not see the journeys as separate, but as a part of a broader network:

All places, starting from Ethiopia up to Libya, there is a smuggler. Every town that you reach, there is a smuggler who is dealing with this one who is staying in Ethiopia. They are paying them. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

There are indications that such networks start as far back as Eritrea:

In Sudan, I met people who took the car from Asmara to the border and no-one stopped them – 100 per cent, this means that officials are involved.¹³⁷ I have not met the people trafficking from Eritrea to Ethiopia, only heard about it. (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The connections between the networks appear to be well organised. From the perspective of the interviewees, most indicated that they observed these interconnections, but were not sure if the full journey was organised by one or more individuals.

¹³⁷ It is illegal to leave Eritrea without a visa, and visas are nearly impossible to get. There is a shoot on sight policy at the border for anyone trying to cross. (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Hence, this interviewee is pointing out that if someone is able to cross the border without being stopped (or shot), they must have the involvement of officials.

Complicity of authorities

An interviewee in Ethiopia mentioned that the traffickers had made a deal with the border guards in Ethiopia to allow them to cross the border between Sudan and Ethiopia:

The traffickers make sure that people can cross the river. Also, we don't have papers, so the traffickers help with that, or else you can be stopped by the police. [...] The traffickers make an agreement with the guards. Sometimes you have to wait, even 2 or 3 days, until the guard that you have an agreement with returns. (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

For most crossings from Ethiopia to Sudan, avoiding the police was the main objective. This included travelling by car, but often actually crossing the border on foot and at night:

I walked from Ethiopia to Sudan, sometimes walking, sometimes car. Sometimes shooting [being shot at]. (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The interviewee in the above excerpt reported that the Ethiopian police shot at their car when they passed a checkpoint, but they got away unharmed. Others said that they were arrested by Ethiopian police during their crossing.

According to a number of interviewees, smugglers in Sudan have connections with the security forces and were afforded certain liberties in their business:

From Khartoum to Omdurman [on the West side of the Nile, just opposite to Khartoum], there is a post [control post], but they didn't ask you [for papers]. They just take money, the police that is. There are contacts. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

There are reports that drivers and the refugees they transport are sometimes arrested. Some refugees who were arrested on route to Libya were forcibly transported back to Eritrea. After being deported to Eritrea, interviewees reported that they were forced to re-join national service (often after spending time in prison):

When we started the way to the desert, the government of Sudan arrested us. After that, we returned to Khartoum. After Khartoum, I was deported to Eritrea. [...]

They had a group of soldiers for me, I was mixed with other Eritrean soldiers. After eight days, I escaped again. I didn't want to stay there. (Interviewee 1007, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In Sudan, there are more stories about the complicity of police with traffickers, as well as abuse by the police. Five interviewees directly experienced abuse by police in Sudan, particularly in Khartoum.¹³⁸ This included beatings, destroying their refugee card, asking for money for their release and being threatened with return to Eritrea. In addition, the Sudanese police stole items, including communication devices like mobile phones:

The Sudanese police caught us, took our mobile phones and arrested us. We had to pay 400 [Sudanese] pounds [USD 70] 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)

In one focus group discussion, interviewees reported having witnessed the deportation of six Eritreans to Eritrea by Sudanese security forces at a border checkpoint in 2021. The others, including another focus group of women in the same location, were threatened with return to Eritrea (Interviews 5017 and 5018, focus group discussions with Smits, face-to-face, July 2021).

One interviewee was sold by a Sudanese police officer to a trafficker and taken to Libya (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Other interviewees did not directly experience this, but witnessed such connections. One interviewee stated that police raided Hajer, but deliberately allowed the traffickers there to get away (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). Another interviewee explained how the police in Khartoum play a role in the kidnapping of people to Libya. He had lived in Khartoum for two years, but was unable to work out of fear of being arrested

¹³⁸ Interviewees 0004, 0017, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March-July 2019; interviewees 1008, 1011, 1024, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019

again. This interviewee said that the Eritrean traffickers have agreements with the police and that if you are stopped by the police you may be handed to the traffickers (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Involvement of Eritreans in the trafficking network

Most Eritrean interviewees who can name their traffickers usually say that they are Eritrean. Some of those involved are Sudanese, but working with Eritreans for translation:

I stayed in Hager almost one month three weeks because I could not pay the money quickly. The owner of that place is Bereket. The people working there are Eritrean. It is Eritrean people who are beating us. There are people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia there. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In all interviews, the interviewees were asked about the nationality of their trafficker, or the nationality of the persons working with them. The interviewees could recognise them as Eritrean by a number of traits, most of all their ability to speak fluent Tigrinya, the main language spoken in Eritrea, their names and other cultural specifications, recognisable to the refugees:

I don't know him. He wears Arab clothes, white clothes. He looks like the Arab people, but he's really not. He is from Eritrea. He speaks good Tigrinya. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Collectively, the interviews sketch a clear image of the involvement of Eritreans on the routes during each stage of the journey. This includes the routes in Ethiopia and Sudan, which are covered in this chapter. The traffickers who were named frequently as operating in Libya are described extensively in Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

Discussion

Several aspects of the routes of Eritrean refugees to Libya, described previously in the literature, were confirmed by this research, such as the key entry points on the border from Ethiopia to Sudan, namely,

the towns of Metemma (in the Amhara Region) and Humera (in the Tigray region) (Davy, 2017). Similar to Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016), many interviewees in this research also reported travelling through Hajer in Sudan (see sections on ‘The routes to Libya’ and on ‘Payments for the journey’, in particular the sub-section on ‘Payment and torture in Hajer in Sudan’), although in contrast to the report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016), which found Hajer to be the last stop-over before Libya, most of the interviewees spent time in Khartoum and travelled to Libya from Khartoum.

While many interviewees reported choosing to contact ‘connection men’ in Sudan, they may have been heavily influenced by agents of the traffickers in the refugee camps and communities. Other interviewees reported having no intention of travelling to Libya, and being kidnapped while at work or arrested by the police and handed over to the traffickers. Hence, in contrast to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020), this chapter finds that active recruitment by traffickers does take place, although it often happens through trusted intermediaries, and may, therefore, not appear to be recruitment at first. From the interviews, it appears that the refugees lack alternatives. The evidence gathered in this research indicates that the first element of trafficking may in fact be satisfied: the recruitment of the victims.

This is contrary to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou’s (2020) analysis. There are two possible explanations for why Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) did not find any active recruitment and influence: perhaps they did not ask the questions that could have revealed the influence of agents of traffickers in refugee camps and urban areas, or perhaps such influence has increased in the years since 2017 (the interviews of Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou were conducted between 2016 and 2017, so their interviewees would have been in Ethiopia and Sudan earlier than that).

Migrants and refugees are transported from Ethiopia to Khartoum in Sudan (unless they entered directly into Sudan), then to Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. They are often passed through different hands: connection men in Khartoum, drivers, holding places

(like Hajer and in Libya), and different warehouses in Libya while waiting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This is often done by force, fraud or deception. Furthermore, agents working to recruit refugees spread information such as ‘the roads are good now’, encouraging refugees to travel. In addition, the payments agreed upon often change and the conditions under which those payments are extracted in Libya are not disclosed, which is deception. Hence, the second element of trafficking is also satisfied: the transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception.

There are various ways in which refugees can get in touch with a trafficker. Three were identified in this research: through a friend or other personal connection, through intermediaries, and directly through the trafficker himself. Despite connecting with ‘smugglers’ through trusted networks, all interviewees did end up in the hands of traffickers who subjected them to forced payment, in other words, trafficking for ransom. Even if payment amounts were agreed upon beforehand, the conditions under which they were extracted still constitute force. Payments for the different parts of the journey are made separately, averaging USD 1,640 for Eritrea or Ethiopia to Khartoum, USD 2,055 for ‘the desert’, and USD 2,358 for ‘the sea’. Refugees and migrants were also extorted for ransom while in Libya – on average USD 4,095 – often by multiple traffickers. Hence, the third element of trafficking is also satisfied: the aim of exploitation for profit.

While this chapter uses the term ‘payments’ for agreed-upon prices that were paid, it could be argued that all such payments are ‘ransoms’, or money extorted to secure the release of a prisoner. This is because the payments described by the interviewees were always extracted under the threat of torture, if not direct torture; all interviewees were imprisoned when the payments were demanded; and, in a large number of cases, payments were either not agreed upon ahead of time, were increased arbitrarily, or the interviewees were forced to pay multiple times to the same or different traffickers. It could be argued, therefore, that simple payments under such conditions are never voluntary and that, at the point where refugees arrive in Libya, they

are unable to change their mind or negotiate payments in any way. The only way for them to be released is for their families to pay for their release – thus, the payment constitutes a ransom.

Thus, the definition of human trafficking on this part of the journey is fulfilled in relation to each of the core elements for the majority of the interviewees. Therefore, the trajectories from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, as well as the extortion in Libya, can and should be classified as human trafficking, as is already the case in classifications used by the UN (UN Security Council, 2018), and seen as such, correctly, by law enforcement agencies.

This research also indicates that there is a network operating, possibly across all parts of the route investigated. However, the degree of interconnectedness between the networks from Ethiopia to Sudan and from Sudan to Libya should be further studied. Several interviewees suggest a greater connection across all of the different elements of the journey, with some having paid for the whole trip in Libya, while others were ‘free to choose’ a new facilitator in Khartoum, or travel onward with the same facilitator.

In this study multiple examples were recorded of collusion between facilitators and authorities, confirming the earlier findings of Van Reisen *et al.* (2017); Van Reisen & Estefanos (2017a) and Van Reisen *et al.* (2018). In this study we found evidence of the following: authorities turning a blind eye and/or taking bribes at checkpoints; arresting and selling migrants/refugees to traffickers; and creation of a culture of fear through arrests and returns.

The interviews indicate that the phenomenon of kidnapping at the very start of the trafficking still occurs (as it did in Sinai trafficking). This shows that it remains profitable to take refugees against their will. In the case of trafficking in the Sinai desert, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) also describe that recruitment slowly shifted to kidnapping as the ransom prices increased. In this chapter, Sudanese are involved in all reported cases of kidnapping. This is similar to what Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2017) described: that the Sudanese ethnic Rashaida were operating under Eritrean

General Manjus. These cases indicate the linkages between such kidnappers in Sudan with Eritrean and Libyan perpetrators.

The facilitators are in any case interconnected by money transfers and logistical arrangements. The money extracted from the refugees and from relatives facilitate all of the actors involved in the various locations on the routes, including the drivers, the intermediaries, and the officials. Building on the work of Van Reisen & Estefanos (2017a) who provide detailed descriptions of money flows in human trafficking in Sinai, further tracing of these financial flows may reveal the organisation of the criminal organisations thriving on the profits and controlling the trade.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the following question: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya and does the practice constitute human trafficking?* To answer this question, a series of sub-questions were asked. The first sub-research question was: *How are the journeys of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya initiated?* It appears from the interviews that the victims are in fact recruited by ‘connection men’ while they are in the refugee camps and the urban areas of Sudan and Ethiopia. Although the interviewees often reported initiating contact with these people to ‘facilitate’ their journey across the desert, they were also approached by traffickers, either directly or indirectly, through intermediaries or their own friends and personal contacts. These people plant the seed and encourage people to embark on these dangerous journeys; they make agreements that are often not kept once in Libya, with prices changing and increasing. They ‘package’ the information as coming from trusted members of the community. They are active in communities, churches and refugee camps. They use social media and word of mouth, creating networks and trust. This set up is highly adaptable and fluid. It is argued that this constitutes deception under the definition of human trafficking. As well as recruitment through deception, there is also recruitment using force, with some interviewees reporting being kidnapped and forcefully taken to Libya.

The second sub-research question asked: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya?* Once recruited, the migrants and refugees are then transported through the desert to Libya. The routes taken can be broken into several main parts: Ethiopia to Khartoum in Sudan, across ‘the desert’ from Khartoum to Libya, and across the Mediterranean Sea, referred to by the refugees as ‘the sea’ (note the journey from Eritrea, which is often the point of origin for the interviewees in this book, is not covered in this chapter). The refugees are transferred at points like Hajer (Sudan) and Kufra (Libya), and harboured in trafficking ‘warehouses’ and ‘stores’ along the way. There are also variations in these routes; one refugee reported coming to Libya from Egypt, others were deported from Israel to a third country like Rwanda or Uganda, before embarking on the journey to Libya.

In relation to the third sub-research question – *What are the conditions on the route?* – it was found that while on route through the desert the drivers who work for the traffickers are in control of the refugees and complicit in their abuse. Refugees are stuffed into pick-up trucks or Lorries without enough food or water and travel at dangerous speeds across the sand to reach Libya. Accidents, such as falling out of the car, are common and many die on this route. Women are regularly raped by drivers or traded with others for use for sex. Another risk is being kidnapped by the roaming Chadian armed groups, who sometimes fight with the traffickers for ‘control’ of the refugees, in order to (re)sell them.

Control over information plays an important role in the trafficking of refugees along the routes. Although refugees often have a phone in refugee camps before they commence the journey to Libya, they lose access to the device on the route to Libya (interviewees reported either not bringing it with them or it being stolen). By creating ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape, the traffickers are in control of the information exchange, which means that they can ensure that the refugees do not give any information to family, the media or the authorities. The refugees are also not able to record any details of their journey, such as by taking photographs, hampering investigation

of the crime. The loss of this tool is an important aspect of the control that the traffickers have over the refugees during their trafficking trajectories.

The fourth sub-research question looked at: *How are payments made, where and to whom, and under what conditions?* On the routes to Libya, payments are made for segments (the ‘desert’, and then the ‘sea’), as well as for the whole journey. Although payments are usually agreed before the journey commences, the amounts often change after the refugees arrive and the refugees find themselves forcefully detained until they arrange payment. The process of extracting payment through torture is prevalent, at points of transit as well as when they reach their destination in Libya. Due to the arbitrary nature of payments, the situations of imprisonment and the threats and torture under which the payments are extracted, the authors of this chapter argue that all payments can be classified as ‘ransoms’, as they are sums extracted from family and communities in order to secure the release of a prisoner. The traffickers in Sudan, particularly in Khartoum, are connected to those in Libya. The refugees do not usually pay the complete amount for the journey when they are in Sudan. Rather, the payments are done by their family members once they arrive in Libya. The networks are connected and cooperate, and they are part of a larger network.

The fifth sub-research question asked: *How are these routes organised (facilitators, networks, collusion of authorities) and what is the involvement of Eritreans (including Eritrean authorities) in this organisation?* From the interviews, the connections between those involved in the transportation of migrants and refugees to Libya appear to be well organised – from initiation of the journey (recruitment and kidnapping), through to travel through the desert, receipt in Libya and, finally, the journey over the Mediterranean Sea. There are many actors involved: facilitators, drivers, connection men, smugglers, guards and traffickers. Most of the interviewees observed interconnections, but were not sure if the full journey was organised by one or more individuals. In addition to the network being highly interconnected, the interviewees reported the involvement of the

authorities. In Sudan, interviewees told stories about the complicity of police and border guards with traffickers. The crossing of borders and travel through the desert is facilitated by military personnel.

So, in answer to the main research question: *Do the practices described in this chapter constitute human trafficking?* It is concluded from the interviews that the elements of trafficking are all present – namely, recruitment; the transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception; and exploitation with the purpose of generating profit. Therefore, this phenomenon qualifies as human trafficking. The findings of this study indicate that this highly lucrative form of human trafficking – human trafficking for ransom – which was initially identified in the Sinai, is now well established in Libya. Hence, there is a possibility that this form of human trafficking could spread to other parts of the region, or may have already done so. With the current instability in the Horn of Africa, there is serious concern that human trafficking for ransom may increase in volume and spread to more geographic locations.

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Author contributions

Klara Smits 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. Letizia Storchi contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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Chapter 10

Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya¹³⁹

Morgane Wirtz

Introduction

Open Google Maps in satellite mode and type ‘Libya’ in the search bar – you will see a gigantic country, the fourth largest in Africa in size, 90% covered by desert. In the middle of the Sahara, its 4,383 kilometre border, drawn in straight lines, separates Libya from its six neighbours: Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt. To the north, a 1,770 kilometre coastline opens onto the Mediterranean Sea – and to Europe. Zuwarah, in western Libya, is only 300 kilometres from Lampedusa in Italy. This geography is one of the reasons why Libya is so attractive to people on the move, as well as to human traffickers seeking to prey on them.

Of the five migration routes through Libya, most Eritreans use the south-eastern route. Their journeys are facilitated by smugglers and human traffickers, who keep them in holding camps, warehouses and stores along the way. Grave human rights violations are occurring in these places – but also in the official detention centres funded by the DCIM. Migrants and refugees are beaten, tortured, raped and killed. Few make it to the coast, where they wait in departure points for their chance to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. If caught by the Libya Coast Guard, they are sent back to official detention centres, where the cycle starts again.

¹³⁹ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author’s PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

Despite the current boom in the construction of walls to control access to certain parts of Libya (Carayol & Gagnol, 2021), there are many routes through the country. Migrants and refugees¹⁴⁰ enter from Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt. They are from West, East, Central and North Africa. Some come from Asia and the Middle East, including Syrians and Bangladeshis. All routes converge in the north-west of Libya – in Tripoli or coastal cities – where there are departure points for the Mediterranean Sea. These routes have been used for the smuggling and trafficking of goods, drugs, arms and people since time immemorial.

However, research on the trafficking routes across Libya is scarce. Micallef (2017) presents a map of the routes and hubs. He shows that illicit trade is organised across the whole country and in coordination with neighbouring countries. He states that, since the fragmentation of Libya after the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, the exploitation of migrants and refugees is increasingly becoming a source of income for armed groups operating in the country. Other authors, such as Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2019), also reflect on human smuggling and extortion in Libya, and on how they are connected. They state that the experience of Eritrean refugees in Libya depends on which territory they enter from and which tribe controls that area.

The places where migrants and refugees are kept along the human smuggling and trafficking routes are many. These are called ‘holding camps’, ‘prisons’, ‘warehouses’, ‘houses’, ‘hangars’, ‘stores’, ‘farms’, and ‘credit houses’.¹⁴¹ There are also official detention centres. Malakooti (2019) identified, located and compared the main official detention centres in Libya in 2019. She also indicates the location of other places where migrants and refugees are held and the departure points for the Mediterranean Sea.

¹⁴⁰ 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).

¹⁴¹ See Glossary of Terms.

Despite this research, little is known about the human trafficking routes through Libya. To understand the practices, its drivers and origins, there is an urgent need to investigate the routes used and the places where people are kept along the way. To fill this gap, the research question addressed in this chapter is: *What are the trafficking routes through Libya, including the places from which people depart, the transit hubs and the places used to hold migrants and refugees?*

After this introduction, the methodology used for this research is set out, which is followed by the findings of the interviews, grouped under the five migration routes – the southern route (from Niger), the south-eastern route (from Sudan), the western route (from Algeria), the north-western route (from Tunisia), and the north-eastern route (from Egypt). Evidence from the interviews is also presented on the north of Libya, where the roads converge. This is followed by a brief discussion and conclusion.

Before the methodology is presented, the next section provides a general description of the terminology used to describe the places where people on the move are held, including holding camps, official detention centres and departure points.

Holding camps, official detention centres and departure points

There are many places where people on the move are held, mostly against their will, while in Libya. These places, official or not, change their location regularly. In this chapter, the places mentioned by the interviewees are presented. Some of them may have closed their doors by the time of reading. The aim is to present the routes, hubs, and human rights abuses reported by migrants and refugees while in detention centres. In this chapter, we generally refer to these as ‘holding camps’, ‘official detention centres’ and ‘departure points’.

A ‘holding camp’ is a generic term used to describe any place where migrants and refugees are held until they pay the ransom for their release (and for their onward journey north from where they can attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea). These places vary in size. In the smallest holding camp reported in the interviews, the detainee was

alone. The largest hold about 1,000 detainees at a time. This is why the names to refer to the camps vary; they are called ‘prisons’, ‘warehouses’, ‘houses’, ‘hangars’, ‘stores’, ‘farms’, and ‘credit houses’.¹⁴² Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies have no access to these places, hence, all kinds of abuse takes place there. Ex-detainees have reported starvation, lack of hygiene, disease, torture, punishment, sexual violence and forced labour (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021). Captivity in these places can last from a few days up to years (Malakooti, 2019).

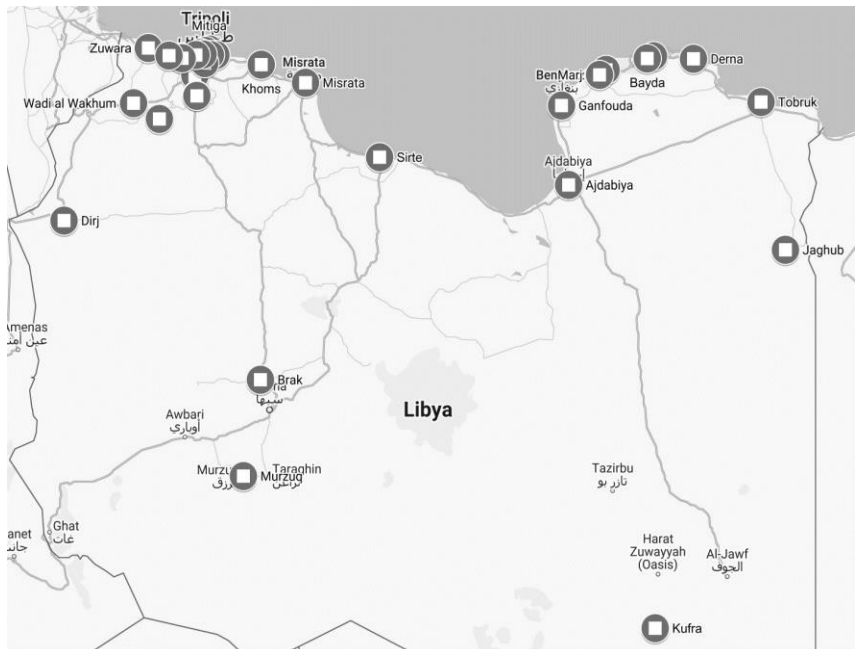


Figure 10.1 Official detention centres listed by UNHCR in 2021 and mentioned by the interviewees

(Source: Based on primary and secondary data and created from Map data ©2022 Google)

‘Official detention centres’ are prisons where migrants and refugees are detained, run by the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) under the Ministry of Interior or by forces affiliated with the

¹⁴² See Glossary of Terms.

Government of National Unity in Libya (previously the Government of National Accord), often through the DCIM. The locations, types of facility, reason(s) and lengths of detention are multiple. In October 2021, there were 24 official detention centres listed by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Libya (UNHCR, 2021). Even for the United Nations, it is very difficult to know how many official detention centres are active as they close and reopen frequently.

While most of the official detention centres in Libya receive funding from the government, in many places, power still lies with social connections between armed groups and communities, rather than state institutions (Eaton, Alageli, Badi, Eljarh & Stocker, 2020). As a result, the Ministry of Interior has little to no control over the security forces running the operation, other than providing finances (Malakooti, 2019). In some instances, non-state armed groups have opened detention centres that have later been recognised as official by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019).

Migrants and refugees are held in official detention centres arbitrarily and indefinitely for illegal migration without charge or trial (Amnesty International, 2020). International aid organisations and UN agencies have limited access to those places. Such access is a process of constant negotiation (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*). This has resulted in a lack of transparency, making it difficult to monitor the situation and living conditions of the detainees. Human rights abuses are common in these facilities (OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2016, 2018a).

Official detention centres sometimes close after reports of gross human rights violations, but can reopen shortly after (Malakooti, 2019). This leads to difficulties in establishing an accurate overview of what happens in these facilities on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes it is unclear if a place is an official detention centre or a holding camp – as both can be run by traffickers or armed groups. It is also possible that camps switch hands, although this is not confirmed. Chapter 13 gives a full description of the conditions in these places.

Finally, the term ‘departure point’ is used in this chapter to describe the places where migrants and refugees are hidden before crossing the Mediterranean Sea. These points are often close to the coast. Migrants and refugees wait there until conditions are met to attempt a crossing. They are often locked in departure points and kept silent to avoid being spotted by the security forces. Human rights abuses are common in departure points, however, seem to be less regular and systematic than in official detention centres and holding camps.

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).

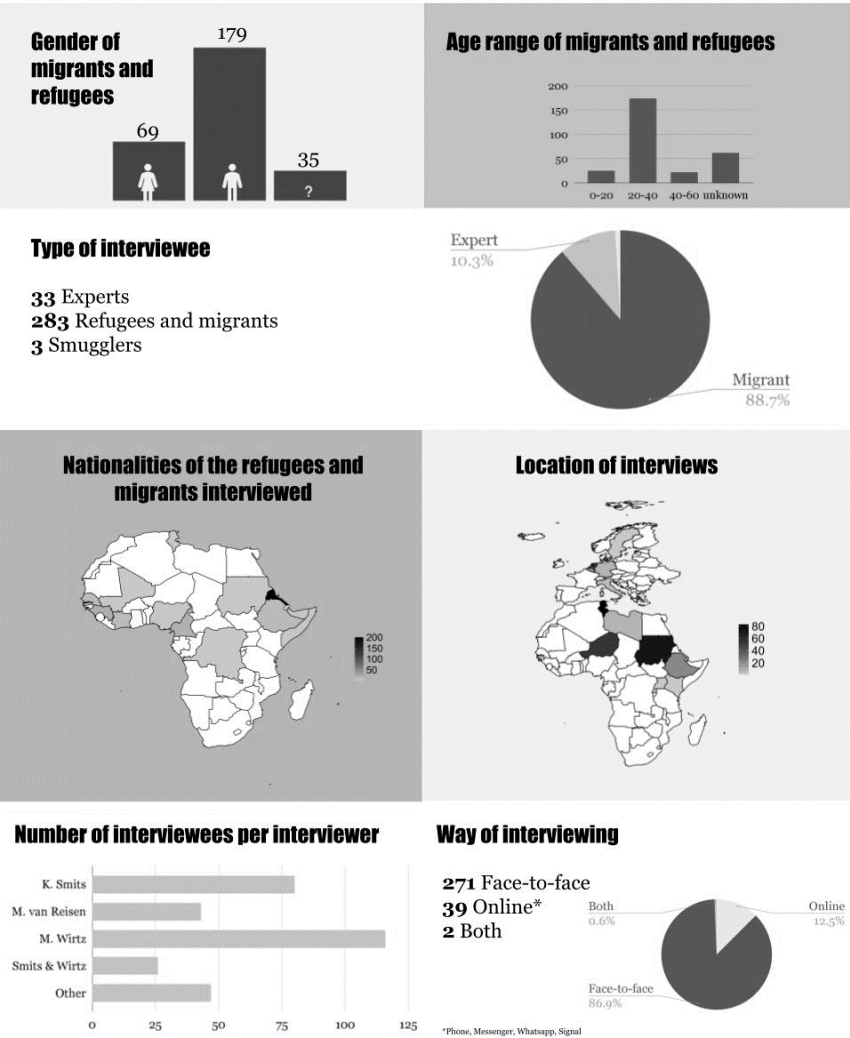
The large majority of the interviews analysed in this chapter were carried out between March 2019 and December 2021 by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits and Adoum Moussa. Interviews by Mirjam Van Reisen were conducted in small focus groups, and several interviews from her previous research have been re-used. 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).

After analysing all interviews, the interviews with migrants and refugees who had been trafficked in Libya (n=128) were used for closer analysis. These were coded and labelled according to the Libyan cities they had travelled through and the money they paid to reach the next destination. A second coding and labelling was conducted in parallel on detention facilities. All detention facilities described by the interviewees have been indexed and coded using the labels: city; type of detention facility (official, unofficial, departure point); name of the place; who worked there; who the detainees were; the number of interviewees who mentioned the place; the nationality of interviewee; date of detention; the mention of killings, torture, forced labour, sexual violence, starvation, disease, or connections with human trafficking networks (for official detention centres); the impact of the war in Libya on the interviewee; complaints about NGOs and UN agencies (yes/no); and other. This coding and labelling allowed the author to compare across testimonies and highlight the places where different interviewees met in different places and identify if they were imprisoned together, among other things.

Figure 10.2. Overview of interview statistics¹⁴³

312 Interviewees



¹⁴³ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

The following sections present the five main routes used by the victims of human trafficking to enter and leave Libya. The southern route, along the border with Niger and Chad, is mainly used by migrants and refugees from West Africa. The second route is in the south-east of the country near Libya's border with Sudan and Chad. It is the main road taken by migrants and refugees from East Africa, including Eritrean refugees. The third route travels along the west of Libya, along the border with Algeria and attracts migrants and refugees primarily from West African countries. The fourth route is in north-west Libya, at the border with Tunisia and is used by Tunisians and Libyans, as well as migrants and refugees from East and West Africa. The fifth route is on the east coast of Libya and follows the Egyptian border, with migrants and refugees typically arriving from Egypt. Asian and East African migrants and refugees also take this path. In the north-west of Libya, all routes converge. Departure points are located in several coastal cities for journey across the Mediterranean Sea. The majority of official detention centres are also situated in that part of the country.

Southern route (from Niger)

Originating from Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Gambia and other places in West Africa, people on the move meet in the area of Agadez, a city in the north of Niger. From the interviews, it becomes clear that the city of Agadez is a gateway to the Sahara and an important crossroad. It is here that the tarred road ends and migrants and refugees say that they call a 'smuggler' to organise the rest of their journey to Libya. These smugglers are often Tuaregs¹⁴⁴ or Toubou,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ The Tuareg are a traditionally nomadic ethnic group that live in the Sahara in Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuareg_people).

¹⁴⁵ The Toubou (also spelled Tubu) are a traditionally nomadic ethnic group that live in the Sahara, mainly in Chad, Libya, Niger and Sudan (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toubou_people).

as they know the Sahara well. But there are also many West Africans in Niger who organise the journey of their compatriots to Libya.

Since 2016, smuggling has been illegal in Niger and is actively policed. As a result, departures have decreased drastically. Those that do take place are organised at night or with the support of the security forces who control the checkpoints to the city. Agadez is also sometimes bypassed and departures are organised from other towns, such as Zinder (Wirtz, 2019).

To leave Agadez, migrants and refugees are generally loaded on to 4×4 Toyota Hilux vehicles, with 28 passengers per vehicle. To reach Sabha, in the south of Libya, it takes five days of travel from Agadez. These journeys are exhausting and many accidents have been reported (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*). A smuggler interviewed in Agadez said “The Sahara has become a cemetery ordeal” (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018).¹⁴⁶

In 2022, Libya started expelling migrants, which has driven up the amounts charged by smugglers in Agadez. Adoum Moussa, journalist and researcher in Agadez explained the following:

By the start of 2022, Libya has started to expel migrants of all nationalities along this road. They are brought in Libyan trucks directly to Agadez. This resulted in an increase in the prices of smugglers. In 2022, migrants/refugees paid around West African franc 750,000 [EUR 1,150] to go from Agadez to Sabha. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp messages, March 2022)

The prices were lower in 2019:

In 2019, the price for Sabha was CFA 250,000 [EUR 380], CFA 200,000 [EUR 305] for Qatrun and CFA 400,000 [EUR 610] for Tripoli. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

The main cities in southern Libya mentioned by the interviewees are Qatrun, Sabha and Brak Al Shati. These cities are also destinations

¹⁴⁶ This interview was also published in the documentary Teghadez Agadez (Wirtz, 2019).

for migrants and refugees from Chad. This route is mainly used by West African and Sudanese migrants and refugees and passes through the gold mines in the north of the country (Interviewee 1104, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022).

Although the number of migrants using the southern route is impossible to calculate, in a survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) over a year in 2020, a total of 40,886 outgoing migrants, going mainly to Libya, were registered in Niger, while a total of 9,756 migrants going to Libya were registered in Chad (IOM, 2021b).

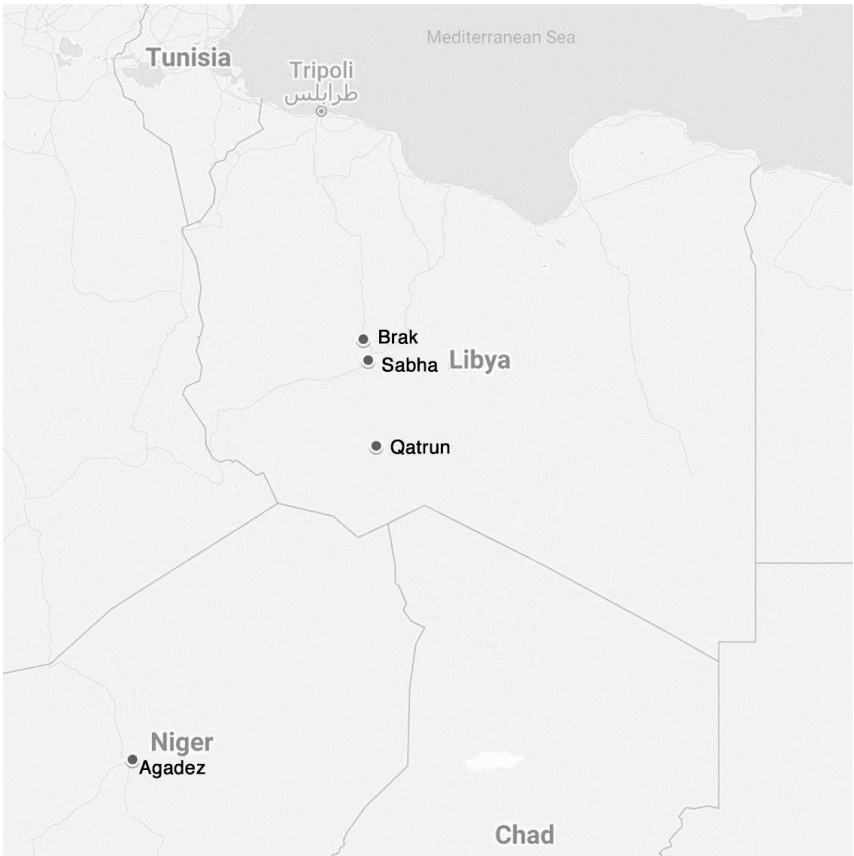


Figure 10.3. Migration hubs along the southern route

(Source: Based on primary data and created from Map data ©2022 Google)

Qatrun

Qatrun is one of the first oases in Libya after crossing the border from Niger or Chad. It is a small city in the middle of the Sahara, on the road to Sabha. It is not a main stopping point, so the area serves mostly as a transient space (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020). Migrants may decide to stop in Qatrun to work for a while and collect money to continue their journey. A Gambian migrant shared his experience in Qatrun:

In Qatrun, fortunately, they don't have mentality job. They have ... like if they are building houses, sometimes you help them, do a smear for the house, scrape it, or sometimes they don't carry loads. If they have loads, you help them drop them. Sometimes you go to offload shops [warehouses], big shops used to bring rice, or macaroni [...]. Sometimes they give you a shop to sit down there for months offloading loads and bringing loads inside. They pay you. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

From Qatrun, transit is possible to Niger, Chad or north, towards Sabha and Tripoli. The Gambian interviewee stated that girls were raped and many people died during transit at Qatrun (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

Sabha

Sabha is a town in a Saharan oasis. It is the capital of the Fezzan region and is situated in south-western Libya, approximately 640 kilometres south of Tripoli. The city is an important migration hub. It is the main stopover for migrants and refugees who enter Libya through Niger and Chad. It is also a destination for migrants and refugees who enter the country from Algeria. Many migrants and refugees who we interviewed for the purpose of this chapter explained that they worked for a while in Sabha before continuing their journey northward or back to Niger. Testimonies of forced work in the city and the gardens around were also collected:

[We stayed three days in the Sahara, without food or water. He saw us, he said he doesn't want to create problems. We will stay in his garden, we will work to do everything there. Then he will help us go to Tripoli. When we arrived at his house, we started working, he took us as prisoners. [...]] We work for him for free for up

to a month like that. When he left, we also continued to work. He closed the door, and gave us milk and tea. We broke down the door. We went straight to the centre of Sabha. In Sabha we found black people working there who sleep with their bosses, they don't pay the money. They pay up to a year, they say: we will send you to Europe. We saw that those people don't speak logically [make sense]. (Interviewee 1045, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

There are many places in Sabha where migrants and refugees hide before being transferred to their next destination.

There was one DCIM run detention centre in Sabha, the Sabha Tariq al-Matar detention centre, which is listed by the UNHCR as closed as of October 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). Since 2022, migrants have been gathered in another detention place in Sabha (which is run by Libyan authorities, but it is not clear if this is an official detention centre), before being expelled to Niger (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp messages, March 2022). The interviewees mentioned four other places where they were detained – these were not official detention centres and it is not clear who they were operated by. Twelve detainees, from various African countries, were locked up in the smallest one, 105 in the largest one. Two interviewees reported being beaten and three experienced sexual violence in these centres. A Senegalese interviewee was shot as he tried to escape one such place and left without receiving medical care (Interviewee 1046, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020).

Sabha is also a stopover on the prostitution network that goes from Nigeria and the sub-region to Europe (Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*). Since the 1990s, women have been trafficked on this road (Kuschminder, 2020). After being promised a trip to Europe and a job, they find themselves in Niger, Libya or Europe, having to pay off huge debts through prostitution (Wirtz, 2021).

After their stay in Sabha migrants and refugees go to Niger, Chad, Algeria or travel towards Tripoli and the north of Libya.

Brak

Brak, or Brak al Shati, is a small town in the desert surrounded by many agricultural gardens. The city is located 80 kilometres north of Sabha, on the road to Shwayrif and the coast. Forced labour and human trafficking for ransom have been reported in Brak. Networks of human trafficking of refugees from East Africa have a branch in Brak. Eight interviewees (seven Eritreans and one Somali) stated that they had been detained in Brak and faced severe human right violations. Five of them had been held in the warehouse of Aziz,¹⁴⁷ a notorious Sudanese human trafficker (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*) and reported seeing him there. One interviewee stated that 190 women, children and men were locked up in Aziz’s warehouse. Another one talked about 900 detainees. Shooting (to death), electric shock, beating, burns, hanging upside down or with hands and legs together, and sexual violence have all been reported by interviewees as occurring there.

After their stay in Brak, some interviewees reported being transferred to Bani Walid or Shwayrif. Others continued their journey to Tripoli or Sabratha.

South-eastern route (from Sudan)

Khartoum, a large, modern city, crossed by the Nile was the departure point for the large majority of the people interviewed for this chapter. This route, which links Sudan to Libya, is described in detail in Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*. The migrants and refugees who take it are mainly Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis and Sudanese. It is often in Khartoum

¹⁴⁷ Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

that they come in contact with a ‘connection man’¹⁴⁸ who organises their journey to Libya. The connection men were identified by the interviewees as Sudanese, Eritreans or Ethiopians. The interviewees reported making a deal for the journey. In 2016, the price was around USD 1,600 for crossing the Sahara, plus another USD 1,600 for crossing the Mediterranean Sea. However, most of the time, the price actually paid by the refugees is way higher than this, as they are sold, kidnapped and arrested several times on their journey through Libya.

Departures can be organised from different places in Sudan, but were mainly reported in Khartoum or in its opposite city on the west bank of the River Nile – Omdurman. Passengers hide for a while and, when they reach a sufficient number, are loaded into big Lorries and carried north. At a certain point in the desert, the passengers are transferred from the Lorries to 4×4 pick-ups.

The trip from Khartoum to Libya takes one month on average. The interviewees mentioned several stops where they were handed from one driver to another. A young Eritrean explained:

[We spent] one month, alone in the Sahara. One week without food, without water. Many people were killed there, also children. We went by car and walking. A bit by car, and also walking. But it took a really long time. [We were transferred between drivers] from Sudan to Chad ... from Chad to Libya ... from Libya to Libya ... almost three times. Four times! (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

As this excerpt shows, the road from Sudan to Libya is dangerous. Most of the interviewees mentioned lack of food and water. Sexual violence was also reported. Many witnessed the death of other passengers who fell from the car, were abandoned or killed by the drivers.

A portion of the road between Sudan and Libya might be through Chad. Many interviewees mentioned fighting between their Libyan

¹⁴⁸ 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).

drivers and Chadian armed groups. Some were kidnapped by Chadian armed groups and sold to human traffickers. The destinations mentioned by the interviewees who took this route were Kufra, Ajdabiya, Bani Walid, Shwayrif, Brak, Ishlavia and Umm al Aranib.



Figure 10.4. Migration hubs along the south-eastern route

(Source: Based on primary data created from Map data ©2022 Google)

Kufra

Kufra is an oasis town in the south of Cyrenaica region in Libya. It is isolated in the Sahara desert. The city is surrounded by gardens dedicated to agriculture. There are two official detention centres in Kufra: one managed by the DCIM and one established and maintained by the municipal government (Malakooti, 2019).

Kufra is an important migration hub. It is the first stopover for migrants and refugees who enter Libya from Sudan, sometimes via Chad. Most of these migrants and refugees are Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali, Sudanese, and Chadian, but other nationalities are also present. When, asked about the nationality of migrants and refugees in Libya, a representative of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) answered:

I think there are all nationalities there. There are even North Koreans. North Koreans I think the only places in the world where you can find them are Venezuela and Libya. I am not joking! In Kufra, there are North Koreans by the way!
(Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

The majority of the Eritreans interviewed for the purpose of this chapter transited through Kufra. In or around the city, there are many places (sheds, farms and warehouses) where people on the move are received and divided according to their traffickers. One interviewee shared the following:

We reached Kufra. They brought us to a warehouse outside of the city, in farmland. I stayed there one night. 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)

In most cases, the interviewees explained that they spent a few days in Kufra and were then transferred to other cities, where they became victims of human trafficking for ransom.

However, people are also held in holding camps and warehouses in the city, which are not in any way run by the government. Eight different places were mentioned by the interviewees. Holding between 70 and 750 detainees, these are places where human trafficking for ransom is practised. The conditions in those places (also called warehouses by the interviewees) were reported to be

deplorable. Disease, lack of hygiene and starvation are common. An interviewee, who was asked to pay USD 8,225 in Kufra remembers:

Every morning, there was a dead body. People were dying every morning. Ten people. They throw them outside. It is because of the hunger. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The young man quoted above was shot in the leg as he tried to escape from the warehouse. Interviewees who were detained in such places reported being beaten with plastic tubes and sticks, shot, having water thrown at them, their hands and legs tied together, and experiencing sexual violence.

The deportation of migrants and refugees to Sudan or Chad is organised in Kufra (Creta, 2020). All of the interviewees met for this chapter continued moving north after their transit in Kufra. Most of them were sent to Shwayrif or Bani Walid.

Shwayrif

Shwayrif is a small city in the Sahara desert in the north of Libya. It is a migration hub for East African migrants and refugees on their way to the northwest of Libya. Many come through Kufra. It is also a place where people who have been kidnapped on their journey are brought. Human trafficking for ransom is practised in Shwayrif.

Five interviewees described places (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) where they had been detained in Shwayrif. Three of them had been imprisoned in a detention centre belonging to Abdusalam,¹⁴⁹ a well-known Eritrean human trafficker (see Chapter 11: *“You are the Ball – They are the Players”: The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). They were detained with between 1,000 and 2,000 other Eritrean, Somali and Sudanese refugees and reported having arrived there after being kidnapped on the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

¹⁴⁹ Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

Interviewees who fell into the hands of human traffickers in Shwayrif mentioned starvation, lack of hygiene, disease, beating, and sexual violence. One mentioned that several detainees died of hunger (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

After their transit in Shwayrif, the interviewees were brought to Sabratha, Bani Walid or Tripoli.

Western route (from Algeria)

Algeria is a working destination for many West African migrants and refugees. They save money there, before returning home or continuing their journey to Libya or Morocco. From the north of Algeria, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea to Spain or Italy is also organised. The interviewees who had passed through Algeria described a difficult situation, in which they are constantly chased by the police who arrest illegal migrants and deport them to the border with Niger in the desert.

There are two important crossing points between Algeria and Libya. The first is at Ghat, in the south-west of Libya, which is used by people travelling towards Sabha. The second is at Gadamis, in western Libya, and is used by people who wish to continue their journey to Tripoli or coastal cities in Libya.

As this research was conducted in Niger, Sudan and Tunisia, this is not one of the routes studied. However, in the course of the research, five people were interviewed, originally from West Africa, who had crossed the border between Algeria and Libya through Gadamis. According to them, the smugglers who work on this border are from Algeria, Libya and various West African countries. They collaborate and are organised in networks. The price of the trip is negotiated in Algeria before departure. In 2018 and 2019, it varied between EUR 120 and 600, depending on the destination.

The crossing of the border often starts at Debdeb, in Algeria. Two interviewees, a couple from Guinea, explained the conditions under which they made the journey:

They crammed us in the back of 4x4s, like cans of sardines. [...] Sometimes they packed us in. We were tied up with tarpaulins. The air couldn't get in. There were many people who suffocated. We tried to lift the tarpaulin to breathe fresh air. [...] After Zintan, a car came to get us. They put us in the trunk. You can't even see where you are going. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

The crossing of the Libyan-Algerian border was particularly hard for this couple. They witnessed the death of passengers, including a pregnant woman. They were also beaten by drivers and the woman was raped by Libyan smugglers (Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*). Another Gambian interviewee crossed the border on foot, accompanied by an Algerian guide. He described his journey as follows:

I took the car from Algeria, I came to Debdeb. After Debdeb, we walked between Debdeb and Libya, almost 25 km – on foot. There were women, children. There was also an Algerian. He was the one who took us across the border. When we arrived in Libya, he was going to return [to Algeria]. Now there were Libyans [who took responsibility for us]. It’s a network that does business among themselves. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This interviewee’s original destination was Tripoli, but he was kidnapped on the road and forced into slavery in Sabha. Several interviewees mentioned bandits working along this border.

The destinations mentioned by the interviewees who took the road from Algeria to Libya are Gadamis, Sabha, Zintan and Tripoli. Like the other roads, the road between Debdeb and Gadamis is also taken to leave Libya.



Figure 10.5. Migration hubs along the western route

(Source: Based on primary data created from Map data ©2022 Google)

North-western route (from Tunisia)

Zarzis and Medinine are two cities in the south of Tunisia. The first is oriented towards the Mediterranean Sea and offers its inhabitants and tourists wide white sandy beaches, adorned with palm trees. The second is inland, planted with olive trees and has a drier climate. Both cities receive migrants and refugees from all over Africa, who have arrived directly in Tunisia by plane or fled Libya by land. The main crossing point along this border is Ra's Ajdir.

For people who do not have Libyan or Tunisian nationality, the border crossing between the two countries is more likely to be from Libya to Tunisia than vice versa.

However, in recent years, there has been a return to Libya of migrants and refugees who had originally fled Libya due to gross human rights violations. Their objective is usually to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Libya. They know that by taking this route they risk their lives, but, as one interviewee explained: “Instead of living for nothing, you have to die for something” (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Tunisia often does not meet the migrants and refugees’ expectations in terms of protection, job opportunities and wages (Chapter 16: “*Gate Closed*”: *The Situation in Libya during COVID-19*).

To cross the border between Tunisia and Libya, there is no need for a smuggler. Attending a meeting in an apartment, a young refugee in Medinine, in Tunisia, wearing gloves, a simple shirt and a pair of jeans said a casual: “Goodbye, guys!” (Interviewee 1029, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). There was no hugging, no bag, nothing at all. It was as if he was just going to the shop next door. But he was going to Libya. One of his friends explained:

Of course he doesn't take a bag with him. Otherwise, he could be identified. He is going to take a car to Ben Gardane and then he will cross the border on foot, hiding in the bushes. If the police catch him, they will bring him back. There is a guy here today: the police arrested him yesterday and brought him back. He will leave again tomorrow. (Interviewee 1027, informal conversation with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

The young refugee added:

After I reach the border with Libya, I will again use my own feet. (Interviewee 1029, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

The destinations mentioned by the interviewees who took the road from Tunisia to Libya are Zuwarah, Zawiyah and Tripoli, from where they try to take a boat across the Mediterranean Sea.



Figure 10.6. Migration hubs on the north-western route

(Source: Based on primary data created from Map data ©2022 Google)

North-eastern road (from Egypt)

During our research, we met one man, a 27-year-old Eritrean, who had entered Libya from Egypt. Being aware of the fact that migration in the east of Libya is often underreported, we interviewed a few experts on the topic to gain an initial understanding of it. This section contains the results of those interviews. A representative from the Libyan branch of the OMCT shared the following:

It is mainly Egyptians who take the road from Egypt to Libya. People from Syria, Bangladesh, Iran or other Asian countries, and a few Somali and Eritreans, also use this migration path. They are mainly registered at the UNHCR in Egypt and,

because they have waited for a long time, then they decided to cross. (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

It is often through intermediaries that refugees in Egypt contact a facilitator (someone who arranges the journey) to take them to Libya. An activist for the human rights of Eritrean refugees explained:

The Egyptian mafias cannot deal with refugees, because they don't know their language. They don't know how to communicate with them. So there are some [people] working in the middle. Some of them are Eritrean, Sudanese, also Nigerians and Somalis, like that. They send them refugees. The [smugglers] motivate them by money, or they motivate them saying: "If you bring 50 or 60 refugees, finally we will take you with your family without any money to Italy". (Interviewee 1100, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp call, March 2022)

The representative from OMCT stated that the facilitators working on this border are mainly Egyptians and Libyans from the Ouled Ali tribe:

The people who are doing business at the border, the families, they don't consider themselves as Egyptians or Libyans. [...] In the east, there are specialised families who are doing business with special or specific items. For instance, you have families who are controlling only drugs. Anyone can't jump into this business. And there is a kind of family monopoly. [Something like:] "This is our business and no one jumps in". [...] And you have another family doing only food. And another family doing only human trafficking. They don't call it trafficking actually, they call it just smuggling, because it is just the transport. Bringing people from one point to another point. (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

The facilitators can also be from other countries:

From Cairo, I started the way to Libya. An Eritrean connection man took me in charge. I agreed with him from Egypt to Italy: USD 3,000. I took a pick-up to travel. At the border between Egypt and Libya, we crossed on foot. After that, we took back the car. (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

According to the experts interviewed, the price paid by migrants and refugees to cross the border to the west of Libya varies from around

USD 2,000 to 3,000. It is possible to pay less, if the destination agreed on is in the east, closer to the border. Some Egyptians pay less, around USD 1,500, and have the opportunity to pay in Egyptian currency.

Departures to Libya are organised in small coastal Egyptian cities, like Marsa Matruh. Then, as explained by interviewee 1008, portions of this journey can be done on foot and other parts in pick-ups, Land Rovers and Land Cruisers.

The journey between Egypt and Libya can be really dangerous; two interviewees mentioned organ trafficking on this road:

The Egyptian government found many people in the desert or at the border, they already had many operations on their body, like that. This also happens there. Also there are people who say: "We were together but five of us got lost. When we got up in the morning, we didn't find five of our friends. We don't know who took them". When they ask the mafia, they say: "Oh they escaped from us. What do you want us to do? They escaped from us". And in fact, the mafia always choose two, three or four of the hundred refugees. One, two, three, four, or five and they bring them to those doctors and they start to do operations, because they need their organs. This is happening all the time.

If 150 people start to move from Egypt, 135 or 140 will reach [Libya]. Maybe 15 people, maybe 10 people, maybe 5 people are always lost on the way. And, of course, 3 of them, 4 of them pass away because of diseases, like heart attacks or something. But some of them are already chosen by the mafia groups to take them to those doctors and to kill them or give them some drugs or medicines and to start taking their organs. After that they kill them or sell them. This kind of story, we hear a lot about in Egypt. (Interviewee 1111, interview with Wirtz, Phone call, March 2022)

The first transit city after crossing the border from Egypt is Tobruk. From there, migrants and refugees can continue their way along the Libyan coast, or take 'the 200 road' that directly links Tobruk to Ajdabiya. Later, they can continue their journey towards Tripoli or Libyan cities on the western coast, from where they can try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The OMCT representative shared:

There are not many human traffickers in the east [of Libya] compared to the west. (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

In the east, the business practised is more smuggling of people than human trafficking for ransom. However, it also happens that migrants and refugees are sold on the north-eastern road and brought to Bani Walid or other places where migrants and refugees are detained across the country (see the section on Ajdabiya and Benghazi).

Tobruk

Tobruk is a city in the north-east of Libya on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. It is the first important city for people who enter Libya from Egypt. There is one official detention centre in Tobruk, the Tobruk detention centre, operated by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019).

From Tobruk, migrants and refugees can continue their way in the direction of other cities on the coast of eastern Libya or take ‘the 200’, which is a 200 kilometre road that directly links Tobruk to Ajdabiya, which, according to the OMCT representative, avoids cities and a large number of checkpoints (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022).

According to the OMCT representative, there are also departures by boat to Europe from Tobruk. Interviewed in March 2022, the OMCT representative stated:

What we have observed since the beginning of this year is that there are some departures from the East [of Libya]. Mainly from Tobruk. The last two weeks, a boat drowned and about 20 people, Egyptians and Syrians drowned. And the bodies are still coming out from the shore to the coast. (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)



Figure 10.7. Migration hubs on the north-eastern route

(Source: Based on primary data created from Map data ©2022 Google)

Jaghbug

Jaghbug is a village in the Libyan desert, located 30 kilometres west of the border with Egypt and 500 kilometres south-east of Benghazi. There is one official detention centre in Jaghbug, the Jaghbug detention centre, which was reportedly closed in July 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). A translator who worked for an NGO in Libya was able to visit this centre in 2018. He describes it in these terms:

[Compared to the other detention centres], it was a fairly quiet, peaceful building. People are inside. It was not full. So it was quiet. Behind bars. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The translator added that about 2,000 sub-Saharan men, women and children were locked in this centre. He also saw several Congolese people there.

More information has to be collected to detail the crossing of the border between Egypt and Libya at this point, including how people arrive in this detention centre and the roads taken by migrants and refugees after Jaghbub.

Benghazi

Benghazi is the second most populated city in Libya. It is the main town in the east of the country. Large parts of this city were destroyed during the civil war. As the city is on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, it is one departure point for the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea to Malta or Italy, which lie 700 kilometres north-west of Benghazi. There is one active official detention centre for migrants and refugees in Benghazi, called Ganfuda detention centre, which is run by the DCIM (Global Detention Project, 2021).

During the research, we met two migrants/refugees who travelled through Benghazi during their journey. One had been arrested by soldiers in Ajdabiya and brought to the immigration service in the city (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). For the other one, Benghazi was a transit town on the way between Sudan and Tripoli (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019). According to a human rights defender for Eritrean refugees, there is a direct connection between Sudan and Benghazi:

The trip would go from Sudan to Benghazi. Then from Benghazi to Tripoli. [...] At the border, the drivers change to Libyans. The [passengers] don't know the drivers. Then they are divided. First divided, then they pay. Everybody knows their smuggler. Somebody in Benghazi calls with the contact person: did you receive the money? If yes, then, "OK, go". The security [forces] of Benghazi gives cars and weapons for the traffickers to transport the refugees. The driver's only duty is to keep the passengers and transport them. (Interviewee 0023, interview with Smits, face-to-face, February 2022)

The quote above suggests that there are unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) in Benghazi, but details about these places were not uncovered during the research. A warehouse dedicated to human trafficking for ransom in Al Marj, 100 kilometres east of Benghazi was, however, mentioned (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022).

After transiting to Benghazi, migrants and refugees may attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea or take the road to Tripoli. This road is very difficult, as detailed by an interviewee from Eritrea:

[When] we are leaving from Benghazi, to Tripoli, we are going under the big truck. We are under the truck, and then they put them over us ... bricks, for building houses. Ah, to hide the people. So difficult. Yes, even two people died in that time, because we don't have any air. If you protest, they beat you. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Refugees travelling between Benghazi and Tripoli are sometimes diverted from their original destination to an unofficial detention centre (e.g., holding camp, warehouse), as the director of the Foundation Human Rights for Eritreans, Muluberhan Temelso explained:

[From Benghazi], some don't want to take them to Tripoli, but want to take them back to the desert. I received some messages from refugees who had started their journey, but still they have no idea where they are. [...] It can take about 11 hours from Benghazi to Bani Walid, maybe more. It depends on the way they use. If they pay for the checkpoints, it is shorter. But if they don't pay, they are forced to take other ways. It takes more time. (Interviewee 1101, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

Ajdabiya

Ajdabiya is a town in east Libya, 160 kilometres south of Benghazi. The city is at the intersection of the roads from Kufra, Tobruk, Benghazi, Misrata and Tripoli. It is an important migration hub. There is one official detention centre in Ajdabiya, called the Ajdabiya detention centre, which is controlled by armed groups. Given the power of armed groups in Libya, the Minister of Interior cannot control all of the detention centres. It seems that the DCIM has no

other role than to finance these centres, which is the case for this one (Malakooti, 2019).

The experts interviewed for this chapter compared Ajdabiya to Kufra. It is one of the first transit cities for migrants and refugees who enter Libya from Sudan. The OMCT representative described it as follows:

One side of the town is full of migrants and the [smugglers] do their own business and transportation. It is a big hub. It is the same as in Kufra. One side of the city is well known as inhabited by the migrant community, and also by traffickers and smugglers, and everything is happening in that place. Drugs and prostitution. It is the same. (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

The OCMT representative added that migrants and refugees do not usually stay long in Ajdabiya. It is a transit city where people are sorted in big warehouses before continuing their journey. In some of those places up to a thousand people are locked up, as Muluberhan Temelso, director of the Foundation for Human Rights for Eritreans, explained:

Ajdabiya and Kufra are similar places. They receive people from Sudan. They are only different in distance. It depends on whom the migrants belong to, someone from Ajdabiya or someone going to Kufra. It depends on who the smuggler is. (Interviewee 1101, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

The facilitators that Muluberhan Temelso refers to are of all nationalities and they collaborate with Libyans. They organise the transfer of people from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. Temelso describes unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) where they are locked up before continuing their journey:

When you arrive in Ajdabiya, you are forced to pay the money for the desert. There are hangars there. You cannot jump through the fence of the garden. There is a big iron door. They lock you there. There is a toilet there, water there. And you only get out of that house to eat your meal once a day. So it is a big house. There are several detention centres for the refugees there. They force them to pay for the journey they have already made. (Muluberhan Temelso, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

During the research, two Eritrean refugees were interviewed who had been imprisoned in the same unofficial detention centre in Ajdabiya. They described a very tiny place of 20 square metres hosting 80 men, women and children. One of them said:

We eat there, we sleep there and we use the toilet inside there. They were beating us. They said: "keep quiet, keep quiet. No talk. No movement". There was much sickness and disease. We had no water to clean and we were dirty and we had insects. There was a lack of blood because there was no food. There was skin infections. And also, the weather was very cold in our blankets and clothes. There was much suffering. It was planned to ask us to pay money. Then, we escaped from there. All of us. It was about morning. We tied the Libyan guard and we escaped. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Ajdabiya is a two-day drive to Tripoli. When they take that way, migrants and refugees are sometimes diverted from their original destination to the desert and brought to Shwayrif or Bani Walid where they fall victim to human trafficking for ransom (Interviewee 1105, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022).

North Libya – Departure point for the Mediterranean Sea

In this section, the details about the locations in North Libya mentioned by the interviewees are presented. It starts with Tripoli and Bani Walid, then other locations are listed in alphabetical order.

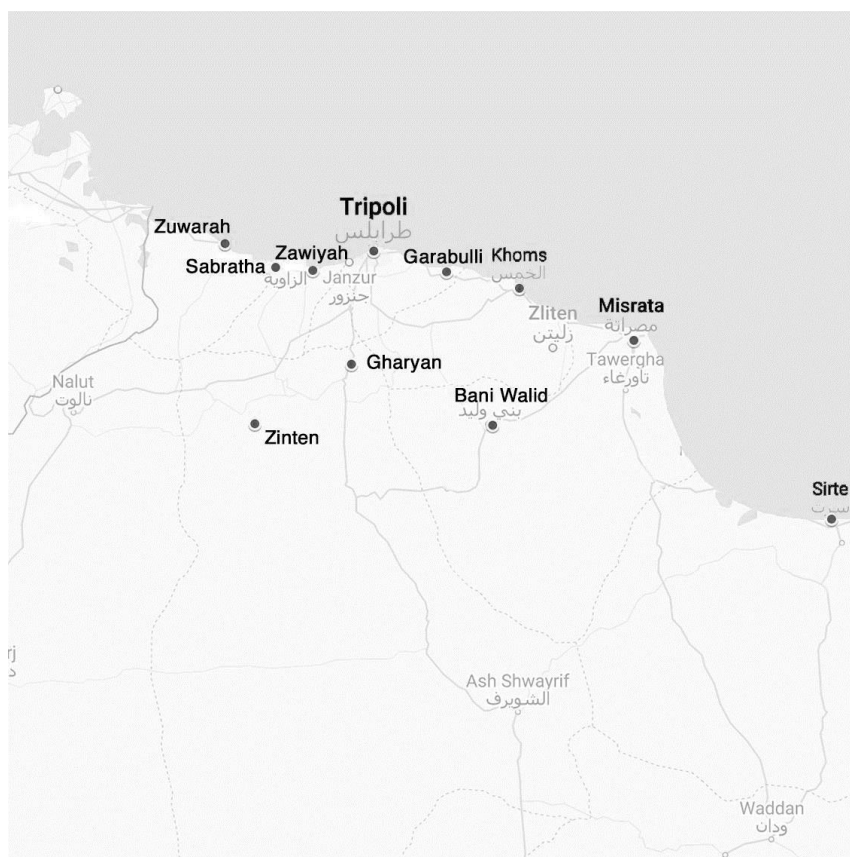


Figure 10.8. Migration hubs in north Libya

(Source: Based on primary data created from Map data ©2022 Google)

Tripoli

Tripoli is built on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, across from Malta and Sicily. It is the capital of Libya and the largest city in the country. It is the most popular region for migration movement. According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), approximately 86,280 (nearly 15%) of the 575,874 migrants and refugees in Libya are in Tripoli (IOM, 2021a). Many of them live and work in the capital. They often share a house that they rent with other migrants and refugees.

Situated in the north-west of the country, Tripoli is a hotspot for migrants and refugees wishing to cross the Mediterranean Sea to

Europe. Four departure points were reported by the interviewees in Tripoli. A man explained that, in 2016, he was in a place with 3,000 other Eritreans and Ethiopians waiting for a boat, good weather and security conditions to allow them to depart to Europe (Interviewee 0006, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Two interviewees reported experiencing bad treatment while at the departure point. One was forced to drink urine by a guard. The other one explained that at his departure point people were beaten by a whip if they made noise. The injunction not to talk and to remain silent is common at departure points. The smugglers/traffickers are afraid of being discovered by the security forces. In several cases, the interviewees never embarked on the sea crossing from Tripoli and were kidnapped or arrested and sent to other departure points or (unofficial or official) detention centres.

Four unofficial detention centres were reported by the interviewees in Tripoli. In these places, the interviewees mentioned lack of food and beatings, sometimes with iron sticks, which resulted in broken bones, threats with large knives, being burnt and electric shocks. In July 2021, eight official detention centres were reported to be active in Tripoli (UNHCR, 2021). The people interviewed for this research gave details on four of them: Qasr bin Ghashir, Tariq Al Matar, Tariq Al Sikka and Tajoura.

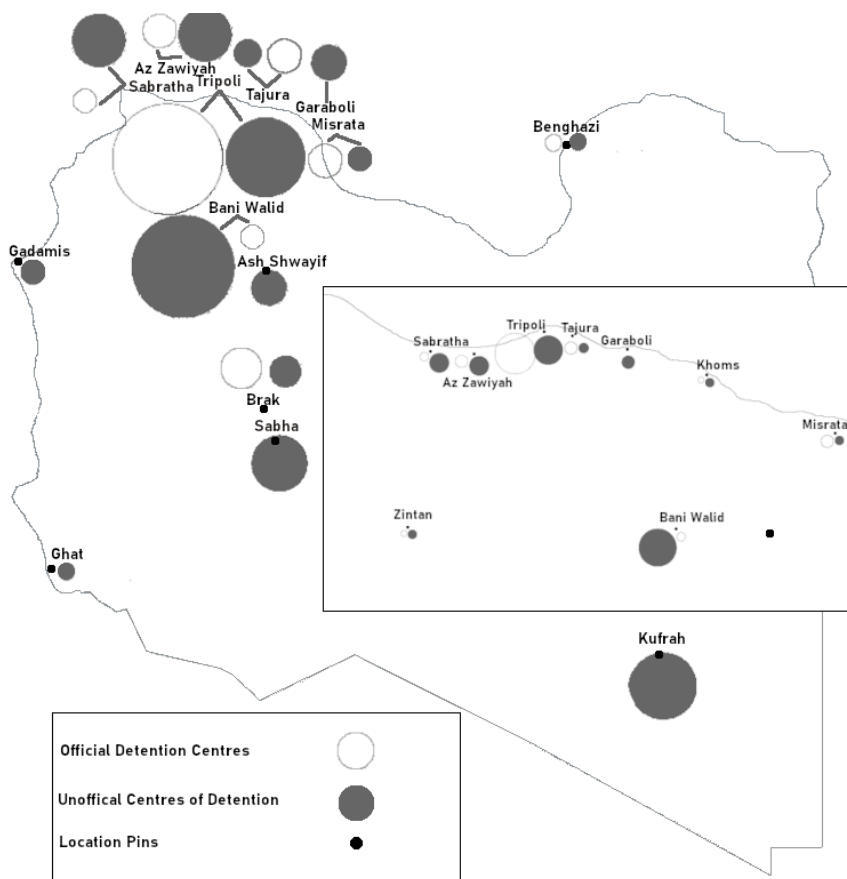


Figure 10.9. Detention centres, proportional to the number migrants and refugees detained in each centre
(Source: Based on primary data)

Qasr bin Ghashir Detention Centre

Qasr bin Ghashir is in the south of Tripoli. According to the detainees, the prison is composed of several hangars, which hold refugees and migrants, mainly Eritreans, Sudanese and Nigerians (Elumami, 2019). An Eritrean refugee contacted while he was detained in Qasr bin Ghashir in December 2018 stated that they were 300 detainees in the past and that there were now 150 women,

children and men locked up. He described Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre as follows:

We are in a big warehouse. [...] The weather is very cold. [We have] no clothes. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp messages, December 2018)

The guards in Qasr bin Ghashir have been accused by the interviewees of working with smugglers and human traffickers:

The leader of this prison, sometimes he sends people in plastic boats [...] Some of our brothers stayed for months with this man. They paid USD 1,500 to go out of this prison. (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp message, July 2019)

The interviewees added that some refugees are forced to work in the house of the boss of the prison without receiving payment (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Interviewees also reported lack of water and food, their possessions being stolen, and beatings if they were found with forbidden items, such as mobile phones. Despite this, some were brave enough to use a phone to share information for this research.

The main danger for migrants and refugees in Qasr bin Ghashir seems to be the war. In January 2019, the detainees found themselves in the middle of the conflict. They explained later:

We are in a bad condition. [...] We are in big trouble dear [...]. Our place is a big war zone. Again, our place, our compound is the material that takes the guns from inside our compound. And everything ... the damage, the tools, they prepare in our home. They prepare the guns and everything inside the compound. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

On 23 April 2019, fighting erupted in the area of the detention centre and the 700 detainees – unarmed men, women and children – found themselves trapped and caught in the cross fire. There were reports of several deaths and at least 12 detainees were injured (MSF, 2019). At least 325 detainees were later evacuated to Zawiyah detention centre (Elumami, 2019).

Tajoura Detention Centre

Tajoura is a town located about 25 kilometres east of Tripoli (Malakooti, 2019). Tajoura detention centre is run by the DCIM and the al-Daman armed groups. It is infamous for an airstrike that hit the detention centre on 2 July 2019 and resulted in the death of 53 detainees and injury of 130 others (United Nations, 2019). This attack can be explained by the fact that the detention centre is actually located inside a military base. A former detainee described the centre as follows:

There are some policemen sitting in front of the door. There is a lot of hard guns and houses in Tajoura. [...] Number one is for the ladies. Number two is for Nigerian men. Number three is for Eritrean and all of those who need to be registered with the UNHCR. (Interviewee 1098, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Although it is an official centre run by the DCIM, human trafficking for ransom is carried out there and the perpetrators include government officials. Interviewees reported that detainees were systematically coerced to pay government soldiers for their release (Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020). It was also reported that armed groups were “hiding Somali and Eritrean soldiers in the camp to later sell them” (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). An interviewee stated that kidnapping was organised by the armed groups working in the prison:

I tried to find a job inside the compound translating for the militias. [...] I was translating for them because they are kidnapping West African people from the road during the night, those who are working in cafeterias, in every place, they are kidnapping and take money from them ... they are using electric shocks inside the compound! That place! (Interviewee 1098, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

In Tajoura, forced labour has been reported inside and outside the detention centres. One refugee described how he was forced to work with weapons and to follow the armed group during their missions in

conflict areas (also see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*):

They told me to clean the weapons. I was cleaning the weapons with petrol and something like a machine gun, they bring it, they open it and I wash it. I did not know how to connect it and put it together. But after they taught me, I can clean it and again put it together for them. (Interviewee 1091, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

Interviewees added that detainees were beaten if they gave information about the situation in this official detention centre, and this observation was confirmed by another researcher with knowledge of the situation (Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Tariq al Matar Detention Centre

‘Tariq al Matar’ literally means ‘the way to the airport’ in Arabic. This detention centre is infamous among migrants and refugees and 23 of the interviewees in this research were detained there at some point in their journey. All of them describe a large hall with 1,200 to 1,500 detainees locked together. An Eritrean man shared the following:

We were sleeping on the ground. Like this size, you can't sleep on this size [...] If you try to move, you will lose your place. [...] So we did this: we stayed with friends there and half of us slept at night, half of us slept during the day. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The majority of the interviewees who were in Tariq Al Matar complained about the lack of food and unsanitary conditions. Four toilets were available for the more than a thousand detainees. Refugees also mentioned tuberculosis and skin diseases. The interviewees reported people dying in this prison.

Almost all of the interviewees who had been in Tariq al Matar also complained about the attitude of the guards. They reported that they stole the belongings of detainees, including the provisions given by UNHCR. Several Eritreans said that detainees were sold to human traffickers. One day, the detainees decided to protest against the selling of other detainees and fighting started. An Eritrean man

recounted the following (similar reports were given by other interviewees):

I stayed six months in the prison and I was shot by a gun in the prison. In the stomach, you want to see? [...] The problem is that they took 20 people to sell them. After another day, they do like that. So if they take 20 people, after 20 people, after another time, they will take us. UNHCR doesn't care about us. We are registered with UNHCR, but they didn't care about us. They didn't come to check on us. That is why we were angry. Everybody was angry. We decide to fight with them, to break the door and try to go out. They shot me. You want to see a photo? This is in the hospital. They shot me and after the Air Police heard about this. Tariq al-Matar is close to the airport. Because they tried to kill us with gas. They threw a gas inside a hole, three gas canisters. The guy watching the prison tried to kill us. There is a video. Everybody shared the video. There is my photo in it. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Interviewees also mention beatings by the guards, as well as religious discrimination. Three ex-detainees reported that some of them were forced to work inside and outside the prison without payment.

In August 2018, the detainees found themselves in the middle of the civil war in Libya. Bullets entered the centre and the detainees escaped. An Eritrean refugee recalled the following:

The war happened and the guards left us and we escaped from that place because it was really bad and everybody moved. Everybody broke the door and went out, this 1,500 people started walking in the street. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Many of the interviewees met in the Emergency Transit Mechanism camp in Niamey had been resettled by UNHCR from Tariq al Matar detention centre (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*). This prison was reportedly closed in July 2021 (UNHCR, 2021).

Tariq al Sikka Detention Centre

Tariq al Sikka is in the centre of the Libyan capital, Tripoli. This centre is run by the DCIM and the al-Khaja armed group (Malakooti, 2019). Many of the interviewees we met who had been detained in Tariq al

Sikka stayed only a few nights before they were transferred to Tariq al Matar detention centre, as Tariq al Sikka was really too crowded:

The prison is just like ... tuna. You can't sleep", recalled an Eritrean ex-detainee.
(Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The detainees in Tariq al Sikka are of all nationalities. An Eritrean refugee explained that the detainees are:

From Asia, Africa and Arab countries. More than 600 in one big hall.
(Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The interviewees described food shortages in the prison and diseases like tuberculosis and skin conditions. One mentioned being beaten with a stick (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Another one said that the soldiers came and asked if someone could work in their house, but no one answered (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

The interviewees we met who weren't transferred to Tariq al Matar after their stay in Tariq al Sikka, were transferred to the Emergency Transit Mechanism camp in Niaméy, where they were interviewed for this research while waiting to be resettled in Western countries (see Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*).

Bani Walid

The town of Bani Walid is located approximately 180 kilometres south of Tripoli in Libya. It is at the intersection of roads from the south and to Misrata and Tripoli. During our research, we met 33 people who said that they had been in Bani Walid. Most of them were transferred there from Sudan or Kufra. Others came from Sabha or Brak. Others arrived in Bani Walid after having been kidnapped in coastal cities of Libya.

Interviewees describe this city as perhaps the worst place for migrants and refugees in Libya. It is a hotspot for human trafficking for

ransom. This quote from a Nigerian migrant who was sold to human traffickers shows how the place is perceived by foreigners in Libya:

They wanted to take us to go and sell us to the private prison in Bani Walid, where there are the most deadly prisons in Libya! Where they pay in European and other hard currencies! Where people die like chickens! (Interviewee 1030, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Seventeen different unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) were mentioned by the interviewees in Bani Walid. Some of them were mentioned by several different interviewees as where they were detained. A representative of the Libyan branch of the OMCT who was able to visit Bani Walid confirmed that human trafficking for ransom is a major practice in the city:

In Bani Walid itself, where we have what we call 'al nahr road'; the river road, you have more than 20 traffickers and they have their own farm, and they have their own network. [...] In Bani Walid, even if you pay, you will be tortured. [...] You have to be tortured. Otherwise they feel something was missing. (Interviewee 1105, Libya, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2022)

When an interviewee mentioned 'Bani Walid', as researchers, we knew we are going to hear gruesome stories. There are so many dead bodies in Bani Walid that the victims of human trafficking refer to it as 'The Ghost City'.

Unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) mentioned in Bani Walid hold between 50 and 1,600 detainees. The interviewees reported that detainees are of various African nationalities, as well as Bangladeshis.

Besides starvation, disease, and lack of hygiene associated with being locked in crowded, tiny and sometimes underground places, the interviewees described particularly cruel treatment in Bani Walid. They reported being beaten with sticks, electric wire, iron bars and rifles, sometimes resulting in broken bones. They were tortured with cold water, boiling water and fire; they were tied upside down, their hands and feet bound behind them, or with chains. Several experienced electric shocks. The interviewees also mentioned the removal of limbs. Many witnessed killings and several were locked up

with the dead bodies of their co-detainees. Particularly traumatising sexual violence against women and men was also reported in Bani Walid (see Chapter 15: “*We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey*”: *A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*). Such violence was often combined with humiliating and degrading acts.

Migrants and refugees who are not able to pay the requested ransom are killed or forced to work as translators or torturers for human traffickers. Others waited, often months, before being transferred to coastal cities. From there, some attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Others, were sold again or kidnapped and had to pay a ransom again.

Garabulli

Garabulli, also called Castelverde, is a town on the edge of white sand beaches on the Mediterranean Sea. It is located approximately 60 kilometres east of Tripoli. Due to its geographical position, Garabulli is a departure point for migrants and refugees wishing to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. During our research, we met eight migrants and refugees who had been through this city. Most of them had been transferred there after they had paid their ransom in Bani Walid.

Two unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) in Garabulli were mentioned by the interviewees. One of them is under the control of the famous Sudanese human trafficker Aziz.¹⁵⁰ Women and men from various nationalities were reported to be locked up there. The quote below, from a man, allowed us to understand the treatment of detainees in the second unofficial detention centre:

They open water and fill our body to the top. 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

¹⁵⁰ Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

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 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

After their stay in Garabulli, most of the interviewees continued their journey by attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Gharyan

Gharyan is a city in the mountains situated approximately 100 kilometres south of Tripoli. Two official detention centres for migrants and refugees are located in Gharyan. The first one, Abu Rashada detention centre, is infamous for an explosion that occurred on 20 July 2021 caused by ammunition stored nearby. There were no reports of detainees injured in the incident. Hundreds of migrants and refugees escaped the centre on that day (Creta, 2021). None of the interviewees in this research had been detained in this prison.

The second detention centre for migrants and refugees in Gharyan is Al-Hamra detention centre. During the research, 12 of the interviewees had been detained there. All of them described their experience in this official prison as particularly traumatising. They stated that this detention centre is made up of 20 containers, each of them holding 100 to 110 people. Women and men are in separate containers. Detainees are from various nationalities. An Eritrean man described the following:

The containers are very dangerous. Inside the containers there is no air, no food, no water, no light. It is one container for 100 to 110 persons. There is no medical. When you are locked inside a container, there is a small window. If you knock at the door, they open and beat us. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Several interviewees reported beatings and sexual violence in this prison. Many also mentioned lack of food. The conditions caused diseases to spread, leading to many deaths, one participant saw five people die due to illness (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019).

Several interviewees reported that one day, in spring 2018, bandits came and tried to kidnap detainees from the prison. Many escaped and more than 450 people found themselves on the street. They were later transferred to Tariq al Matar detention centre.

Khoms

Khoms is on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 120 kilometres east of Tripoli, famous for its well-preserved ancient ruins. There is one official detention centre in Khoms, operated by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019). Journalist Sara Creta, who visited the prison, reported that a separate cell was reserved for ‘troublemakers’. She also pointed out that some detainees were used to build a wall in the prison and that smugglers came to the centre to gather people for the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea: “I have tasted the food, it’s not even food. It’s like plastic, it’s not even cooked. There is no sauce, no salt, nothing” (Interviewee 9002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

Due to its geographical position on the coast, Khoms is an important departure point for migrants and refugees who wish to cross the Mediterranean Sea. However, in this research only one interviewee had attempted the crossing from Khoms. He was arrested in the water by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought back to Khoms.

Misrata

Misrata is the third largest town in Libya, after Tripoli and Benghazi. It is situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, about 185 kilometres to the east of Tripoli. At 400 kilometres from Malta and Lampedusa, Misrata is, like many coastal cities in Libya, a departure point for migrants and refugees who wish to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Until October 2019, there was one official detention centre in Misrata, called the al-Krareem detention centre, which is run by the DICM (MSF, 2019). Women, men and children are detained there. A

former volunteer translator with an NGO who visited this prison described it as follows:

In Misrata, there were tents. It was like an old prison. So there were some roofs, surrounded by barbed wire. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

According to this volunteer, in this official detention centre torture was a ritual:

I saw marks of punches on faces and arms. But when I talked to the doctors about it, they told me there were lots of lashes. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The volunteer added that sexual violence was applied in al-Krareem detention centre against men, women and children (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

Two unofficial detention centres (e.g., holding camps, warehouses) were also mentioned by the interviewees. One of them explained that, in 2017, bandit groups kidnapped 160 refugees who were then captured by the police, held in the police station and sold to trafficker Abduselam¹⁵¹ (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019) (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

One of the interviewees explained he had been transferred from al-Krareem detention centre to Niger, where he waited for resettlement in a Western country. The other people we met and who had travelled to Misrata later continued their journey towards other cities in Libya. This may be a coincidence. Many migrants and refugees go to Misrata and then cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

¹⁵¹ Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

Sabratha

Sabratha is a city on the Mediterranean Coast, located approximately 70 km west of Tripoli. It was one of the ‘three cities’ in Roman Tripoli, and the city is famous for its archaeological sites. For migrants and refugees, Sabratha is one of the departure points for the Mediterranean Sea. Many of the 16 people interviewed who went through Sabratha had been sent there by their human trafficker, after having paid a ransom in Kufra, Bani Walid or Shwayrif.

There is one official detention centre in Sabratha – Tawila detention centre – which is run by the DCIM, as well as the Sabratha Operational Room (Malakooti, 2019). We met one Guinean woman who had been detained in this prison. She described small cells, detainees sleeping on the ground without blankets, lack of water and the beating of men (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

Situated less than 300 kilometres away from Lampedusa and 380 kilometres away from Malta, Sabratha is a departure point for crossing the Mediterranean Sea. It is the city where the infamous human trafficker Ahmad Oumar Al-Dabbashi, nicknamed El Amu,¹⁵² operated (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). Six of the people interviewed for this research were sheltered in El Amu’s stores in Sabratha. They described many stores, or large stores, and a lot of weapons. Women, pregnant women, children and men were reported to be held in places that hold 160 people to 1,000 people. The detainees are made up of all African nationalities and were waiting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Only one interviewee mentioned beatings. Rape, however, seems to be more common in the places under the control of El Amu. In autumn 2017, there was a fight between El Amu and other brigades

¹⁵² Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

or smugglers in Sabratha. Two interviewees explained that El Amu gave weapons to migrants and refugees to fight on his side:

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

After this fight, the former detainees we interviewed were sent to different official detention centres in Libya. Many ended up in Gharyan.

Other departure points and unofficial detention centres were also mentioned by the interviewees in Sabratha. One of them held up to 950 people. Women, children and men of various nationalities were reportedly held in these places. Gross human rights violations were described in those unofficial detention centres: beatings, broken legs, hangings, the selling of people as slaves, and killings (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

After Sabratha, the interviewees reported being transferred to other cities or detention centres in the north of Libya.

Sirte

Located on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 460 kilometres from Tripoli and 560 kilometres from Benghazi, Sirte has played an important role in the Libyan civil war. It is where Muammar Gaddafi was born and died. It was the last stronghold of forces loyal to him and Sirte was the theatre of the final and decisive battle of the first civil war.

From March 2015 until December 2016, the city was in the hands of Islamic State (ISIS). It is the Government of National Accord, backed by the UN that recaptured the town. In 2020, control of the city was

disputed by the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army.

Located approximately 560 kilometres from Malta and 600 kilometres from Lampedusa, Sirte is not the best departure point for migrants and refugees who wish to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. In Libya, Sirte is the connection point between the eastern and the western part of Libya.

There was one official detention centre in Sirte, which has since been closed (UNHCR, 2021). The conditions in that prison were reported to be particularly harsh, as a former translator for an NGO reported:

In Sirte, it was in the city centre. [...] Surrounded. A bunch of security. The least you can say is that you can find 500 people in the space of 20 square metres. Sometimes they push the dying backwards, to get some air. In turns. [...] And the faces were so pale that it was the same aspect that repeated itself over and over again.
(Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The same interviewee added that the detainees were locked in containers, and faced forced labour and torture:

They even told me about cases of castration. Doing surgery without morphine, just to hurt them. (Interview 2000, with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

He described the treatment of the bodies of detainees who had died:

When there are a lot of bodies, they are put in big garbage bags. That's what the immigrants did. Afterwards, they made a big hole somewhere else, with the security, and that was it. Sometimes they would give them to the dogs as food. I've already seen a human, totally bitten. You could only see the bones. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The NGO translator also talked about sexual exploitation in Sirte detention centre. He described a room where the 'prettiest' girls were brought and exploited by the chiefs of the prison (see Chapter 15: *We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey*: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya).

Except for this NGO worker, none of the interviewees reported going to Sirte during this research.

Zawiyah

Zawiyah is a city on the Mediterranean Sea, situated about 50 kilometres west of Tripoli. The interviewees who went to Zawiyah reached the city in order to attempt a crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, or disembarked there after having been arrested at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard.

There are two official detention centres in Zawiyah, the Al-Nasr Centre and the Abu-Issa Centre (both run by the DCIM), and one privately owned detention centre, the Al-Nasr Brigade (run by a non-state armed group) (Global Detention Project, 2021). Four interviewees mentioned that they had been detained in those prisons. The number of detainees reported there varied from 370 to 700, depending on the interviewee and when they were detained. The interviewees reported starvation, disease and human rights violations. On 18 April 2018, the DCIM ordered the closure of Al-Nasr Detention Centre following the report of human right abuses. However, the Al-Nasr Brigade did not follow this order and the centre remains operational (OHCHR and UNSMIL, 2018a).

Abu-Issa Detention Centre was also closed in 2018 following allegations of sexual abuse, but was reopened by an armed security force less than 24 hours later under a new name (Malakooti, 2019). The conditions in this last centre were reported to be particularly hard, by a refugee who contacted us right after he escaped:

I was caught from the sea. I went to a prison that is worse than all the others I have been to so far. It is more dangerous than Guantanamo Bay. People are so hungry there that they eat Colgate [toothpaste]. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

This refugee detailed sexual violence in Abu Issa prison:

They beat us there. They beat us naked! They remove all your clothes, then they ask you to walk like frogs, and then they laugh at you – at your genital parts. And they are gay! They are also raping men there! Not only women, men also. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

Interviewees also reported collaboration between the ‘prison owners’ and the smugglers, who send the detainees to unofficial detention centres (e.g., warehouses or stores) or to departure points for the Mediterranean Sea. An Eritrean refugee explained that in Al-Nasr Detention Centre, the detainees were asked to pay to be sent to sea (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Situated approximately 300 kilometres right from Lampedusa and 375 kilometres from Malta, Zawiyah is a departure point for crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Migrants and refugees of all African nationalities, but also from Syria, Bangladesh and other countries, gather in Zawiyah and hide while they wait to embark in boats. The bosses of those departure points are also of different nationalities. The main challenge mentioned by the interviewees who stayed in the departure points in Zawiyah was the order to remain silent and the excessive cost of basic necessities during their stay. A Sudanese refugee mentioned sexual exploitation:

They use the girls. They are fucking them. Some came without paying. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, March 2020)

There are also unofficial detention centres (e.g., warehouses and stores) in Zawiyah, where migrants and refugees are beaten and asked to pay ransom for their release. The smaller hold 37 people and the larger between 300 and 400 people. An interviewee mentioned that they had been sold to those places by their ‘connection men’ or by the Libyan Coast Guard (Interviewee 1063, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020).

Interviewees mentioned being locked up in cramped spaces and receiving insufficient food in unofficial detention centres in Zawiyah. They also reported being tortured and beaten with water pipes and guns. Two interviewees said that they were sold to ISIS or kidnapped by them in Zawiyah. Kidane,¹⁵³ a frequently mentioned human

¹⁵³ Note, this name was given in the interviews and is of an alleged trafficker. The author makes no comment on whether or not he is in fact a human trafficker, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

trafficker, paid for their release (see Chapter 11: *“You are the Ball – They are the Players”*: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). Whether the kidnappers really belonged to ISIS or were other bandits collaborating with the human traffickers to make the refugees pay more is unclear. An Eritrean man describes what he went through while in the hands of who he believe were members of ISIS:

They tortured us without asking for money. Just because we are Jewish. We faced a lot of violence with them. They distributed packets of cigarettes among us and forced us to smoke. They burned our skins with the cigarettes. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

After their stay in Zawiyah, the migrants and refugees we met during this research attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea or were transferred to other cities or detention centres in the north of Libya.

Zintan

Zintan is a town situated in the mountains, approximately 175 kilometres south-west of Tripoli. There is one official detention centre there, the Zintan Detention Centre, run by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019). The people detained in this prison reported being unhappy with their geographical location, as Zintan is far from Tripoli and the assistance of NGOs and UN agencies. They felt forgotten. An Eritrean refugee described the prison as follows:

It was like a store of tanks in the middle of the bush. We were in a bunker. [...]. We were around 800 to 900 Eritrean and Somalis in that place. Beating was better there. But, as it is in the bush, there were snakes and scorpions coming inside. It was also cold. I don't remember how long I stayed there. Maybe two months and three weeks. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Zintan detention centre is infamous for its harsh conditions, as its detainees launched a campaign on social networks to protest against the conditions in the centre and appeal to the United Nations for help (see Chapter 17: *Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya*). Journalist Sara Creta reported that smugglers were coming to Zintan detention centre to send migrants and refugees to departure points for the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea (Interviewee 9002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Zintan is also a transit city for the migrants and refugees who entered Libya from Algeria in Gadamis and who are on their way to Tripoli.

Zuwarah

Zuwarah is a city on the Mediterranean coast. It is situated about 100 kilometres west of Tripoli and 60 kilometres from the Tunisian border. Among the eight interviewees who went to Zuwarah, the majority had come from Tunisia or Tripoli, where they had worked to save money to cross the Mediterranean Sea,

There is one official detention centre in Zuwarah, called the Zuwarah detention centre, which is run by the DCIM and the General Criminal Investigation Department of the Ministry of Interior (Malakooti, 2019). A Nigerian woman who stayed more than a year in this prison reported that women were given a red tea that caused drowsiness, weakness and resulted in miscarriages (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020). Men in the prison were given less food and beaten severely resulting in swollen faces and red eyes (Interviewees 1042 and 1046, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Several departure points were reported to be located in Zuwarah, where up to 300 people waited to cross the Mediterranean Sea. They were often described as ‘good places’, where migrants and refugees from all over the African continent waited for the conditions to be right to cross. A Guinean migrant described his departure point in Zuwarah as follows:

It is a good place, a house. They put us TV, high volume so that we watch the film and make no noise. We stayed for three days and then they pushed us out to sea.
(Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Unofficial detention centres (e.g., houses) also exist in Zuwarah. But the places where the people we met were detained seemed to be less organised and connected than in other Libyan cities. A young Eritrean man explained:

A Libyan took me to work in his car. And... I knew it before because he took me on a long journey. And I asked him: “Where are you taking me?” and he said: “I

am taking you to work, then I will take you back to your home after you finish the work". Then I waited. Then we passed many checkpoints, then he took me to Zuwarah. In Zuwarah he locked me in and he asked me for money. I met two people who were locked in. They were Sudanese. I asked them. They said he did the same to them as he did to me. He didn't tell me how much money he wanted because he locked me and he left. And after one night, we broke the door and we escaped from that place and we started a journey to the west. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

After their stay in Zuwarah, most of the migrants and refugees we met continued their journey up north and attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea or escaped Libya to Tunisia.

Discussion

This chapter explores the human trafficking routes and hubs in Libya. The interviews found that migrants and refugees are not only transported from one destination to another, but held by traffickers in camps, warehouses and stores all over the country. This finding is in line with the findings of Reitano, McCormack, Micallef and Shaw (2018), who state that the border between migrant smuggling and human trafficking becomes blurred in Libya. They draw attention to the fact that lumping smuggling and trafficking groups together under one heading can have negative effects on policy decisions. They point out that, due to this, action is taken to criminalise smuggling and migration, instead of prioritising the protection of migrants and refugees human rights (Reitano *et al.*, 2018).

Malakooti found that an economy of migrant detention is developing in Libya (2019). She shows how detention centres are located along the migratory trail and points out that migrants and refugees are a source of income for armed groups, which at the same time create the illusion of counter-smuggling and facilitate the activities of selected human traffickers (Malakooti, 2019). This can also be deduced from the evidence presented in this chapter, from which a picture of roads and places of detention emerges. Departure points are close to (official) detention centres, and detention centres are not far from human traffickers houses.

Grave human rights violations are reported in this chapter. They take place in official detention centres as well as the places used by human traffickers. This is in line with the finding of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNSMIL & OHCHR, 2016; 2018a; 2018b). The crimes reported in this chapter have also been denounced by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL), which call for the opening of an investigation by the International Criminal Court as to whether or not the treatment of migrants and refugees in Libya meets the threshold for crimes against humanity (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021).

The human rights violations seen in Libya are the continuation of human trafficking for ransom in Sinai, which was first identified in 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). The modus operandi applied by human traffickers in Sinai and what has been reported in this chapter correlate. Similar torture routines are reported in the human traffickers' houses in Libya, as were reported in relation to Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017). This is further developed in Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*.

Important findings are presented in this research that allows us to understand human trafficking trajectories and to locate detention centres and human traffickers' houses where grave human rights violations are committed every day. However, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of this research. The author wrote this chapter on the basis of descriptions provided by interviewees and found in the literature. Hours were spent on Google Earth, spotting the locations. Pictures of detention centres were collected and are considered very valuable data.

The findings of this chapter also reflect the focus of the interviewee. This is why more information on human trafficking for ransom and on the locations of human traffickers' houses has been collected than on official detention centres and departure points. This is also why

information is scarce on east Libya and on towns like Khoms and Garabulli. During this research, few people who had travelled through those places were met. This does not mean those places – and others – are not important places for human trafficking. More research needs to be done to determine their role in human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the trafficking routes through Libya, including the transit hubs, the places used to hold migrants and refugees, and the places from which people depart to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Five routes through Libya were investigated, on which migrants and refugees travel or are transported. The first one is the southern route from Niger and Chad. This route is taken by West African migrants and refugees. The main migration hubs on this route mentioned by the interviewees met for this chapter are Qatrun, Sabha and Brak.

The second route is the main road taken by Eritrean refugees. It goes from Sudan to the east of Libya, passing through Kufra, Shwayrif, Ajdabiya and Benghazi as transit cities. The east African migrants and refugees who take this route often fall into the hands of human traffickers.

The third route is between Algeria and the west of Libya. There are two entry points on this border: Ghat and Gadamis. The West and North African migrants and refugees who take this route often later continue to move towards Sabha or towards Zuwarah and Tripoli, in the north of Libya.

The fourth route is the road between Tunisia and Libya. The main crossing point of this border is Ra's Ajdir. This road is mainly taken by Libyans and Tunisians. But West, East, Central and North African migrants and refugees also use it to escape or enter Libya.

The fifth route lies between Egypt and Libya, in the north-east of the country. Egyptians, but also Asian and East African, migrants and refugees take this path. The migration hubs mentioned by migrants and refugees in the east of Libya are Tobruk, Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

All those routes converge in the north-west of Libya, where there are more job opportunities for migrants and refugees, and where it is easier to cross the Mediterranean Sea, as the coast is close to Europe. It is in this part of the country that one can also find the largest number of official detention centres where migrants and refugees are kept if they are arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard. The main hubs and locations mentioned by the interviewees in the north-west of Libya are Bani Walid, Garabulli, Gharyan, Khoms, Misrata, Sabratha, Sirte, Tripoli, Zawiyah, Zintan and Zuwarah. In these places, migrants and refugees are held in official detention centres, holding camps, warehouses, trafficker's houses, transit points and departure points, in which grave human right violations are taking place. Bani Walid is one of the biggest human trafficker's hubs in Libya, located approximately 180 kilometres south Tripoli at the intersection between different routes.

Of course, other routes and migration hubs exist in Libya. But they were not mentioned by the people interviewed for this research. Routes are constantly changing. As can be seen from this research, there are many routes used by migrants and refugees and many people who are willing to facilitate these journeys, profit from them, and take advantage of those using them. Despite the efforts of those seeking to shut down the routes and stem the movement of people to Europe, every time a path closes, another seems to emerge. As a smuggler in Agadez said: "No one can prevent migration" (Wirtz, 2019).

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Ethical clearance

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Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz is the author of this chapter. Lucy Murray contributed to an earlier version of this chapter.

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“You are the Ball – They are the Players”: The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya¹⁵⁴

Klara Smits

Introduction

The Eritrean smugglers take money. After that, they try to bring a thief for you. And then they send you to the road, and send you another thief, then another. That is why the Eritrean refugees pay a lot of money – a lot of money. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Many of the human traffickers preying on refugees and migrants in Libya have been named before in the literature. These names and others also came up in the interviewees conducted for this research. This chapter describes the main alleged traffickers, where they are operating, their connection with other alleged traffickers and their current status. Such information is vital to enable prosecution of the perpetrators of this heinous crime.

The interviews conducted for this research refer to Eritrean smugglers, who take a lot of money from Eritrean refugees¹⁵⁵ in a chain of events that culminates in human trafficking for ransom. The benefit of the money extracted from these people on the move goes to what can be referred to as the human trafficking network(s) that span the Horn of Africa, from Eritrea to Libya. Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) conservatively estimated the cumulative value of the ransoms paid in Sinai trafficking for the period 2009–2013 as USD 600 million. In 2017, Van Reisen

¹⁵⁴ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author’s PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

¹⁵⁵ 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).

and Estefanos (2017) estimated that, by 2016, the cumulative value of human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans had reached a staggering USD 1 billion.

Eritrean organisations published the first lists of suspected traffickers between 2012 and 2016.¹⁵⁶ In 2016, Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) identified transnational and highly-organised criminal groups, led by ‘kingpins’. Based on primary and secondary research between June and September 2015, this publication named Eritrean human traffickers Maesho Tesfamariam, Medhanie Yehdego Mered, Ermias Ghermay, Wedi Issak, and Abdurazak Esmail (working through subordinates Jaber, Hamad Omar and Jamal Saudi). It also named Abduselam as an Eritrean moving refugees from detention centres to Libya. Furthermore, it identified Kidane, Walid, Chegora, and a female smuggler, Zaid. In Sudan, it identified Eritrean traffickers feeding into the network in Libya, namely, Wedi German, Kiros, John Merhay, and Shumay Ghirmay.

Ethiopian investigators cited by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) named Ali Hashia as a kingpin between Ethiopia and Sudan. These investigations identified the place known as ‘Hajar’ in Sudan as a key hub for trafficking. They also named ‘first class’ smugglers, who charge high prices for safer routes using aircraft, such as John Habtu (Habeta, also known as ‘Obama’) and Awet Kidane. It also identified Kesete Te’ame (aka ‘Asgedom’, in this chapter known as ‘Angsom’) as a trafficker involved both in ‘first class’ smuggling as well as trafficking into Libya. The same investigations also mention Efreem Misgna, who was arrested on suspicion of smuggling people; they also note that this man was often seen in the entourage of individuals from the Eritrean government.

In 2017, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) identified traffickers associated with human trafficking in the Sinai. Their chapter (which

¹⁵⁶ See <https://asmarino.com/press-releases/1341-the-saga-of-the-eritrean-refugees-and-the-human-smugglers-with-a-list-of-their-names> and <https://africamonitors.org/2016/12/13/list-of-individualsallegedly-involved-in-human-trafficking-and-smuggling-in-the-sudan>

appears in *Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea* by Van Reisen and Mawere, (2017), identifies Angesom Teame (aka Angesom or Wejahy or Angesom Kidane) as a key person coordinating Eritreans in the Ethiopian refugee camps. These authors also identified Eritrean General Teklai Kifle ‘Manjus’ as a key Eritrean authority involved in the transportation of Eritreans across the border, working together with members of the Rashaida,¹⁵⁷ who played a key role in the transportation and kidnapping Eritreans to the Sinai. Their chapter also cites the United Nations (UN) Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (UN Security Council, 2011) as a source. Sinai survivors told the UN Monitoring Group that the money Manjus received went all the way to the top of the Eritrean government. Members of Rashaida and Bedouin¹⁵⁸ tribes were identified as key actors trafficking Eritreans to the Sinai. Interviewees in the chapter name Abu Salem and Abu Abdellah (two brothers) as key players on the Sinai side of the Eritrean human trafficking. Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) also identified Abu Khaled, Ismael Abderaza Saleh (Abdurazak Esmail), Kidane, and Medhanie Ydego Meredas (Medhanie Yehdego Mered), as other key players in human trafficking.

The Netherlands, during the time that it was a member of the UN Security Council, prompted the first resolution to counter human trafficking. The resolution imposed international sanctions on six human traffickers in Libya, including two Eritrean traffickers, Fitiwi Abdelrazak and Ermias Ghermay, who had been previously identified in above cited investigations (UN Security Council, 2018a). Following this resolution, the European Union (EU) adopted the same sanctions (Council of the European Union, 2018). The United

¹⁵⁷ The Rashaida (also called or Bani Rashid) are a tribe of ethnic Bedouin Arabs in the Horn of Africa (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashaida_people).

¹⁵⁸ The Bedouin (also called Beduin, or Bedu) are nomadic Arab tribes that live in the desert regions of the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, the Levant, and Mesopotamia (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bedouin>).

Kingdom (UK) also took up the sanctions against Abdelrazak and Ghermay in 2022 (UK Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, 2022). The UN Security Council also sanctioned Libyans involved in trafficking, notably, Ahmad Oumar al-Dabbashi (al-Amu) and Abd Al-Rahman al-Milad (al-Bija) (UN Security Council, 2018a).

There is ample evidence of the involvement of Eritreans at the highest level of the criminal organisations that traffic Eritrean refugees, a practice which, as stated previously, has considerable monetary value (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). However, there has been no systematic analysis of the key persons involved in the organisation of the human trafficking networks. The aim of this chapter is to identify the persons involved in human trafficking for ransom of Eritrean refugees. The research question is: *Which persons were identified by the Eritrean refugees interviewed as responsible for human trafficking for ransom in Libya?*

The next section presents the methodology used for the research presented in this chapter, followed by a brief description of how refugees view their interaction with the people responsible for the situation they are in, which is referred to in this book as human trafficking for ransom. In the subsequent section, the alleged traffickers identified by the respondents as operating in Libya, are described, followed by a section of key operators in Sudan. This is followed by an examination of the possibility that Libya is being used as a 'black site' by the Eritrean regime, based on the empirical evidence that emerged from the interviews. The subsequent section looks at the cloaking of human traffickers – presumably to protect themselves from prosecution. This is followed by a synthesis of all the findings, in which the network for human trafficking for ransom in Libya is traced. In the discussion, the findings are compared with the findings of other researchers in earlier publications. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

The author underlines that in many cases, the persons named in this chapter have not (yet) been convicted of human trafficking or related crimes. Until such conviction, they have the right to presumption of innocence before a court.

Methodology

This chapter provides a listing of the people allegedly involved in human trafficking for ransom to Libya. It is based on ethnographic research data, supplemented by information from the literature. to give a full picture of what is known about each alleged trafficker. In this chapter, and in other chapters of this book, the authors provide the names identified as persons alleged to be in charge of and/or function at the top of the pyramid of the human trafficking networks. Most of these names are already in the public domain, some persons are under sanctions or wanted by international crime investigators. While the naming of any person in this chapter or in this book does not constitute any proof in a legal sense, it is relevant to study who are the people allegedly involved in the organisation of the atrocity crime of human trafficking for ransom.¹⁵⁹ This work builds on cautiously executed previous work, already undertaken and published, and available on the Internet, which is identified in this chapter and used for the purpose of triangulation of findings.¹⁶⁰ This chapter also provides images of some of the persons alleged to be traffickers. Careful note was taken to discover whether the image corresponded with the name of, and information known about, the person by triangulating information from multiple sources and resource persons.

The research was part of 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

¹⁵⁹ While GDPR regulates personal data protection, it is not intended to undermine public interest. See EU GDPR Art 85: “Member States shall by law reconcile the right to the protection of personal data pursuant to this Regulation with the right to freedom of expression and information, including processing for journalistic purposes and the purposes of academic, artistic or literary expression.” See Rucz, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ The inventory presented in this chapter has been developed with caution and the author and editors request that any errors are immediately brought to their attention (contact: mvreisen@gmail.com).

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*.

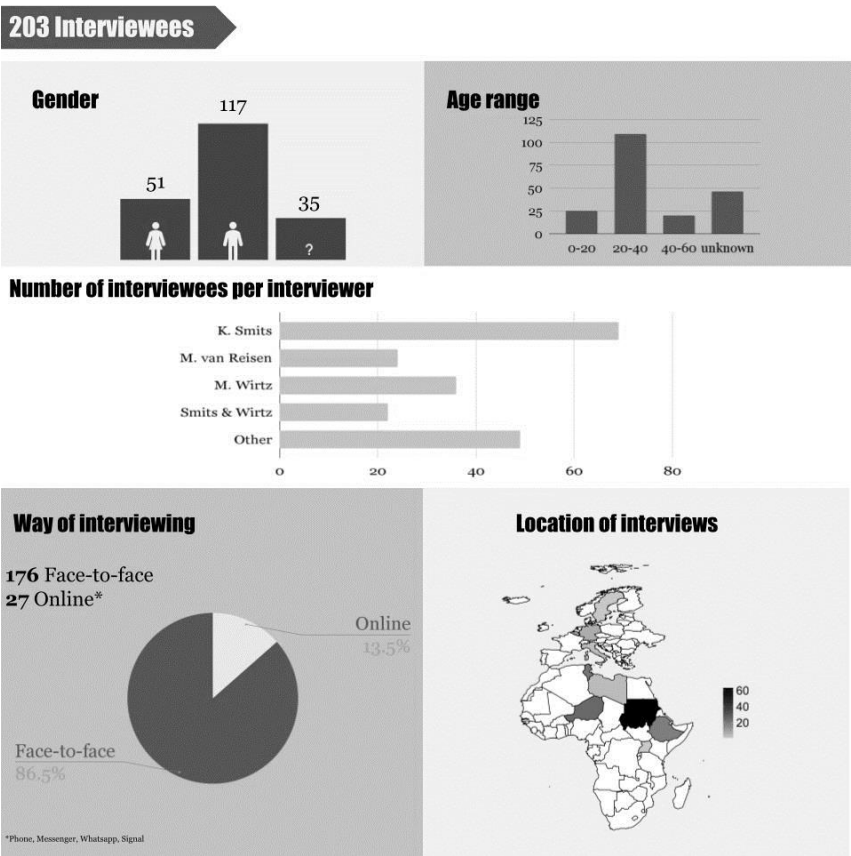
The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background of this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social 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 on WhatsApp, 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. All of the Eritreans who had passed through Libya were held in detention under threat of torture, or directly tortured, for the purpose of prompting payment, thus fulfilling the definition used in this book of trafficking for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

The listing of the names is relevant and necessary in order to begin to understand the organisation of the human trafficking networks operating from Eritrea to Libya. Previous work has begun to open up understanding that the networks are well organised and have a clear hierarchy. This chapter further investigates this and is intended to give a more detailed and precise understanding of the operations of the networks and how these are directed. The understanding of the key players should also help to contextualise the information provided in

the interviews by victims of human trafficking and enable further investigations into patterns and trends concerning the operations of the networks and to investigate outliers in data provided by the people participating in the research.

Figure 11.1. Overview of interview statistics¹⁶¹



The literature used in this chapter was selected through a data search of the sources identifying human traffickers operating in Libya, as well as a specific search for sources on each individual trafficker whose name featured in the interviews. All identified literature was

¹⁶¹ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

subsequently analysed for relevant information about the traffickers mentioned by name in the interviews.

For the purpose of this chapter, all interviews were examined for the names and descriptions of the traffickers. These were listed in a database with a note of their likely nationality (if mentioned), the location where they were active, any nicknames that were mentioned, the different interviews they were mentioned in, whether the information was first-hand or second-hand, the year that the information was recorded and, if it was mentioned, the year that the alleged trafficker was encountered by the interviewee. In addition, any additional information, such as who the alleged trafficker cooperated with, was also recorded.

This information was then analysed. Due to the phonetic nature of the Tigrinya language, spoken by most of the interviewees, spelling differences occurred frequently. Names that were similar and were suspected to belong to the same person were double-checked with the original interview sources, to ensure that the information was about the same person. In addition, information was cross-checked with external sources, including reports, books and news articles. As the human traffickers often go by aliases and nicknames, and even change their names, it may be that a single name refers to multiple people, or that a single person goes by multiple names. The information, which was gathered in interviews conducted from 2019 to 2021, was compared to identify similarities in names, locations and modus operandi to assist with identification and with the mapping of operation. This chapter also provides some information on how the victims (refugees and migrants) interacted with their traffickers.

The analysis of the interviews focused on the persons who allegedly trafficked Eritrean refugees. Although Eritrean traffickers were not selected in particular, from the analysis it emerged that the main traffickers of Eritrean refugees are Eritrean. Several other key actors, who often work closely together with Eritrean traffickers, are also mentioned. For each of the alleged traffickers, we describe where they are active and what abuses were faced by the interviewees in their warehouses. The resource persons who were interviewed were in

Libya between 2014 and 2020. As the human trafficking networks are rapidly evolving and changing, also in relation to the political situation, the key actors involved and how they operate may have changed since the interviewees were in Libya.

This chapter identifies the key players in these networks, based on testimonies of victims of the traffickers. It does not present an exhaustive list of traffickers. Not all of the interviewees remembered their traffickers, and some stated that they did not know their names. Others were uncomfortable talking about their experiences. Before presenting the findings on the key human traffickers, the following section looks at how the refugees and migrants view their interaction with the human traffickers.

The relationship between refugees and traffickers

The interviews revealed a complex relationship between the Eritrean refugees and their traffickers. The research found that the first contact may be initiated by the refugee, who is trying to move away from what they perceive as a hopeless or dangerous situation. Given the few options available to them, Eritrean refugees sometimes feel that they need traffickers to start the journey from Khartoum to Libya. At other times, the refugees are actively recruited by smugglers or traffickers, and sometimes even kidnapped (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*).

First, we discuss with the smuggler [USD] 3,800. After that, when they send us to Sabratha, they try to send a thief. Then the thief ask us for more money. Then the thief says, don't worry, I will out you [let you out]. Just pay [USD] 1,700. So we pay [USD] 1,700. And then the thief asks us for another [USD] 5,000. That's in Sabratha. Just like a ball. We are a ball – the smugglers are the players. (Interviewee 6003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The refugees usually call the persons facilitating journeys ‘samsara’ or ‘connection men’.¹⁶² Many of the interviewees described how they found such a person, usually via their connections or by tagging along with a friend. There is sometimes space for negotiation of the price and other things, as can be seen from the following excerpt:

We met one time to discuss about how to [do the journey] and about money – how to pay the money and how to secure your life. He talked about his work.

(Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The Eritrean ‘smuggler’ named by interviewee 0017, Kibirichi, delivered them to Bani Walid to the warehouse¹⁶³ of Welid (also see later in this chapter), where they paid the agreed amount, but found themselves stuck for 11 months, eating once a day and enduring severe beatings. This example (one of many) shows how these ‘connection men’¹⁶⁴ are an integral part of the trafficking networks to Libya and beyond. The negotiated price was subject to arbitrary change and, in some cases, the refugees were kidnapped by or sold on to other traffickers. Some refugees, such as interviewee 1050, know this, but decide to go anyway:

[...] even if you make a deal with them, it's not the amount that they will make you pay later on – also I knew even if we had a deal, I was sure that my family would not pay a penny for me, but I didn't have a choice, so I just decided to go.

(Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Once the refugees enter into the trafficking network, the name of the main trafficker becomes a code under which they are then handled (the code dictates the route taken and the warehouse, or part of the

¹⁶² For migrants and refugees, the term ‘samsara’ (Arabic for ‘smuggler’) refers to the person who is paid to organise an illegal journey from a point A to B. The terms can also refer to human traffickers or connection men (see Glossary of Terms).

¹⁶³ The terms ‘prison’, ‘warehouse’, ‘house’, ‘hangar’, ‘store’, ‘farm’, ‘holding camp’ 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).

¹⁶⁴ 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).

warehouse, in which they are kept). It determines where they will be transported, and where they will be held. An interviewee explained as follows:

When I entered Bani Walid, the connection man was waiting for me there. In one compound they had four stores. Every connection man who will see you says: "You are from which connection man in Sudan?" When you tell the name, he will take you. All of them are from Eritrea. My connection man was called Welid. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In this way, the refugees become familiar with the (nick)names of their traffickers, often without meeting them, seeing them or speaking to them. This continues throughout their transportation and imprisonment.

The human trafficking networks of Eritrean refugees and migrants in Libya are disguised as smuggling. Although the refugees often initiate contact with the middlemen (although some are actively recruited or kidnapped), once they arrive in Libya, the terms negotiated in Sudan, such as the price, often change and it becomes clear to the refugee that (s)he has little, if any, control over the situation. The refugees are at the mercy of the human traffickers. This is when the realisation hits them that they are being trafficked.

Key human traffickers and where they work

During the interviews, the researchers became familiar with certain names that were constantly repeated by the interviewees. These names will be introduced here.¹⁶⁵ Each sub-section describes what was already known about the alleged trafficker and what the interviewees said about him, including where they work and who they work with. This chapter focuses on Eritrean refugees, and it is significant to note that the human traffickers named here are mostly Eritreans, who collaborate with members of the trafficking networks,

¹⁶⁵ Note, the names in this chapter were given in the interviews and are of alleged traffickers. The author makes no comment on whether or not they are in fact human traffickers, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

who may hold other nationalities. The names are listed in alphabetical order.

Abdella/Abdallah

Description

The name Abdella or Abdallah came up frequently in the interviews. It is a common name with many spelling variations. It is possible that ‘Abdella’ may refer to multiple persons. Not much is known about this person (or persons) from previous research, nor from our interviews. Most interviewees refer to Abdella as a Libyan.

There appears to be at least one particularly notorious Abdella active in Bani Walid, referred to by two interviewees as Abdella Sini (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019; 1059, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Two other interviewees were also trafficked by Abdella in Bani Walid, although they did not specify that this was Abdella Sini – however, the circumstances described were very similar (Interviewee 1024, 1049, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019 – June 2020).

Bani Walid

The alleged trafficker Abdella Sini in Bani Walid is notable because he appears to have a particularly violent reputation and is used by other traffickers to threaten interviewees into paying. One interviewee was in a warehouse run by his trafficker Abderazak in Bani Walid, but when he could not pay, he was taken to Abdella Sini to scare him:

They tried to scare us, to take us to Abdella Sini. So we stay for a little week or two weeks and he beat us. He tried to force us to pay. So after two weeks, they return us to our place. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Abdella Sini himself also asks for ransom:

He [Aziz] sold us to Abdallah Sini, in Bani Walid. After that, Abdallah was asking again USD 6,000. Some people died there. Abdallah is a very cruel person. He will kill people by electricity and by the gun. If you don't have the money, if you can't pay this money. Some people, I saw it with my eyes, some people died in front

of my eyes, because they could not pay this USD 6,000. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The interviewee described that there were both Somalis and Eritreans in the place run by Abdella Sini. Translators, including an Ethiopian who worked with him because Abdella speaks only Arabic, also were present, the interviewee said.

Another interviewee was tortured by Abdella in Bani Walid and asked to pay USD 3,500. He was tortured by electric shock (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). Pictures were taken of the refugees and shared on Facebook. When the interviewee could not pay, Abdella let him work instead.

One of the interviewees reported that sexual violence was common at Abdella's place: "There are many women whose lives have been disrupted; like, they were underage, [and] they left [Abdella's place] pregnant" (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). The interviewee herself delivered a still born baby in Bani Walid. She also said that she saw people commit suicide there.

Other locations

There are references to Abdella in Tripoli (twice) and Ajmail, near Zuwara (once). In these cases, it is not clear whether the interviewees refer to the same person. However, the Abdella in Tripoli is also referred to as very cruel:

The smuggler [Abdella] asked us to pay money. We said "we don't have money". But he didn't hear us. He was beating us every night. When we slept, he came and he opened the door and he beat us. We said: "we don't have money". One time, at night, he came to the warehouse. I was near to the door and he took me and he made me sleep on the ground and he brought plastic with a lighter and he burnt me here. Then he showed the plastic on fire and he told everybody: "if you don't pay, I will do the same to you". After one day, everybody started to pay. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Another interviewee refers to an Abdella of Gambian nationality in Tripoli. It is likely that this is a different Abdella. In reference to Ajmail (near Zuwara), an Abdallah was working with Welid to send Eritrean refugees to Tunisia.

Cooperation with other traffickers

Referring to the Abdella Sini in Bani Walid, interviewees confirm he works with Aziz (Aziz sold their group to Abdella) and Abderazak. Abderazak was said to be the main trafficker, but was in Dubai. Therefore, Abdella Sini may have been the best option to intimidate the interviewee into paying.

Abdurazak

Abdurazak, also known as Abdurazak Esmail or Fitiwi Abdelrazak, was identified in the report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) as a key trafficker in Libya. He is an Eritrean, known to travel frequently to Dubai, from where he conducts his human trafficking business. A known associate mentioned in the report is Jaber, who works in Libya to oversee his business (Sahan Foundation & IGAD ISSP, 2016). Abdurazak, identified as Fitiwi Abdelrazak, was sanctioned for human trafficking by the UN Security Council (UN Security Council, 2018c). His network was described by the UN as stretching from Sudan to Libya to Italy, via cells which he oversees: “Fitiwi Abdelrazak has been identified in open sources and in several criminal investigations as one of the top-level actors responsible for the exploitation and abuse of a large number of migrants in Libya” (UN Security Council, 2018c). It was noted by the UN that the victims of Abdurazak were numbered in the tens of thousands (UN Security Council, 2018c).

Only one interviewee testified to being trafficked by Abdurazak. This was in Bani Walid. Abdurazak himself was in Dubai, said the interviewee, but his worker Jaber was present, and they were held in a warehouse owned by a Libyan, Mohamed Musgi. He entered there in June 2017. Although he did not see Abdurazak, sometimes they spoke with him:

Sometimes he calls to us. Because if you don't pay the money, bad things happens. I didn't know in Khartoum, because I came with normal Samsara [smugglers or connection men]. But I know about him in Libya. [...] [He tells you] “if you don't pay the money, I will sell you.” He said that. If they sold you, the money is tripled.

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

Abdurazak was also working with Abdella Sini in Bani Walid, who took the interviewee and others in his group for two weeks or so, before returning them to Abdurazak.

Abduselam

Description

One of the most notorious alleged Eritrean traffickers is known as Abduselam. In a La Repubblica article, refugees described him as around 30 years old, short, and ‘shrill-voiced’ (Palazzolo, 2020). A report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) names Abduselam in connection with buying



Figure 11.2. Abduselam
(Source: La Repubblica (Palazzolo, 2020))

refugees to transport to Italy from Libyan detention centres. Abduselam is believed to be a key person in the network of Eritrean traffickers. La Repubblica indicates he has made his home in Ash Schwayrif (Palazzolo, 2020).

Eleven interviewees indicated that they were trafficked by Abduselam.¹⁶⁶ Of those, four were in Ash Schwayrif, two were in Misrata, and five were unsure of their location or did not specify it in their interview. The interviews sketch the image of Abduselam as an interlocutor. He is mentioned in several other interviews with people

¹⁶⁶ Interviewees 0002, 0008, 0009, 0010, 0011, & 0016, interviews with Smits, face-to-face and by WhatsApp, March 2019-April 2019; Interviewees 1003, 1010, 1012, 1017, 1052, & 1057, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2019-June 2020

who have not been trafficked by him as a key connector between traffickers and authorities.

Ash Schwayrif

The group sizes in the warehouse or warehouses of Abduselam in Ash Schwayrif are large. It is unclear whether Abduselam has one or multiple locations in Ash Schwayrif. The lowest estimate was 450 people in a warehouse, all belonging to one group. Another interviewee mentioned that there were more people when they were there, one estimating 1,000, the other at least 2,000.

The treatment in the warehouses of Abduselam in Ash Schwayrif was described as very bad: “No food, no clean water [...] they beat. It’s hard to live. [...] So many people there they die. They die. They die every day; they die one person, two person” (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Another interviewee confirmed the poor circumstances:

[...] for the guys, they were beaten and sometimes they were splashed with dirty water and they were beaten. It was so difficult for us; we were taken out and we were given to Libyans so that they can also rape us. For everyone who come when they are drunk, they take us. (Interviewee 1052, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The payments demanded by Abduselam in Ash Schwayrif were USD 1,500 (in addition to another unknown payment to Abduselam made before that – the interviewee who reporting paying this amount was resold to Abduselam and held in the same warehouse in Ash Schwayrif twice), USD 3,300 and 5,000. Two interviewees explained that they were taken to Ash Schwayrif after first spending some time in Kufra (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019; 1012, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). One of those interviewees indicated that he paid in Kufra, and was transported to Ash Schwayrif afterwards to wait.

Misrata

The two interviewees who testified that they had been trafficked by Abduselam in Misrata¹⁶⁷ both indicated that he had a good relationship with the police there. The police would arrest people, give them to Abduselam for extortion:

They took me to Misrata's police station. Another connection man knew this place. His name is Abduselam. He is Eritrean. He has a good communication with the police. He asked the police to catch the people so that he could take them afterwards in exchange for money. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Following 22 days in the police station, Abduselam transported the interviewee to Sabratha, where the interviewee and the other victims ended up in a warehouse of Al-Amu and were asked to pay USD 1,700. After paying, the interviewee was sold to another trafficker.

Another interviewee explained that his group were on their way to the sea after having paid their first ransom, but some Libyans warned Abduselam they were coming. Abduselam's men showed up and abducted all of them:

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. [...] Abduselam asked for USD 5,500. In his store, in Misrata, I could not see the sun. The door was closed. I stayed there almost seven months. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This shows that Abduselam has connections with the Libyan people (unspecified) in Misrata, who act as informants. He is then able to intercept people who arrive to cross the sea, and extort them for ransom.

¹⁶⁷ Interviewees 1003 & 1010, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019

Connections with other traffickers and actors

One interviewee links Abduselam to the Eritrean government:

I think there was [someone working with the Eritrean government]. In Libya, maybe. Because there was a man of the government, of the power, my controller. His name is Biniam and his second name is Afro. Pseudonym. He is born in Gashbarka. (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The interviewee said that Biniam ‘Afro’ was working with Abduselam in Libya. Interviewee 1012 clearly describes the close relationship between the Eritrean, Abduselam, and the Libyan, Al-Amu:

When I paid the money, Abduselam said: “You will go to the sea”. I went to Sabratha. I stayed there almost three months. The chief of the house where I stayed was called Al-Amu. He is a Libyan working for Abduselam. I stayed there three months; after that fighting started between the connection men. When the policemen came to that place, Al-Amu decided to change [our location] to another place in the desert. It was in holes in the mountains. I stayed two days there. After that, Abduselam decided to change for another house. Abduselam and Al-Amu are working together. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

After the interviewee had paid his ransom in Ash Schwayrif, he was brought to Al-Amu for the trip over the Mediterranean Sea. When fighting started, Abduselam and Al-Amu decided together what was to happen to the refugees. The two formed a kind of powerhouse in Libya at the time that the interviewees were present. One shared the following: “Abduselam is the biggest Eritrean smuggler. He is working with the biggest Libyan smuggler – Al-Amu. Al-Amu is the biggest smuggler” (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Another interviewee indicated that after being arrested in Misrata, Abduselam had delivered him to a warehouse owned by Al-Amu in Sabratha. In Misrata, Abduselam was said to have good connections with the police.

Abduselam was also reported to be cooperating with the ‘Daesh man’ Mohammed Whisky. After Mohammed Whisky sent a whole group

back because some had not paid for the sea, he sold the group to Abdusalam, who held them in a warehouse in Ash Schwayrif. Abdusalam buys many of his victims from others. Another interviewee indicated that he and his fellow refugees were sold to Abdusalam by smugglers who picked them up from the seaside, pretending to be UNHCR staff. Interviewee 0005 indicates that all big alleged Eritrean traffickers – Welid, Kidane, Abdusalam, Abdella – in fact work together.

Abdusalam also works with people outside of Libya. One interviewee indicated that Abdusalam buys refugees kidnapped by Chadian armed groups. In addition, Abdusalam works with traffickers operating in Khartoum, as the following excerpt describes:

Tinaat stayed in Sudan. He was working with Abdusalam and Abdusalam said: “Tinaat is not paying the money that I am asking for you”. But I had paid for Tinaat who stayed in Sudan. Then Abdusalam says that I had to pay USD 2,400 again. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This quote indicates that there are links between Sudanese traffickers and Abdusalam. It is not possible to say from this quote alone whether traffickers in Sudan, like Tinaat, are not paying the money they already received from the trip, or whether this is something that traffickers like Abdusalam say in order to justify asking for more money.

Al-Amu

Description

Ahmad Oumar Al-Dabbashi (aka Al-Amu, Al-Ammu, Al-Ammo, ‘The Uncle’) has earned a spot on the UN Security Council’s sanction list for trafficking (UN Security Council, 2018b). He is the commander of the Anas al-Dabbashi armed group, operating in the stretch of coast between Melita and Sabratha (UN Security Council, 2018b). He was the key trafficker in Sabratha, until his armed group was co-opted to stop the crossing of migrants and refugees (Micallef, 2021).

According to Micallef (2021), and there is evidence that Italy helped to broker a deal

with Al-Amu on this. However, two months later, the armed group was defeated there in 2017. The UN Security Council has accused Al-Amu of having ties with Islamic State in Libya as well (Micallef, 2021). He was born in 1988, according to the sanctions documents issued by the UN (UN Security Council, 2018b).

It was reported that, in April 2020, Al-Amu returned to Sabratha. His armed group emerged as one of the groups working together with the Government of National Accord, the temporary government in Libya backed by the United Nations and led by Al-Serraj (MENA Research and Studies Center, 2020).

Al-Amu receives his own sub-section in this chapter, as he is mentioned in many of the interviews as a key contributor to the suffering of refugees in Sabratha. Many of those ended up being



Figure 11.3. Ahmad Oumar Al-Dabbashi
(Source: Photograph widely circulated on social media, including Twitter and Facebook)

caught in the 2017 fighting in Sabratha. Eight interviewees testified to being trafficked by Al-Amu.¹⁶⁸ All of them were in Sabratha.

Sabratha

From the interviews, an image of Al-Amu emerges as a trafficker who was fully involved in the business of trafficking for ransom. Not only did he house the refugees trafficked by other traffickers before pushing them out to sea, but he also extracted ransoms. One refugee summarises what happened after he was arrested by the police, then Abduselam (Eritrean trafficker) negotiated with the police and he ended up in the hands of Al-Amu:

In Sabratha, Al-Amu is the boss of all the connection men in the city. In that place there are many stores for Al-Amu. He has many guns. I stayed four months in a store of Al-Amu. We were 160 persons. Among them there were 40 girls. Some of them were young. Other were pregnant. There were also children. Three women even delivered there. It makes another three children. There was no medicines there, bad water, no food. Every time they come, they beat me. They ask for money: USD 1,700. I paid that money. (Interview 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many interviewees testified they were there when the fighting in Sabratha started in 2017. An interesting picture emerges of what happened there. Some interviewees stayed in their warehouses and, although they had already paid, they had to pay again to the new armed group, sometimes after having been divided up (Interviewees 1003 & 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April–November 2019). One interviewee was transported to another location:

When I stayed there three months, after that a fighting started between the connection men. When the policemen came to that place, Al-Amu decided to change to another place in the desert. It was in holes in the mountains. I stayed two days there. After that, Abduselam decided to change for another house. Abduselam and Al-Amu are

¹⁶⁸ Interviewees 1003, 1012, 1014, 1016, 1019, 1023, 1026, & 1055, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019–June 2020

working together. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This interviewee shows how Al-Amu, even while fighting, cooperated with Eritrean traffickers to ‘salvage’ some of the detainees. One interviewee said they had to fight:

Al-Amu had told us he would bring us to the sea. But he made fighting, among the Libyans. With Haftar or with anything. And then, we fought. Al-Amu was also a soldier. They told me: “You, you, you”, from the camp. “You go to bring the shooting guns from the underground! More shooting guns! A lot of shooting guns!” They asked us to fight. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Some interviewees managed to escape when the fighting started (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Others were sent to prison (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019).

Cooperation with other traffickers and actors

Al-Amu has already been mentioned in this chapter as working together with Eritrean traffickers, including Abduselam and Kidane. Two interviewees also mentioned that Al-Amu worked with Aziz, even when the fighting in Sabratha started (1023, 1027, Interviews with Wirtz, November 2019 – January 2020).

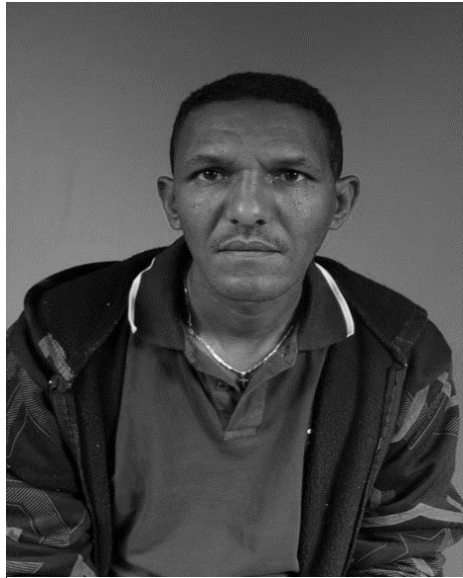
Some Eritrean refugees interviewed considered Al-Amu the biggest among Libyan traffickers, working with the biggest among the Eritreans. In this sense, especially the link between Abduselam and Al-Amu seems strong: “Abduselam is the biggest in Eritrean smuggler. He is working with the biggest smuggler Libyan Al-Amu (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). Al-Amu also ‘bought’ refugees from Daesh after they were kidnapped in Zawiya; he exchanged them for some Daesh prisoners who he held (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

The interviews did not cover the period of time when Al-Amu returned to Sabratha, so his current role is not known. The interviewees also did not mention what Al-Amu did between his defeat in 2017 and his return in 2020.

Angesom

Connection to trafficking

Angesom is an alleged trafficker who has been previously described in reports and books, but has not previously been connected publicly to human trafficking in Libya. He is known under many different names: Angesom or Angosom, by his second name Ta'ame or Teame, or as Kassate Ta'ame Akolom (UN Security Council, 2013). His nickname is Wajehoy (spelt in various ways). The earliest mention that the authors could find of Angesom was from a joint statement by Release Eritrea and other organisations about human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai desert in 2011. The report states:



**Figure 11.4. Kassate Ta'ame Akolom
(aka Angesom Ta'ame)**

(Source: Photograph published by the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (UN Security Council, 2013))

Additional testimonies collected by the organizations indicate that an Eritrean man named Angosom, based in Khartoum, Sudan, is responsible for kidnapping hundreds of Eritrean refugees from Shagarab and Kassala refugee camps in Sudan and from May Aini and Shimelba refugee camps in Ethiopia and then selling them to human traffickers in Egypt. (Release Eritrea, 2011)

Later, the International Commission on Eritrean Refugees (ICER) published a report on traffickers involved in the Sinai in 2012, naming Angesom as a key actor. In February 2012, they wrote:

Angesom is well organized constantly changing his telephone number and have 9 people working for him. Informants claim that he is crucial in the overall scheme of

things and if apprehended it would be a big blow to the smuggling and extortion ring.
(International Commission on Eritrean Refugees, 2012)

The report further mentions that Angesom is based in Ethiopia and Sudan, and plays an important role in smuggling refugees across the border at Metemma and Humera (in Ethiopia), which are key crossing points from Ethiopia to Sudan. Angesom was said to be working in close cooperation with key operatives in the Ethiopian refugee camps. Furthermore, the report of the ICER speculates that Angesom may have been a prominent member of the Eritrean intelligence.

This key observation that Angesom was an Eritrean intelligence officer is confirmed by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (UN Security Council, 2013). In its 2013 report on Eritrea, the monitoring group investigated revenue from human trafficking. In it, Angesom (identified as Kassate Ta'ame Akolom) was said to be “leading a human trafficking and hostage-taking ring operating in Eritrea, northern Ethiopia and eastern Sudan”. He was said to have been in the Eritrean military for ten years, then operated for a period as an intelligence officer. The report of the monitoring group continues to describe how Angesom crossed into Ethiopia and pretended to be a refugee and a defector, and “as such he was allowed to join the ranks of the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Justice (EMDJ), an Eritrean opposition group operating in Ethiopia, as a team leader” (UN Security Council, 2013, p. 36).

In 2012, Angesom was arrested in Ethiopia at the border, at Humera, with guns and a large amount of cash. He confessed to working with General Teklai Kifle ‘Manjus’, an Eritrean general heavily implicated in human trafficking (UN Security Council, 2013). Angesom also said that his EMDJ membership allowed him to travel between Shagarab refugee camp in Sudan and the camps in Ethiopia. There, the monitoring group said that witnesses described him as constantly on the phone, coordinating the trips of refugees together with Rashaida traffickers (UN Security Council, 2013).

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) spoke to several witnesses who referred to Angesom as a major trafficker who started in the Sinai. Communications received by these authors state that Angesom did not just work for the Eritrean intelligence, he was in fact the head of security for the Eritrean Intelligence Ministry for 10 years (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

Connection to Libya

None of the interviewees in this research had been directly trafficked by Angesom to Libya, but several stated he had a key role in setting up the networks. Although Angesom is a well-known name in the Sinai context, some key interviewees state that his connections and routes still exist:

I have talked before about Angesom Te'ame, he is the father of all traffickers. [...] The branches he made, they are still working. (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021)

This interviewee and two other interviewees (Interviewees 0023-2; 0022, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021) state that Angesom set up the branches to Libya, and controlled the trip from Ethiopia to Sudan and from Sudan to Libya. One shared the following:

Angesom controlled both the trips from Ethiopia to Sudan and Sudan to Libya. You would pay [USD] 1,700 from Addis to Sudan. Jonas arranges Addis to Sudan and then gives you to Angesom. Angesom arranges Sudan to Libya, you pay [USD] 1,700 in Libya. Then Angesom gives you to a trafficker in Libya to cross the sea. (Interviewee 0023-1, interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021)

The interviewees also speculate that Angesom may continue to play a role in trafficking in Libya through a representative.

Connections with other traffickers and actors

Angesom was mentioned by other sources as having connections to many traffickers operating in the Sinai, including other Eritreans (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017), but also traffickers from the Rashaida tribe (UN Security Council, 2013). The ICER report (ICER,

2012) mentions that Angesom worked in close cooperation with his former underling, John Merhay (discussed later in this section).

Angesom was said to be working with Medhanie Mered in the Sinai (Interviewee 0023, interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021). According to one interviewee, another partner of his was Jonas Tsegai (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021). This interviewee states that although Jonas was a key partner of Angesom in Ethiopia, he was later hunted by Angesom as Jonas tried to set up an independent network. Jonas ended up in prison.

Angesom is described by one interviewee as having powerful connections with the Eritrean government and intelligence, which allows him to control other traffickers, mostly by controlling the money:

Even the capture of Kidane was by [Angesom's] band. He works with security personnel of Eritrea, so if you go your own way, he can make them catch you. No smuggler is not controlled by the [Eritrean] regime. Otherwise, the money cannot go. If you use the wrong bank and you are trying to keep the money from them, they will hunt you. (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021)

The involvement of Angesom raises further questions regarding the involvement of the Eritrean intelligence apparatus in the human trafficking of Eritrean nationals.

Current status

Interviewees state that Angesom was brought back to Eritrea by the Eritrean government. They said that he played a key role for the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments in identifying crossing points and the location of Tigray leaders in the war in Ethiopia, as he had lived there for an extended period of time (Interviewee 0023, interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021).

Aziz

Description

Aziz is a name that came up frequently in interviews with Eritrean refugees. The context described by the interviewees, in interviews that

were taken independently from each other, makes it likely that the interviewees are referring to the same person. Aziz's main location is Brak Shati. He is described as working together with big Eritrean traffickers and Chadian armed groups. According to the interviewees, he is around 40 years old. He dresses "like an Arab, in traditional clothes and a turban" (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Most interviewees agree that he is Sudanese. One interviewee mentioned that his name is Abdel Aziz, although this could not be confirmed through other interviews or sources.

Six interviewees testify to being trafficked by Aziz.¹⁶⁹ Of them, five were in Brak Shati. One interviewee was first in Al Manara before being transported to Brak Shati (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). Several interviewees were pushed to the sea at Garabulli or Sabratha after being held in Brak Shati by Aziz (Interviewee 1019, 1023, 1028, Interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019 – January 2020). One interviewee was held in Kufra (1028, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020).

Brak Shati

Aziz detains people of multiple nationalities. "I saw many people: Eritrean, Somali, even from Madagascar" (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). The abuse faced by detained is severe. There is no space to move, little food and water, no hygiene, and there are many beatings. Women, men and children are all packed together.

Interviewees paid high ransoms to Aziz, mostly between USD 5,000–6,000. Hundreds of people were said to be in Aziz's warehouse. One interviewee estimated that there were 900 persons in one place (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). He described the warehouse as containers, where a single person may have one square metre to himself.

¹⁶⁹ Interviewees 1019, 1023, 1027, 1028, 1051, & 1054, interviews with Wirtz, November 2019-June 2020

Interviewees describe the torture in Aziz's warehouse in a lot of detail. The abusers are said to be mainly Libyans, but also Sudanese and Eritreans. They shoot the walls to threaten the detainees. They take women away to abuse them. They tie them up to the wall with their heads down. They hit people's knees. Also when the detainees call their families to ask for the money, shots are fired in the air to scare the family members. They tie people up with electric wire in 'helicopter' position. They beat the hands and feet of people. "They cuff 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). In addition, detainees are burned with molten plastic. In the summer, it was so hot that one interviewee described people fainting (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). There is also rape of both men and women, perpetrated by the guards, mostly Libyans. When asked whether Aziz would hit people, one interviewee said:

Aziz is the boss, big boss, he can sit in the chair. The person who works with Aziz, they have the shooting guns with them. They come inside the apartment. If Aziz says: "hit this person", it is not Aziz who will hit him, but Aziz's "hitters". Aziz is the boss; he didn't hit us, but he said: "hit them". (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

People also died from diseases in the warehouse of Aziz:

I tried to fly away from the camp because they died; about four people because of disease; every disease, except corona, is there in Aziz camp. (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

After people had paid their ransom, they were transferred to another warehouse. One such place is nicknamed 'Canada', explained an interviewee.

Many people under Aziz ended up paying more than once (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Interviewee 1051 paid USD 5,500 to Aziz in Brak Shati, and was then transported to another warehouse. There, Aziz told them they had been kidnapped by other traffickers and they would have to pay another USD 5,500. However, it was Aziz asking for the money.

When asked if others have a similar experience, she said yes: “There are people who paid 10,000 to 20,000 [US] dollars, yet they still couldn’t make it alive” (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020).

Other locations

One interviewee was trafficked and held for ransom by Aziz in Kufra:

The first time that I arrived at Al-Koufrah, they brought us, 70 people, in this kind of room [around 10m²]. 70 people! It is not enough, this kind of room for 70 people! The owner of that place, the smuggler, is calling people one by one, in order to ask them for the ransom. His name is Aziz. [...] He is working with Libyans, with Sudanese. He has a lot of guards. They have strong weapons. They are slaughtering a goat or a sheep in front of the refugees and they eat it in front of the refugees and the refugees they are feeling hungry. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

The interviewee was Somali. The ransom demanded for him was USD 8,825. His family collected the money from different clans in Somalia. Aziz severely beat people:

He starts to beat you with a big stick. If the blood is not coming from your head, he will continue to beat you. When the blood is coming from your head, he will say: “Go and sit there, you will send me the money, as soon as possible”. But if you are not bleeding, he will just continue to beat you. [...] There are so many people that they took in picture and make video calls, and again, when they call our parents, they call them on video calls to ask for the ransoms. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Connections with other traffickers and actors

Aziz is said to be Sudanese, but has good connections with other traffickers. “[...] he has Eritrean smugglers with him” (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). One interviewee mentioned that Aziz worked with an Eritrean intermediary called Dagusha to ask ransom from his family (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). Another interviewee mentioned that Aziz had contacts in Khartoum with whom his family dealt (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019).

Aziz worked together with others in Brak Shati. One interviewee said that he shared a warehouse there with Kidane (Interviewee 1054, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). He sold another interviewee to a trafficker called Aforki (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). Aziz was also working with Al-Amu in Sabratha (Interviewees 1023 & 1027, interviews with Wirtz, November 2019 to January 2020).

Aziz was mentioned several times in connection to Chadian armed groups. Chadian armed groups would kidnap interviewees while they travelled from Sudan to Libya. There, Aziz would buy them:

After that, when I travelled from Sudan to Libya, at the border the Chadian soldiers, they surround me. They arrested the 25 with me, and the 25 from other groups. They collected all of us in one group. After that, they divided us in two groups: one group about 100 something and the second of 90 persons. Then somebody came to buy me. His name is Aziz. He is working in Libya. He bought me, the other people in my group and the other 100 persons. He bought the two groups.
(Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Aziz was exclusively mentioned as the link with the Chadian armed groups. Afterwards, some kidnapped interviewees were then sold to Eritrean traffickers. It is not clear from the interviewees whether they are official troops or independently-acting armed groups.

Medhanie

Description

Medhanie Yehdego Mered is an alleged human trafficker who became widely known after a person named Medhanie was arrested in Sudan and extradited to Italy. This Medhanie spent three years in an Italian prison, before the court ruled that there had been a mistake of identity: the arrested man, Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe, was not the notorious trafficker (The National, 2021). Medhanie is also known as ‘The General’. He was accused of being the trafficker behind the

Lampedusa disaster in October 2013 (BBC, 2016). He is also rumoured to be very wealthy.

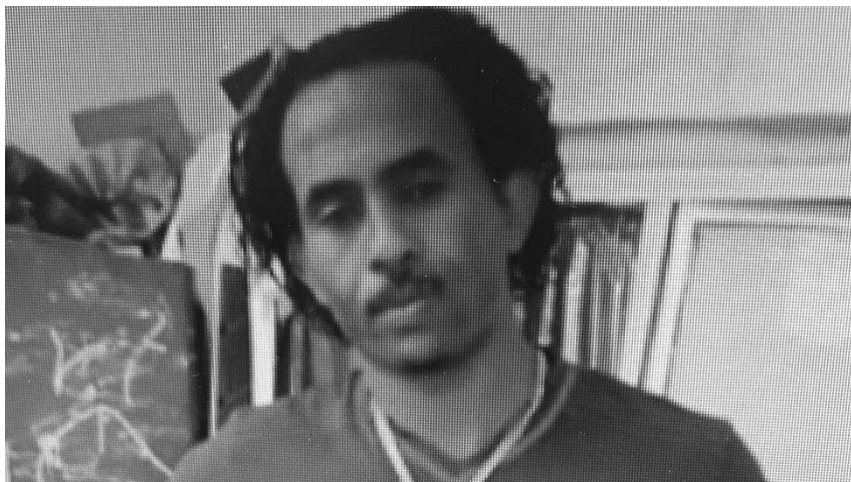


Figure 11.5. Medhanie Yehdego Mered (aka The General)

(Source: Photograph posted by BBC (2016), see
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36478210>)

Previous research mentioned Medhanie as a key player in the trafficking networks (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). He was named as having strong connections with Bedouins¹⁷⁰ and traffickers accused of perpetrating trafficking in the Sinai (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). In addition, he has been alleged to be connected to Eritrean ransom collectors in Sweden (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). Following the release of Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe, it can be concluded that the ‘real General’ is still in the field. A report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) stated that the international investigation has prompted Medhanie to go into hiding.

¹⁷⁰ Bedouins are nomadic, Arabic-speaking peoples of the Middle Eastern deserts, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bedouin>).

Among the interviewees, two were trafficked by Medhanie.¹⁷¹ Both were in Tripoli. Both were in Libya relatively early, compared to other refugees interviewed – around 2014/2015. Some of the interviewees mention Medhanie, but were not trafficked by him. One other person who submitted a testimony had helped to pay ransom for people trafficked by Medhanie.¹⁷² It might be that following the international investigation, Medhanie is laying low or has changed his identity or the name under which he conducts trafficking.

Tripoli

The two interviewees that were held by Medhanie were located in warehouses in Tripoli.¹⁷³ In both cases, Medhanie was said to be working together with another trafficker: Welid in one and Wedi Isaac in the other. Both interviewees held by Medhanie paid twice, once for the desert (USD 1,600 in both cases) and once for the sea (USD 1,600 in one case, USD 2,000 in the other).

The circumstances in Medhanie's warehouses were described as terrible, especially for those who could not pay:

Mostly if the people don't pay, at times, they get raped, they get tortured. Almost all the detainees. It is a harsh, terrible centre. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The detainees in Medhanie's warehouses were threatened with knives and tortured with electric wires. The torture took place in front of everyone. It was mostly the Libyans doing the torturing, says an interviewee, but Medhanie would come to survey his warehouses:

0001: One night, he came – so many loudspeakers, "Medhanie, Medhanie", but he's a very big man.

K: So he came to your centre at some point?

¹⁷¹ Interviewees 0001 & 0007, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019

¹⁷² Interviewee 3002, testimony received by Van Reisen by e-mail, 2017

¹⁷³ Interviewees 0001 & 0007, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019

0001: One day. It was at night time. Speakers say “Medhanie, Medhanie” ... we heard this. He was loudly announced. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another interviewee describes how the hands of detainees would be beaten with iron sticks and that detainees would get little food. There were no sanitation or hygiene facilities in Medhanie’s warehouses (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Connections with other traffickers and actors

The interviewees mentioned that Medhanie directly cooperated with Wedi Isaac and Welid in trafficking. For example, they used the same boats to send their victims across the sea and shared a warehouse. An interviewee also mentioned that Medhanie would pay a big chief in Libya, said to be the chief of the navy (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

A testimony submitted by interviewee 3002 alleges that Medhanie had strong connections to the Eritrean government, and that Medhanie was active in the Sinai before moving to Libya. The testimony also indicates that Ermias was another alias of Medhanie.

Medhanie Mered, whose other alias is Ermias, used Eritrean passports of many names, and whenever he was in the Sudan, he would take a recommendation document from the Eritrean Embassy and travelled to any country he wished to travel to. He used to travel repeatedly to Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia. He used to receive a lot of cooperation from the Eritrean Embassy. From 2006/2007 up to 2010, Medhanie committed many crimes in the Sinai desert (Egypt) against Eritreans and other refugees, including trafficking people to Israel, kidnapping and hostage-taking and theft of body organs. But sometime after 2010, Israel started watching its borders closely and even returning refugees who had entered to Ethiopia, Egypt and other countries that they had started from, and also the crimes of Sinai became publicised more and the people who reached Israel got less and less and more and more people were getting stranded, so Eritrean refugees almost stopped using the route and turned toward the new country of South Sudan and to Libya. Medhanie then, after conferring with Abrham, left the Sinai and returned to the Sudan, and he went to Juba, South Sudan. But because it didn’t work out there as they had hoped, he returned to Sudan and met with his associate Abrham. And, in accordance

with Abrham's instructions, he went to Libya. Since 2011, he has been continuing all his criminal activities in cooperation with Abrham. (Interviewee 3002, written testimony, collected by Van Reisen, 2017)

The testimony describes in detail how the Eritrean Embassy supported Medhanie and that Medhanie held multiple passports in different names. The testimony goes on to describe how, in 2015, a group of Eritreans were kidnapped by Abrham, an associate of Medhanie, and taken to Libya. The person who communicated with them, the testimony alleges, was Medhanie. Medhanie was also tied to trafficking in the Sinai by two interviewees (Interviewees 0023-1 & 0023-2, focus group interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021), who stated that he worked together with Angesosom in the Sinai.

John Merhay

Several interviewees were trafficked by 'John' in Libya. The report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) also referred to a John – John Merhay – active in Libya. A list of traffickers compiled by Africa Monitors also refers to John Merhay, specifying that he was also active in Sudan, around Hamdayet (Africa Monitors, 2019).

One interviewee said he was trafficked by John (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). He described him as a person in his mid-thirties and said was from Gashbarka in Eritrea, and that he used to live in Sweden before coming to Libya (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). In the warehouse, he was beaten and women were raped when John's men were drunk. He also said that John worked with Kiros and someone named Freselam. One of the interviewees trafficked by John was in a warehouse in Kufra (Interviewee 1016, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). They were then transferred to Welid's warehouse in Kufra. John was also linked to Angesosom, and was said to be a former underling of Angesosom.

John Habeta

John Habtu (Habeta, also known as ‘Obama’) has been described as facilitating ‘first class’ smuggling, charging high prices for safer routes by plane, often through complex journeys involving multiple stops at multiple continents. This is why it is presumed that the refugees in Libya mentioning ‘John’ were referring to a different John – presumably John Merhay, mentioned above – and not John Habeta. John could also be operating under multiple names.

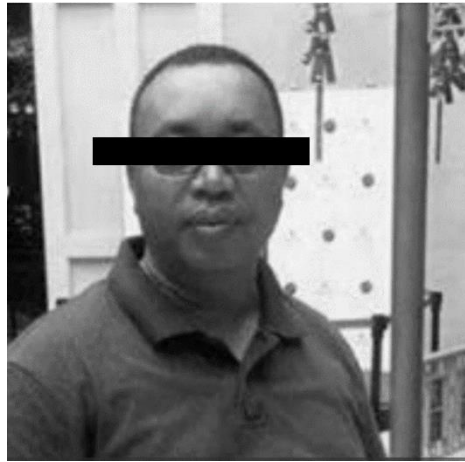


Figure 11.6. John Habtu (Habeta, also known as ‘Obama’)
(Source: Photograph sent to Van Reisen through WhatsApp communication)

Prosecution and conviction

John Habeta is a Dutch national of Eritrean descent. He was previously living in Amsterdam, but was arrested in Kenya and repatriated to the Netherlands in early January 2022: “a Dutch national of Eritrean descent wanted for human trafficking with Interpol red notice had been deported to the Netherlands” (Wasiki, 2022). The press report stated:

John Habeta, 53, had been on the run for four years and was believed to be running an underground international human smuggling network for the trafficking of people from Africa to Europe, according to a statement by the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) in Kenya. He was arrested in Nairobi following a covert operation by DCI detectives. He is linked to at least four different operations where groups of Eritrean nationals were smuggled into Europe through Asia. Immediately after his arrest, he was extradited to the Netherlands on orders from the Ministry of Interior,’ the statement read. (Wasiki, 2022)

Information received by WhatsApp and shared with the researchers suggested that John Habeta was associated with the PFDJ.

John ‘Sina’

Via a contact who interviewed many survivors of trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, a third ‘John’, was identified. This John, who may or may not be the same as John ‘Merhay’ or John ‘Habeta’, is identified as ‘John Sina’.

The Eritrean collaborator in Sinai torture camps was called by the people here John Sina. I suspect that they added the Sina and that maybe they never knew his real name. (S., WhatsApp exchange with Smits, October 2022)

As identified by the resource person, John ‘Sina’ was active as Eritrean collaborator in the Sinai torture camps. It is not known if this same ‘John’ now operates in Libya.¹⁷⁴

Kidane

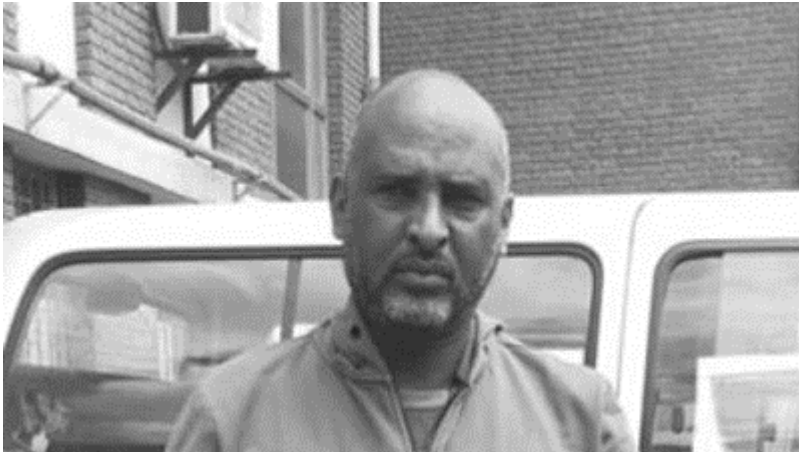


Figure 11.7. Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, at the time of his arrest in Addis Ababa

(Source: Photograph published by the Dutch police; Politie, 2021)

¹⁷⁴ A fourth ‘John’ came up in the research in relation to the deportation of Eritreans from Israel to Rwanda and Uganda. However, it was determined that this ‘John’ was not involved in trafficking, and was not Eritrean.

Description

Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, who is of Eritrean nationality, is one of the key alleged traffickers in the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees. Kidane operated in several locations throughout Libya. Seven interviewees reported that they were trafficked by Kidane to Libya: three were in Bani Walid, two were in Sabratha, one was in Brak Shati and one was unaware of his location.¹⁷⁵ As we have not been able to triangulate the information on Brak Shati, the focus will be on Bani Walid and Sabratha, which appear to be his main strongholds. Kidane's name was also mentioned by several other interviewees, in connection to their own traffickers or because they witnessed or heard of abuses by Kidane.

In the interviews, Kidane is reported to be cooperating with other traffickers, Libyans, and Daesh (Islamic State or ISIL). The interviewees mention hundreds of people in his warehouses – up to 900 people.

Bani Walid

Three interviewees were trafficked by Kidane in Bani Walid.¹⁷⁶ They paid him between USD 2,400 and 7,000. The witnesses described being severely beaten and tied up while in the hands of Kidane. The man who paid USD 7,000 was promised by his 'connection man' in Khartoum, who was nicknamed Muhari, that he would have to pay USD 3,500 from Khartoum to Italy. However, Kidane doubled the price once he arrived.

Another witness described how he ended up in the hands of Kidane after being kidnapped and forcefully taken to Libya by a Sudanese policeman:

In Khartoum, I started working with an electrician. One day, when I finished work, a policeman caught me on the way home. He sold me to another person. That one is

¹⁷⁵ Interviewees 1005, 1009, 1011, 1014, 1015, & 1054, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2019-June 2020; Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019

¹⁷⁶ Interviewees 1005, 1009, & 1011, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019

a Sudanese. On the 7 August 2016, he took me to Libya through a group of other persons. In Bani Walid, he sold me to a guy called Kidane. Kidane said: 'I will buy all the persons'. He asked for USD 5,000 from everybody. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

However, that was not the end of the interviewee's interaction with Kidane. As he was travelling to the sea towards Zawiya, he was kidnapped by Daesh. Kidane bought back the group from Daesh and extorted them again for another USD 2,000.

The interviewees reported suffering abuse from Kidane in his warehouse in Bani Walid. One interviewee said that it was too painful to talk about. Another interviewee, who was also in Bani Walid, witnessed Somali refugees being beaten in the camp that belonged to Kidane.

Sabratha

Two interviewees testified that they were held by Kidane in Sabratha.¹⁷⁷ One interviewee testified that he was bought by Kidane from a Libyan chief in Zawiya, who captured them on the road to the sea. The interviewee was then brought to Sabratha, where Kidane tried to obtain ransom from the interviewee:

He asked us to pay USD 4,300. We refused to pay. Then he asked for USD 3,500. We refused again. Then, he gave us to Wedi Isaac. That one asked USD 1,500. (Interviewee 1015, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Another interviewee reported how Kidane 'took' him after he had been captured by Daesh, a story similar to the interviewee who had the same experience between Zawiya and Bani Walid.

Al-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 Al-Amu took us in charge. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

¹⁷⁷ Interviewees 1014 & 1015, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019

This interviewee was first asked USD 3,500 by Kidane; just like interviewee 1015, he was sold to Wedi Isaac when he could not pay.

Connections with other traffickers and actors

Kidane's network is described as extensive, reaching all the way "from Eritrea to Europe" (Interviewee 1009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). In an unknown location, one interviewee was held by Kidane, who was working together with another notorious Eritrean trafficker, Abduselam (see next section):

We can pay to Kidane. Kidane, at that time, was working with Abduselam.
(Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewee clarifies that someone else, nicknamed Medhanie (although not the infamous trafficker Medhanie Yedhego Mered, known as "The General"), was in charge of the warehouse. The money was paid to Kidane. He explained that the warehouses of the traffickers Kidane and Abduselam were separate, but they were cooperating.

Wedi Isaac is also mentioned by two interviewees as associated with Kidane. Kidane sold them to Wedi Isaac, who was operating in Bani Walid, when he failed to extract money from them. Wedi Isaac and Kidane were said by one interviewee to be pooling refugees to cross the sea.

After 10 months the money was paid. Kidane and Wedi Isaac, another Eritrean connection man, grouped 400 persons together. These 400 persons were going to go to the sea. We took big trucks from Bani Walid to Zawiya. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Kidane also works with non-Eritrean chiefs and traffickers. The main connection there is Al-Amu, a Libyan and a big name in the trafficking business. Kidane was said to be working with him in Sabratha, although they each had their own warehouse. Kidane is also mentioned by one interviewee as cooperating with Aziz (1054, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Kidane is known to cooperate with Welid, who unlike Kidane, remained in prison following his arrest in Ethiopia (Girma & Hayden, 2021a), but Welid and Kidane were not linked by those interviewed for this book.

Interviewee 1011 indicated that Kidane had bought him back from Daesh after being kidnapped by the terrorist organisation on the way to Zawiya.

Many smaller ‘connection men’ were mentioned as working in Khartoum, whose victims ended up in the hands of Kidane. They include Michiele and Muhari.

Prosecution and conviction

Kidane was first arrested after having been spotted on the streets of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in February 2020 (Hayden, 2021a). However, after one year in prison, he escaped from the court and disappeared (Hayden, 2021a). In absentia, Kidane was sentenced to life without parole (Hayden, 2021b). After his escape, Kidane became the focus of an international investigation, and Dutch prosecutors put Kidane on the ‘most wanted’ list (Politie, 2021). Kidane and a group of collaborators were arrested by the Middle Eastern Chapter of Interpol on 1 January 2023 in the airport of Khartoum, Sudan. He was taken to the United Arab Emirates, where he is expected to be tried. The accusations leading to the trial are understood to be in any case financial malpractice and whitewashing (Personal conversation, phone, M. Van Reisen, 5 January 2023). The Netherlands has requested extradition to the Netherlands for the crimes of smuggling and human trafficking. The Netherlands is part of an international team leading the investigation of human trafficking in Libya together with Italy, the UK and other international partners (Personal conversation, phone, M. Van Reisen, 5 January 2023).

Wedi Isaac

Description

Wedi Isaac (also spelled Issak) is another alleged trafficker from Eritrea, whose name occurs many times. The report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) included a photograph that they claimed was of Wedi Isaac, showing off his muscles. In the report, he was said to be working with Medhanie before the arrest of the other ‘Medhanie’, which was confirmed by one of our interviewees (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). The report also indicated that it was Wedi Isaac who took over from Medhanie when he went into hiding.



Figure 11.8. Wedi Isaac

(Source: Photograph from Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP, 2016)

Five interviewees testified that they had been trafficked by Wedi Isaac.¹⁷⁸ Two of those interviewees were together and met in his warehouse.¹⁷⁹ The locations were Tripoli (Interviewee 0007), Bani Walid (Interviewees 0011, 1014, 1015, 3003) and Sabratha

¹⁷⁸ Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019; Interviewees 0011, 1014, & 1015, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019; Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, continuous from February 2019

¹⁷⁹ Interviewees 1014 & 1015, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019

(Interviewees 1014, 1015)¹⁸⁰. Wedi Isaac was mentioned in several other interviews by refugees who had not directly been his victims.¹⁸¹

Bani Walid

Wedi Isaac is one of the big names allegedly active in trafficking in Bani Walid. From the interviews, it also appears to be his main base. Two of the interviewees, who met each other in his warehouse in Bani Walid, reported that his warehouse is large. They saw Wedi Isaac only when he came to ask for money. They paid USD 2,200 “for the sea” (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

Another interviewee was also in a warehouse run by Wedi Isaac. He stated that Wedi Isaac organised his whole journey, from Sudan to Bani Walid (where he paid USD 7,500). In Zawiya, he had to pay another USD 3,500. The first amount, USD 7,500, was paid in Dubai. The exact way in which this was paid, and by whom, was not specified by the interviewee (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019).

Other locations

One interviewee was held in a warehouse shared by Medhanie and Wedi Isaac in Tripoli. His main ‘boss’ was Wedi Isaac. He was the one who came to ask him why his mother had not paid yet. He was beaten and deprived of food. He heard about one person who died because he was poor and had no mother or father to pay for him. His mother paid the ransom in Asmara. He paid USD 1,600 twice, once in Tripoli and once to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

The other location where two interviewees were held (together) was Sabratha (Interviewees 1014 & 1015, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). They were in a warehouse that belonged to Wedi Isaac, but Wedi Isaac himself was in Bani Walid. He asked USD 1,500

¹⁸⁰ There two interviewees were also both in a warehouse of Wedi Isaac in Bani Walid.

¹⁸¹ Interviewees 0002 & 9001, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019; 1003, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019

from each of them. They were there until conflict broke out in Sabratha in 2017.

Connections with other traffickers

Two interviewees both reported that they were held first by Kidane in Bani Walid, but were eventually given to Wedi Isaac, who asked for less money when they could not pay (Interviewees 1014 & 1015, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Cooperation with Wedi Isaac is also mentioned by another interviewee trafficked by Kidane, who said that Wedi Isaac and Kidane mixed together their victims on one boat (Interviewees 0011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Wedi Isaac was reported to be working with Medhanie, sharing a warehouse in Tripoli. He was also mentioned in the report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) to have taken over from Medhanie when he went into hiding.

Wedi Isaac is also working with Libyan traffickers, but according to the interviewees, he is the one in charge. He also works with traffickers in Sudan. One interviewee said that when the money is paid in Sudan, these traffickers bring the money with them when they come to Libya, so that they can pay the trafficker in charge (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

One interviewee speculated on the connection between Wedi Isaac and Eritrean generals (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). As his family paid his ransom in Asmara, he stated that this (the collection of the money) was the work of generals in Eritrea. However, he said that asking about that in Eritrea was much too dangerous:

If you want water and you ask for it [in Eritrea], you are put in prison. If you ask this, then your whole family [is put in prison]. (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Current status

It was reported on social media that Wedi Isaac died in an accident in Libya in September 2021. Such rumours are hard to verify, and some experts warn that ‘staged deaths’ could be a way for traffickers to disappear.

Wedi Babu

Description

Another name that came up in many interviews is Wedi Babu. Nothing about Wedi Babu is known from previous reports or news articles. His name is not mentioned, although it is possible that he operates under other names as well. Interviewees state that he is Eritrean. Wedi Babu is active in Bani Walid. Four of the interviewees for this research said they were trafficked by Wedi Babu.¹⁸²

Bani Walid

The ransom amounts, which were named independently by all four interviewees trafficked by Wedi Babu were almost the same: three paid USD 3,800 and one paid USD 4,000. Wedi Babu's warehouse in Bani Walid is large, as described in the following:

In the store of Bani Walid it was very difficult. There were a lot of people in one store. Almost 600 persons in one room. Women and men are mixed together. In that place there are children, pregnant women [from rape]. It is very difficult in that store. There is no food. If somebody cannot pay, they were beaten by the connection man. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Interviewees describe being beaten while on the phone with their family in the warehouse of Wedi Babu. Interviewees paid ransom in Khartoum and in Eritrea.

Another interviewee explained that he did not see Wedi Babu there, but “there are some persons responsible for phone calls, they're [saying], you are from Wedi Babu” (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). The interviewee paid Wedi Babu USD 4,000, but after waiting for a long time, Libyan traffickers came and demanded that he pay again:

¹⁸² Interviewees 0010 & 0013, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019; Interviewees 1003 & 1010, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, March to April 2019

The Libyan smugglers say that Wedi Babu left. If you offer money, you can escape from that. Until you do not offer the money, you will die there. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Connections with other traffickers

Wedi Babu has connections with traffickers in Sudan and Eritrea, as ransoms were paid there. Interviewee 1010 explained that his family paid his ransom in Eritrea, after making contact with a trafficker in Eritrea working with Wedi Babu. Wedi Babu is also mentioned as working with Libyan traffickers:

The Libyan man working under him was called Moussa. Moussa was the big boss in this store. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Welid

Description

Welid or Walid is the nickname of Tewelde Goitom, another alleged Eritrean human trafficker. Girma and Hayden (2021b) say that Welid was particularly notorious for raping his victims. He would also threaten to release recordings of the rapes. A report by the Sahar Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016)

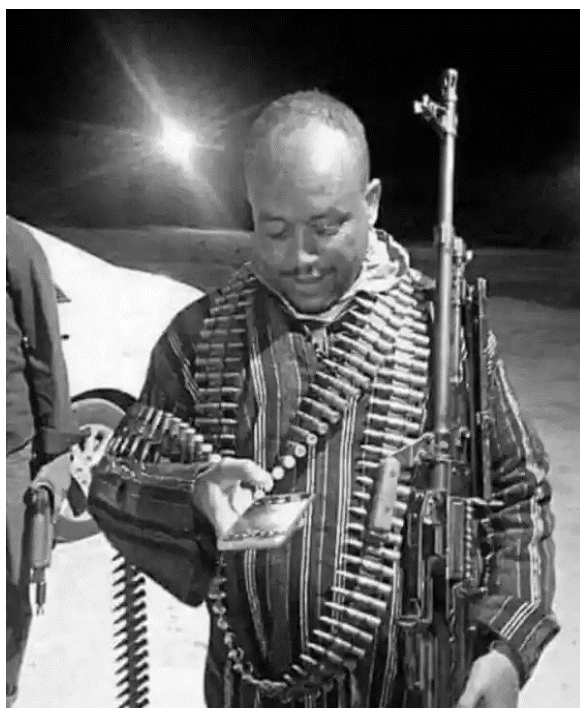


Figure 11.9. Tewelde Goitom (aka Welid or Walid) (Source: Photograph received from a refugee; also published on Facebook and image triangulated with resource persons)

also mention the activity of Welid (next to Kidane) in Libya.

Nine interviewees¹⁸³ testified to being held in the warehouses of Welid in various locations in Libya. One was held ‘close to Tripoli’, one in Aljmail (close to Zuwara), five in Bani Walid, one in Kufra, and one in Nasmah (a small village about 100 km from Bani Walid). Various other interviewees mentioned his name, but had not been held by him.

Bani Walid

The interviewees¹⁸⁴ testify that, at least on some occasions, Welid was personally present in his warehouse in Bani Walid. They also testify that the warehouse held a large number of people, over 1,000. Two interviewees held together in Bani Walid said that the numbers were even greater, at least 1,500 or 1,600.

The interviewees testified to severe torture at the hands of Welid in Bani Walid. Two persons who were able to pay immediately said that they were not beaten, but that they saw those who could not pay being severely beaten. Every morning, he would make them call their families while beating them. The ransom amounts demanded ranged from USD 3,000–5,500 in Bani Walid under Welid. One interviewee stayed in the hands of Welid for one year and three months, because he could not pay. The torture he endured was severe:

He called somebody working for him, took him outside in the sun. He makes milk and sugar. He shakes it. He ties my hand and legs. He puts 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)

The interviewee was asked to pay USD 5,500, but he had only USD 4,500, as he had agreed in Sudan that he would make the trip for USD

¹⁸³ Interviewees 0001, 0017, & 0018, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March-July 2019; Interviewees 1004, 1008, 1013, 1016, 1017, & 1023, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019

¹⁸⁴ Interviewees 1004, 1008, 1013, & 1016, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019; Interviewees 0017 & 0018, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019

3,800. Finally, Welid agreed that he could pay USD 4,500, if did so immediately. “Okay. Today, I will give you the phone. When you send me this money, no problem, you will go to Italy. But if you cannot pay money, I will kill you”, Welid told him (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

Not only Eritreans were held by Welid in Bani Walid, but also Ethiopians and Somalis. Food was in short supply in Welid’s warehouse, according to the interviewees. It was also withheld as punishment for not paying:

K: Was there any extra food for you because you were pregnant? They didn't give anything?

0018: Nothing. You get the stick [gestures getting beaten]. If you paid you get a little.

K: If you pay they don't beat you so much?

0017: No pay: every day without the sun, without food, water, stick.... get telephone... Ohhhh, every day. (Interviewees 0017 and 0018, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Interviewees explained that beatings were carried out with iron sticks, and were forceful enough to break bones. One interviewee testified that people frequently died at the hands of Welid.

Other locations

Other refugees detained by Welid were held in various places. This included one person in Kufra, one person near Tripoli, one person in Nasmah, and one in Aljmail, near Zuwara.¹⁸⁵ Zuwara appears to be the place from which Welid would send the refugees out to sea, as it was mentioned in several interviews.

One interviewee said that he was held near Tripoli, where he was asked to pay USD 2,000, after he had already paid USD 1,600 when he entered Libya at Ishlavia. In Tripoli, he was held by Medhanie and

¹⁸⁵ Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019; Interviewees 1016, 1017, & 1023, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019

Welid. He estimated that there were over 1,000 people in the warehouse:

[...] in the detention hall, in one day they were shooting guns to make us stop talking. We have children, women, a lot of children – about 1,000 people were there together. And I saw that a lack of... how do you say that? There wasn't enough food. We have, what do you call that? ... A skin condition? Itchy skin. Some of the women were pregnant and they gave birth at that time. (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another interviewee stayed for one year and five months in Welid's house in Kufra. The size of the place was not described by the interviewee.

They use to beat us with electric wires or with sticks. We had problem of memory as well. Women and men were in the same room. I was not that much beaten. My husband has been beaten. They wanted us to see him being beaten. 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)

A person who was held by Welid in Nasmah described the experience as “the worst”:

Everybody knows about Welid. He used to rape every women. A lot of women who passed through his warehouse got pregnant. So he asked us to pay USD 6,000. But we didn't have any possibility to do so, so he beat us with sticks while we were on the phone with our relatives, family members or husband. This happened to me as well. I was beaten. He broke my arm. (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This interviewee stressed that it was Welid personally who did the raping. If he was not present, there were no rapes. Other torture included beating with shower hoses. The torture was filmed by traffickers in this warehouse in Nasmah, and the videos shared on the Internet. The interviewee ended up paying USD 6,000 to get out.

One interviewee was in a house of Welid in Aljmail, near Zuwara. He was living in Tripoli when he paid Welid USD 2,500 to take him across the Mediterranean Sea. However, he ended up in the store of

Abdallah, who worked with Welid, and Abdallah sent him to Tunisia instead.

Connections with other traffickers and actors

Welid was another well-connected trafficker. One confirmed associate of Welid is Shishay Godefay Demoz, who was arrested and sentenced as an accomplice; he assisted Welid in Libya (Girma & Hayden, 2021b).

Welid is also connected to Abduselam. After a group of refugees was captured by bandits, they asked the bandits to call their trafficker, Abduselam, to free them, however, it was Welid who showed up. Welid also has a connection with 'John' in Libya, another Eritrean trafficker (possibly John Merhay). Interviewees were transferred from John to Welid in Kufra. It was also mentioned that Welid was working with Abdallah in Libya, at a place close to Zuwara. This is probably a different Abdallah than the one described earlier in this chapter. Other interviewees mention unnamed Libyans cooperating with him.

Welid also worked with traffickers in Khartoum and Egypt. A trafficker called Alex was mentioned, who promised one interviewee that he could make the trip for USD 3,800. However, Alex took the money and the interviewee ended up having to pay another USD 3,800 to Welid. Another trafficker mentioned was Take, who took one interviewee from Cairo to Bani Walid, where he ended up being held by Welid.

One interviewee links Welid to the trafficking in the Sinai desert:

I heard it with my ears when he said: "I was working in Sinai before!" When they are together, the smugglers, he said: "I was working in Sinai before". Like that. When they are drinking, they are talking like that. (Interviewee 1059, focus group discussion with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Although this information was coincidentally overheard by one interviewee, it provides a line to trafficking in the Sinai, in which a very similar *modus operandi* was used.

Prosecution and conviction

Welid was arrested in Ethiopia in March 2020, following the arrest of Kidane (Girma & Hayden, 2021a). The two were said to be cooperating, particularly in Bani Walid. Girma and Hayden (2021a) report that Welid was convicted under the name Amanuel Yirga Damte, but the victims indicate this is a false name. Welid was sentenced to 18 years in prison for trafficking (Girma & Hayden, 2021b).

In October 2022, Welid was extradited to the Netherlands to face trial (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2022). The Dutch prosecution said that the 38-year old Eritrean was:

[...] suspected of smuggling Eritreans to the Netherlands on a large scale and under life-threatening circumstances between 2014 and 2020. On their way to Europe, victims were beaten, tortured and raped, while they were held in camps in Libya with hundreds of others. (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2022)

At the time of writing, Welid has not yet been convicted in the Netherlands.

Other traffickers

Several other alleged traffickers mentioned by the interviewees appeared to play an important role in the networks, at least at the time the interviewees were in Libya. Some have also been mentioned in previous reports. Their roles will be briefly described in this subsection.

Chegora

Chegora was mentioned in the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) report as one of the Eritrean smugglers operating in Libya and Sudan. Confidential interviews by Sahan Foundation and IGAD (2016) in Libya indicated that boats belonging to Chegora were in conflict with Kidane's on the high seas at one point.

One interviewee for this research was trafficked by Chegora (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). The interviewee contacted him by phone from Khartoum in 2017 in order to arrange his trip to Libya. The interviewee said that

Chegora is called Tuemuzgi and confirms that he is Eritrean. According to the interviewee, Chegora lived in Kampala, Uganda, at that time. Chegora and the interviewee agreed on USD 3,500 for the desert and the sea, but he was kidnapped by Chadian armed groups before reaching Libya.

Another interviewee who knows of Chegora, but was not personally trafficked by him, said that Chegora worked together with Kiros, John, Abdusalam, Welid, Kidane, and Abdella (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

Mohammed Whisky

One man referred to by several interviewees is Mohammed ‘Whisky’. Mohammed Whisky was also referred to by Eritrean refugees in interviews with Camilli (2018). According to the Eritreans she spoke to, Whisky was particularly notorious for being part of the Islamic State (Daesh). He was referred to in the article as a Libyan, who was holding refugees in an underground prison, and was said to have killed some Eritreans who would not convert to Islam.

Two interviewees were trafficked by Mohammed Whisky. One paid him USD 5,000 (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, February 2019). Another interviewee was held by Whisky in Bani Walid. She referred to him as a “Daesh man” (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). She described how her group was kidnapped by him on the way to the sea, and that the warehouse where they were detained lacked food. The detainees were subjected to “a lot of violence” (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). She paid him USD 2,500 and was sold to Abdusalam in Ash Schwayrif:

The Daesh man and Abdusalam they knew each other, but I don't know what kind of relationship they have. This Abdusalam requested us for more money, USD 1,500, because he said that he bought us from Mohammed Whisky. (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Keshi

Two interviewees (who were together) were held by Keshi (also spelt as Kashi) in Bani Walid:

The chief there was Keshi. He comes from Ada Hagusha, near Asmara, in Eritrea.
(Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another interviewee added that he worked together with a Libyan named Diab (Interviewee 0005, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

One interviewee said he was trafficked by Kashi in the Sinai around 2009/2010 (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). He does not refer to being tortured, but was taken from Sudan to Israel via the Sinai through Kashi's network. He said Kashi was an Eritrean. However, it is not clear from the context whether this may be the same person as the one operating in Bani Walid.

Traffickers in Sudan

Unlike the top-level traffickers operating the warehouses in Libya, the traffickers in Sudan are more numerous and the same names rarely reoccur twice. Names recorded in the interviews include Alex, Tinaat, Mikele, Wedi, Wassie (all Eritreans), Tadese (Ethiopian), and Abo (Sudanese), to name a few. Some interviewees did not know the names of the traffickers, because they were in a group, and did not have personal contact; others have forgotten or never knew their names. These traffickers often informed the refugees about the journey. Most did not ask for payment in Sudan:

He informed us that we would have to pay once we arrive in Libya and if we pay that we would be sent to the sea. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In most of the interviews, the refugees do not put any blame for their mistreatment on the traffickers in Sudan. Most of the key actors remain relatively hidden. It may also be the case that they operate under different names to avoid detection or a 'bad reputation'.

Libya as a ‘black site’ for Eritrean government’s nefarious activities

The suspected links between trafficking and Eritrean officials run back to the Sinai trafficking times. A report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reads:

People smuggling is so pervasive that it could not be possible without the complicity of [Eritrean] Government and party officials, especially military officers working in the western border zone, which is headed by General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”. Multiple sources have described to the Monitoring Group how Eritrean officials collaborate with ethnic Rashaida smugglers to move their human cargo through the Sudan into Egypt and beyond. This is in most respects the same network involved in smuggling weapons through to Sinai and into Gaza. (UN Security Council, 2011, p. 110)

In a book by Van Reisen and Mawere (2017), the same conclusion is drawn. The book describes how refugees are driven out through policies of deliberate impoverishment and human rights abuses, and the involvement of officials, military staff and gangs in trafficking for ransom. This takes place, at best, with the tacit approval of the Eritrean government and, at worst, with its involvement (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

This brings us to the current situation in Libya. Some of the interviewees stated that they suspect that some of the Eritrean traffickers in Libya have connections with Eritrean authorities. Furthermore, recently, there are indications that governments such as Eritrea’s may be able to use Libya in more structured way, namely as a ‘black site’, through their connections with such traffickers. A black site is a secret jail, where prisoners are held (and sometimes tortured) without trial. In the case of Eritrea, early warnings suggest that the Eritrean government may be using traffickers in Libya to punish dissidents.

An interviewee stated that more direct contact between human traffickers in Libya and authorities in Eritrea was happening, since the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, started. Since the start of the war in Tigray, the presence of Eritrean intelligence has been growing. One

interviewee with many contacts in Addis Ababa goes so far as to indicate that the Eritrean government is virtually in control of some parts of the Ethiopian government, such as the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, face-to-face, October 2021). This has led to Eritrean involvement in identifying Tigrayans, but also Eritreans, for arrest in Addis Ababa.

One interviewee located in Europe indicated that a family member of his was taken directly from Addis Ababa to Libya with the cooperation of Eritrean authorities in Addis (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons). The interviewee, who was politically active in opposition to the Eritrean government, had received threats, indicating that his political activity was the reason that his family member was taken forcibly to Libya. He was then extorted to pay ransom for his family member. The interviewee also stated that many more people from a specific neighbourhood in Addis Ababa had disappeared – some were taken to prison or other locations, many to Eritrea as well.

Then suddenly, a bit over a week later, I got the call that he was in Libya. They let me hear his voice for a few seconds. The whole time he was there, they let me hear him twice. [...] I understood that he was captured by [human trafficker]. [...] He [the intermediary] said that “I shouldn’t make this political” – that way, he let me know that it was because of my opposition to the regime in Eritrea that my [family member] was there now. [...] I came to the conclusion that Libya, at the moment, also is a prison camp for the Eritrean government. (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons)

This, according to the interviewee, is possible because of the cooperation between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Tigray conflict. Hence, Eritreans in Ethiopia are now vulnerable:

The people who fled to Addis are all from national service. They know exactly how the military people are. They were also tortured and abused in Sawa [a military camp in Eritrea]. So they know how the people torture – they have experienced it. So they knew exactly that these people were the guards of Sawa, the same people who

abused soldiers in Sawa. It was exactly the same. (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons)

There are, at the time of writing, three cases known to the researchers of well-known political activists who have had a close family member abducted, two of which were taken to Libya. One of those was eventually released and arrived in Europe in a serious medical condition (Interviewee 3014, personal communication with Van Reisen, October 2020).

Although these allegations have not yet been thoroughly investigated, there is a possibility that Libya could be being used by the Eritrean government as a ‘black site’ or secret prison, where people are held without charge, with cooperation by the human traffickers, to punish those who are opposed to the regime.

Åsa Nilsson-Söderström, Former Member of the Liberal International Human Rights Committee, referred to this type of harassment by the Eritrean government as ‘borderless harassment’ (Erisat, 2022). The operation of black sites is in line with the ‘borderless harassment’ engaged in by the Eritrean government, which was also described in Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*. This includes repression of Eritrean opposition, anywhere in the world, forced payment of 2% tax and other contributions by members of the Eritrean diaspora, and intimidation of all those who have fled Eritrea.

Cloaking of human traffickers

The traffickers identified in this chapter have become well-known figures. Although they do not always use their real name, and may in fact use multiple names, they have become recognisable. In some cases, pictures of them are freely available. However, some interviewees who are following the situation in Libya state that this is changing:

0022: Most of the smugglers [in Libya] now try to hide, but they are still there.

K: Do you have any idea why they try to hide?

0022: *I believe the Eritrean government may want to kill smugglers because they could speak on the role of the Eritrean government [in the trafficking].*
(Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021)

The interviewees state that new names are now mentioned when people are being trafficked for ransom in Libya:

Now there are new names, most of them changed to Muslim names. Like Ibrahim, Abubaker, Adi Hanum, Aman... Lines are scattering, and they are making a new one. They are trying to hide it [trafficking]. It started only this year [2021]. But all the things are the same. People are still being held, and need to pay ransom.
(Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, face-to-face, December 2021)

Hence, there are early indications that the traffickers in Libya might be attempting to go into hiding and are taking new names, in order to divert attention.

Synthesis: Tracing the trafficking network

The interviewees consistently named the key actors who played a leading role in their trafficking. As one informant for this book explained, the networks go all the way from Eritrea to Italy, and even beyond, and in each location the top-level trafficker is working with subordinates and with local people to manage the trafficking line. For Eritrean refugees, these are usually top-level Eritrean traffickers. In this synthesis, some of the key names, locations and relations will be linked together.

The list of alleged human traffickers described in this chapter shows that the names of key actors were mentioned multiple times in the interviews. The information from the interviews both corroborates and extends what was already known about these traffickers. Some traffickers whose names emerged from the interviews have not previously been extensively described in the literature, reports or news articles. The locations in which these traffickers were active was described by the interviewees. The bigger actors were often active in multiple locations. In addition, from the interviews, some links between traffickers, and between traffickers and other actors, such as armed groups and authorities, can be established.

The locations in which human traffickers are active include a few ‘hot spots’ (see Figure 11.10). Bani Walid appears to have the highest concentration of human traffickers, perhaps due to its location – relatively remote, yet close to key coastal hubs. The traffickers at the top control the warehouses, although they are often run by Libyans, with the help of other smaller actors (Eritreans, Somalis, and Sudanese). Some traffickers were physically present in their warehouses, at least some of the time. For example, Welid was described as present in his Bani Walid warehouses, where he also personally engaged in sexual and other abuse. Others, such as Abdurazak, seem to have left the business to others, while they stay in other locations such as Dubai or Uganda.

Some locations appear to be dominated by one trafficker, at least when it concerns the ‘niche market’ of trafficking Eritrean refugees. These include Aziz in Brak Shati and Abduselam in Ash Schwayrif. Most extort the ransom from the refugees in Brak Shati, Bani Walid and Ash Schwayrif, also occasionally in Kufra, before transporting them to the coastal cities. Refugees reported often being stuck for months in the hands of traffickers, waiting for a boat. This makes them vulnerable to kidnapping, reselling, and other abuse.

Coastal cities also have their dominant traffickers. Al-Amu was the most frequently mentioned in this regard, in his stronghold of Sabratha, until he was expelled from there in 2017. As the interviews show, Al-Amu was fully engaged in trafficking for ransom. It is unknown what his current engagement is, after his apparent return to Sabratha in 2020.

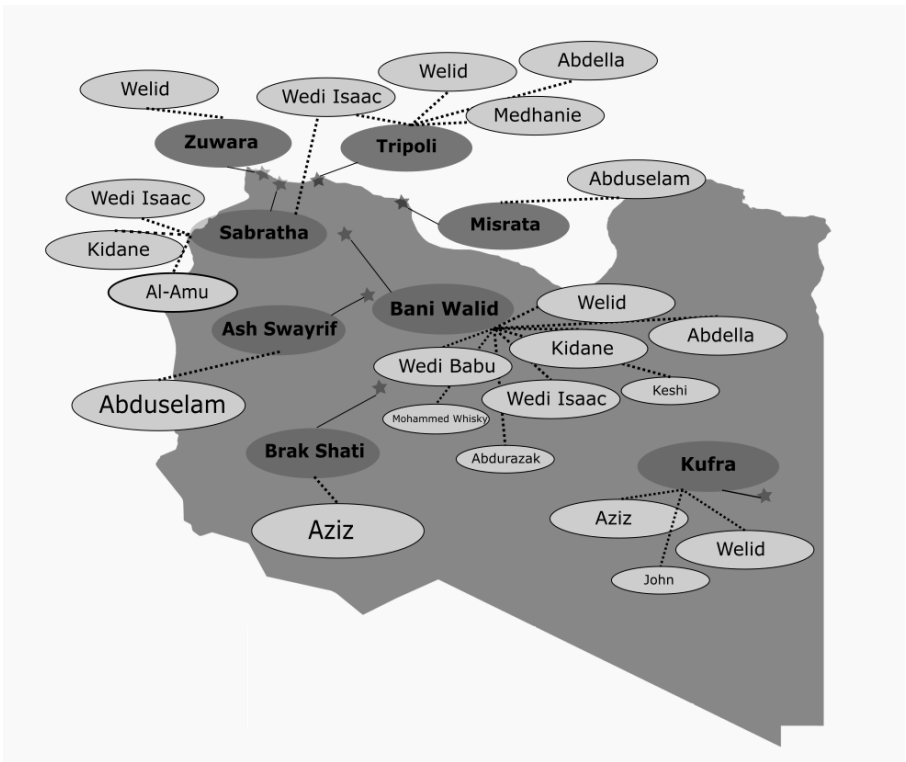


Figure 11.10. Main locations of alleged human traffickers in Libya discussed in this chapter, based on the interviews
 (Source: Adapted by Klara Smits from Libya map by Free Vector Maps.com)

Some alleged traffickers described in this chapter are well known to the authorities, but pursuing any kind of justice is almost impossible, because of their connection with top government officials. Of the traffickers named in this chapter, only Welid and Kidane are in prison. Only recently has the international community become bolder in pursuing international traffickers, with Dutch prosecutors putting Kidane on their ‘most wanted’ list. Other traffickers on the list have been sanctioned by the UN Security Council (Al-Amu, Abdurazak), but this has not led to accountability or justice.

The challenge of bringing the top-level human traffickers to justice has a lot to do with the freedom they have to operate their networks in Libya. As seen from the descriptions above, the traffickers have

well-established networks and work with armed groups and local authorities. Figure 11.11 summarises these connections.

What this figure shows is the complexity of the networks, and the practice of frequent kidnapping and reselling. When one trafficker falls away, for example, Medhanie, another takes over, for example Wedi Isaac. Within these complicated networks, the refugees become “like a ball”, as described by interviewee 6003.

This system can also be exploited at a higher level. For instance, since the start of the Tigray war, the Eritrean intelligence has gained a stronger foothold in Addis Ababa, as reported by one interviewee, and are now practically in charge of arrests of Tigrinya-speakers in Addis Ababa, including in some cases Eritrean refugees. One member of the Eritrean opposition in the diaspora has indicated that his nephew was kidnapped from Addis Ababa and taken directly to Libya with the involvement of the Eritrean intelligence. Although this requires further investigation, it shows that Libya might be being used as a ‘black site’ for the Eritrean government to punish citizens, with the help of human traffickers.

Upon reading the interviews, it is striking how much “like a ball” the refugees are treated. The cases where refugees have been in the hands of only a single trafficker are the exception, rather than the rule. Many have experienced the warehouses of multiple traffickers named in this chapter, sometimes without knowing where they are in Libya, or how long they will stay. They tell long stories of kidnapping, arrest, escape, failed sea crossings and imprisonment, all the while facing torture and inhumane circumstances. For some, their imprisonment spanned years. By naming these traffickers, this chapter contributes to the documentation on the people who have committed these crimes.

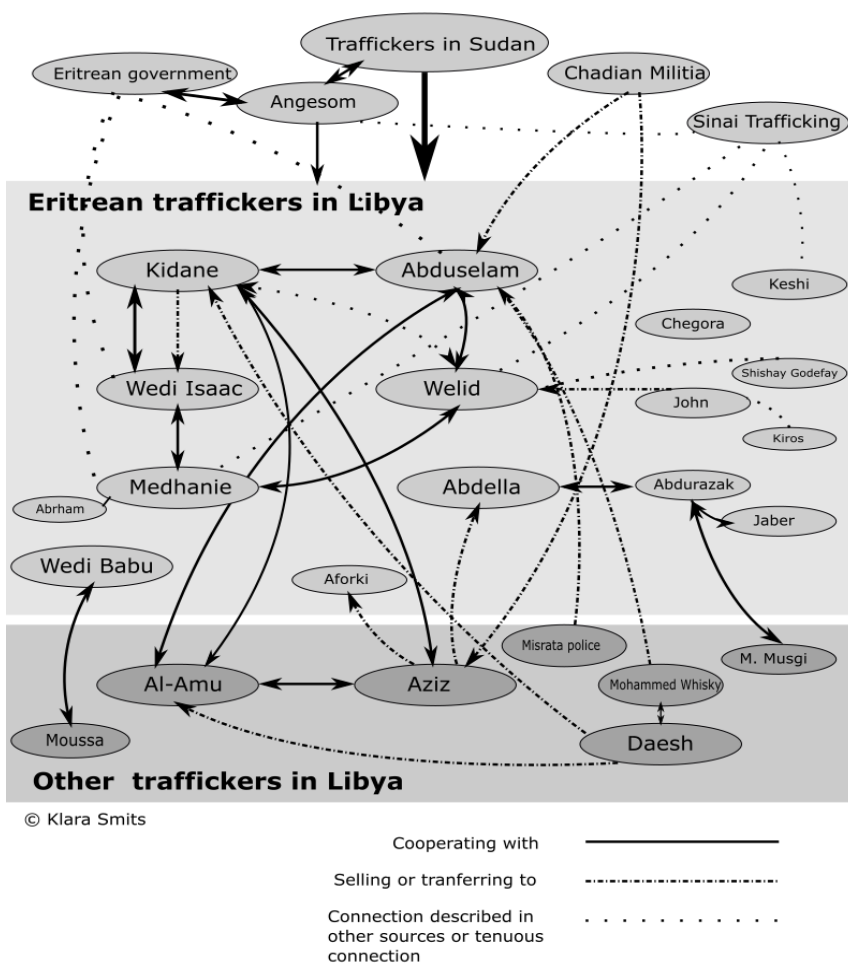


Figure 11.11. Relationship between alleged traffickers inside Libya (Eritrean and other)
(Source: Based on interviews and other sources)

Discussion

The investigation of the trafficking networks that operate in Libya has led to sanctions, arrests and investigations. Notably, the criminal investigation conducted in collaboration between the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Italy, Europol, Interpol and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has led to the arrest and extradition of people such as Welid. Others on the list remain relatively unknown.

An overview of those previously named in the literature (key actors), those named in this work, and those arrested or sanctioned are presented here. The names in the table marked with an asterisk (*) are those where it is uncertain whether or not it is indeed the same person as previous named, arrested or sanctioned.

Table 11.1. Key actors named in this chapter, named in the literature, and those arrested or sanctioned

Previously named	In this chapter	Arrested or sanctioned
Abu Abdellah* and brother Abu Salem	Abdella (Abdallah)	
Abdurazak Esmail - Ismael Abderaza Saleh	Abdurazak (Abdelrazak)	Fitiwi Abdelrazak
Abduselam/Abdelselam	Abduselam	
	Al-Amu	Ahmad Oumar al-Dabbashi
Kesete Te'ame (aka 'Asgedom') – Angesom Teame (aka Angesom or Wejahy/Angesom Kidane)	Angesom	
	Aziz	
Medhanie Yehdego Mered – Medhanie Ydego Meredas	Medhanie	

Previously named	In this chapter	Arrested or sanctioned
John Merhay*	John 'Merhay'	
John Habeta	John 'Habeta'	John Habeta; arrested in Kenya in 2021, extradited to the Netherlands
	John 'Sina'	
Kidane	Kidane	Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam; arrested in Ethiopia in 2020, escaped in 2021. Re-arrested in Sudan in January 2023.
Wedi Issak	Wedi Isaac	
	Wedi Babu	
Walid	Welid	Tewelde Goitom; arrested in Ethiopia in 2020, convicted in 2021. Extradited to the Netherlands in 2022.
Chegora	Chegora	
	Mohammed Whisky	
	Keshi	
General Teklai Kifle 'Manjus'		
Maesho Tesfamariam		
Ermias Ghermay		Ermias Ghermay
Zaid		
Wedi German,		

Previously named	In this chapter	Arrested or sanctioned
Kiros		
Shumay Ghirmay		
Efrem Misgna		
Abu Khaled		
		Abd Al-Rahman al-Milad (al-Bija)
		Mus'ab Abu-Quarin
		Mohammed Kachlaf

The names that came forward from the work of the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) and Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) focus primarily on the early networks in place. However, this table shows that there is considerable overlap between the work of these authors and the findings of this chapter. In addition, action has already been taken, in the form of arrests or sanctions, to bring some of those traffickers to justice. What can be seen from the list of sanctions and arrests, is that many of the traffickers who have been caught were using their own name or a version of it. This chapter has shown that this may now be changing, with the traffickers feeling the consequences of prosecution coming closer. This may mean that the trafficking networks in Libya may move more underground and hidden.

This chapter has also shown where the traffickers operate, and what the interlinkages between them are. These networks include cooperation, selling and transferring from one trafficker to another. The traffickers on the list have been accused of severe human rights abuses, however, many have not yet been arrested or sanctioned.

Conclusion

This book set out to describe the cycle of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. A key part of this is an in-depth description of how the trafficking networks function in the case of Eritrean refugees, which was described in this chapter. As seen in Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*, the trafficking networks and locations in Libya are extensive. Key traffickers manage such networks. These traffickers operate with others, including Libyans, and also cooperate in some instances with other traffickers.

Although the trafficking took place in Libya, the vast majority of key traffickers mentioned by the interviewees are Eritrean. This means that the control over human trafficking networks transporting Eritreans across Libya is in the hands of other Eritreans. These alleged human traffickers have been connected to Eritrean authorities in Eritrea.

This chapter has presented the names and aliases of the people mentioned by the interviewees as having arranged their trafficking trajectory, and details the abuses they committed, including torture, and extracted ransoms. In some cases, the information corroborates what was already available in the literature, reports and media. In other cases, names, as yet unreported or little reported in other sources, were uncovered.

The analysis shows the key locations in which these traffickers are active, including Bani Walid as a primary location, but also Tripoli, Kufra, Brak Shati, Ash Schwayrif, Misrata, Sabratha and Zuwara. In addition, the analysis highlights the intricate network of interrelations between the traffickers, among each other and also with other actors. The most often recurring names are described as transferring and selling trafficked persons, and cooperating in other ways – for example, by sharing warehouses.

Where it concerns Eritrean refugees, many of them come under the control of alleged Eritrean traffickers in Libya. Many of those actors are well known, including Abduselam, Kidane (Kidane Zekarias

Habtemariam), Welid (Tewelde Goitom), Medhanie (Medhanie Yehdego Mered), Al-Amu, and Abdurazak. Some of these actors have since been arrested, prosecuted, or sanctioned. There are also lesser known names of people who, nonetheless, were described as playing a key role in the torture of the interviewees, such as Wedi Isaac, Wedi Babu, Abdella, the Chadian armed groups, John (Merhay), Chegora, Mohamed Whisky, and Keshi.

The trafficking networks described by the interviewees start in Sudan and, in a few cases, Ethiopia. The networks include alleged linkages with the Eritrean government, which requires further in-depth research and analysis. The networks also include others, such as top-level Libyan armed group actors, Libyan police, and Chadian armed groups, who kidnapped and sold some interviewees to traffickers – mainly Aziz, who is presumed to be Sudanese.

The men described in this chapter have mostly been able to operate with impunity. As shown by the arrest of Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, they have even been using their own (first) name in the process. More recently, however, their operations seem to have become more clandestine, and the much-used names are disappearing, replaced by names that are unknown or less known. Further research and investigation by international police and prosecutors is, therefore, urgent to ensure that victims can access justice.

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Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from Tilburg University REC2017/16; REDC # 2020n13; REDC# 2020/01 3a; REDC 2020.139.

Author contributions

Klara Smits is the sole author of this chapter.

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Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya¹⁸⁶

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 new information and communication technology (ICT), especially

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.

¹⁸⁶ 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.

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. Jérôme 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.

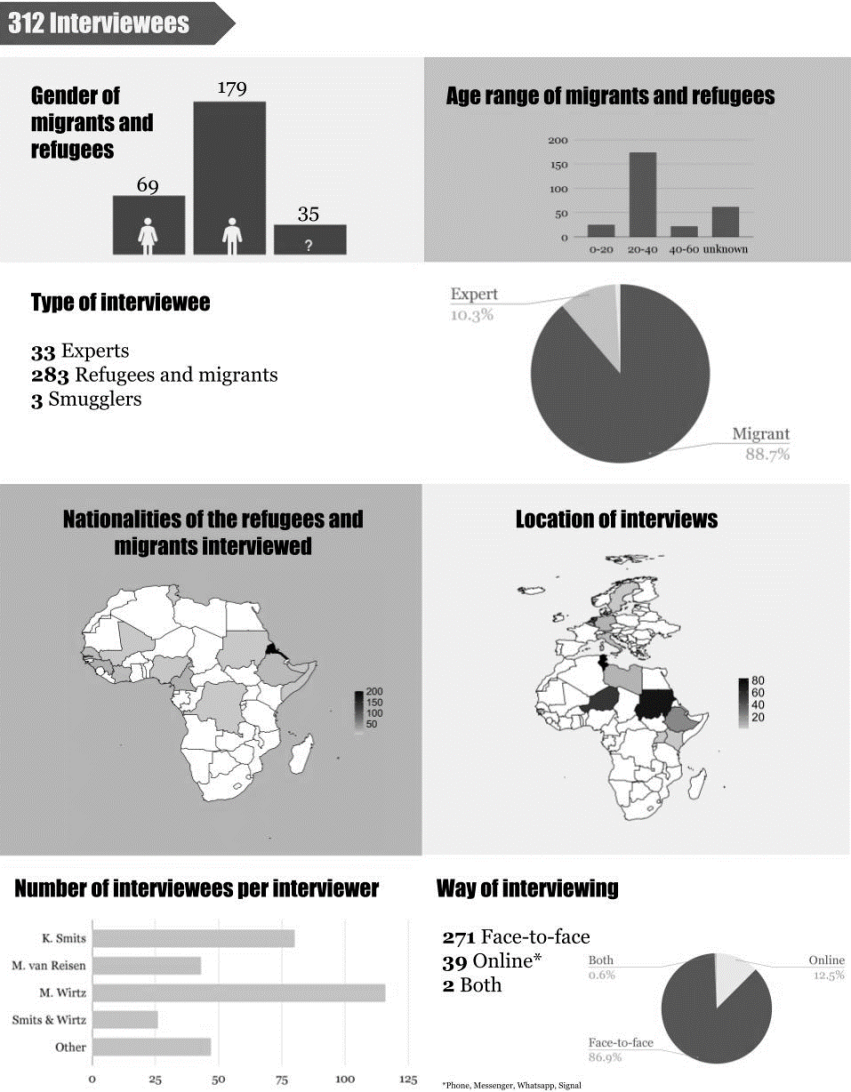
Methodology: Exploring the perspective of survivors

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 statistics¹⁸⁷



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

¹⁸⁷ 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’¹⁸⁸ is. This place can be called a ‘warehouse’, ‘transit point’ or ‘distribution centre’.¹⁸⁹

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.

¹⁸⁸ 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).

¹⁸⁹ 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 communicate 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 to 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).¹⁹⁰ 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)

¹⁹⁰ 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)¹⁹¹

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)

¹⁹¹ This interview was also published in the documentary *Teghadez Agadez* (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)¹⁹²

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’¹⁹³) 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.

¹⁹² This interview was also published previously (in 2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

¹⁹³ ‘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)¹⁹⁴

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".

¹⁹⁴ 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)¹⁹⁵

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)

¹⁹⁵ 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.

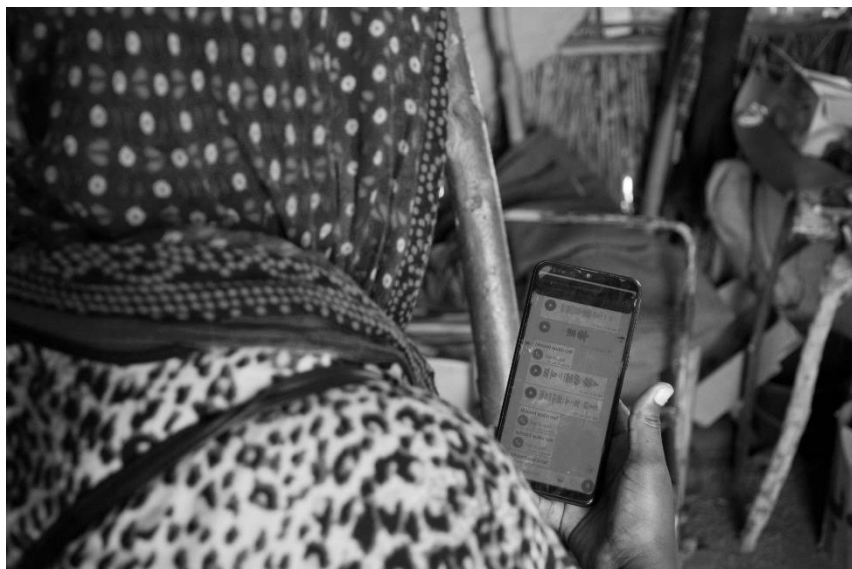


Figure 12.2. Woman in Um Rakuba refugee camp in Sudan receives audio recording of the screams of her cousin in Libya (24 June 2021)

(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. b/c [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,¹⁹⁶ 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

¹⁹⁶ 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,¹⁹⁷ 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)

¹⁹⁷ 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 (*bawala*) is tightly linked to the collaboration with Libyan traffickers. According to Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017), the *bawala* 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 *bawala* 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 Giancesello contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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**Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in
Official Detention Centres in Libya¹⁹⁸**

Morgane Wirtz & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction

Hundreds of people, sitting on blankets next to each other in huge hangars; skinny bodies glancing curiously at the lens; the faces and hands of detainees reaching through the bars of the small windows in the containers – these are the pictures brought back from ‘official detention centres’ by photojournalists and published in international media and NGO reports. Photojournalist Narciso Contreras described the following:

The conditions in official detention centres in Libya are dire – they are overcrowded, there is insufficient food and water, and detainees are beaten, raped and tortured. Many have died from starvation, disease or at the hands of the guards. If they are released or escape, they risk being arrested and sent back. The Libyan Coast Guard intercepts migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea and ‘sells’ them to human traffickers. This is fueling the smuggling and trafficking of human beings and undermines the protection of refugees.

The centres are overflowing with people. Migrants are crammed into cells; they writhe and push against each other, each one trying to carve out their own space. They shoot their hands out through the bars, stretching their fingers wide, begging, pleading to be released. Here, nothing is dignified. There is no ventilation, no basic sanitation. In the forty-degree heat, the combined stench of sweat, urine, and faeces is vomit-inducing. (Contreras, 2016, p. 8)

¹⁹⁸ 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.

Videos shot in these centres are also available. The documentaries *Detained by Militias: Libya's Migrant Trade*, by Vice News (2015), and *Libya, No Escape from Hell*, by Sara Creta (2021a), are particularly illustrative of the conditions in official detention centres.

In 2020, Amnesty International presented a report on detainees in seven detention centres in Western Libya run by the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). DCIM facilities are run by the government of Libya and hold migrants and refugees.¹⁹⁹ Drawing on data from the International Organization for Migration's (IOM's) Displacement Tracking Matrix, Amnesty International found that 34% of those detained in DCIM centres were Eritrean nationals (Amnesty International, 2020).

The detention of refugees is given a legal justification in that Libyan law does not distinguish between irregular migrants and refugees. It also does not have mechanisms for the protection of refugees or asylum procedures. Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees or the 1967 Protocol that followed. Therefore, when refugees cross the border to Libya, stay or exit without proper documentation they are in contravention of the law and can be arrested (UNHCR, 2020). Once they are arrested, they end up in a so-called 'official detention centre', which is a prison that is run by forces affiliated with the Government of National Unity in Libya (previously referred to as the Government of National Accord). The forces running these centres are often arranged through the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM).

While official detention centres in Libya usually receive funding from the government, they rely for their running on mechanisms that are not just administrative (Eaton, Alageli, Badi, Eljarh & Stocker, 2020). Consequentially, the control over the way in which these facilities are run by the Ministry of Interior is limited. Its main role is to provide

¹⁹⁹ 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).

the funds for these facilities (Malakooti, 2019). There are examples of non-state armed groups in Libya opening detention centres that were subsequently given status as ‘official’ by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019). In addition, official detention centres regularly close or change their name or status, making it difficult to keep track of. In a study by Malakooti (2019) of migrant detention in Libya, she demonstrates that there is a link between smuggling dynamics in Libya and the system of official and non-official migrant detention. Malakooti also shows that the DCIM works with the support of armed groups to operate the official detention centres (see Table 13.1). The table of detention centres in Libya published by Malakooti in 2019 is key to understanding the importance of official detention centres in Libya.

Table 13.1. Detention Centres in Libya (Malakooti, 2019)

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
DCIM						
1	Bu-Issa	Zawiya	DCIM	Abid al-Fatah Barood	Warehouse	54
2	al-Bayda	al-Bayda	DCIM	Rida Hareesh	Building (Mol)	18
3	al-Khoms	al-Khoms	DCIM	Mahmud Barfaad	Building (Mol)	216
4	al-Krarcem	Misrata	DCIM	Ismaeen Shnb	School	440
5	al-Kufra	Kufra	DCIM	Muhammed el-Fadil		149
6	al-Twisha	Ghasr Ben Ghashir	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
7	Benghazi	Benghazi	DCIM		Bersus prison	
8	Ganfunda	Benghazi	DCIM	Amhed Alarefy	Building (Mol)	45

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
9	Ghat	Ghat	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
10	Janzour	Janzour	DCIM	Siraj Ashour	Building (Mol)	100
11	Jufra	Jufra	DCIM	Ali Sokni		Not functional
12	Qatrun	Qatrun	DCIM			Not functional
13	Sebha	Sebha	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
14	Shahat	Shahat	DCIM	Ramzy Atia	Building (Mol)	42
15	Souq al-Khamis	al-Khoms	DCIM	Adil Nbaya	Building (Mol)	49
16	Tarhouna	Tarhouna	DCIM			Not functional
17	Tobruk	Tobruk	DCIM	Atia al-Abidy	Building (Mol)	24
18	Ubari	Ubari	DCIM			Not functional
19	Zintan	Zintan	DCIM	Naji al-Bajoush	Warehouse	2104
20	Zliten	Zliten	DCIM			30
DCIM and others (non-official)						
21	Abu Salim	Tripoli	DCIM, Abu Salim Battalion	Fathi al-Kikly		562
22	Ain Zara	Tripoli	DCIM, Militia 42	Tarik Baheej	Building (Mol)	0
23	Ajdabiya	Ajdabiya	Militia		Building (Mol)	13
24	al-Nasr	Zawiya	DCIM, al-Nasr Brigade	Mohamed Rhoma	Warehouse	533

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
				(DCIM) and Mohamed Kushlaw (al-Nasr Brigade)		
25	al-Sabaa	Tripoli	DCIM al-Khouja militia	Imad Dozan		0
26	Ghaser Ben Ghashir	Ghaser Ben Ghashir	DCIM, Tarhouna militia	Abid al-Bast Naas	Building (Mol)	640
27	Gharyan	Gharyan	DCIM, al-Kwasim militia	Abid al-Hameed al-Tunisy	Warehouse, containers	0
28	Kufra	Kufra	Municipal Council, Saria al-Hudud			100
29	Tawila	Sabratha	DCIM, Sabratha Operational Room	Basim Ghrabli	Building (Mol)	0
30	Salahuddin	Tripoli	DCIM, TRB militia	Ahmed al-Warfli	Building (Mol)	0
31	Tajura	Tripoli	DCIM, al-Daman militia	Noor al-Deen al-Gritly	Building (Mol)	800-1000
32	Tarik al-Mattar	Tripoli	DCIM, 301 Brigade	Wajdey al-Montaser	Building (Mol)	400
33	Tarik al-Sikka	Tripoli	DCIM, al-Khoja militia	Naser Hazam	Warehouse, old buildings, new containers	100-650
34	Zuwara	Zuwara	DCIM & General Criminal Investigation Department of Mol	Anwar Bodeeb	Former military prison	500

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
Note: The information in this table was gathered by field teams and was current as at December 2018.						

Media reports state that refugees and migrants, including those intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard, are regularly brought to detention centres (Contreras, 2016; Creta, 2021b; Vice News, 2015). Although the number of detainees fluctuates, arrests – including mass arrests – continue (The Guardian, 2021). In addition, refugees and migrants are in some cases expelled from Libya after their release from detention, without due process, by being transported across the border or left in the desert (United Nations, 2021).

Libya's system of detention has been widely criticised for the inhumane treatment, and even torture, of migrants and refugees. Articles by the media, reports by non-government organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies describe the shocking conditions and human rights violations in DCIM prisons (Wintour, 2019; Urbina, 2022; The Guardian, 2021). In a note to the UN Security Council, "UNSMIL and OHCHR advocate for an immediate end to the systematic use of blanket, arbitrary and indefinite detention in respect of migrants and refugees, and for the gradual closure of all immigration detention centres in the country" (UN Security Council, 2021a). Reports also show that this system of detention is interwoven with the human trafficking networks (Contreras, 2016; Creta, 2021b).

Mehmet Enes Beşer and Fatimah Elfeitori (2018) also describe the human rights violations in official detention centres in Libya. Based on their analysis of information obtained from the reports of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations, they paint a dire picture of arbitrary detention, malnutrition, lack of hygiene, sexual abuse and torture in DCIM prisons. The authors call on the European Union (EU) to avoid encouraging and legitimising local armed groups through bilateral agreements to combat what it considers 'illegal'

migration,²⁰⁰ as it “contributes to the vicious cycle of abuse in the country” (Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018, p. 4).

Hayden (2022) argues that migrants and refugees are locked in official detention centres in Libya as a consequence of the EU’s migration policies. She shows that the EU is supporting the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants and force them back to Libya. They are then locked up indefinitely in detention centres, some of which are run by armed groups.

Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2021) also report abuses in detention centres, highlighting the blurring of the border between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ detention centres. They point out that: “An entire government unit has profited from the trafficking, detainment, and human rights abuse of migrants” (p. 5).

Okoli and Chukwurah (2019) examine how armed groups in Libya contribute to the migration crisis and how European migration policies bolster human trafficking by armed groups in Libya. According to these researchers, local armed groups, which have proliferated in Libya since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, are participating in the commodification of migrants and refugees in the country. Another conclusion of their research is that European policies to combat illegal migration trap migrants in Libya, where they are subjected to slavery and exploitation (Okoli & Chukwurah, 2019).

The European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL) (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021) explain that official detention centres in Libya have been forced to function significantly beyond their capacity limits. According to one expert, the DCIM has become so overloaded that it has urged the Libyan Coast Guard to stop bringing people back to Libya. However, the Libyan Coast Guard has not honoured this request.

²⁰⁰ This use of this term is strongly contested as refugees are not ‘illegal’ *per se*, as they have a right to seek asylum from countries that have signed the Geneva Convention, which includes countries in Europe.

Particularly since February 2021, conditions inside detention centres have further deteriorated and tensions have been heightened, resulting in several violent incidents, including the fatal shooting of migrants and refugees (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021).

According to the head of the Libyan Coast Guard, 99% of migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres in Libya were intercepted at sea (UN Security Council, 2021b, p. 12). However, migrants and refugees are also arrested in Libya while travelling from one place to another or in urban areas (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*). In 2021 and 2022, mass arrests of migrants were conducted by Libyan authorities. On 1 October 2021, Libyan authorities conducted raids in the neighbourhood of Gargaresh, in Tripoli, in what they say was an anti-drug operation. Many migrants and refugees live in this area and an estimated 4,000 were arrested and put in detention centres. This led to protests in front of the Community Day Centre in Tripoli. For three months, around 1,000 migrants camped in front of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) building. Again, on 10 January 2022, in a violent raid, more than 600 migrants and refugees were arrested and transferred to Ain Zara detention facility (Carretero, 2022a; InfoMigrants, 2022). Doctors Without Borders treated 68 migrants who had been injured in the operation (ANSA, 2022).

Eritrean asylum-seekers are generally regarded as eligible for protection, given the political persecution and human rights abuses in Eritrea and the forced indefinite national service. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea has denounced crimes against humanity, which it says are committed “as part of a campaign to instil fear in, deter opposition from and ultimately to control the Eritrean civilian population since Eritrean authorities took control of Eritrean territory in 1991” (OHCHR, 2016). This makes the situation of the Eritrean refugees who are blocked while seeking to reach protection in Europe especially relevant for further investigation.

However, the information on the situation of Eritrean refugees held in Libya is scarce and very little systematic research has been done on their experiences and how the refugees themselves perceive their situation. Hence, the objective of this chapter is to investigate how Eritrean refugees experience and perceive the conditions of detention in official detention centres in Libya. The main research questions is: *What are the experiences of Eritrean refugees in official detention centres in Libya, as perceived by the refugees themselves?*

This is answered in three parts:

Sub-Q.1: *What happens when Eritrean refugees are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard when trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea?*

Sub-Q.2: *What are the conditions in which Eritrean refugees are held in official detention centres in Libya?*

Sub-Q.3: *What is the relationship between Eritrean refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities?*

The next section presents the methodology used to answer these questions. This is followed by the findings. Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Methodology

The study presented in this chapter is part of 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).

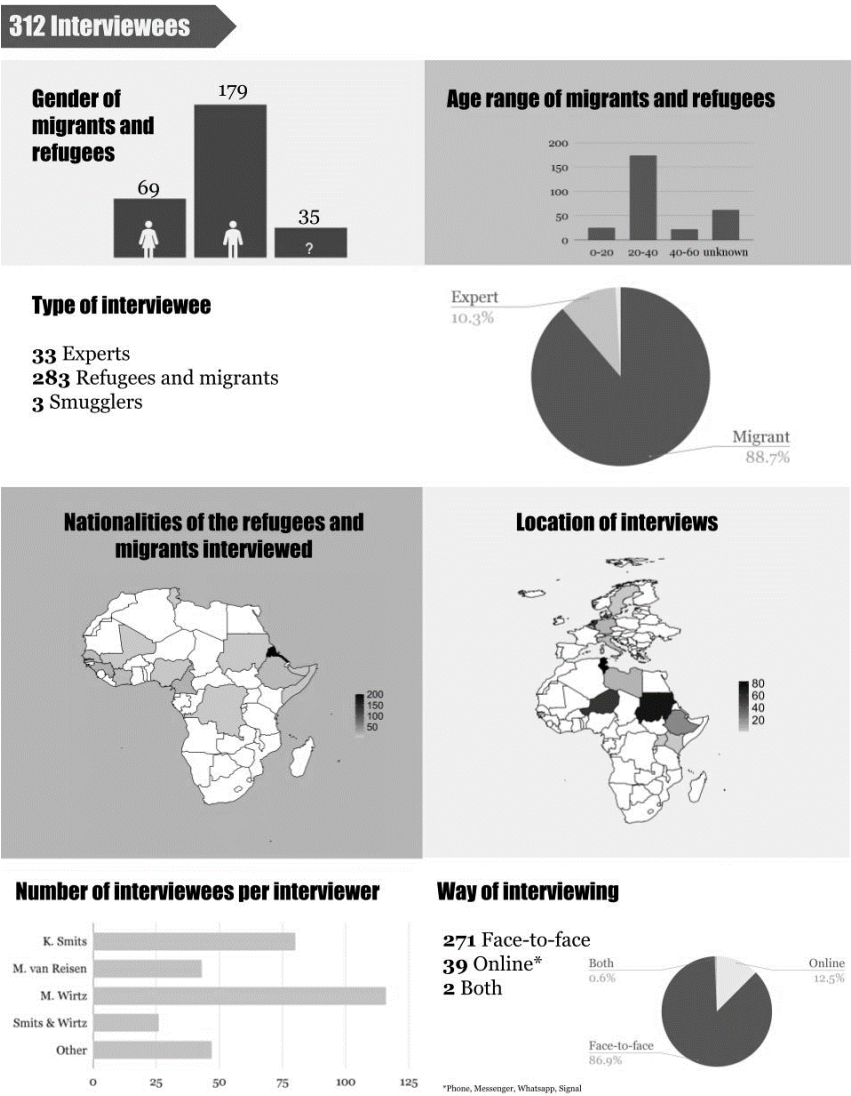
This chapter focuses on the experiences reported by Eritrean refugees, regarding the situation for them in DCIM official detention centres. Most of them reported that they were at some point in a detention facility during the period 2015 to 2020.

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 held, 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) had Eritrean nationality. Others 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).

For the purposes of this chapter, the interviews with Eritrean participants are the main focus; where experiences of other interviewees are used, this is clearly identified. Key information came from three ongoing conversations that took place on WhatsApp with three Eritrean refugees held in Zintan and Qasr bin Ghasir with Van Reisen and Smits in 2018 and 2019. These refugees were able to

access a phone and communicate on a regular basis; they also were able to send pictures from those locations.

Figure 13.1. Overview of interview statistics²⁰¹



²⁰¹ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

After analysis of all the interviews, the interviews of the participants who had been in official detention centres in Libya were coded and labelled according to the dates of detention, name of detention centre, description of locations, human rights abuses mentioned, sexual violence witnessed, smugglers/traffickers/chiefs of places, nationality of human trafficker, people working with human trafficker, interactions with humanitarian organisations, interactions with visitors, access to information, information produced, and feelings mentioned, among other things. This coding and labelling allowed the author to compare across testimonies.

The following sections present the findings of these interviews, in three parts: arrests by the Libyan Coast Guard, conditions in official detention centres, and relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities.

Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard

Desperate, tired, frozen – this is often the situation in which migrants find themselves after a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*). Photojournalist Narciso Contreras pictured migrants on the shore at Tajoura in Libya after having been arrested by Libyan Coast Guard (Contreras, 2016). They are dirty. Some are sleeping on the sand. Migrants and refugees in that situation know that instead of the freedom and victory they had imagined upon reaching Europe, they are now ‘back in hell’. They wait for humanitarian organisations and UN agencies to arrive to provide them with assistance, but instead of helping them, these organisations send them to official detention centres. A refugee recalled the following:

We started travelling [across the Mediterranean Sea] from Libya early in the morning, at 3:00 a.m. We travelled from there. But the Libyan Coast Guard caught us in the sea in the morning. Our zodiac got punched out [deflated] so they arrested us. We thought they were Italians, Europeans. So, we became happy, because everybody was down in the water. As we saw them from far, we did not see the flag. After they came to us, we saw the flag ... Until then, we did not believe that they were Libyans. But they were Libyans and they took us to Tripoli and after that they

divided us. They took me to the hospital, because I became sick at that time. I was shaking. I was shaking [because of the] cold. I was feeling coldness. I got hypothermia. Cold. After that they took me to the hospital, the ambulance brought me to Tajoura [detention centre]. (Interviewee 1085, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sometimes, humanitarian organisations and UN agencies, facing difficult negotiations with the Libyan authorities, have no other choice but to lead the migrants and refugees to detention centres when they ask for help. These are the only places where they can have rare access to provide them with assistance. This generates situations that are hard for the refugees to understand. An Eritrean, who was later evacuated to Niger for transit, explained:

In Misrata, we called a Swedish NGO. We knew that they help Eritreans. [...] The Swedish woman made contact with UNHCR. She got one person from Libya, to bring us to UNHCR. She gave the money to this person – 200 dinars [USD 40]. He will inform UNHCR. After that the UNHCR and the police will bring a car for us. Twenty-three people. One of us was kidnapped and sent to a store. Remaining twenty-two.

I stayed in Misrata for two days there with people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia, also from West Africa. From Misrata, they took us to Gharyan [...], 95 kilometres away. In Gharyan, they gave us to the police, militia [armed groups]. The UNHCR kept us in a prison. Before it was a prison. At that time it was also a prison. UNHCR put us in a prison. Still now UNHCR puts people in prison. But they come to see and advise the people. UNHCR has no place for us. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some migrants and refugees also go to official detention centres by choice. A former translator for an NGO working in Libya indicated:

There were children who had come alone. [Among the detainees] a small percentage had come by themselves because they thought it was better [to be in the detention centre] than to stay on the streets. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

When asked if he thought it was better for a refugee to live on the streets or in a detention centre in Libya, the social worker replied:

In the street, you can hide, find a shelter. [In detention centres] you are insecure in security ... their security. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Conditions in official detention centres

Panic and incomprehension

The first moments after arrival in a detention centre are often described as hard times. There is panic and incomprehension among the refugees. In some instances, refugees state that body searches are carried out. The refugee's possessions are stolen, as they have monetary value for the prison guards:

Some of the [refugees] are registered, others not, but they are working. So [the authorities] know they have some kind of money. So even during the arrest, they will take everything from them. Money, phones, everything. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Even after their entry and some time spent in prison, the belongings of refugees can be stolen. In the following testimonies of Eritrean and Somali refugees, the guards confiscated goods that they had authorised in the past:

I had a phone, but the Libyans took it. They took the phone of everybody because they say we are not allowed to use a phone in the detention centre. I think they don't want us to share the situation. First, they gave us permission to have a phone, but once everybody had a phone, they took it. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

They are beating people. Sometimes. We are using money, for instance, in the prison. We are buying a telephone. If they see your phone, they will take it from you. If they see the money [...], they will take it from you. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

Several interviewees also stated that the goods offered by NGOs or UN agencies to improve their conditions in detention were also stolen by the guards as soon as the humanitarian organisation or UN agency

had left the centre. An Eritrean refugee who was detained in Tariq Al Matar stated:

Sometimes in the prison they gave us clothes, shoes, blanket, soap from UNHCR. But the policemen took it. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions

Locked in big halls, prisons, old schools and even a former zoo (Stephen, 2013), the interviewees described the detention centres as overcrowded:

The people who were beaten there [Tariq Al Matar], it was because they stayed close to the window or to the door, because it is really hot and then they beat everyone. Some people were forced to go out of that place and to work for somebody else. Then a conflict started inside Tripoli. Some bullets started to fly. I don't know who was fighting. It is the city of Tripoli. We went out of the detention centre and we went to the police station. Then, they brought us to Zintan. We were in this place. It was like a store of tanks in the middle of the bush. We were in a bunker. A Libyan man was the chief of that place. It is difficult to know if he was a policeman or a smuggler, because the policemen and smugglers are working together and changing positions all the time. We were around 800 or 900 Eritreans and Somalis in that place. The beating was better there. But, as it was in the bush, we had animals like snakes and scorpions coming inside. It was also cold. I don't remember how long I stayed there. Maybe two months and three weeks. UNHCR was visiting that place. They selected some people to go to Tripoli. I went to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This excerpt, from an interview with an Eritrean who was first detained in Tariq Al Matar and then in Zintan, describes well the situation of refugees in official detention centres.

Sitting on a balcony in front of the sea in Tunis, a former translator for an NGO in Libya has difficulty talking about what he saw in the official detention centres. For him, the right term is not 'detention centre', but 'concentration camp':

[It was in the middle of] nowhere. Surrounded. A whole lot of security. We found some 500 people in the space of 20 square metres. Sometimes there are those who

push the dying back, to get some air. In turn. Men and women, in separate rooms. These are not rooms, they are containers, outside. [There is] no room... No room... And the faces were so pale that it was the same aspect repeating itself over and over again. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The lack of space in the official detention centres was pointed out in many interviews. Overcrowding and lack of water results in sanitary issues and disease. Several interviewees were detained in Tariq Al Matar detention centre and reported that there were more than 1,000 migrants in one room with just four bathrooms, which were usually clogged with dirty water. An Eritrean explained:

In Tariq Al Matar, we stayed three months. These three months, we were about 1,500, 1,600 [people]. Even sometimes 1,700. It is a big hall. For all of those 1,700, [there were] only four toilets. One was not working, leaving three. Even the three, among those 1,700. Imagine! It is not enough. After one week, maybe I can use this toilet. It is really crowded. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

A Nigerian woman who stayed in Zuwarah detention centre for seven months describes the unbearable conditions in which she was detained:

Wah! The conditions in prison are very bad! We don't eat. We don't have a good place to sleep. We sleep on the bare floor. Yes. And hum ... water, we don't bath. It took a lot of time before some journalists came and they changed that. Before that, it was a very bad place, bad odour, not good. [...] [Inside the prison there are] a lot of infections. Skin infections, vagina infections. Everybody suffers! And the men, the men, suffer a lot. A lot. For the women, it is better because we eat twice a day. But the men, if we are having one bread for one woman, then it is half for one person [man]. And it is just once a day. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Many interviewees and journalists described the lack of food in those official facilities. Talking about Abu Issa detention centre, one Somali interviewee stated:

People are so hungry there that they eat Colgate [toothpaste]. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

The way that food is served also shows the lack of respect afforded to detainees. An Eritrean who was detained in Gharyan Al Hamra shared the following:

It is really difficult in that place. You cannot see the sun. They give us the food through a small window. The water, the same. Nobody can go outside. We were in containers. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2019)

Starvation and bad hygiene can lead to the outbreak of disease. In interviews, the disease most mentioned are lice, scabies and tuberculosis. A young Eritrean man who was detained in Qasr bin Ghashir explained:

They did not do any care. The MSF [Doctors Without Borders] came only to distribute the medicine. They don't transfer to hospitals. Because some people are suffering from TB [tuberculosis]. And some people lack haemoglobin. Some people, maybe they lack teeth. Some people suffer from kidney because of no pure water. Just the suffering, you cannot list off. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

There are many Eritrean minors among those imprisoned. One minor of 15 years old said he felt desperate after being taken to many different detention centres. Eventually, he was brought to the hospital with tuberculosis (Interviewee 7024, interview with Stocker, WhatsApp, October 2019).²⁰²

All of the interviewees who were in official detention centres, which includes nearly all of the interviewees for this chapter, agreed that the basic living conditions in the centres are inhumane.

Treatment of women

The safety of women, particularly pregnant women, in official detention centres is not taken into account. The Nigerian woman who testified above delivered in Zuwarah. She recalled the following:

²⁰² 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*.

They took you to the hospital and hum ... you deliver alone. Even if it is in the hospital, it is like in prison. They just keep you on a bed and remove your clothes and tell you to push. Nothing. No injection. No checking. I mean, you need to check, you need to scan. Nothing! [...] They just keep you at a distance. Because we are smelling. We don't bath! We don't take a bath! We don't brush our teeth, we don't change our clothes. We are smelling, so I don't blame them, you see. [...] After the delivery, they just clean that part, the vagina. If you want, you can take a bath. There is no soap. [...] It is just cold water. And then, you go back to the prison, in that same condition! With the baby! (Interviewee 1083, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In addition, this interviewee observed that many women in detention centres miscarried. One woman questioned the real effect of a red tea that was given to them:

You know, women, most of them have babies. They have so many miscarriages because of bad water. There is a red tea they give to us. [...] When women drink that tea, they have a miscarriage, some their baby will die. When they deliver, they deliver dead babies. You can't swallow anything. When you drink this tea, it heats your throat, you can't shout, you can't talk. It weakens all this part. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

Women also face sexual violence on a regular basis. The topic of sexual violence is discussed further in Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*.

Torture and punishment

The interviewees stated that torture is carried out in various ways, for example, by depriving the refugees of food, water and sleep. Refugees are also beaten on a daily basis and subjected to electric shocks. A former translator for an NGO in Libya explained:

Imagine, a torture I heard about was putting [the detainees] in one of the cells for 13 days or more. And then put them directly under the rays of the midday sun. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The same source gave details about whom the torturers were in the detention centres he visited in Sirte, Misrata and Tobruk:

2000: *The torturers are militias [armed groups]. And I also saw some ... and that intrigues me... I also saw some torturers, but they look European. Like bluish eyes. I think they were from Eastern Europe. I also saw Iranians. That I remember. [...] [The torturers were] of all ages. I saw lots of little ones, children.*

Interviewer: *They get paid?*

2000: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Well?*

2000: *Apparently, yes.*

Interviewer: *They seemed to enjoy it?*

2000: *Yes. Above all, there are some children from 12 to 17 years old ... or even less than 12 years old too. [...]*

Interviewer: *All the guards in the prisons are men?*

2000: *Yes.* (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The detainees are beaten to impose discipline. Interviewees reported that refugees are shot or beaten if they do not stay in line in the corridor, if they make too much noise, or if they try to communicate with one another. A Nigerian woman who was in Jawazat prison shared her experience:

If the police hear that you are talking, they are coming and they are beating you. So you don't want to communicate with your wife, nothing. Because, when they come they don't only beat the one that is talking, they beat everybody. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Beatings are also inflicted on detainees because of their religion. Jewish and Christian refugees mentioned cases where expressions of their religion, such as the wearing of crosses or praying, were met with punishment. An Eritrean refugee detained in Tariq Al Matar detention centre said:

When the guards see our crosses, they beat us. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Another Eritrean young man who was imprisoned in Gharyan explained:

They are abusing us with our religion. They said: "You are Christian," like this, this, this. Very bad words. If there are the guards at night, they come to the door, sometimes they open and get inside: "You are masihi [Christian, in Arabic], masihi, masihi", like this. Hitting. Someone catches your hand, and the other is beating. If someone is sick, if you need to take medication: "Hey! Insh'allah tamut", they are saying like this. It means: "I hope you will die". "I hope you will die all of you. You are masihi, things." This is a bad situation. It was very terrible conditions. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The nationality of the detainees is also a factor in the torture inflicted by the guards, especially in the context of civil war in Libya, with different countries involved. The translator who worked for an NGO in Libya remembers such an event:

There had been a small problem in Chad. And they felt that the Chadians had wanted... I don't know, it was a massacre or something like that ... of Libyans. In addition, it was a tribal issue. And anyone coming from Chad or whom they considered to be Chadian, they wanted to [interrogate him to] have information on what had happened. And there you go. Afterwards, the 'festivities' [the torture]. The extent of the atrocities depended on those who carried out the torture, the torturers. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The torture applied by guards in the official detention centres is also sometimes inflicted as a punishment. The dissemination of information about the detention centres is serious misconduct in the eyes of the guards. Phones are generally confiscated and communication with the external world is controlled. However, some detainees still manage to hide and keep a phone inside the prison. An Eritrean refugee said that there was only one hidden phone in Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre where he was held:

0010: The boss didn't allow us to use a phone to speak. [...] But there was one phone they hid from the boss and all the people were using it. [...]

Interviewer: How many people were using that one phone?

0010: *Almost 200, something like this, maybe. Though, I don't know the exact number.*

Interviewer: *And how did you get money on the phone? How did you get the credit?*

0010: *The workers, the police, they entered the money, and are trying to buy the credit or some more time. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)*

Researcher Klara Smits was first contacted by this interviewee when he was in the detention centre. At that time, he managed to share with her the current situation and even pictures of inside the prison. He was also able to make calls, although the connection was often too bad to establish a line for very long. Just by owning a phone in the prison, refugees take a large risk:

Sometimes when [the guards] see some material that is not allowed by them, if they see it, extreme punishment. They are punishing [refugees by beating] at the bottom of the legs. Like this, the bottom of the feet. But already the place and the situation is punishment, because if we are locked, we do not see anything. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Sharing about the conditions in the detention centre also puts the detainees in danger. An interviewee shared the following:

Before I escaped, I had heard rumours from other refugees. They said that people are communicating with journalists, Human Right Watch. And they are posting some news, some fake news about the military. They told someone put it, like those who are speaking English. [The guards] are asking: "Who speaks English? [...]" They know who speaks English and Arabic very well. [...] They call all the [refugees group leaders]. They punished them, they locked them. Sudanese leader. Somali leader... In the office [...]. They took them there, they locked them. They beat them on light and used electric shocks on them and, after, they said: "You have to tell me because you are responsible, you are a leader. You have to tell me who is posting on Facebook, who has a phone, who is communicating with UNHCR outside, those who are outside, in Geneva or wherever there are. No matter if it is a journalist or human rights [advocate]. We need these people." So they said: "We don't know! Someone who has a phone, he can use it. He is hiding it when he is sleeping. He is using it under his bed sheet, so we don't know." (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

An Eritrean interviewee who was detained in Gharyan explained that complaining to humanitarian workers can also lead to punishment:

Complaining about their situation to NGOs, UN agencies, journalists or officials who visit the detention centres can also lead to torture at the end of the visit. "If a foreign person comes, then you can't speak, because you will be punished".

(Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019).

The interview by Van Reisen held over a long period of time with an Eritrean refugee held in Zintan reveals a similar situations. While the refugee was able to take photos sometimes, he had to be extremely careful. And, he was worried that if it were known to those in charge of the camp that he was taking pictures and sending them he would be severely punished, including by being sent to a camp run by armed groups or human traffickers, where the conditions were perceived to be much worse. He also was fearful about attention being drawn to him, and that if he tried to speak to the authorities when they visited, he would be punished. He described experiencing a serious reprimand after having written to officials in international organisations to draw attention to the situation. Hence, this refugee found that, whatever he tried to do, the possibilities as a result of speaking out were very limited and also dangerous (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019).

Protests inside detention centres and shared by phone are also forbidden (see Chapter 17: *Active Agency and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya*). Different interviewees explained how protests and claims were suppressed through violence by guards. Attempts to ask for better living conditions and respect for human rights ended in deadly clashes between detainees and guards. An Eritrean man detained in Tariq Al Matar testified as follows:

The problem was that [the guards] took 20 people to sell them. After another day, they did it again. So if they took 20 people, after 20 people, after another time, they will take us. The UNHCR didn't care about us. We are registered with the UNHCR, but they didn't care about us. They didn't come to check on us. That is why we are angry. Everybody is angry. We decide to fight with them, to break the door and try to go out. They shoot me. You want to see a photo? This is in the

hospital. They tried to kill us with gas. They threw a gas inside a hole, three gases. The guy watching the prison tried to kill us. There is a video. Everybody shared the video. There is my photo on it. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Death

The living conditions in official detention centres are dire and can lead to the death of detainees. As some excerpts above stated, the refugees testify that their lives do not seem to have a lot of value in the eyes of the guards. One Eritrean refugee who was stuck in Zintan detention centre testified that in less than one year, he saw 17 people die in the detention centre. Most of them died of tuberculosis, some of hunger, and one person hung herself. Over WhatsApp, the interviewee kept in touch daily, while updating about the situation in the detention centre:

Three Eritreans are dead now. [...] One lady also, Ethiopian. All by TB [tuberculosis]. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, April 2019)

He noted that the doctors who came had no experience, although eventually he stated that IOM started taking away those who were sick – presumably for treatment. Among the pictures the interviewee managed to send, which he would then immediately delete out of fear of repercussions, were pictures of bodies wrapped in sheets (see Figure 13.2).

Other refugees highlighted that people died because of disease in particular, mostly tuberculosis. An Eritrean man stated:

0011: [...] and they transferred me to Tariq al Matar. [...] Lack of food, lack of toilet, lack of water... everything. There is a lot of people dead because of TB [tuberculosis], because of any disease. We lived with 1,200 people in one hall. A big hall, 1,200 people.

Interviewer: How many people did you see die of tuberculosis?

0011: Month 3 to month 8 [March to August], I see a lot of people, over 20, I don't know. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Other interviewees follow the situation in Libya from a distance, hearing from those who are stuck in detention:

There are my friends in Libya, they are in bad condition. Forty persons dead because of disease – TB [tuberculosis]. There is big problem in Libya. So I speak with them on the telephone. I hear a lot of things. I talk to them on Facebook. I think about them. But UNHCR doesn't care about them. (Interviewee 1006, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The NGO translator interviewed for the purpose of this book explained:

When there are a lot of bodies, they are put in big garbage bags. It was the immigrants who did that. Afterwards, they made a big hole elsewhere, with security and that's it.

There were sometimes some who gave them as food for dogs. I have already seen a human, totally bitten. We could see the bones. [Sigh]. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)



Figure 13.2 Photograph of a dead body in an official detention centre in Libya
(Sent by interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, April 2019)

In general, little information is available about the number of people who die in official detention centres and what is done with their corpses.

Payments

According to many interviews, prisoners are sometimes allowed to pay (the guards or the heads of prison) to get out of official detention centres. The amounts paid are on average between 500 and 2,000 Libyan dinars (USD 110–435) (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019). According to journalist Sara Creta, the payment of ransom for redemption can constitute a real source of income for armed groups ruling official detention centres:

[The authorities] organise an attack, they seize the neighbourhood. They arrest 200 people and they bring them to jail – to the detention centre. And then they say: “OK, if you want to go out, it is 2,000 dinars [USD 435], or 200 dinars [USD 45]”. And that is the price to pay if you want to get out. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some refugees explained they felt that the armed groups were using them as a way to get money. A Sudanese man explained:

I have been on the boat to Europe, the balloon boat. After two days, Libyan militias [armed groups] caught us and sent us to prison – Zawiyah Prison. It was really bad. There, they used us to get money. If we gave them 2,500 dinars [USD 545], then, they would let us go. (Interviewee 1018.1, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp call, October 2019)

And a Guinean man added:

It is advantageous for the militiamen [to have many migrants in prison], because they also sell you as a slave. Or you pay yourself to go out. Example: if they have 1,000 migrants, maybe more than 500 will get out [by paying] the militiamen. They will give 500 euros, 800 euros, it depends. (Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Another Guinean man who managed to escape Zawiyah detention centre explained how he then negotiated the release of his wife, who was still in Zawiyah:

I started working with an Arab, because I do earthenware. But, I had a headache, I couldn't work. The Arabic asked me: "Ma hi mushkilatuk?", "What is your problem?" I told him that my wife is in prison. He told me that it is very easy. Because they can easily get Africans out of prison. He told me to go with him. I told him that I came from this prison and that if the boss of this prison sees me, I can die. He said to me: "OK". Because he had a lot of work, he couldn't take me and put me in jail. The Arabs, when you have worked with them, they will caress you until you finish the job. He left and took my wife out, and then I didn't give him any money [for that]. He admired my work so much. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

A Sudanese refugee in Libya explained how they negotiate to get their friends out of detention centres:

You know here in Libya, we pay money to get someone out of prison. The first thing that we do, we are going to have a deal with someone to get [our friend] out of prison. The deal is on how much money we are going to pay. This is the first thing. And then, where we can meet. This is the second thing. And the third thing is my condition: [...] I am going to tell him: "If you bring my guy, I am going to give you the money". [...]. The person you deal with could be Libyan or the soldier himself or another guy from the nationality. (Interviewee 1028.3, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, 26 February 2022)

As the excerpts above show, the ransoms to get out of the so-called 'official' detention centres are generally much less expensive than the ones paid to get out of the other centre. The two have very different business models. However, in some cases recorded in the interviews, the process of extorting ransom by the guards in the official detention centres is similar to the extortion of ransom by the human traffickers in the unofficial detention centres. One Eritrean man interviewed in Italy said that he paid USD 6,500 to get his nephew out of Al-Mabani official detention centre (Interview 9001-2, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021). He said that he paid the ransom to the police, but refused to explain how. This testimony is the only one collected with such a high amount requested for the ransom. Another interview with a refugee who worked as a translator inside a DCIM detention centre gives insight into human trafficking for ransom inside an official prison:

I was translating for them [the guards], because they are kidnapping West-African people from the road during the night. Those who are working in cafeterias, in every place... They are kidnapping and taking money from them using... They are using electric shocks inside the compound! That place! [...] But nobody knows. They are keeping it a secret in the house. (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

This kind of testimony shows that the border between official detention and human trafficking for ransom is blurred.

Forced labour

Many refugees also stated that in several prisons, Libyan citizens could come and hire prisoners to work for one day or more. The jobs that they are asked to do are mainly cleaning or building houses. Sexual slavery also occurs and is elaborated on in Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*. Payment or rewards are often promised in exchange for the work accomplished, but not always delivered. A refugee explained:

There are some people that are Libyans, but they are militias [armed groups] of that area. They come there and ask: “I need five slaves”. They come in front of the gate of [the prison]. So these people, they are detainees from UNHCR, we are there because of UNHCR, not because of Libyans. [...] Me, I started to work to find a job. Every morning when someone comes there, he says: “We need five eubayd”, which means 5 slaves. “I need five slaves.” Everybody that is hearing that one, they are feeling angry. But we are eating the same food every day. In order to get vegetables or cigarettes, we are following them. Sometimes, they are giving us, sometimes they are saying, “Akab sayara”. Just: “Follow this car, they will bring you to prison.” Without giving you food, without giving you ... (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Several interviewees explained that it is actually during this forced work that they were able to escape from detention. An Eritrean refugee shared the following:

After four months, they took me to work outside. I had to clean. Then, I escaped from the work. Then, I went to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019).

In the testimonies above, refugees are bought from detention centres for only a day and they are brought back in the evening to their cells. It can also happen that they are bought for long periods and have to pay back their employer in labour for their release. A West African man explained:

Sometimes when you're locked up in prison the [Libyans] want to come to the prison, then they ask who is a mason, to get out there. You will accept, you go out there. They send you [to their] home. They will say to you: "OK, I am going to take you out, you stay with me, you work for a few months or a year, after you reimburse me my money." You can imagine the job, you're going to do more than a month, when to get out it's CFA 500,000 or 800,000 [USD 763 or 1,220]. So it is worth a week of work. But I work with him for a year. He's the one who will win with you. It's like slavery. (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Forced work occurs outside of the detention centres, but also inside the walls of the prison. As explained earlier in this chapter, refugees can be forced to work in the detention centre (e.g., cook or clean) and even participate in conflict. One interviewee worked as a translator for the guards (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). An Eritrean detainee recalled that the chief of Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre used to take prisoners to work in his house. He said that refugees are not paid for their work, and that sometimes they are taken randomly. However, he also said that refugees may agree to carry out such labour for free just to spend some time outside the prison and get some fresh air (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Sold to human trafficking networks

Libyan authorities, through the Libyan Coast Guard and DCIM detention centres play a key role in human trafficking (Contreras, 2016). Numerous testimonies show that migrants and refugees are regularly sold to human traffickers. The testimony of an Eritrean refugee met as part of this research confirmed this:

I will tell you a story. One ship was caught by the Libyans – this is a true story. The ship was caught by the Libyan navy. When they caught the ship, they came near

the sea. The UNHCR took them to Khoms. After that, those people waited for a long time. After that, the boss did something; the people, they sold them, to Bani Walid. The man that took the people was the worst man in Libya. So the persons were underground – they tried to put them, they tried to ... even two people or one was killed. He asked for 20,000 [US] dollars for one person. Eighteen people – he asked 20,000 for each one. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

It is not only when migrants and refugees are transported between the beach or the port to the detention centre that human traffickers can get new victims. Testimonies collected from Eritrean refugees show that human traffickers can also buy migrants and refugees from the police or directly from detention centres. A number of Eritrean refugees interviewed confirmed this:

We were arrested by the policemen. They have communication with the connection man. They took me to Misrata's police station. Another connection man knew this place. His name is Abdusalam. 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. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

When we entered the prison, some connection men made contact with the soldiers to ask to buy us. But all of us, we said: "Me I stay in prison. If you want me out, you have to kill me". We all agreed. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

They told us once, they need to take 50 migrants from Eritrea to sell them to the smugglers. But we asked them: "What do those people want? Why do you want us to go with them?" He said some bad words to us. Then [we said]: "Yeah. Tell us. If you need some people, tell us for what reason you want to use them". Because we know if some policemen take people, sometimes they sell them to smugglers. They never come back to the prison. So we asked them. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

According to some testimonies, large-scale kidnappings also take place in official detention centres. It is not clear from those testimonies who the perpetrators are. The case below happened in Gharyan Al Hamra detention centre around the end of 2017. It was

described by two different Eritrean refugees met at different periods in different countries:

One day, some people came to kidnap us. Their faces were covered. They broke the gate by shotgun. Some people were kidnapped, but we managed to escape. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Suddenly, 5 a.m. morning, some smugglers came. Those are... I don't know. Mafia. I have seen only people like this in movies. They are covered. They have masks on their faces. They have guns. They open the door with one shot. They shoot and open the door. "Emsbi, Emsbi." "Go, go, go, go" to the car. They have two big trucks. They bring all the computers and cameras in that prison. Then, they came to that room where we are living. Then, most of the rooms, they opened it. We were shouting. Really, really shouting. We didn't have any opportunities. There is not someone who can fight against [them for] us. Even the chief of that prison. Even the members. They were not there. We were left alone. About 100 people, they took them. Most of them were Somali. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As the research stands, no information has yet been found about what happened to those who were kidnapped from official detention centres.

The above testimonies show that detainees in official prisons can be sold to human traffickers, as future victims of human trafficking for ransom. They can also be sold to traffickers who organise the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Journalist Sara Creta explained:

[Migrants] told me [that human traffickers] were directly coming to the centre to pick up the people to put them at sea. [This happens] in Tajoura. In Zintan it is the same. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

A refugee contacted in Libya stated the same:

In the prison where I was, Abu Issa prison, some smugglers come to buy people. If they are bad smugglers, they will bring you to Bani Walid. If they are good, they will bring you to the sea and ask you to pay again to be pushed [sent to sea]. (Interviewee 1027.2, interview with Wirtz, Messenger phone call, August 2020)

The connection between the Libyan Coast Guard, those running official detention centres, and the human traffickers is very problematic. The EU is financing the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent what it considers ‘illegal migration’ – although not all people on the move are ‘illegal’, as refugees have a right under international law to seek asylum in Europe. The Libyan Coast Guard ‘sells’ migrants and refugees to human traffickers – they hand them over to the traffickers for money and, hence, can be considered part of the human trafficking network. For refugees, this is very frustrating and several argue that the EU is responsible for their fate. An Eritrean man and a Somali man shared the following:

We are suffering more than anything. And nobody takes responsibility. This is a shame on the EU. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, December – April 2019)

Even Europeans, they are working with the Libyans. They are giving money to the Libyan Coast Guard, which is selling us to Bani Walid. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One Eritrean interviewee suspected that the Libyan Coast Guard may have sold other refugees returned from the sea together with him directly to traffickers, although he could not be sure:

0010: [They brought us] to Qasr bin Ghashir. Unfortunately, 38 persons from [among] us, they are kidnapped by the Libyan Coast Guard.

Interviewer: What happened to them?

0010: Actually, we don't know what happened to them.

Interviewer: 38 people taken by the Libyan Coast Guard? Do you know why those people were taken by the Libyan Coast Guard and not others?

0010: Just separately by 30 people, 38 people, separate people like this. Unfortunately, the 38 people they didn't come with us in the Bin Gashir detention centre. They were sold to other smugglers. Actually, we think that maybe they were kidnapped, but we don't have an idea; but, sometimes, they do things like this. Some are going back to the detention centre and some are kidnapped in order to take money from them. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The refugees are trapped in a cycle from which it is very hard to escape. If they finally get the chance to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought to official detention centres – or sold to the human traffickers – and the cycle starts again.

Caught in violent conflict

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the security situation in Libya has been unstable (see Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*). Migrants and refugees travelling across the country are caught in the middle of conflicts and civil wars fought between different military groups. Even in prison, their safety is not guaranteed. Official detention centres are ruled by armed groups and are often located close to – and sometimes inside – military bases or military targets. An Eritrean refugee described Qasr Bin Ghashir detention centre, in Tripoli as follows:

Our place is in a big war zone. In our place, our compound, there is the material [...] and the guns [which are stored] inside our compound. [...] They [Libyan armed groups] prepare the guns and everything inside the compound. [...] So they try and test the guns every day. The sounds are extremely [loud]. [...] We no longer think about the food and small things, we think about when we will escape from this war. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

On 23 April 2019, Qasr Bin Ghashir detention centre was raided by armed men and detainees were shot at (Amnesty International, 2019). At least 12 ended up in hospital. One of the detainees who spoke with Amnesty International (2019) explained that their phones were taken by the attackers and that they were being shot at afterwards. Later, on 2 July 2019, Tajoura, another migrant detention centre, was bombed. At least 44 migrants and refugees died and over 130 had severe injuries (Wintour, 2019). According to the spokesman for the Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar, their target was a camp run by armed groups nearby (Wintour, 2019). One of the Eritrean

interviewees was in touch with people inside the centre when the attack happened:

Yesterday in the midnight [there was an] air strike – twice within 5 minutes. Forty people are dead and 80 injured. It's so heart breaking. (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, March-August 2019)

Some detention centres have also been closed due to their proximity to war zones. In 2018, Abu Salim detention centre was abandoned by guards fleeing clashes and, for more than 48 hours, about 8,000 migrants and refugees stayed locked in the prison without food and water (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; Trew, 2018). Several interviewees also stated that something similar happened around October, November 2018 in Tariq Al Matar detention centre. An Eritrean explained:

The war happened and the guards left us and we escaped from that place because it was really bad and everybody moved. Everybody broke the door and went out. These 1,500 people started walking in the street. And me and others were separated from the others and going our way. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As some of the official detention centres are ruled by armed groups, migrants and refugees are also sometimes forced to engage in the conflict. The UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel stated: “Some people who were in detention camps in Libya have reported that they were given the choice, stay in the camp for an unknown period of time, or be sent to the front to fight” (Wallis, 2017).

An interviewee who had been detained in Tajoura detention centre explained how he was asked to work for the armed group. He started with cleaning rooms in the military buildings of the compound. Then, he was told to clean weapons as well. Eventually, he was forced to take part in the war:

I was working for them cleaning the weapons and loading the weapons even during the war. The first war, I was there. They forced me to follow them to the battlefield. I was sharing food for the militias [armed groups] – those who were fighting. [...] When they ambushed somebody, we would follow them. And they tell us to search their pockets, and bring anything that is inside. They stay away. [...] If we are

finding money on a dead body, we give it to them. (Interviewee 1091, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

After a while, the interviewee did not want to work for the armed group anymore. However, he was told that he had to work for them for the rest of his life and was not allowed to go back to the prison.

So, as I was working there, I was working there every time, they were forcing me. Even ... as I was working for them, the second war came. The last war that happened last year, between Haftar and these guys. And again that one, I was there. (Interviewee 1091, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

The armed groups also work with the mercenaries from other sub-Saharan countries, who joined the conflict willingly. About 3,000 Sudanese men are reported to be fighting on the side of the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar (Burke & Salih, 2019). Sudanese mercenaries are also involved in smuggling activities, which blurs the difference between those who were forced to take the weapons and those who did it by choice (Burke & Salih, 2019).

According to a translator who used to work for an NGO in Libya, migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres are also sold to serve as mercenaries in other countries:

The Libyans are there to run their business. They were dealing with the smugglers to bring sub-Saharan Africans there and [...] they directed [some of] them towards Saudi Arabia to fight against the Yemenis, towards the Emiratis also to fight against the Yemenis. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities

As official detention centres are under the control of the DCIM, actors like I/NGOs, UN agencies, journalists, embassies and representatives of authorities can have access to these centres. However, as will be discussed in this section, the Libyan administration does not encourage this access and it can have repercussions for the detainees. Having raised this point, this section

elaborates on the assistance received by refugees imprisoned in official detention centres and the lack of trust they have of I/NGOs and UN agencies. Finally, resettlement and voluntary return will be examined as a potential solution for Eritreans refugees to escape Libya.

Lack of access

Libya has not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees or its 1967 Protocol. These document sets out, among other things, the obligations of states to protect refugees. But in Libya, there is a legal vacuum on asylum. To justify their presence on the ground, humanitarian actors must constantly negotiate with the authorities. Sources, who preferred to stay anonymous, explained that visas to Libya are hard to obtain for staff of I/NGOs, UN agencies, and journalists. Once on the ground, the security situation complicates travels within the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions made visits to some detention centres all but impossible for long periods of time.

Those who obtain a visa and who manage to travel within the country, despite the context, have to be patient in dealing with Libyan bureaucracy and gaining access to prisons (Contreras, 2016). Sara Creta, a journalist who specialised in migrants and refugees in Libya explained:

Everything needs to be negotiated and needs to be negotiated on a daily basis. So this means that I may have the agreement with this colonel: “Yes you can film”. But then the night before there was a protest, or there were people who were killed or anything is happening, so then you are not allowed to film. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Official detention centres open and close their doors often, which also complicates access to them and any follow-up by external actors. Some prisons, located further from the capital, are also difficult for NGOs and UN agencies to access. The refugees locked up in these centres feel abandoned. A Somali refugee shared the following:

In the prison where I was, one week ago, they killed seven people! If you die there, as it is far away from the cities, no one will know. This prison is in the bush. (Interviewee 1027.2, interview with Wirtz, Messenger phone call, August 2020)

An Eritrean refugees said:

We wanted to go to Tripoli, because we saw everything. All the people are resettled from Tripoli, but we were in Gharyan, in a far place. We thought that problem made us far from UNHCR and everything. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Even when access is granted to external actors, it is under the strict surveillance of the authorities. Sara Creta explained:

Even if you are allowed to film, there will be someone next to you with a gun, and telling you: "You film this, you don't film that." [...] If media don't have access and if access to media is reduced, we cannot understand what is going on, we cannot have an independent report on what the conditions exactly are. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

An Eritrean refugee explained how the visits of external actors can be carefully prepared by the guards of official detention centres:

When I entered Tariq Al Matar, I was afraid because there were many, many people of different nationalities. There were almost 1,500 people in one store. [...] UNHCR came once a week. When UNHCR was about to come, the Libyan policemen took all the Eritreans outside. They will say: "These people are free". You understand? There are many, many Europeans who come to see you in that place. So when they are leaving, all the people will enter the store. When they have finished their work, they start to beat us. "Go!" "Enter!" When you are praying, [they] beat [you]! When you need to sleep, [they] beat [you]! They have problems of water, problems of medical. Some people are sick. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, talking to 'foreign visitors' can be perceived by the guards as gross misconduct and is often punished by beating after the departure of the visitor (humanitarian worker, journalist or other official). An Eritrean refugee explained:

Even if you talk to someone who was coming, if the police see you talking with that person, after that, when they leave that place, when they are alone, the police will come to you and say: "Come, come. What were you talking about with that white people?" They hit us many times. Even they lock us up alone. So we were afraid. We could not talk in front of them. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

This young Eritrean recalled how frustrating it was to be unable to speak with visitors in Tariq Al Matar detention centre:

They told us that white people were coming. But we didn't know what they wanted. We thought they needed to talk to us. They needed to see our situation. Even we saw them. We were locked up, but we saw them. What did they mean? What do they need the chief to inform them? We were locked. We cannot speak freely with them. We know our pain. But we didn't have any opportunity to talk to them face-to-face. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The situation is also very hard for the visitors to the detention centres, because they know that the ones who agree to talk to them might be beaten after having delivered their testimony. Sara Creta, who was able to get information from a refugee detained in Tajoura confirmed the following:

The information I collected speaking with this fellow's friends in Tajura, by hidden phone, they are all extremely scared to speak about this, because they are so afraid of what could happen to them. They told me: "He was beaten in front of us, like a snake". And he could not even stand up after they had been beating him, and then he was brought to this separate cell, where he is now staying with other guys that either have tried to escape from the centre or so on. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Despite the risk, some interviewees try to find ways to report on their situation:

Some people within the prison smuggled a phone which people could use. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

According to this interviewee, the refugees use this phone to share photos, videos, protest and information with their friends, families, activists and journalists (see Chapter 17: *Active Agency, Access and Power*:

Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya). An Eritrean refugee noted that a friend of his shared a picture on Facebook to ask for help when they were together in a detention centre (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, July 2019). Many refugees interviewed for this book reported exchanging information and pictures with one another about what happens in other detention centres in Libya as well. For example, videos about the Tajoura bombing in July 2019 were shared widely among the refugee community.

Assistance received

Many reports exist on the activities of I/NGOs and UN agencies in official detention centres in Libya. The point of this section is not to enumerate all of them, but to inform the reader of the kind of assistance provided, as highlighted by the interviewees. Several refugees told about the non-food and personal hygiene items – such as blankets, mattresses, clothes, shampoo, soap or toothpaste – provided by I/NGOs and UN agencies, when they manage to have access to official detention centres in Libya. Primary healthcare and psychosocial support are also provided, as well as COVID-19 vaccinations.

A young Eritrean woman recognised that because UNHCR was more present in Abu Salim detention centre, her living conditions were better than other places in Libya where it was not working (Interviewee 1016, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Some interviewees also underlined that thanks to the UNHCR mediation, they could access information and get in touch with their families, even though they were detained in Libya or stuck in Niger. An Eritrean refugee remembered that:

[The organisations] came with a telephone. They took me outside and they gave me a telephone to call my family. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 2019)

A Somali refugee explained:

MSF [came] every two weeks. [...] If you wrote a letter to give to someone outside, they would send it. They would not cheat you or, for example, treat you bad.
(Interviewee 1084, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

UNHCR also helps particularly vulnerable detainees to be freed. This type of procedure is extremely rare, as it requires the approval of prison officials and strong advocacy (Carretero, 2022). Resettlement and voluntary return are organised by UNHCR and IOM. Those programmes will be explored further later in this section.

I/NGOs and UN agencies have advocated for many years for the closure of official detention centres and published numerous valuable reports denouncing the abuses perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya.

Distrust

Despite the support provided by I/NGOs and UN agencies, and even though some refugees stated their living conditions were better when these organisations were present in detention centres in Libya, many voiced distrust in relation to the staff of these organisations. There is a widespread sense of frustration towards UN agencies among migrants and refugees in Libya. The interviewees expressed their frustration over the perceived unfairness, especially in priorities for resettlement. They feel that these organisations do not care about them, but rather their own reputation. A Guinean man explained:

[Talking about IOM] No registration. Sometimes they repatriate people to show international opinion that they are working. But it's the opposite. IOM is going to prison every two weeks. Or sometimes they don't even come for a month.
(Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

A Somali refugee argued:

They don't even want to register us. They are wasting their time. They are just writing the name of the fathers, for two persons and after two weeks later, they come back and they will ask you the name of your mother. They will return back again. After five months, or six months, they will come back to you, they will start again to register

another person. (Interviewee 1092, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Among the grievances of the refugees are the infrequency of visits by UN agencies and the difficulty in reaching them to call for help. An Eritrean refugee in a transit centre in Libya reported that he:

[...] contacted the EU and UNHCR on Twitter and by email, [but] they didn't respond to my claims. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, January 2019).

A Somali refugee similarly stated:

I have the number of three organisations: Libyan Red Crescent, IRC, ... There are a lot of NGOs. But if we call them, they don't come. They will give you another number and say: "Call this person". Then this person will give you another number again... Until you get tired! One of my friends has TB [tuberculosis]. He is not breathing. I called and I said: "There is a guy here, he can't breathe. He is not eating. I am living in Abu Salim". They gave me another number, then at the other number, they gave me the number of the first person I had called. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

The question of language is another issue that affects communication between refugees and I/NGOs and UN agencies. Many refugees do not speak Arabic, French or English. Some refugees offer their services to translate for their compatriots, but the accuracy level of the translator and the question of trust remains a problem. An Eritrean refugee explained:

You cannot trust the translator. But it's not a problem from the translators. There is a problem with translating. The problem is from the UNHCR. The translators are not from our country. They are from Ethiopia. Sometimes, the Ethiopian translators cannot understand your language. Sometimes the Tigrinya [they speak] is not the same as us [what we speak]. He cannot understand Tigrinya very well. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

In some cases, the interviewees raised the fact that they have no say whatsoever about what is published about them or about their story. In the following interview excerpt, an Eritrean refugee is complaining about posts shared by Libyan forces and by humanitarian

organisations. For him, who had escaped from the hands of human traffickers and who was ‘saved’, only to be locked up in an official detention in Benghazi, stories shared on social networks are not telling the truth:

One soldier took a photo of us and shared it on social media. After that, in the morning, the Red Crescent came to us and took us by car to Benghazi. Then, the soldier said in front of us, recording us a video: “We saved these people from smugglers, we do like this, we did like this”. Then he was sharing it on social media. [Later], the immigration did the same. They recorded us and said: “We did like this and like this and like this”, on social media. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Distrust is particularly expressed toward local workers in these organisations and their suspected relations with the prison guards. Journalist Sara Creta described the following:

MSF has local doctors, but they are Libyans, so they are not trusted. Even local staff of UNHCR are not trusted. IOM is not trusted. We do understand this, I think. And even if I am on the ground with a Libyan colleague, or a Libyan translator or fixer [facilitator], I will ask them to step away when I am doing an interview. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

And a Somali interviewee said that:

They are just there to waste their time, making their stories with the soldiers... They are the same people. But if you complain... For instance, once the Dutch Embassy, or something like that, came there. When we told them our problems, the UNHCR informed the Libyan soldiers, the militias [armed groups] [who talked with them]. Because UNHCR [...] they will say: “This man is talking about you, about your soldiers.” [...] UNHCR, you can’t tell them a secret. (Interviewee 1095, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Two interviewees referred to official detention centres as ‘UNHCR prisons’. The lack of communication between the staff or humanitarian organisations and migrants and refugees feeds the feeling of distrust. In many cases, the refugees have been brought to detention centres under the eyes of NGOs and UN agencies, who

were on the shore when they were repatriated, after their arrest on the Mediterranean Sea.

It has to be noted here that migrants and refugees imprisoned in Libya face daily abuse and human right violations. The fact that external actors such as NGOs, UN agencies, journalists or state actors come to visit the prisons and see the conditions in which they are held, but that the situation does not change, is extremely concerning.

Resettlement and ‘voluntary’ return

In 2007, UNHCR started to evacuate ‘particularly vulnerable’ people from Libya, via Niger and Rwanda, as part of an emergency evacuation programme to resettle them in so-called ‘safe’ countries in Europe and North America (UNHCR, 2021a). In Niger and Rwanda, refugees are placed in transit camps while waiting for their applications to be processed (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*).

Priority for resettlement is given to ‘most vulnerable’; this usually means women, children or sick people. This selection causes confusion and feeds feelings of distrust towards UN agencies. An Eritrean refugee contacted by phone while he was in a detention centre in Libya explained:

[The UNHCR came and resettled] Seven overages; four males and three females. The UN forgets people who are between 32 and 45 years old. They don’t see that we have been living here for more than eight months. And they pick newcomers who have been here for maybe two months. [...] UNHCR is slowly killing us. [...] The UNHCR registers people to unregister them. (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, April 2019)

Some interviewees said that they suspected corruption, for example, that UNHCR workers are bribed to register some over others. An Eritrean refugee stated:

Those who come registered don’t have priority. For instance, those who have registered on 15 October 2017 still, up to now, they are waiting in a bad situation. There are also so many Eritreans who are overage, but registered as underage. No one complains about them from UNHCR members. Even ladies who are single have

registered as married, fakey. (Interviewee 3003, private messages with Mirjam Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 2019)

The same interviewee reported that a person who had died had his identity stolen, and someone else was registered in his name. Among the refugees, there is a feeling of broken promises. “The UNHCR is playing with our cases” is a statement that was made by several interviewees. Many said that they waited for months in official detention centres with the hope of being resettled, but nothing happened. All of the refugees feel that they have the right to be resettled, after what they have been through. As of 1 October 2021, UNHCR estimates that there are 41,681 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Libya; 6,544 refugees and asylum seekers were resettled or taken to a third country between 2017 and October 2021. The UNHCR resettles an average of 1,636 individuals per year, so it would take around 32 years to resettle everyone (UNHCR, 2021c).

Another possibility to escape Libya is voluntary return to one’s country of origin. IOM offers this option and has returned tens of thousands of migrants and refugees. But for Eritreans, this option is not possible, as they face prison and re-enlistment in the national service upon arrival in Eritrea. There are also suspected connections between the Eritrean government and human traffickers for ransom (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). One refugee shared the following:

Another West African from Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin... These countries have embassies. The embassy will come here, he will make some processes and he will return back. But Eritrean and Somali and Ethiopian people cannot go back to their country because they have political problems. Maybe the government will say: “It’s free”. But it’s not free there. Every person when they go to Eritrea, they have only prison. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

One Eritrean interviewee explained that his embassy paid him a visit when he was in prison. However, he did not trust them:

When I was in Tariq Al Matar, Eritrean officials came to say: “Now there is peace. Go back to your country”. But every person cannot accept and go back, because they will be put in prison or be killed by the government [once in Eritrea]. That is

why all the people are afraid. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Despite this, some rare Eritreans decide to benefit from voluntary return. The authors have spoken to one refugee who returned to Eritrea to later flee the country again, as well as to a journalist who has spoken to three more people who did the same. The people who made the choice to return did not do so not because they expected a safe return, but out of desperation. One Eritrean interviewee stated:

I would rather die in my country than here. (Interviewee 0019, interview with Smits, face-to-face, November 2019)

Returning to Eritrea poses a great risk for refugees. This means that, with the small number of places available for resettlement, the only option left for Eritreans to escape Libya is to flee to other countries via land borders or across the Mediterranean Sea. If they choose this second option, they risk death during the crossing or being arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought back to Libya and this never-ending cycle.

Discussion

This chapter describes the tip of the iceberg of the situation facing migrants and refugees in Libya. From the interviews emerges a frightening picture of detainees in the official detention centres being kept in unsanitary conditions, without enough food or safe water, and beaten, punished, raped and tortured. The interviews also describe refugees dying from disease and being killed while in detention. These findings correspond with numerous other reports published by research groups, journalists, humanitarian organisations and UN Agencies (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020; 2021; Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018; Creta, 2021b; ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; El Taguri & Nasef, 2021; Hayden, 2022; OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2016; 2018). On the basis of 1,300 first-hand accounts and after regular monitoring visits to eleven immigration detention centres in Libya, OHCHR and UNSMIL observed:

Severe overcrowding, lack of proper ventilation and lighting, inadequate access to washing facilities and latrines, constant confinement, denial of contact with the outside world, and malnutrition. Conditions lead to the spread of skin infections, acute diarrhoea, respiratory tract-infections and other ailments, and medical treatment is inadequate. Children, including those separated or unaccompanied, are held together with adults in similarly squalid conditions. UNSMIL has also documented torture and other ill-treatment, forced labour, rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by DCIM guards with impunity. The fact that women are held in facilities without female guards further facilitates sexual abuse and exploitation. UNSMIL staff found that female detainees are routinely subjected to strip searches by or under the gaze of male guards. (OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2018, p. 5)

The majority of interviewees explained that they ended up in official detention centres after having been arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, which was also pointed out by many journalists and researchers. OHCHR and UNSMIL write:

[After having faced the perilous crossing of Libya], the journey continues with the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossings, increasingly ending in interception or rescue by the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and then transfer back to Libya where migrants face indefinite detention and frequent torture and other ill-treatment in centres unfit for human habitation. (2018, p. 4)

The refugees interviewed for this research said that their possessions were stolen after their arrest. Other researchers also denounced particularly traumatic body searches:

These searches often include internal cavity searches – sometimes susceptible to amount to the crime of rape – and are carried out on arrival at a new detention centre or place of captivity or transit to find and steal money and phones from migrants and refugees. (ECCHR et al., 2021, p.37)

Killings have been reported in official detention centres. The interviewees said that many die in detention. Little is known about what is done with the corpses of the detainees. Testimonies describing detainees being shot at when they tried to escape are not rare. On 8 October 2021, six detainees were killed by the guards of Al-Mabani detention centre while they were trying to escape; 24

others were injured. IOM stated: “Some of our staff who witnessed this incident describe injured migrants in a pool of blood lying on the ground. We are devastated by this tragic loss of life,” (IOM, 2021). The incident led to demonstrations in front of the UNHCR office in Tripoli. Thousands of migrants and refugees gathered to ask to be evacuated from Libya (Magdy, 2021).

In addition, migrants and refugees are prevented from telling their story to those outside the detention centre. They are punished if found using phone and face retribution if they talk to visiting journalists, researchers or staff from humanitarian organisations.

The migrants and refugees in detention are also caught up in the violent conflict that afflicts Libya, which leaves them even more fearful, distressed and vulnerable. One refugee explained how he was forced to work as a mercenary for the guards. The findings of this chapter correspond with other events that have been reported. On 20 June 2021, an explosion occurred in Abu Rashada detention centre in Gharyan. Satellite images collected by Middle East Eye show how the compound where migrants and detainees are detained looks like a military base, with armoured vehicles parked in front of the buildings (Creta, 2021b). Survivors said that the explosion was caused by a spark in the ammunition depot. This was denied by the authorities, who stated that the blast was caused by a gas canister and that no people were injured. Other witnesses said that many people were injured in the explosion and that a hundred died (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021).

The findings of this research suggest that refugees may be sold on to human traffickers, from official detention centres. This finding corresponds with information from other sources. Most strikingly, the number of refugees does not add up. There is a discrepancy between the number of people intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard (according to the UNHCR, 27,551 people were arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard and the General Administration for Coastal security between January and October 2021; UNHCR, 2021b) and the number in official detention centres. Although the actual number of detainees is likely to be much higher, only 7,000 migrants and refugees were registered in DCIM detention centres in October 2021

(ECCHR *et al.*, 2021). In an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Federico Soda, IOM head of mission in Libya, claims that “the figures do not stick” (Urbina, 2022):

The difference undoubtedly corresponds to all those who end up in these improvised secret prisons, managed by smugglers and militiamen, and forbidden access to humanitarian workers. (Urbina, 2022)

The suspicious disappearance of migrants and refugees has been denounced by many humanitarian organisations (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020).

Once the migrants have been repatriated by the Libyan Coast Guard and the NGOs have done their work with the survivors, the procedure is to take them directly to the official detention centres. Although NGOs, UN agencies, journalists, embassies and representatives of authorities can have access to those official detention centres, this access is dependent on the security situation and the good willing of Libyan bureaucracy. Journalists and humanitarian organisations regularly complain about the consequences of the difficulties they face in accessing official detention centres. The newspaper *Libération* wrote: “As the only witnesses to the abuses [committed in detention centres], NGOs, such as MSF, are often considered undesirable by the prison masters or their superiors” (Macé, 2021). In July 2021, for example, MSF lost its access to peripheral detention centres in central-western Libya following the suspension of authorisations by the central authorities (Macé, 2021).

This intensifies the lack of trust expressed by migrants and refugees towards NGOs and UN agencies. All Eritrean refugees interviewed stated that they felt abandoned by the UNHCR and that not enough was being done for them. The disappointment of migrants and refugees towards NGOs and UN agencies is expressed in many press articles.

The documentary *Libya: No Escape from Hell* (Creta, 2021a) shows the frustration of refugees over the selection of refugees for resettlement. This was particularly intense after the bombing of the Tajoura prison

in 2019, after which the UNHCR evacuated some refugees to the Gathering and Departure Facility (GDF) in Libya, while the others, having nowhere else to go, walked there.

The interviews indicate that the treatment of Eritrean refugees in official detention centres differs from the treatment of other migrants and refugees (although this needs to be further explored). There are several aspects that distinguish Eritrean refugees from other migrants:

- Eritrean refugees cannot benefit from support of their Embassy or from IOM voluntary return programme, as they would put their life in danger by returning to their country.
- Eritreans are considered refugees. As a Somali interviewee explained, in some detention centres, they are put in a separate room with those who are generally considered refugees by UNHCR: “Room number three is for Eritrean and all of those who need to be registered by UNHCR [...]. Sudanese, Eritreans and Somali are in the same room because these people are refugees, real refugees” (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020).
- Eritreans are among the nine nationalities eligible for the Emergency Transit Mechanism and have a chance (even if small) to be evacuated out of Libya by the UNHCR and resettled in a third country.²⁰³
- Eritreans have an important monetary value in the hands of human traffickers, for various reasons, which are elaborated on elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). Hence, they are at more risk of being sold to human traffickers by the guards of official detention centres.

²⁰³ UNHCR is registering individuals from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen. Almost 60% of migrants living in Libya come from Niger (20%) Egypt (18%) Chad (15%) and Nigeria (6%) (Bonnet & Hartpence, 2021).

- Many Eritreans do not speak Arabic, English or French, which can make it difficult for them to understand what is going on and what the guards of the prison are saying.
- Christian Eritreans face discriminations in official detention centres on the basis of their religion.

This chapter is based on the first-hand testimonies of people who have been incarcerated in official detention centres in Libya. The extent to which the testimonies triangulate is remarkable. During the research, different people were interviewed in different places (mainly Tunisia, Niger and the Netherlands) at different times (between 2019 and 2020). Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews showed that they were describing the same detention centres and experienced the same human rights abuses. Nine of the interviewees were actually in Tariq al Matar at the same time, in January 2018. They describe the same conditions in different words. One interviewee was also, accidentally, interviewed twice: In April 2019 by Morgane Wirtz, and in July 2019 by Klara Smits. Although the words are slightly different, his testimony is the same.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to assess the conditions in official detention centres, particularly DCIM centres, from the perspective of the detainees. Insufficient food and water, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions lead to the outbreak of diseases like tuberculosis, lice and scabies. Pregnant women lack assistance when delivering and access to medical care is scarce. Diseases, as well as mistreatment, cause deaths in detention centres.

Refugees in official detention centres face torture including by deprivation of food, water and sleep. Beatings and sexual violence are common. The use of electric shocks was reported by several interviewees. Torture is applied as a form of punishment, a way to ensure discipline, to make the detainees stay in line and remain silent, on the basis of their religion or nationality, and to humiliate the detainees. Dissemination of information about the situation in detention centres is met with harsh punishments including beatings

and detention in a separate cell. Escape attempts can be dealt with by shooting at (and killing) the detainees.

The guards of official detention centres are making money from the detainees by stealing their possessions, through the money paid to get out of prison, and by selling them to human traffickers. This creates a never-ending cycle that traps migrants and refugees in Libya. To fight against what it considers ‘illegal migration’, the EU finances the Libyan Coast Guard, which intercepts and arrest migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. After they are arrested, migrants and refugees are sent (back) to detention centres, from where they may again fall into the hands of human traffickers. Hence, the EU, through its policy of funding the Libyan Coast Guard, is exacerbating the predicament of the migrants and refugees.

The official detention centres are often led by armed groups and sometimes located inside military bases; these are not safe place for the refugees. On several occasions, detainees reported being forced to fight in the conflict or to handle weapons. Some have become collateral victims of the civil war.

NGOs and UN agencies lack access to official detention centres. Without legal protection for refugees in Libya, these organisations have great difficulty negotiating with the Libyan authorities for visas for their staff and access to detention centres. The small amount of provisions they manage to provide to detainees are often stolen by guards and the lack of other options (like resettlement) – and the opaqueness of the procedures around such options – result in a lack of trust in UNHCR by refugees and migrants, who are left living in a hell on Earth with a feeling of broken promises.

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Ethical clearance

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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.

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“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya²⁰⁴

Klara Smits

Introduction

The human trafficking cycle was first identified in relation to Sinai trafficking by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). They observed that when migrants and refugees²⁰⁵ who had been trafficked for ransom were released, after payment of their ransom, or managed to escape, their ordeal did not end. Some managed to cross into Israel, where they ended up in prison or detention; others were arrested by Egyptian security forces and either detained or handed back to the traffickers. Many perished in the desert or simply disappeared. In the Horn of Africa, migrants and refugees find themselves trapped

In Libya, Eritrean migrants and refugees find themselves in vulnerable situations. With no legal status or viable options, and limited access to information, migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations, making them easy prey for traffickers and others seeking to exploit them. Sold, sold-on, used for forced labour and prostitution, and tortured for ransom, these migrants and refugees become trapped in a cycle of abuse and exploitation that is hard to escape and is best understood as a human trafficking cycle.

in a continuous cycle of abuse, exploitation, and vulnerability. With no legal status or viable options and limited access to information,

²⁰⁴ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

²⁰⁵ 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).

migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations, making them easy prey for traffickers and others seeking to exploit them (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).²⁰⁶

Eritreans are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, due to the grave human rights situation in Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; 2016; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017), the lack of legal ways for them to obtain an exit visa, and the shoot on sight policy at the border, which forces them to turn to smugglers if they wish to leave, as well as the involvement of top Eritrean officials in the human trafficking network (UN Security Council, 2011; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). In addition, there are a large number of Eritreans in the diaspora who can afford to pay the ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), making them a target group for human traffickers.

Although Sinai trafficking stopped in around 2014, for various reasons, including the erection of a fence in the Sinai between Egypt and Israel, which prevented migrants and refugees from entering Israel (Human Rights Watch, 2012; 2014), this same *modus operandi* morphed into trafficking for ransom in Libya (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019). In the Sinai, Eritreans made up a large proportion of the victims of human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015), and this is still the case in Libya, mainly due to their situation in Eritrea, which prompts them to leave in large numbers (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). The *modus operandi* is roughly the same and it is possible that the same trafficking networks are involved (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*).

²⁰⁶ Human trafficking is usually analysed by looking at what happened to the victims during the act of trafficking. This act is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as having three main components: the act (such as transportation or recruitment), the means (such as threats or deception) and the purpose (for exploitation) (UNODC, n.d.). According to this definition, the process appears linear. However, this is not always the case in practice in places like Libya, with the process being more circular.

Amnesty International (2020) describes the abuse of migrants and refugees in Libya outside of detention as part of what it calls the cycle of abuse of refugees and migrants. This includes economic hardship, exploitation and robbery. Migrants and refugees living in Tripoli told Amnesty that their money and phones are frequently stolen, and that they have no means to seek accountability, as they live illegally. One refugee shared the following:

The militias rob us in the streets, they take our money, purses, phones. They also beat us with their weapons or use knives to threaten us. The landlord also comes at night to beat us and threatened us with a knife and took our money and phones.
(Amnesty International, 2020, p. 37)

In addition, Amnesty names forced labour, sexual violence and barriers to healthcare access as key concerns for refugees and migrants in Libya (Amnesty International, 2020). Other humanitarian organisations present in Libya, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), stress in their reports that the protection options that humanitarian organisations are able to offer to migrants and refugees are extremely limited (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). Furthermore, Libya has been characterised as a ‘black hole’ in the digital landscape (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019), which further heightens the vulnerability of refugees and migrants to trafficking, as they have no independent access to information, or a way to make themselves heard (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

In May 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and REACH (2022), in their assessment of the humanitarian needs of migrants and refugees in Libya, identified that:

...needs were most commonly found among East African respondents, with 95% of respondents from this region found to have severe or extreme needs. This group was also found to have the most complex needs profile, with 22% of total respondents from East Africa presenting a combination of health, shelter, and non-food item (SNFI), and protection-related needs. (UNHCR, & REACH, 2022, p.3)

Despite the high level of needs of East Africans, including Eritreans, in Libya, there is a dearth of literature focusing specifically on the

situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya. Among the limited publications on this practice, Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019), focus on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya. However, beyond the locations of detention, their situation is not analysed in-depth. Other authors focusing particularly on the journeys of Eritreans through Libya, including Belloni (2016) and Kuschminder (2021), do not go into detail about what happens to migrants and refugees who end up stuck in Libya long term or try to escape in ways other than successfully crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Achtnich (2022) wrote a detailed essay based on the lives of two Eritreans she met in Tripoli, Libya. In her essay, Achtnich describes Libya as “a human bioeconomy” that aims to derive value from refugees and migrants. In Tripoli, the two Eritrean migrants/refugees she spoke to reported feeling singled out as foreigners, and felt they had little power to stop anyone from mistreating or robbing them (Achtnich, 2022). However, due to the limited sample, according to the author, the essay serves merely as “a compelling entry point”.

A thorough analysis of the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees in Libya, as part of the human trafficking cycle, is lacking. Therefore, this chapter asks the question: *To what extent does the situation that Eritrean refugees find themselves in Libya – after escaping from human traffickers or detention – fuel the human trafficking cycle?*

This chapter focuses on the situation of migrants and refugees from Eritrea in Libya (for a full justification of this focus, see Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*), but also makes use of the testimonies of other people on the move (mainly people from Somalia, Sudan, and West Africa). It compares the situation in Libya with the human trafficking cycle in the Sinai desert in Egypt, as defined by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). This chapter uses Eritrean refugees as a case study to determine if a human trafficking cycle can also be identified in relation to human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It looks at what happens after people escape from the human traffickers and detention centres in Libya and explores how the conditions they find themselves in fuel the human trafficking cycle in Libya.

The next section sets out the methodology used in this chapter. Following this, the findings of the research are presented, including what happens to migrants and refugees after they escape from human traffickers or detention, while they are travelling within Libya, and while living in urban areas. This chapter also briefly touches upon the facilities provided by humanitarian organisations, such as those of the UNHCR, and what these can and cannot provide to those in need of assistance. It then looks at examples of slavery (other than human trafficking for ransom, before turning to the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and what happens when migrants and refugees are intercepted and returned to Libya. Next, the findings on other ways that migrants and refugees leave Libya are presented, including by crossing a land border to a third country (using the example of Tunisia) and the option of evacuation from Libya to a third country (using the example of Niger). Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Methodology

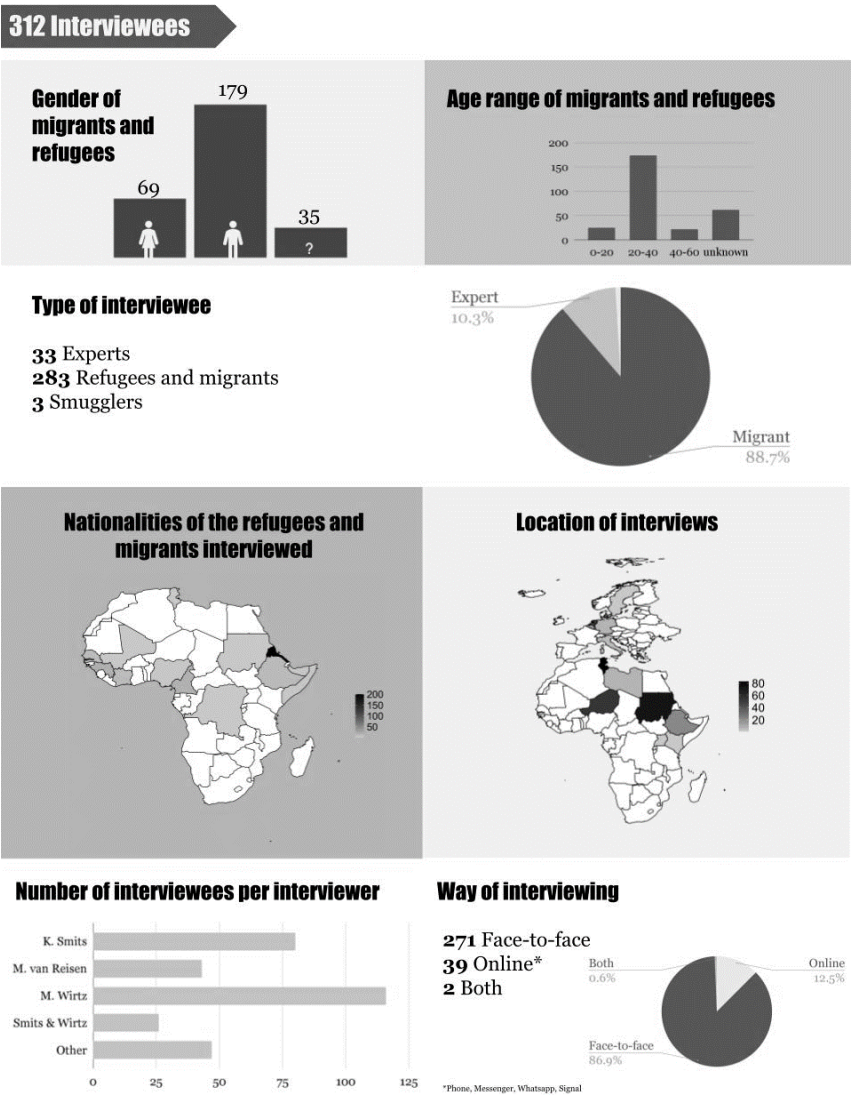
The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning 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).

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 held, 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) had Eritrean nationality. Others 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).

After analysis of all the interviews, the interviews of the participants who had been in detention in Libya were selected for use in this chapter. All of the interviews were analysed looking at the part of the story during and after the migrants and refugees escaped, were released, or otherwise fled situations of human trafficking and detention.

Figure 14.1. Overview of interview statistics²⁰⁷



The following sections present the findings of the research.

²⁰⁷ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

Escape from detention – what’s next?

There is no legal pathway out of the official detention centres for refugees and migrants in Libya (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). Leaving the warehouses and holding camps²⁰⁸ run by traffickers is equally as difficult. In Chapter 12 of this book (*Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*) and Chapter 13 (*Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*), Wirtz and Van Reisen describe some of the ways in which people leave human trafficking camps: by either paying the ransom and being released, being resold (including after paying the ransom), being transported to the Mediterranean Sea after paying the ransom, or death as a result of torture, starvation, or illness. Sometimes, migrants and refugees manage to escape the detention centres or holding camps/warehouses. One interviewee who escaped a human trafficking warehouse in Bani Walid explained:

We break the door, and escape. It’s dead-dead. If I stayed in that place, I would be dead... If I break out, I could be dead. Dead-dead. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

After more than one year in Libya, and after having been arrested or kidnapped about a dozen of times, a young Eritrean refugee managed to escape twice in over a day. At 10 pm he escaped the house of human traffickers who were asking him for 3,000 Libyan dinars (approximately USD 2,000²⁰⁹) for his release. Then he was arrested by the police and put in prison in Zuwarah. That night, he did not let it go:

²⁰⁸ ‘Detention centres’ are established or ‘officialised’ by the Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) under the Ministry of Interior and are run by the DCIM or militia. ‘Holding camps’ and ‘warehouses’ are some of the terms used to describe the places where migrants and refugees are kept while on route to through Libya (also called ‘prisons’, ‘houses’, ‘hangars’, ‘stores’, ‘farms’, and ‘credit houses’); they are generally are run by human traffickers (see Glossary of Terms).

²⁰⁹ The exchange rate used throughout this chapter was calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

I talked with some Eritreans. They were thinking of escaping from that prison. Six boys and four women. "What are you thinking?", I asked. "We are thinking of escaping." Then, I joined them. At 1 am we used a robe. One by one. We escaped. I didn't sleep. In the morning, they [the police] put me in the prison, at night, I escaped. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

There are more stories among the migrants and refugees of decisions made as a group to escape. For example, one group decided that they had had enough of being dragged by human traffickers to different places to avoid police and fighting in Sabratha:

When I stayed there almost four days it was really difficult. No food. That is why the whole 205 people agreed. The whole people said, "We will go to the Red Cross". We broke the door and went to the police station. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Several interviewees in this research had escaped detention centres and holding camps. Many said that the guards of these places used to send them to work for Libyan citizens, which presented an opportunity for them to escape. A young Sudanese man explained:

Az Zawiyah Prison was really bad. There, they used us to get money. If we gave them 2,500 Libyan dinars [USD 512], then they would let us go. They sent us to work. I escaped from work [...]. One day at work, I said to the others, I don't want to enter prison again. I escaped. I just went like a normal guy and after a while, I ran because I knew this place. I had already worked there. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, July 2020)

The civil war in Libya also led to the flight of thousands of migrants and refugees held in official and unofficial detention centres. In August 2018, two interviewees escaped Tariq Al Matar detention centre in Tripoli, in the middle of military clashes:

The war happened [civil war in Libya] and the guards left us; we escaped from that place because it was really bad and everybody moved. Everybody broke the door and went out. About 1,500 people started walking in the street. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Then in Tariq al Matar, in August 2018 a war started. [...] One day, at night, we couldn't sleep, even one minute, because it was very crowded with weapons and bombing going off near us. Many, many bullets got inside and hit many detainees. Even one was dying in the morning. They shot him in the heart. He died immediately. Then, it was very, very, very shocking; all of the people who were surviving in that environment left that place and went far away. We even left the police, all of the police left us alone – we broke the door. After we broke the door, the military saw us. Because, we were a large group – about 1,400, like that. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

After he fled Tariq Al-Matar detention centre, the interviewee from the second excerpt received a bit of assistance from a Libyan citizen and was able to enjoy a bit of autonomy for a while:

I met some Libyan man, I asked him: "Please save me. Please give me some water, some food". He told me: "Okay. I will give you water. I will give you food, then you have to clean this, you have to do this, this". I said, "Okay no problem". At night, I was sleeping. I stayed with him for one or two weeks. Then I found some Eritreans. I talked with them. "How are you? Where are you living?" We found a house to rent. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

But freedom is difficult to maintain for an Eritrean in Libya, especially in the rural areas. They are at constant risk of being kidnapped or sent to prison. One Eritrean refugee interviewed had a bad experience after he escaped from a warehouse in Bani Walid:

At the mosque, we saw the Sheik and we asked him to give us a phone to call the smugglers to go to Tripoli. He said, "Okay. Wait here and I will give you a phone". After he brought two men. One of the men was a smuggler. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

In the context of the civil war and feeling singled out as foreigners, migrants and refugees in Libya find it difficult to trust anyone. What is also revealing in this testimony is the direct request for the telephone to contact a smuggler. For people on the move, this is practically the only way in which they can travel in Libya, despite the cost and the dangers involved.

During this research, the author also came across testimonies of migrants/refugees who had been helped by Libyan citizens:

After that, one Muslim priest, he found us and he took us to his house. We stayed for one week in his house. He took us to Tripoli and he left us on the road. [...] He didn't tell us his name, because he was afraid they would take him. He helped us so well. That means 10% of Libya was good. But the 90%... (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Escaping detention often leads to a cycle of re-incarceration and extortion in Libya. In the next section, the onward strategies used by people on the move to navigate Libya and flee the country are explored.

Travel within Libya

After escaping from the place where they are detained, migrants and refugees face a difficult choice – where to go and who to trust. Migration and its facilitation are criminalised in Libya. Moreover, the police and armed groups often cooperate with the human traffickers:

We were arrested by the policemen. They have communication with the connection man. They took me to Misrata's police station. Another connection man knew this place. [...]. He [the human trafficker] asked the police to catch people so that he could take them afterwards in exchange for money. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewee's testimony indicates that the police in Libya form a link in the human trafficking chain. Another interviewee also described a negative experience with the Libyan police:

We met one sheik inside a mosque and we told him we were migrants and we had been kept in a warehouse. We asked him to bring the police for us, to tell the police. He brought the police. The police came and took us to a soldier camp, their camp. We stayed there one day. In that camp, they were planning to sell us. We cried, cried. And they shot at us. They brought a car to transport us. But finally, we don't know why, they stopped. They stopped selling us. Then we spent the night in that camp. And we slept in the open light. We had nothing, no blankets, ... I slept on the ground outside. One soldier took us and shared our story on social media. After that, in the morning, the Red Crescent came to us and took us by car to Benghazi. Then,

the soldier said in front of us, recording us a video: 'We saved these people from smugglers, we do like this, we did like this'. Then he shared it on social media. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 15 November 2019)

As described in Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*, it is not uncommon for police to have direct ties with the traffickers and they may sell migrants and refugees who are captured or who ask the police for help. In other cases, interviewees state that the police took them to a Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) or detention centres run by armed groups.

After escaping from human trafficking warehouses, most Eritrean migrants and refugees ended up in a detention centre. Some had reported to humanitarian organisations (such as the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] and UNHCR), but were then also transferred to a detention centre, after having received care.

They brought us to the place of the Red Cross. They gave us blankets and jackets and food. It was in Sabratha. After that, we changed to Ghiryan al Hamra prison. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some of us managed to escape. We walked for three hours, in the direction of Tripoli. After, we were approached by Libyan soldiers. The day after, the UNHCR brought a bus. They first sent us to Tariq al Sikka and the day after to Tariq al-Matar. (Interviewee 1015, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The most common experience of the interviewees who escaped or were freed before reaching the sea was to be either arrested by the police or picked up by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), then taken to a detention centre. If a migrant/refugee wants to avoid being detained, they need to find another way to travel that does not involve contact with the police. One Eritrean refugee thought about approaching a police station, but chose to hitchhike instead:

[...] We saw police station and we didn't have any choice but to go there, even if they sold us or do anything to us. [...] Okay, so I was already exhausted, in addition being pregnant, and at that point we couldn't trust any Libyan, because even their policemen, they were also thieves – out for themselves – and, as far as I can remember,

I think we left [...] from that place, we were scared and left. [...] we] stood on the way [hitchhiked] and it was that man who brought us to a place called Tajura. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

However, this person who picked the interviewees up was apparently linked to traffickers, and brought them to a trafficking warehouse. A Senegalese man who was in Libya between 2012 and 2020 described the travel conditions:

If you want to move, it is very risky, the transportation in Libya is very risky. It's risky, because if the Arabs see you they will take you and put you in prison, they will sell you and take the money, and you will stay there to suffer again. They will attack and ask for money, they take everything – your phone, everything – and you start from scratch. (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This man's testimony illustrates that not only could any person pluck you off the streets and sell you, but they also rob you, particularly of your mobile phone. Another Eritrean refugee described the situation after his escape as:

We were walking and running. Some people opened the fire on us. Other people wanted to hold us to sell us. [...] In Libya, any migrant/refugee is dollars. When they see people from Eritrea, what they see is money. That is why they want to have us. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The same interviewee went on to reach out for help:

In Misrātah, we called human rights [organisation], a Swedish NGO. We knew that they help Eritreans. One of us had contact with a Swedish woman from that NGO. We called her. The Swedish woman made contact with UNHCR. She got one person from Libya, to bring us to UNHCR. She gave the money for this person – 200 Libyan dinars [USD 41]. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This example shows the challenge of communication for migrants and refugees caught in ‘black holes’.²¹⁰ It takes one person with connections to a humanitarian organisation to both contact the UNHCR and also arrange transport from a Libyan person to take the group to UNHCR. However, finally, UNHCR transferred them to the prison of Ghiryan al Hamra.

On rare occasions, some interviewees managed to get from one place to another by finding someone willing to help; for example:

When we broke out of this prison, we were not going together. Everybody went anywhere. So I went with three people. After that, we travelled a lot of miles. After that we tried to go out by the road. One Muslim priest, he found us and he took us to his house. We stay for one week in his house. He took us to Tarabulus and left us in the road. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

This way, the interviewee managed to make it to Tripoli. The outcome was, however, still the same for him, as he ended up in Tariq al Sikka detention centre. Having reported to the UNHCR office in Tripoli, they gave him a choice:

He left us on the road near Burji – you know Burji? The UNHCR office in Tarabulus. At that time, we went to that office. We told them about this [our situation]. They asked us: can we give you a house to stay in that place, or send you to enter Sikka, or... they want us to leave Libya. So we went to Sikka. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Having been given the choice to either live in a house in Tripoli, or a detention centre – but with the chance of being relocated out of Libya – the interviewee chose detention, where he spent three months, and a further three months in the hospital after contracting tuberculosis.

²¹⁰ ‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

Others, however, do eventually end up in urban areas outside of detention. The next section presents the findings of the research on the situation in urban areas.

Urban areas

Although the situation in the official Libyan detention centres is often highlighted by humanitarian organisations, this is not where the majority of the migrants and refugees are located. Data collection by the International Organization for Migration's (IOM's) the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) counted 635,051 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Libya over the period of December 2021 to January 2022 (IOM, 2022). UNHCR (2022a) estimated in January 2022 that only 2,300 of them were in official detention centres. This number fluctuates constantly as people are arrested, escape or are released. However, the majority of migrants and refugees remain outside of detention, mostly in urban areas of Libya.

It is hard for humanitarian organisations to estimate the number of migrants and refugees in urban areas. Much of the migration to Libya is for the purpose of work. However, the fact that there is no migration policy and that migrants and refugees have no legal status in Libya makes them vulnerable and leads to abuse (UNSMIL, 2018). The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) highlighted that, as a result, "migrants and refugees refrain from approaching police stations or armed groups engaged in law enforcement, fearing arrest and other abuses" (UNSMIL, 2018, p. 52). Libya does not recognise refugees or asylum seekers, so, even if they are registered by the UNHCR, refugees remain illegal.

In January 2020, UNHCR counted 4,000 Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees registered and living in cities in Libya (UNHCR, 2020b). Less than half of the Eritreans interviewed for this chapter explained that they lived in cities after having escaped from official or unofficial detention centres. They reported trying to find accommodation, access medical care, and work or wait for money to be sent by relatives, and until the conditions were right for them to cross the

Mediterranean Sea (like summer or Ramadan). They described combining resources with several other Eritreans to rent a room.

However, life is not easy for Eritreans living in urban cities. They are often exploited by their employer, if they are fortunate enough to work. One Eritrean refugee explained that he was employed at a supermarket, but never felt safe.

Then when we got that house to rent, me, I started work in a supermarket. It was not easy. When I go to work, I am looking around. Because if they see you in the road, they take you. They ask you for money. I was afraid for many days. Every day. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Eventually, this interviewee was tricked by his employer and taken by people who asked him to pay money for his release. Slavery is common in Libya, as we will cover later in this chapter. An Eritrean refugee explained:

I escaped from that detention, then, I was caught by one Libyan who asked me to become a slave. He asked me to work for two weeks with them, then we escaped again. Because the Libyans, if they catch you on the streets, they will take you and you will become a slave, or some people will ask you for money. It is upon a chance. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Due to the civil war and their illegal status, migrants and refugees living in urban areas of Libya are always in danger. In January 2020, two Eritreans asylum seekers were shot to death in their accommodation in Tripoli (UNHCR, 2020b). The people interviewed for this research know how dangerous it is for them to simply live in Libyan cities:

In Tripoli, there were too many problems. I was living in a rental house with six people. [...] I was not free there. You can just go to the shop, but we are afraid to go. Every night, it was the war. Every night. I couldn't relax in Tripoli. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Several interviewees reported having been kidnapped by human traffickers while they were living in urban areas, simply when they were walking on the street or at work.

Facilities provided by humanitarian organisations

There are locations that migrants and refugees are kept in that are not detention centres. The most well-known of those was the Gathering and Departure Facility (GDF) run by the UNHCR from 2018 until its closure in January 2020 amidst security concerns due to intensification of the Libyan civil war around the complex (Wallis, 2020). The main purpose of the GDF was to house those migrants and refugees who had been selected for evacuation. They would wait in the GDF until they were able to be transported out. Several interviewees who had been to the GDF experienced it as a relief, even though they had to stay there longer than expected. However, entering the facility was not always easy – a 15-year-old minor who was brought to the hospital, because he was sick with tuberculosis, was brought to an urban area by UNHCR and was expected to pay rent, rather than bringing him to the GDF. Only after his guardian, already in the GDF, contacted as many people as he could, was the minor admitted (Interviewee 7024, interview with Stocker, WhatsApp, October 2019).²¹¹ Eventually, and especially after the bombing of the Tajoura detention centre in July 2019, the GDF became overcrowded and the UNHCR started to re-assess its strategies to focus more on urban support.

At the beginning of 2020, UNHCR closed the facility, citing security concerns over it becoming a military target, as military exercises were taking place nearby (UNHCR, 2020a). Alternatives for support were provided mainly on the streets, such as the Community Day Center (CDC) in Tripoli. The CDC was a place where humanitarian partners provided aid to migrants and refugees, but it was closed at the end of 2021 and people camping in front of the building were violently removed (InfoMigrants, 2022). Migrants and refugees have taken to camping at places that still provide assistance, such as the UNHCR registration centre, as alternative shelters are not available.

²¹¹ 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*.

Slavery in Libya

In the interviews, different types of slavery are highlighted. These include forced labour, forced labour in the context of conflict, and sex trafficking. One interviewee said that, as a black person on the streets of Libya, people immediately see you as someone that they can exploit:

But inside the country, if you are walking like this, as you are a black man, if they see you they all know you are a stranger. Some people insult you, some people throw stones at you – many things like that. [...] Some people will pay you. Some people may give you work [and] after the work is finishing they don't pay you. And you cannot challenge them, because you don't have power there and in that country, you are the stranger. All of them, they will be one against you. You don't have the power to challenge the people there. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, Face-to-face, May 2020)

Migrants and refugees are even referred to as slaves by some Libyans. This was particularly highlighted by several interviewees who had experience this in official detention centres. One interviewee described the situation in the Tajoura detention centre, where people would come to pick out people to work for them and they were referred to as slaves:

Me, I started to work to find a job. Every morning when someone comes there, he says: "We need five eubayd", which means 5 slaves. "I need five slaves." Everybody that is hearing that one, they are feeling angry. But we are eating the same food every day. In order to get vegetables or cigarettes, we are following them. Sometimes, they are giving us, sometimes they are saying, "Akab sayara". Just: "Follow this car, they will bring you to prison." Without giving you food, without giving you anything... (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One interviewee saw many people taken to work for the boss of Bin Gashir detention centre.

Sometimes they take you by permission, sometimes they are taken randomly. [...] for those who they are taking by permission, those who want to work, they do so because they want to be free from the hole. They're taken, they work and then they are

returned back. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

This interviewee talked about people leaving voluntarily to do the work. They do not do this for payment, which the interviewee clarified they do not get, but for a chance to escape from what he calls 'the hole'. However, he said that one person later died doing this work:

The boss took a group for work in his house. They entered the house and there was an electric line. When he touched the electric line he died. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The lack of any formal protection for those involved in such forced labour, which in this case led to death, highlights the dehumanisation of refugees and migrants in Libya. Another interviewee in a detention centre in Zawiyah calls the practice of slavery in detention centres dehumanising, as he feels they are not seen as humans at all:

They sent us to work. I escaped from work with a fucking Libyan guy. Sometimes, the Libyans we worked for didn't pay us anything. They just gave us food. They don't see us as human beings. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, October 2019)

Also in unofficial places of detention, slavery takes place. One interviewee reported that from the moment of entering Kufra in Libya:

They forced me to work with Libyan people in a garden for six months, without getting money. I was not working for a salary. I was working during the day and the night, I was sleeping in the hall with the other people. He said that if I were not going to work, he would hit me. So I must work. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

These examples from interviewees clarify how pervasive and normalised the use of migrants and refugees for labour and other exploitation is in Libya. According to one interviewee, this became even more common place during COVID-19. He described the situation on the streets of Tripoli as follows:

The Libyans, they are now all detaining people and asking for money. Militias, people from the government, regular people – all of them. Small people, they come to us and they abuse us racially. They kidnap people, even in Tripoli. This was not like that before. You can't dress, because they ask you where you got the money from. If you are eating at a restaurant, they will come and ask: "Hey slave, where did you get the money from to eat". (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Hence, when walking on the streets, migrants and refugees are careful to hide any money that they have, for fear of being robbed or kidnapped for ransom. Kidnapping also takes place in informal job settings. There were two examples where interviewees were working in Libya, only to be taken to another location and extorted for ransom (Interviewee 1019 and 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). One interviewee described it as follows:

Then, one time, a Libyan took me to work in his car. And... I knew it before, because he took me on a long journey. And I asked him "where are you taking me?" and he said: "I am taking you to work, then I will take you back to your home after you finish the work". Then I waited. Then we passed many checkpoints, then he took me to Zouara. In Zouara he locked me in and he asked me money. I met there two person who were locked in. They were Sudanese. I asked them. They said he did the same to them as he did to me. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Several interviewees had been forced to pick up weapons during the war in Libya. One of the interviewees told of being forced to work providing support during the war:

As I am working for them, cleaning the weapons and loading the weapons even, during the war, the first war I was there, they forced me to follow them to the battlefield. I am sharing food with the militias. Those who are fighting. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

It is apparent from the testimonies that even if interviewees do get paid for the work they do, this is arbitrary, as they do not have the means to pursue legal action or complain if they are not paid.

They look for me a job as a housemaid. I was living with the Arabs, working for them. For eight month. Every month, they were paying 500 Libyan dinars [USD

103]. So it was collected. And later, when I tried to ask him, how much they pay me he said that is for eight month. There was much work, so I wanted to know. This is how I got to know, because I asked and asked and asked. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

From this testimony it can be seen that such situations of forced labour are not always completely unpaid, but they are still often forced, underpaid and dangerous. Interviewees described long hours and being assigned physically hard labour:

But even those who work do not get healthy. Because after you go to work for them, you will have to start at seven o'clock in the morning and work until eight o'clock at night. And you as a black man – you will be doing mostly hard labour. And he is going to pay you only 25 dinars for an eight hour day [USD 5]. (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In addition, refugees and migrants can be forced into prostitution on the streets of Libya (such situations are described in Chapter 15: “*We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey*”: *A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*).

Although trafficking for ransom is one form of slavery, this section shows that there are other forms of slavery that are pervasive in Libya, as illustrated in Figure 14.2.

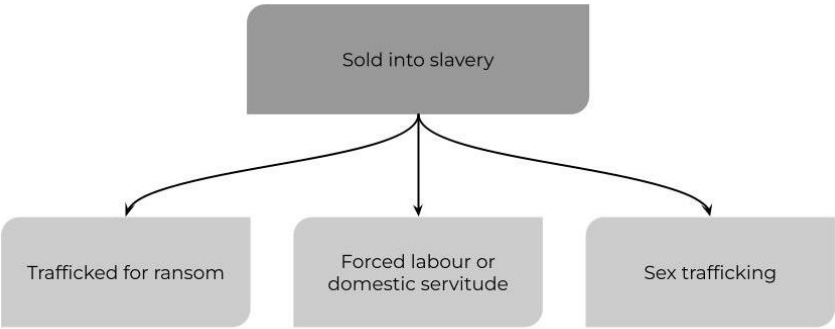


Figure 14.2. Types of slavery described most often in the context of Libya

The sea

From the beginning of the journey, the main intention of the majority of the interviewees was to reach the northern shore of Libya and cross the Mediterranean Sea. When they reach the coast, they usually wait in (ware)houses or camps for the moment to attempt the crossing. However, not all reach the Libyan coast. Bringing migrants and refugees to the coast requires some serious logistics:

After ten months, the money was paid. Kidane and Wedi Isaac, another Eritrean connection man, mixed together 400 persons. These 400 people were going to go to the sea. We took big trucks from Bani Walid to Zawija. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Attempts to cross the Mediterranean are usually surrounded by uncertainty. They take place when the person organising the journey, who is often connected to the human trafficking networks, brings together the necessary logistics and conditions. The first uncertainty comes with the transport to the coast; the roads can be good or bad.

They told us to get ready to go to the sea. Then, the smuggler said the way is not safe. The road is closed. So, you have to go another way. So, he took us to Ajdabiya. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Those interviewed for this chapter reported that they had to wait for several days or months in houses or warehouses, again in poor conditions, characterised by a lack of access to food, water, and medical care. Abuse was also reported by the interviewees:

0002: Shortage of water, shortage of food, shortage of clothing, shortage of medicine – all that was there.

Interviewer: And you were also beaten, abused?

0002: Yes, yes! (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

When waiting for the roads to the sea to open or when waiting for the right boat or conditions to cross the sea, migrants/refugees risk being trafficked again:

They tried to send us near the sea, but it is war, like... a lot of things. [...] I never saw the sea. [...] After that, after five months, he sold us. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Communication continues to be severely restricted in places of transit to the sea. If migrants/refugees have any possessions, these may be taken, including any mobile phones. The only communication they are sometimes allowed by the traffickers is to contact NGOs, such as Alarmphone, to say you are departing – so that they can alert the coast guard. In some cases, the interviewees on the boats were given a satellite phone for this purpose. Thus, the communication is again severely restricted.

When you are in the place before departing, they take all your money and your phone. It is only the day before the departure that the phone is allowed. You can contact the NGOs to say that you are departing. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

An interviewee described the Mediterranean as:

...the deadliest sea in the world. It is a whole continent coming here to drown. (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Although the central Mediterranean route is one of the most dangerous journeys in the world (Robins, 2019), many interviewees say that they would rather die at sea than stay in Libya (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Migrants and refugees run the risk of dying and undertake this perilous journey in overcrowded and fragile boats. The moment of crossing is decided by the smuggler. Once the time comes to board the boat, turning back is not allowed (Smits, 2015). An Eritrean man who attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea remembered the journey:

This was not a real boat. It was a... balentina [dinghy]. It had an engine. It was really dangerous. I went with it and it was a really dangerous situation. It was 12 December 2016. That is cold, that is a dangerous sea. There are many storms there. Cold. (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another said that the boat in which they undertook the journey was leaking:

The ship was broken. You could see the water come in. We took it out with our hands. You know the [type of] ship, the plastic ship? There is some wood under the ship. So the wood was broken. That's why the ship was broken. We told the Libyans at that time when we first entered into the sea, the ship was broken, but they didn't listen to us, only by force. (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

According to one interviewee, security on the boat comes with a price:

There is a price for rubber [boat] and there is a price for wooden [boat]. I paid for wooden. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

Some interviewees said they had received safety jackets, but this is not always the case. Some interviewees also received a satellite phone to be able to call an NGO once in international waters (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019).

External sources describe how roles are defined between the refugees and migrants on board the boats before they depart. These include the captain, often also in charge of the satellite phone, the 'compass holder', and a commander in charge of order on the boat (Urbina, 2022). Such roles appear to be mostly, if not exclusively, taken by the migrants and refugees themselves. Taking on the role of captain is risky, as those who do may be accused of being a smuggler (Harari, 2018). However, often, the captain does not have to pay. Multiple interviewees confirmed that the captains of their boats were migrants or refugees like themselves.

The crossing is an intense experience. Tensions often arise between the drivers and migrants. One interviewee described how he took the lead in his boat with one of his friends, because the passengers were unhappy with the captain:

Because the boat driver... we are not speaking Arab well at the time, but he spoke Arab. He beats us, all of the people. At last, me and [another refugee], he is living in Swiss... we can rob the driver. Because we do not have a choice. [...] Because we don't have a chance. We don't have food, we don't have water... and then there are

almost 5–6 children. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Tensions can also breakout between the passengers:

If you are a smuggler, if you have Eritreans, you put Eritreans aside. Because Eritreans and Somali, they are fighting together. Even Sudani, like that. Even in the boat, Somali are sent in a Somali boat. Because Somali in the sea, they may throw people [overboard]. Even the blacks – Nigerian and such – do like that [throwing people overboard]. Because the place is so tight. The Nigerians are so big. If there is a small Eritrean near him, they throw him. They are not afraid of that. The Somalis are on one ship, the blacks on another. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Such tensions increase the risk of the crossing, as the boats are already overloaded. While some people reach European waters and coasts, others are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard. In 2017, European governments signed the Malta Declaration, which delegated responsibility to the Libyan Coast Guard in the central Mediterranean (European Council, 2017). A Libyan search and rescue area and rescue coordination centre were created in 2018 and funded by Europe (European Commission, n.d.). Instances have been described where Frontex airplanes have helped the Libyan Coast Guard to locate boats to intercept (Urbina, 2022). Migrants and refugees being brought back to Libya describe the experience mostly with disappointment and resignation:

The police stopped me at sea. We had been at sea for four days. We hadn't arrived. On the fourth day, the Italian police, we called them. But they said, "No. As long as you haven't touched Italian waters, we're not going to save you". They are not going to come. But they sit down, they look at you in the sea. They look at us, yes! But if we haven't hit Italian waters, they're not going to save us. (Interviewee 1071, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

After going for seven hours, we were arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard. We were brought back to Libya. When I was on the ground of the ship, even when we were returned, I thought that I had reached Italy. [...] When I reached that ground, I was expecting that I reach Italy. Unfortunately, I see some Libyan guards. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Migrants and refugees intercepted in Libyan waters are taken back to Libya. After being returned, they are registered and taken to Libyan detention centres:

They take us to the near sea by a bigger ship. After that they take us to Tariq al Matar [detention centre]. At that time, near the sea, they took us to UNHCR. They give us a blanket, jacket, and clothes. (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

Two interviewees indicated that they had witnessed the disappearance of people during this process. One Nigerian person said that he had been handed over to traffickers after being returned. Another, Eritrean, interviewee described the process as follows:

Unfortunately, the 38 people, they didn't come with us to the Bin Gashir detention centre [after being returned]. They were sold to other smugglers. Actually, we think that maybe they are kidnapped, but we don't know, but sometimes they do things like this. Some are going back to the detention centre and some person are kidnapped in order to take money from them. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Most of the interviewees for this book did not make it to Europe, either because they had either not been able to attempt the crossing or they had been intercepted on the way. Other than evacuation by the UNHCR, crossing the Mediterranean Sea is perceived by most migrants and refugees to be the only option to escape Libya:

When I was going, I forgot all the problems of store [trafficking warehouse]. I had hope. I would see the sea. Maybe tomorrow, I will enter Italy. I will change my life. Also I will help my sister and my brother. Also there are many people in Eritrea, I will help them, because I know the way. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

However, there is another option – to cross the border from Libya to another North African country.

Escaping by land to Tunisia

Migrants and refugees also flee to neighbouring countries, on foot or using smugglers. This section is based on the testimonies of those who fled Libya to Tunisia, as this is where the interviews were

conducted. None of the Eritrean interviewed by the authors during this research originally planned to go to Tunisia,. Some of them arrived after being rescued in Tunisian waters during a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Others changed their migration trajectory after experiencing the inhumane conditions in Libya. Tunisia is perceived as a safe option for survival by some. A man who escaped from a prison in Zuwarah said:

I decided that I was going to come to Tunisia. I started doing research on my phone and I saw that the UN and the Red Cross are here in Tunis. So I decided to start walking. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

The routes to Tunisia and other neighbouring countries are unsafe; the migrants and refugees run the risk of being picked up by traffickers or falling victim to fighting or criminal activity along the way. The interviewees reported having to hide on the roads by disguising themselves:

[I arrived in Tunisia] by smuggler. I paid the smuggler. I wore the hijab that ladies are wearing. I put the hijab like this, like a cap. I covered my face like a lady, wearing big socks and I followed the driver. So the Libyans they are not looking at you. (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

When they reach the border with Tunisia, migrants and refugees are tired. They have been sequestered for a long time in Libya, and they have had a difficult and dangerous journey to reach the western part of the country. However, they still have to show strength to cross the border illegally:

I took a taxi [...] to Abu Kamash. [...] And from there, I started walking down. I walked for three days before I got to Medinine with my baby on my back. [...] It was very difficult. It is a very big feat. You have to jump in, and you have to jump out. Crossing it was not easy with the baby. You have to cross the barbed wire. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

One interviewee reported having to scale a barbed wire fence, only to be sent back to Libya:

At the border there are guards, they are searching with a lamp. When this light is catching you, you will just hide yourself in small places. They will never see you. But if you stand up, the light will catch you and they will come and capture you. They know where you are because it is a desert. There are only a few trees. So, when you come to Tunisia, there is a wall there, after you get inside that wall, [you hide] [...]. It [the border] has a lot of fences. One is barbed wire. This one is very bad. It will catch you and slice you in your body, in different places. So, we brought big stones, and we broke it. We broke the wall, everything. We entered this place. The first time, they caught me and they returned me back to Libya. They beat me. (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

As Tunisia has no national asylum law, the management and recognition of refugee status has been delegated to UNHCR, which manages three refugee reception centres in Medinine and Zarzis in southern Tunisia (UNHCR, 2022b).

Within 60 days, the exiles must decide whether to apply for asylum in Tunisia or to opt for voluntary return to their country of origin through IOM. If the asylum application is rejected, there are three options: stay illegally in Tunisia, return to Libya or attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (Boukhatia, 2021).

Some interviewees said that, compared to Libya, Tunisia is a relatively safe country where they feel better. But it remains a country that offers few opportunities in the context of a difficult democratic transition and a political and social crisis. Migrants and refugees report facing cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as religious discrimination, as evidence by this testimony:

First, there is discrimination and also, we do have language barriers. The livelihood is very difficult. You cannot afford to pay for whatever you like, buying whatever you want. Even working in the street is not something you can do here. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 202

The lack of job and education opportunities, and inability to see what their future will be, puts many asylum seekers living in Tunisia in a difficult situation. They usually owe debts to their families, who in most cases paid a lot to fund their migration and rescue them from the hands of human traffickers. Many feel that they did not achieve

what they set out to do: reach Europe, or safety and help their families. This has resulted in many migrants in Tunisia experiencing mental health issues, and some even consider returning to Libya. An Eritrean woman living in a UNHCR shelter in Tunisia shared the following:

Sometimes it comes to my mind that I have to decide to go back to Libya and sometimes I just feel that I have to do something worse, like commit suicide. I have some health issues [...] Here, so many people suffered mental issues. There are people who have lost their mind because of all those issues. (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This excerpt shows that their mental state and the pressures of life in Tunisia may drive migrants and refugees to return to Libya to complete the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, Tunisia is becoming a popular point of departure. Some Tunisian nationals also seek to go to Europe, with Tunisians making up the largest population of arrivals in March 2022 (IOM, n.d.).

Evacuation to Niger

For migrants/refugees, another way out of Libya is by evacuation. In 2016, Italy established a humanitarian corridor that allows selected numbers of migrants/refugees to be evacuated directly from Libya to Italy (UNHCR, 2021a). However, for most countries where migrants and refugees are relocated to, this direct corridor is not available. In order for migrants and refugees to travel elsewhere, they are first evacuated to a third country, which serves as a country of transit.

For these situations, the UNHCR has set up the Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) with Niger and Rwanda (UNHCR, 2021b). The programme in Niger was established in 2017 and works on the premise of evacuating potential refugees to Niger, where the UNHCR can register and interview them to determine their refugee status. This process is done jointly by UNHCR and the Government of Niger. Then, resettlement files are produced, from which governments can select. Missions are then sent to interview those selected in order to consider them for resettlement (UNHCR, 2021b).

Twenty-four of the people interviewed for this book were located in Niamey, the capital of Niger, where they were interviewed regarding their experiences in Libya. Some have since been resettled to the Netherlands, Canada, Finland, Belgium and the United States. Others are still in Niger. They are housed mostly in the refugee camp Hamdallaye, as well as in several houses in Niamey. While interviewed in Niger, they frequently brought up their current situation in Niger, where they had been brought with the promise of a short transition. Often, this turned out differently.

Although refugees expressed gratitude towards the UNHCR for bringing them to a safe country, the large majority of interviewees were concerned about their situation in the transit country and about the procedures for resettlement, which are marked by ambiguity and delays. They feel that they are in a deadlock:

UNHCR brought me here. They didn't see me. I am not thinking about eating. I am thinking about my life. I want freedom. I want education, [...] I have been here for one year and three months. It is really difficult. I was not expecting when I entered Niger to stay one year and three months. Now, really, I am not waiting for UNHCR, I am waiting for God. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The refugees have no information about their file while the processes of interviewing, determining refugee status and selection from resettlement files is going on, and cannot choose their country of resettlement, although factors such as having family members in said country can play a role.

The UNHCR is responsible for identifying potential refugees to be transferred from Libya to Niger and Rwanda. It is also responsible, together with the Nigerien government, for processing applications for refugee status determination and producing resettlement files for other countries. In both of these circumstances, refugees have no choice but to wait for UNHCR's response, which can take months or even years. As in Libya, UNHCR in Niger is under fire from refugees and asylum seekers because of their perceived lack of communication and care. An Eritrean man in Niamey explained:

We have asked UNHCR for a long time, by groups and alone, to give us an answer, but they say our case is with the government of Niger. When we ask the government of Niger, they say it is at the UNHCR. They are playing with our cases. (Interviewee 1005, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Nearly all of the interviewees voiced frustration and cited adverse mental health effects because of the delays with their relocation, which pushed some of the interviewees to go back to Libya. Others who were brought to Niger said that they wanted to go back to Libya to try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Many said that they did not choose to come to Niger and that UNHCR made this choice for them:

UNHCR doesn't think or do anything about us. I don't come here for Niger. But UNHCR, for its own reasons, they brought me to Niger. (Interviewee 6003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, August 2019)

The interviewees said that they only agreed to be brought to Niger because they were promised a short transition to a third country. Multiple interviewees stressed that they signed the paper agreeing to evacuation on the basis that Niger would be a country of short transit.

This translates to a sense of abandonment and the idea that UNHCR does not care about them:

The food of UNHCR is not good. They didn't care about people. [...] Even if you go to our centre, there is no water, there is no light. Light is not straight. Cut. Cut. Cut. Even the food. The food is not good. A lot of people don't eat that food. We have no money. We came by UNHCR, not by our family. Am I right? If UNHCR brings us to this town [Niamey], they should protect us by anything. But they don't do anything. They don't care about us. If you make interview. If you have any problem, they should make a solution. But they do not care about our problems. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

They [UNHCR] took you from Libya to Niger. To help you. So where is the help? No money, even soap. After six months, they give it to you. Really. Nothing. Clothes, shoes, everything. You need something, you want to use the telephone – nothing. (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

One interviewee said that in the UNHCR centre in which he was staying, freedom of speech was repressed:

We have no authorisation to talk freely with media. But anyway, the media cannot help. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

Before researchers can enter the refugee camp of Hamdallaye, they need permission from UNHCR. One of the researchers for this book was denied access due to a recent security incident in the camp.

Lack of communication about how the process of relocation works is also an issue. Refugees arrive in Niger with the expectation of being resettled from there. Some state that the UNHCR promised them that the process would be quick. However, from some interviews, it emerges that refugees do not receive clear information about their cases and how the process works:

They didn't tell me. I had one interview, one year and five months ago. Still I am waiting for something, but they don't say anything. If you have any problem, you say something. If something is not clear, you can ask me again or discuss about this. But UNHCR does not do it like this. They said to me: "the first interview has expired. It's not here. Because the one that interviewed you, is not here. So you can do another interview". So I do a second, just like the first time, I make an interview again. They eat my time. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

Another interviewee complained that he waited nine months before being interviewed by UNHCR:

There's no information. Yeah, even me. I have been in Niger for one year and six months [...] You know, I was staying for nine months without any interview. Yeah, first, I come to Niger. They called me, they registered and I did one interview for three hours. In January. They didn't call me. Still nine months. I asked many times, but they didn't answer. Finally, after nine months they call you to interview. After that, I finished the interview. And after some months, they told me they can't resettle. (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The lack of understanding of the procedure is particularly frustrating when refugees see others who came after them leaving much sooner than them:

UNHCR is discriminating. This is the main point. We see other people taken in charge after two months. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

To protest against these conditions, refugees organise sit-ins (Reidy, 2020). An Eritrean man reported that he participated in a demonstration in March 2019. He added that the Nigerien security forces used tear gas to disperse the protesters (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

As is the case in Libya, the lack of information and the frustration hampers a constructive relation between the refugees and the UNHCR. However, many refugees express positive sentiments about humanitarian organisations. Some interviewees have since managed to resettle. One interviewee who the author spoke to 1.5 years after the first interview expressed thanks to the UN and government of resettlement, which had helped her escape the situation (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019, follow-up in December 2021). However, the main thing on her mind when speaking to the author was her fellow refugees, who still remained in Niger.

Discussion

During their non-linear journeys, for example, when passed from trafficker to trafficker, or when there is no hope of release from official detention centres, some refugees attempt to escape. Two basic strategies of escape were described by the interviewees in this research: gathering a group together and breaking the door, and running off while engaged in (forced) work outside of the place where they are held. Especially during the chaos of war, a number of interviewees were able to escape the trafficking warehouses.

After they escape, migrants and refugees have to find a way to travel in Libya, which is all but impossible without assistance. Although some of the interviewees indicated that they were able to travel by foot for long distances, they usually rely on others to transport them. By using such transport, they run the risk of being captured, locked up again and extorted for ransom. Contacting the police is not seen

as a safe alternative. In the worst case, the police have connections with the traffickers, and even hand the migrants/refugees over to the traffickers. In the best case, the migrants/refugees are arrested and sent to the DCIM detention centres. In most cases of escape described in this research, the interviewees ended up in official detention centres. Humanitarian organisations like UNHCR also link them with the police and then to official detention centres in most cases, as reported by the interviewees.

Most refugees and migrants in Libya live in urban areas. Due to the fact that the interviewees in this book were mainly Eritreans and were mainly interviewed outside of Libya, most of them had not spent a lot of time in urban areas. However, the testimonies of life in urban areas described the constant danger of being arrested or kidnapped for ransom. This links to the pervasiveness of slavery in Libya, which this chapter also covered. Being sold into slavery can lead to human trafficking for ransom, forced labour/domestic servitude and/or forced prostitution. The interviewees indicate that they were often seen and treated as slaves. Payment for labour (forced or voluntary) is uncertain or non-existent. Migrants and refugees cannot go to authorities when they are not paid, due to their illegal status, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation and to situations of modern slavery, other than human trafficking for ransom.

Persons sold into slavery may also end up directly or indirectly in positions of forced labour or sexual slavery. Various media reports have paid attention to the topic of slavery in Libya, such as CNN (Elbagir, Razek, Platt, & Jones, 2017), Time (Baker, 2019) and BBC (Einasse, 2021). Most often, the form of slavery described in these articles is the extortion of ransom under torture. However, forced labour, domestic servitude and sex trafficking are also covered. In a 2017 report, IOM stated that one out of two refugees and migrants interviewed by them had worked for someone without having received the compensation that they expected in return (IOM, 2017). Hence, the conditions for migrants and refugees in Libya make them vulnerable to trafficking, and many find themselves trapped in a cycle for abuse and vulnerability from which it is difficult to escape (US

Department of State, 2021), as also shown in the testimonies of interviewees presented in this chapter. In addition, the control over technology (including stealing of phones) leaves the refugees in a black hole in the digital landscape, adding to their vulnerability.

Some interviewees tried to escape the human trafficking cycle by attempting to flee Libya. This chapter covered the various ways in which they did so. The sea was the first and foremost goal of all of those interviewed. Although the interviewees in Europe had managed to cross, most of the other interviewees who had actually been on board a boat – which was a minority – had been intercepted. After interception, the migrants/refugees reported being returned to Libya and taken to a DCIM detention centre.

Other ways to escape from Libya include crossing a land border, such as the border with Tunisia, or evacuation (by IOM) to a third country like Niger. The crossing to Tunisia is dangerous and difficult, and the situation for migrants and refugees in Tunisia is harsh. The interviewees said that they feel guilty because they have not achieved what they set out to do (cross to Europe) and are unable to repay the money they owe to family members who helped them fund their migration – some even consider returning to Libya to try and complete the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. In Niger, the migrants and refugees said that they lack information about their situation and feel frustrated that what was explained as a ‘short transit’ in Niger has turned into a long-term stay. Many interviewees in Niger said that they felt abandoned.

The interviews show how migrants and refugees in Libya are positioned in black holes in the digital landscape. Phones, which are often the migrant/refugees only source of information and contact with the outside world, are among the first things to be taken from them when embarking on their journey, if they are arrested, when crossing the Mediterranean Sea, or during robberies in Libya. Third countries also emerge as black holes in the digital landscape, where information about the refugees’ dossiers, progress, and potential countries of resettlement are tightly controlled by the UNHCR, and this information is not given out with any regularity.

Conclusion

The testimonies given by the interviewees in this chapter show that it is very difficult to escape from the cycle of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Simply paying the ransom does not lead to freedom. Rather, it most often leads to further detention, being on sold, kidnapped, or intercepted at sea, but hardly ever to escaping the cycle. This cycle can involve one or more of the following (in a variety of orders):

- Slavery, other than trafficking for ransom (e.g., forced labour, sex slavery or prostitution)
- Arrest leading to human trafficking for ransom
- Arrest leading to detention centres
- Urban living, including high risk of robbery and other abuse
- Escape across the Mediterranean Sea (potentially leading to interception and return in many cases)
- Escape to a third country (potentially leading to return to Libya to complete the journey)
- Evacuation to a host country (in a very limited number of cases)
- Evacuation to a third country (also in a limited number of cases, potentially leading to return to Libya to complete the journey)

Even after having escaped from Libya to Tunisia or Niger, some migrants and refugees consider returning to Libya to finish their journey – to complete what they set out to achieve. This shows that the human trafficking cycle in Libya traps even those who not only know about, but have experienced, the violence and exploitation in Libya. A lack of viable options to live in or leave Libya – or third countries – has created a trap that is very hard for people to escape from. As pressure to flee from Eritrea continues, and trafficking networks to transport Eritreans are increasingly well organised, this means that people will continue to be trapped without a clear path of escape.

In conclusion, as seen from the testimonies presented in this chapter, once caught in the human trafficking cycle, people find themselves trapped in a cycle of abuse and vulnerability, and are often re-trafficked. With no legal status and limited access to information, they are unable to enforce their rights, are often not paid for their labour, robbed and kidnapped by civilians, armed groups, and traffickers. Even the police are not safe, with interviewees reporting being handed over to traffickers by police. Even after escaping detention or traffickers, migrants and refugees are unable to find sanctuary in Libya, neighbouring countries, or when evacuated to third countries. Without any viable option, many return to Libya, despite knowing the risks, to attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, rather than living in a situation in which they feel there is no hope.

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Ethical clearance

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Author contributions

Klara Smits is the author of this chapter. Asma Ben Hadj Hassen contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya²¹²

Morgane Wirtz

Introduction: Many did that...rape

“The Libyan smugglers, many did that...rape. Sometimes even on the road, they bring you down. They take the women and do whatever they want”, shared a young woman from Guinea living in Zarzis in south Tunisia. Sitting at a round plastic table, she is calm, keeps her eyes lowered to the floor, her hands resting on her knees. “You too have been through this?” I ask her. “Yes,” she replies. “Several times?” (Interviewees 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

She looks down. She is silent and cries softly. Sitting beside her, upright in his chair, her husband explains:

Sexual violence against migrants and refugees in Libya is commonplace – and in the Sahara desert, it is virtually unavoidable. It is used to subjugate and control refugees and migrants, to profit from them and induce payment of ransom, as well as opportunistically – just because they are there. The people interviewed for this chapter reported extremely severe forms of sexual violence, even resulting in death. Since the times of Gaddafi and his harem, there has been a culture of sexual violence in Libya, which has led to the normalisation of this violence, as well as the impunity of the perpetrators.

She had no choice. When you are there, you are between life and death. These smugglers have no conscience. They are drugged and lose control. You can greet them,

²¹² The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author’s PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

they respond with insults or blows. (Interviewees 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This situation has become commonplace in Libya. In July 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) released an alarming report to the Danish Refugee Council. It indicated that out of 16,000 survivors of the journey through Libya interviewed by the MMC, 1,634 reported witnessing or experiencing almost 2,008 incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, affecting more than 6,100 people (MMC & UNHCR, 2020, p. 20). However, the exact number of victims, even among the interviewees, could be much higher, as this type of violence remains a taboo and is often underreported.

Sexual violence in Libya is perpetrated against both women and men. During the field research, we came across two male interviewees who reported experiencing sexual violence during their journey. According to a report published by the Women's Refugee Commission, the phenomenon is common:

[The informants] reported that sexual violence against men and boys is “so high, so widespread, so systematic,” “very common,” “a massive issue,” “up there with the levels of sexual violence against women and girls”, while noting that “almost no one escaped this”. [...] A protection officer commented that “it is so widespread. Everyone knows when a man says, ‘I’ve gone through Libya,’ it is a euphemism for rape.” (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)

“It’s part of the journey,” explained a woman to journalist Maurine Mercier (Mercier, 2018a). Rape on the road to Libya has become so common that some women take precautions – they carry protection or use contraceptives in order to avoid getting pregnant or contracting HIV (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 233). Despite the awareness of this risk, outside the migrant/refugee²¹³ community, little is known about the sexual violence that people on the move face

²¹³ 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).

on the way to Libya. Perhaps this is because being raped is perceived as dishonourable. Rape survivors are not supposed to talk about it. What happens, how, where, why, and who the perpetrators are remains largely unknown.

This chapter attempts to provide some of the answers. It presents an explorative overview of the sexual violence faced by migrants and refugees during their journey to, and while in, Libya. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to look at the overall situation of sexual violence in Libya. Although this book focuses on Eritreans, this chapter throws the net wider to look at sexual violence against all nationalities to understand the context and culture in which such violence is normalised and capacitated in Libya. Hence, the research question investigated in this chapter is: *What are the experiences of sexual violence by migrants and refugees in Libya and what is the culture of sexual violence that contributes to this?*

To answer this question, this chapter describes and compares three broad categories of sexual violence against migrants and refugees which emerge from literature: (1) sexual violence as a tool of subjugation; (2) sexual exploitation; and (3) sexual violence as an opportunistic crime (these categories are defined in the section after the literature review, as they emerge from this review).

Again, this chapter looks at the issue broadly to include categories of people other than those who have been trafficked – it looks at sexual violence against ‘people on the move’, but also other instances of sexual violence. The focus here is on the culture of sexual violence in Libya that enables these practices to take place. Other categories of sexual violence might exist in Libya, but were not raised in the testimonies collected. In the following section, the methodology used for this empirical research is presented. This is followed by an exploration of the topic in the literature. Next, the theoretical framework used for the analysis of the findings is presented. This is subsequently followed by the findings, which are presented according to the three categories distinguished in the theoretical framework. The last section of the findings is dedicated to the impacts of sexual

violence on survivors and their relatives. This is followed by a brief discussion of the findings and the 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*.

This chapter presents the results of a descriptive ethnographic research on sexual violence perpetrated in Libya against people on the move. 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 to 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, and is part of 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 held, 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 of Eritrean nationality. Others 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).

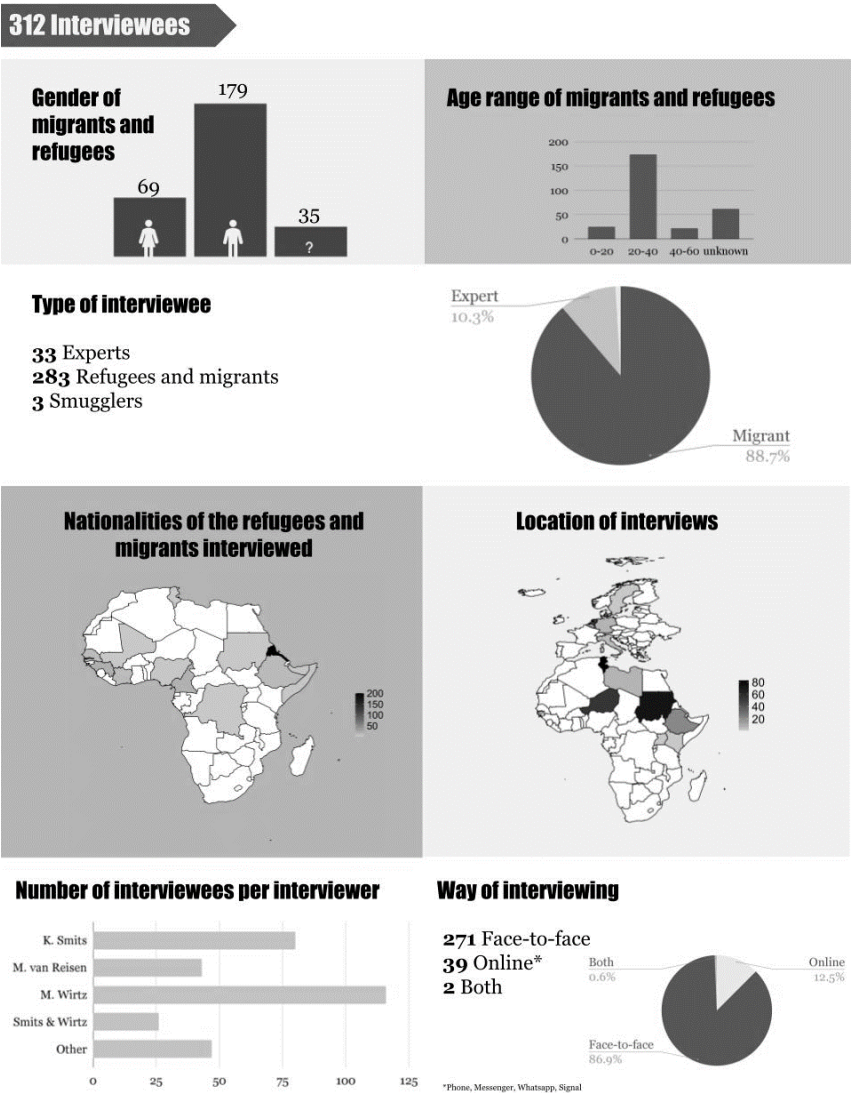
Out of the 128 interviewees who had been trafficked in Libya, 30 people (20 men and 10 women) reported having experienced or witnessed sexual violence during their stay in Libya.²¹⁴ Two smugglers and one resource person gave further details on sexual violence in Libya.²¹⁵

These were selected for the analysis presented in this chapter. In terms of nationalities, the respondents were made up of Eritreans (16), Guineans (7), Senegalese (2), Somalis (2), Cameroonians (2), Sudanese (1), Nigerien (1), Nigerian (1) and Congolese (1). In addition, three interviewees were smugglers, two of which were currently operating between Agadez in northern Niger and Sabha, one was a local journalist and researcher, and one a former translator.

²¹⁴ The majority of the interviewees were explicitly asked if they had experience or witnessed sexual violence. However, in some cases, when it did not seem appropriated, the question was not asked. Others brought the topic up before the question was asked.

²¹⁵ These interviewees did not explicitly state that they had witnessed sexual violence, but they give details of the same.

Figure 15.1. Overview of interview statistics²¹⁶



The labels that were used in analysing the interviews came from the interviews and referred to the relationship of the interviewee with the event (survivor, witness); this included specific labels regarding the

²¹⁶ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

gender of the victim, the position of the abuser, the location where the sexual violence occurred, whether or not the sexual violence was systematic, the presence of witnesses during the crime, whether or not someone paid to abuse the victim, whether or not the act was accompanied by other forms of humiliation, and the lasting consequences of the act. Using these labels, the testimonies were categorised using axial coding according to the three forms of sexual violence distinguished in this research.

The quotes selected to appear in this chapter are those that were the most illustrative of the various abuses that the survivors reported having experienced. Quotes from other research reports and articles by journalists are included in the discussion, as they provide complementary descriptions that help to give a more profound understanding of the practice. The findings from the interviews were supplemented by a literature review on the topic, which is presented in the following section

Literature review: The culture of sexual violence in Libya

This section provides a brief review of the research and literature on present-day sexual violence in Libya. Even though the literature is scarce, some important research based on extensive interviews is available. In particular, the Women's Refugee Commission carried out a study on sexual violence against men and boys on the Central Mediterranean route, which is the first extensive study on this topic and provides important insights into how sexual violence is perpetrated in Libya (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019). However, before delving into the literature, it is necessary to provide a general definition of sexual violence and rape.

Definition of sexual violence and rape

In this chapter, '*sexual violence*' refers to any sex-related act inflicted on a person without his or her conscience consent. This includes threats and attempts, as well as deeds (International Criminal Court, 2011). '*Rape*' refers to unlawful sexual intercourse or any other sexual penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person, with or without force, by a sex organ, other body part, or foreign object,

without the consent of the victim and causes mental and physical injuries (International Criminal Court, 2011).

In human trafficking for ransom

Interviews conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission show that as soon as migrants and refugees fall into the hands of human traffickers, they are at risk of sexual violence. An Eritrean refugee who was kidnapped in a group of hundred people in the Sahara desert explained how his new traffickers imposed their authority:

When the trafficker kidnapped us, they took two men. One was obliged to take off his trousers – they made him rape the other man. This man refused and did not want to do it, he said, 'It's best to die and just kill me.' So they beat a spoon with a fire and burned his tongue and his nipples because he would not do that. Nothing happened to the other man, they let him go, but they said to everyone that this is what happens to you if you don't respect what we want you to do. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 27)

It is often in the Sahara that migrants and refugees realise that sexual violence will be hard to avoid. A health provider interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission stated the following:

I spoke to a young girl who had been travelling in a group through the desert and they were stopped by an armed group. They were taking her away with other women to rape and a man said, 'No she's my wife.' He thought maybe they wouldn't rape her if the husband was there, but they didn't believe him and they forced this man to rape her instead. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, pp. 34–35)

Such abuses are reported on the whole migration road; from the countries of origin of the migrants and refugees till their destination.

Rape is perpetrated in the trafficking camps.²¹⁷ In this case, the perpetrators are usually those working for the human traffickers or the human traffickers themselves. Journalist Sally Hayden covered the trial of top Eritrean human traffickers Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam

²¹⁷ 'The terms 'prison', 'warehouse', 'house', 'hangar', 'store', 'farm', 'holding camp' 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).

(known as ‘Kidane’) and Tewelde Goitom Welid (known as ‘Welid’) (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). She wrote the following about the trafficker Welid:

Goitom [Welid] was particularly infamous for sexual abuse. Multiple victims in different countries told 100Reporters they personally know women who had babies as a result of rape by him. People held in his warehouse said he would pick out any girls or women he wanted, some married, others very young. He allegedly videotaped the assaults, threatening to post them online if the woman spoke out. Relatedly, no female victim has come forward to give evidence, prosecutors say. (Hayden, 2021)

A key informant reported to the Women’s Refugee Commission the case of a man who was captured in Bani Walid.

He was [...] forced into a container with many other people. He was forced to strip off his clothes. Everyone who stayed in the container was in their underwear. [...] At night, guards would take some of the men outside to rape them. He said the raping happened so regularly that it became normal and no man could refuse because the guards had guns and they would shoot and kill you. When the men came back crying, they would talk about what the guards did to them and how violent it was. He said that because it happened to everyone, the men were able to talk about it together. (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 58)

This quote demonstrates the extent of the perpetration of rape against men in trafficking camps. Perpetration in the context of the admission of torture for ransom collection was also reported by the Women’s Refugee Commission:

Bored guards also engage in sexual violence for entertainment purposes. A 34-year-old Nigerian man told a key informant, “The torture is to beat, to electrify the genitals. The sexual violence is to satisfy themselves. It is just for fun, they are laughing when they do it. (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 32)

A similar experience was recorded by journalist Maurine Mercier: “In front of everyone, they ask you to stroke yourself. It stimulates your erection. [...] They laugh, they are happy. It’s unheard of” (Mercier (2018b).

Sally Hayden also reports that some human traffickers use sexual violence as a way of entertainment. She wrote the following about human traffickers Kidane and Welid:

Some survivors said both smugglers forced teams of weak captives to play football against each other. They would shoot at those who missed shots, and the winning man would choose a woman to rape from the other's detainees. (Hayden, 2021)

Sexual violence can also result in the death of the victims. In the testimony below, the death seems to be the actual objective behind the orchestration of sexual violence by the human traffickers:

A health worker described the ordeal of one of her patients, a 24-year-old man from Sierra Leone: "He was in Bani Walid in one of the unofficial places of captivity. [...] Guards had so many people in the holding place, and they had a lot of people who weren't worth anything anymore. They couldn't extort them anymore, so they would initiate a 'cleaning out', saying, 'it's time to clean the prison and have a bath.' They would line up all the men and the women naked – everyone had to strip – and the men and women were in different lines. The women had to masturbate the men. They were forced to do everything to make the man erect. If the men became erect, the guards would cut their penis off. If there was no erection, they would rape the woman with a stick. He said that no woman survived that – they'd rape her until she bled to death. They would do this on a semi-regular basis to reduce numbers. [...] I remember him talking about seeing the mutilated penises jumping on the floor afterwards – they were still activated. He said the guards were laughing while this happened, that it was like watching movie for them – they would sit back and enjoy this. This practice was ongoing; it wasn't a once off. They did it regularly for entertainment. Three of his own friends who he was travelling with died in front of him in that process. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 20)

This testimony indicates that victims of human trafficking, from whom no more ransom can be collected, are vulnerable to extreme cruelty, including sexual violence, which can result in death. Similar findings were reported by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) on human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. They found that cruelties, including sexual violence, could result in death, particularly if there was an impression that the victim could (or would) not be able to collect the ransom. In their analysis, this added to the pressure

on other victims to collect ransom, as they witnessed the consequences of not paying the amounts being demanded from them.

For ransom collection

The findings of the Women's Refugee Commission show that sexual violence is part of the torture applied by human traffickers to migrants and refugees to extort ransom. A key informant explained:

I had a case recently – a brother and sister from Somalia were travelling together with the brother's best friend. The best friend was going out with the sister, he was her boyfriend. They were held captive in Al Kufrah for a few months. The captors gang-raped the sister for six days in a row in front of the two boys. They did that to exert pressure on the boys to have their families send money. She was in a serious condition – she had internal injuries from the rape and died after 15 days. She died one week before we rescued them. These boys were 16 and 17 years old. This sexual violence was used as a method of torture for extortion – to force her brother and her boyfriend to witness this, unable to defend or protect her. They were then forced to ring their families and they begged for help. By the time the money came, she was dead. (Women's Refugee Commission 2019, p. 34)

Even if not often reported, the communication of sexual violence through information and communication technology (ICTs) to add pressure for the purpose of ransom collection was also reported. A health provider explained to the Women's Refugee Commission: "Violence to the [male] genitals is common in Libya. They film genital torture and they Skype with the family to extort money" (2019, p. 24).

ICTs and the filming of sexual violence can also be a tool to exacerbate the humiliation of the victims, as well as to threaten them. Journalist Sally Hayden wrote: "I've heard reports of smugglers in Libya raping women on camera, then threatening to post videos online if the women ever speak out" (Hayden, 2020).

In official detention centres

There are also many reports of sexual violence in official detention centres administered by the Directorate of Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), under the Ministry of Interior (OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2016; 2018a; 2018b; ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021). In

some of them, sexual violence starts immediately after the arrival of the detainee at the prison as part of the intake procedure. A health provider interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission shared the experience of a 22-year-old Eritrean man:

This man was twice forced to undress and bend over for the guards to search in his anus for money. He described how violent and painful it was and that although he wasn't raped with a penis, he feels that he was and now lived in a constant state of fear of being raped. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 22)

Sexual violence is systematic in certain official detention centres. A child protection officer reported the following: "Torture and sexual abuse are part of the daily experience in detention centres in Libya. It's Russian roulette whether you are chosen as a victim one day or the next" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 32). In this case, the aim is to terrorise and enslave the detainees. It can also be a tool for humiliation as a punishment. A key informant told the Women's Refugee Commission the following:

One guy told us that in the detention centre if someone tried to escape, then all the other men in the room are forced to have sex with this person, otherwise they will kill him. We heard that many times. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 22)

From the interviews carried out by the Women's Refugee Commission, it was revealed that sexual violence perpetrated in official detention centres can be very well organised:

He was put in an official [DCIM] detention centre, but kept in a secret cell where he was being extorted for 1,000 euros. He described how they kept people in this cell, which was away from the main prison where the majority of refugees and migrants were held. There was open rape – rape in front of everyone else, against men and women. Men and women died by rape. He could hear women screaming and crying as they were being raped. There were two gates on the cell. When one gate opened, it meant they were going to rape the women. When the other gate opened, it meant they were going to rape the men. Guards had friends who came and took pleasure in raping men. These people didn't work there – he thought they were friends of the guards or could have paid guards to rape the men. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, pp. 23–24)

Hassan, a young man from Cameroon who was interviewed in Agadez after he fled Libya, explained how hard it is to witness this kind of abuse:

In Libya, I went from prison to prison. The last one was the worst. There were three hundred of us in a small room. Some stood, some sat. Every three days at least one person died. We stayed four to five days without food and water. One day they brought two women into our compartment. They wanted to rape them in front of us. We told them that this was not going to happen, that they should do it somewhere else. Not in front of us. They didn't listen. So we got in the way. That's when they hit and shot several of us. (Wirtz, 2018)

It is important to note that the violence described in this section is committed in official detention centres. International NGOs and UN agencies have access to those prisons. A key informant from the Women's Refugee Commission described the experience of a Nigerian woman:

She was taken to Zawiyah [a DCIM centre] where she saw UN logos each time. She said that 'the men were tortured and beaten regularly, and they were raped, too. The women were raped continuously. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 24)

The majority of migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres had been arrested by the Libyan police or the Libya Coast Guard, which is partially financed by the European Union. When migrants and refugees are arrested for attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are usually brought back to prisons where this kind of sexual violence and human rights violations are perpetrated.

Sexual exploitation

Libya is crossed by prostitution networks. Some of them are well known. An example is one that goes from Edo State in southern Nigeria and the sub-region to Italy. Women have been trafficked on this route since the 1990s (Kuschminder, 2020). They are approached in their country of origin and promised to be taken to Europe. Once they arrive, they are forced to pay off a debt ranging from USD 20,000 to USD 60,000 through prostitution (Baker, 2019). As the research stands, survivors of this kind of exploitation are always

women. The perpetrators managing this network are also often women, called ‘Madams’, but can also be men. Men also work in this network as guards, drivers and facilitators. In some cases, women are already forced into prostitution on the road, in Niger or Libya. Women are often sold by their captors to pimps at the head of a ‘connection house’, a term used for ‘brothel’ in the region (Baker, 2019).

A culture of sexual violence

To understand the context of sexual violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya, it is important to remember that Muammar Gaddafi himself faced many allegations of rape. In a book entitled *Gaddafi's Harem*, the investigative reporter Annick Cojean reports that hundreds of women were imprisoned and raped by the former Libyan head of State (Cojean, 2014).

Following the revolution in Libya, the use of sexual violence spread among the forces in opposition. In March 2011, a woman attested on international TV channels that she was arrested and raped by Gaddafi's forces for having demonstrated against the Libyan leader (Allegra, 2018). In April 2011, the US envoy to the United Nations claimed that Muammar Gaddafi was encouraging mass rape during the revolution by supplying his troops with Viagra (MacAskill, 2011).

Since Gaddafi's regime fell in 2011, rape has been used as a weapon against his former supporters. In *Libye, Anatomie d'un Crime*, a documentary directed by Cécile Allegra, a survivor shared that, while being abused, the rapists explained: “We are doing the same as you; Gaddafi's supporters” (Allegra, 2018). In the Libyan civil war and in detention centres, rape is used to destroy enemies, to defile them and to make them the outcasts.

In the same documentary, another survivor related that a member of the Tawerghas ethnic group (a Libyan group rejected for their dark skin, accused of having supported Gaddafi and of having raped more than 1,500 women in Misrata) and migrants were imprisoned naked together all night long. Cécile Allegra also collected testimonies that migrants were forced to rape Libyan men (Allegra, 2018).

Rape is also used as a weapon against migrants and refugees by human traffickers in Libya. In this context, refugees become no more than ‘merchandise’ that can be transported, sold, exchanged or stolen. Sexual violence is used to keep them under control, deprived of their dignity, self-esteem and will. To achieve this aim, both men and women are targeted for rape. The perpetrators are people connected, close or far, to human trafficking for ransom.

As explained in Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*, ‘black’ skinned people continue to be perceived as slaves in some Arab communities. In many cultures, including Western ones, raping a slave or its descendent is not perceived as a crime. Social justice advocate Dorothy Roberts writes, “For most of American history the crime of rape of a black woman did not exist” (Roberts, 1997, p. 31). The fact that migrants and refugees are seen as slaves by Libyans means that they are not perceived as entitled to human rights, which means that sexual violence is not considered to be something that is reprehensible.

Theoretical considerations: Three categories of sexual violence

This chapter looks into the existence of a culture of sexual violence in Libya and the relationship of this culture with the perpetration of sexual violence in human trafficking for ransom. The research takes account of Rorty (1998), who argues that human rights are accessible only if there is a recognition of rights as rights, if there is an empathy towards the people involved in the situation, and if there is enough safety to have the space to consider the people involved in the situation. Failing these conditions, the culture of human rights might not be conducive to the enjoyment of these rights by everyone.

From the literature review, three categories emerge as specifically relevant to the modus operandi of sexual violence perpetrated against refugees and migrants in Libya. The first category is ‘sexual violence as a tool of subjugation’. This category is based on the strategic rape theory developed by the psychiatrist Ruth Seifert. In *War and Rape: Analytical Approaches 1*”, Seifert asks what the reason for rape is, in

general (Seifert, 1993). She then develops five explanations of the function of rape during war. For her, the roots of rape are not in sexual desire; instead, she defines rape as “an extreme act of violence perpetrated by sexual means”.

Rape is not an aggressive expression of sexuality, but a sexual expression of aggression. In the perpetrator's psyche, it does not fulfil sexual functions, but is a manifestation of anger, violence and domination of a woman. The purpose is to degrade, humiliate and subjugate her. (Seifert, 1993, p. 1)

The second category of sexual violence committed against people on the move in Libya is ‘sexual exploitation’. Sexual exploitation is defined as: “Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.).

In many cases, the vulnerability of migrants and refugees is exploited for sexual purposes and monetary profit by others. The testimonies labelled as ‘sexual exploitation’ in this chapter are the ones that related to a financial transaction for sexual services. In most cases, this was done without the consent of the migrant/refugee and they were often not the ones who received the money at the end.

The third category of sexual violence committed against people on the move in Libya is ‘sexual violence as an opportunistic crime’.²¹⁸ This crime is able to be committed because the migrant/refugee is considered to be the ‘property’ of the traffickers or people holding them, who have often bought them, or simply because they are under

²¹⁸ This type of crime is usually referred to as a ‘crime of opportunity’, which is generally understood as a crime that is committed without premeditation or planning, when the perpetrator sees that they have the chance to commit the act (Warr, 1988). In this chapter we have avoided the use of the word ‘opportunity’, as it has positive connotations. In addition, we wanted to distinguish it from crime of opportunity as we do not know the mind of the perpetrator to determine whether or not there was planning and premeditation before seizing the moment.

the control of, or easy to target by, the drivers, smugglers, guards, employers or Libyan citizens.

In this research, sexual violence was categorised as an ‘opportunistic crime’ when it seemed to occur when the perpetrator saw a chance to commit the act and seized it, because the victim ‘was there’ and easy to abuse. This category of abuse was not systematic and was often committed in private.

These three categories are not comprehensive and overlap in some cases. While this chapter attempts to explain why sexual violence occurs on migratory paths to Libya, it is important to keep in mind that the authors were neither present during the crime, nor in the head of the abuser to understand clearly what happened and what was the real motivation while they were committing the crime. The following sections present the findings of the interviews.

Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation

In this chapter, we have defined sexual violence as a tool of subjugation when it is systematic (when all detainees are subject to the violence) or when it is accompanied by humiliation. The spectrum of sexual humiliation practised against migrants and refugees in Libya is large and leaves survivors with deep physical and psychological scars. This section presents the testimonies of migrants and refugees who experienced sexual violence as a tool of subjugation in the Sahara (on the way to Libya), in the official and unofficial detention centres.

On the routes through the Sahara

The first ordeal before arriving in Libya is the crossing of the Sahara desert. People on the move cross stretches of sand in Toyota Hilux 4×4s packed with about 28 people. Their survival depends only on the driver and their ability to hang on to the back of the car. The journey between Agadez in northern Niger and Sabha in southern Libya usually takes around five days. Between Sudan and Kufra, in south-eastern Libya, the journey can take several weeks or even more than a month (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*). The routes are littered with dead bodies; stories of violence and the rape of migrants and refugees abound.

From the interviews, it appears that sometimes drivers, smugglers or human traffickers use sexual violence to implement discipline among the passengers and show them who is in control now. Victims are of all nationalities and can be men or women. A young Eritrean woman recalled the following about her experience in the Sahara.

Between some towns, the car goes very fast. If someone falls, they don't stop to pick him up. The driver and his assistant were raping the women passengers. The men who were with us could not do anything. They were beaten and some were raped. If they tried anything, they were shot dead. (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)²¹⁹

A young Eritrean man testified as follows:

When I was in Gerba [in Sudan], they put me in a hut. I was alone. [...] Even they tried to abuse me. [...] This is the hardest time for me. I don't want to remember that. This is the worst event of my life. I tried to fight with them. I tried to shout. But it was [sigh]. It was very far. It is not... There was nothing around that place. It is far away from the village. They tried many times. Then they even shot the gun in front of me. And they did it. [Cries] (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Sexual violence in the Sahara is so common, that it is no longer unexpected by migrants and refugees. This does not diminish the trauma that such violence causes, as the above quote shows.

In human trafficking camps

In the camps of the human traffickers, migrants and refugees lose their status as 'human beings' and become 'goods' or 'merchandise' that is worth money; often a ransom is asked of the victim's relatives, and they are sold, exchanged or stolen (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). Sexual violence in this case is a strong tool of subjugation used by the 'owners' of the migrants and refugees. It is also used to accelerate the

²¹⁹ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

payment of ransom. In some camps, sexual violence is systematic. An Eritrean woman explained:

We were 50 people, men and women. Forty women. They gave us one bread and a piece of butter. Then, they tried to divide us from the men. This place was full of arms. They divided us and then they raped all of us. (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

According to interviewees, rape is systematic in the warehouses of Ahmad Oumar al-Dabbashi²²⁰ (Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). A young refugee explained:

Of course the women are raped over there. In all the places controlled by Al-Amu, women are raped. But women are raped all over Libya. Al-Amu controls a lot of smugglers and pushes many migrants to the sea. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Some guards in the trafficking camps force migrants and refugees to work with them (Chapter 11). Raping the detainees can be one of their tasks; a Senegalese man explained:

They put a little Somali [refugee] to guard us. When he finds us sleeping, they hit us. But if you touch even a single hair of this little one, they kill you. It's a little one, he is 13 years old, or something like that. He is a Somali. He beat us with a Gambian; he's called Alassane [name changed]. They [the refugees forced to work as guards] are the ones who come to hit us. [...] They rape women all the time, Alassane, the Gambian, every day he comes. He is the naughtiest there. (Interviewee 1069, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

Sexual violence, particularly towards men, is taboo. Survivors are reluctant to share their full migration experiences, due to sexual violence being a ‘shameful’ topic and it is ‘against their culture’ to talk about it, as young Eritrean explained:

²²⁰ Known as ‘Al-Amu’, this Libyan trafficker is on the sanction list of the UN Security Council Committee (2018).

There are men raped. [...] There are too many problems in Libya. Because it is shameful if a man is raped, how can he say it to you like that? [...] It is shameful. And it is not our culture to tell like this. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Even if the topic is taboo, systematic sexual violence has the effect of normalising the practice.

As part of ransom collection

In the trafficking camps, migrants and refugees are sequestered and tortured, with the aim of collecting ransom from their relatives. Sexual violence can be part of the torture applied to a refugee. A young Eritrean woman shared the following:

[In the warehouse in Bani Walid], we were requested to pay. They were taking women out to rape them. Sometimes, we were beaten and at other times we were splashed with hot water. [...] We were beaten as much as the men. For example, they tie you by the feet and they hang you upside down and they beat you. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In some cases, sexual violence in the camps of human traffickers in Libya is combined with the use of mobile phones. Migrants and refugees are forced by the traffickers to contact their families by phone, while being tortured, to beg them to pay their ransom (see Chapter 11). This torture can also include sexual violence. A smuggler interviewed for this research in Agadez explained:

It is true that when one rapes a women, we put the phone. It's true, huh! About Libya, all that is said, know that it is true. Yes, they do that, that's what they do, to show their parents how they live there, for money to come [to make them pay ransom]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)²²¹

Audio, videos and pictures of sexual violence are sent to the families of the detainees in order to accelerate the payment of ransom.

²²¹ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

Sexual violence is often combined with humiliation. This can take various forms and can be even more destructive than the beatings. In the interviews, two people explained, for instance, that they had been forced to drink urine. A young Nigerian man explained:

When I talk about Libya, I see this again; someone giving you their urine and asking you to drink it. You have to drink, otherwise they will whip you. (Interviewee 5010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Genital mutilation was also reported by various interviewees. A young man testified that it is a strong tool of fear used to get refugees to work for the human traffickers:

One day, one person came to me after I refused to work: "What heroes are you to talk to me like this?" He brought something like scissors on my ... on my ... yeah. He is doing like this. [Mimics bringing scissors close to private parts]. He wanted to cut a small part. [...] Blood is coming there. But another Libyan said: "No, no it is haram [forbidden by Islamic law], just leave it". (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sexual violence is a powerful way of destroying someone's humanity and self-esteem. The same man quoted above describes the refugees queuing up outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Tripoli. For him, they hardly seem like human beings anymore:

Some of them don't have hands. Some have lost eyes. Some, before they came to Libya they were men, real men. But now, they are not men. Their organs are not working as they [the human traffickers] are beating it! Or standing on it like this [mimics someone crushing a penis, someone pulling a penis] or hurting you like this [mimics someone with a knife on a penis]. How many people suffer in Libya? (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Subjugation through sexual violence is a highly effective tool for the human traffickers. The effects of this crime stay with the survivors for a long time. From the interviews it is clear that survivors carry the trauma for months, years, or even a lifetime.

In official detention centres

As they are illegally on Libyan territory (Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention on its 1967 Protocol and refugees have no legal status), migrants and refugees are always at risk of being arrested and locked up in an official detention centre. These prisons are controlled by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). Even though humanitarian organisations have conditional access to these centres, interviewees reported many abuses, including sexual violence, taking place. The perpetrators of sexual violence were all identified as guards working in the detention centres. The victims are men and women of various nationalities.

As in the trafficking camps, sexual violence in official detention centres can be accompanied by humiliation. After having been arrested at sea in the summer of 2020, a young refugee was brought to Abu Issa detention centre in Zawiyah. He contacted the authors of this chapter right after his release. He was angry. He wanted to talk about what had happened:

They beat us there! [...] And they are gay! There are also raping men there! Not only women, men also. They rape the men and they beat you. [...] Every morning, they will remove our pants. Then, we are naked like babies. They beat you, then they ask you to walk like a frog. All together. They ask women to remove their bikini, and then to walk like frogs and they start laughing at them. (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, August 2020)

To exacerbate the humiliation, sexual violence is sometimes committed in front of witnesses, such as other guards, as stated in the quote above, or other detainees.

Sexual violence committed in official detention centres can serve as a punishment. This includes the cutting of the genitals, as a former translator working for a NGO in Libya explained:

Once, [the refugees] told me about a rebellion they had done. Some denounced the leaders to the guards. They underwent torture festivities. They even told me that some people were castrated. They do surgery without morphine, just to make them suffer. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

In official detention centres, sometimes hundreds of detainees share one cell. Subjugation through tortures and violence, as described in Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, could be a tool for the guards to keep control of the situation.

Sexual exploitation

Ninety per cent of Libyan territory is desert. For hundreds of years, the area has been used by trafficking networks; merchandise, slaves, drugs, weapons, prostitutes, they are all moved through Libya to Europe. This section looks at the sexual exploitations of migrants and refugees through these networks.

The cases of sexual exploitation against migrants and refugees in Libya reported in the interviews were all committed for monetary gain. Migrants and refugees are a commodity in the hands of human traffickers. With sexual exploitation, the product is a sexual service that is delivered most of the time under force or threat of force. One of the most famous women trafficking networks is the one that goes from Nigeria to Europe. Many women from Nigeria and the sub-region are trapped in situations of sexual exploitation. After being promised a trip to Europe and a job, they find themselves in Niger, Libya or Europe, having to pay off huge debts through prostitution. In Agadez, the amount of these debts can reach EUR 2,000. The price for sex with a prostitute in Agadez is around EUR 5 per time (Wirtz, 2021). In Italy, the service of a prostitute is worth around USD 25 per time. Among the interviews collected for this chapter, one person explained having found themselves in this forced prostitution network. Dozens of women in this situation were met by the authors in Agadez for a photographic report on prostitution (Wirtz, 2021).

The perpetrators of sexual exploitation are both men and women. They can be drivers, facilitators, guards, traffickers, Madams,²²²

²²² 'Madam' is the name given to women involved in human trafficking for prostitution from West Africa to Europe. Madams are often former victims of these networks who have paid off their debt, but have nowhere to go or nothing to do after years in forced prostitution.

members of Islamic State (ISIS) or clients. The victims are mostly women, but also men, especially young men.

In this section we look at the prostitution network of Nigerian women, other prostitution networks, sexual exploitation perpetrated by ISIS, the role of official detention centres in sexual exploitation and prostitution as a way to survive in Libya. As discussed earlier, although this book focuses on Eritreans, this chapter looks more broadly at sexual violence against all nationalities to understand why sexual violence in Libya is so widespread.

A young Nigerian woman explained how she was trapped into prostitution when a family friend invited her to Libya. She explained:

If you are from Biafra, Eastern part of Nigeria and that you are staying in Lagos you will suffer a lot you know. So, you don't get opportunities, going to school was not easy. I could not finish. So, I got an opportunity, somebody told me: "I will bring you to Libya and you are going to get to work". And I said: "OK". He told me: "Don't worry when you will get to Libya, you will work and be paid". I thought that I could work and help my family. So, this is why I decided to come to Libya: to work and to support my family. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This woman travelled across Niger by bus and in other vehicles. When she finally arrived in Libya, she understood that she was expected to work as a prostitute. However, she was able to escape by indicating to her mother the residence in Nigeria of the Madam who had taken her on this journey. Her mother was able to put the Madam under pressure and she did not have to prostitute herself to pay off her debt. But she saw what she had escaped from:

[In Tripoli], I entered a house where there are a lot of girls doing prostitution. So this is where they dropped me. My mind was beating. Because I did not know what was next. There are a lot of girls. Pinky dresses, pants. They were high. They were drunk. Smoke everywhere. In this house I saw the other girl who came with me to Libya. And this was how I got to know she was sold for prostitution. So I stayed there for a few hours. And then, they took me from there to another house. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

To pay off her debt, this interviewee was still forced to work as a maid for Libyans for eight months without getting paid. She describes herself as an intelligent woman – and she is obviously resourceful, as her first contact in Libya repeatedly tried to abuse her, but she managed to escape:

He rapes women. He tried to rape me. But he couldn't. Because I told him that I was having my menstruation. He said: "When are you going to finish?" I kept telling him: "I am over-bleeding". I was using palm oil and I put it in my pants and I said: "You see: I am still bleeding". He said: "Why?" I said: "Maybe it is the desert. I ate a lot of bad food". Then he was tired and he told me to go to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

However, many others are unable to avoid being raped on a regular basis before Libya, inside Libya and after Libya.

Other prostitution networks also exist in Libya, but are less well known. During the research, we came across one testimony of a survivor of such a network. The young woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo was less fortunate than the Nigerian woman mentioned in the previous excerpt. She travelled with a group of migrants directly from Congo Brazzaville to Libya, where she was locked up in various places and sexually exploited:

We arrived in Libya. [...] The houses there are closed, there are not even any windows! [...] And on top of that, there were... Ah God, Libya, I don't know... Men who came to rape you. Men who came for the women every day. Every day. Every day they raped us. [...] One day, I asked a person next to me: "But why do they change us from house to house like that? Why do people come and make love to us like this?" She said that it is the one who kept us there who took the money and then let [the Libyans] come in, they did what they wanted and then they left. That's how he does his business. And if he gets tired of you, he gives you to another person who will keep you in a house again. (Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)



Figure 15.2. Nigerian prostitutes who escaped prostitution networks working in Agadez, Niger

(Photograph: Morgane Wirtz/Hans Lucas, 2021)

It is clear from this interview that the objective of the people at the head of these networks is monetary gain. Migrants and refugees are raped because the person who holds them is paid to let people have sex with them. The abusers are people from outside – locals who come to have sex with (forced) prostitutes.

A woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo described being raped in front of others:

Sometimes [they would rape us] in front of the others, because where are you going to go? It's dark there. It's a disaster, too disgusting. The boys are raped in the anus!
(Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Victims of this kind of sexual violence are of various nationalities. As the previous interviewee stated, they can be men as well as women. In the case of the young Congolese woman, it was pregnancy that saved her from further sexual abuse. When her belly started to grow, her human trafficker got rid of her, as she was no longer of any use to him.

Perpetrated by ISIS

The conflict in Libya has also led to the propagation of extremism. During the research conducted for this chapter, we did not come across any testimonies of survivors of sexual slavery under ISIS. Data on this topic is very limited. “There are almost no survivors,” a key informant told us (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021). However, a former translator working for NGOs in Libya confirmed the use of sex slaves by the Islamic group:

Daesh [ISIS] was taking the women, especially the youngsters [as sex slaves]. [...] Some people allowed themselves to have four or five wives. So it was a good market for them. I didn't see anything. It is hidden. They are brought in cars with tinted windows, so that no one will notice anything and this happens far away from the city centre. But, usually, for every product there must be a market. [...] Generally, those women are directly sold on the dark web. They organise auctions ... everything. I have heard that the highest prices are given to the virgins. It seems that they are worth thousands of euros, or dinars, whatever... I even heard that they organise markets and bit solicitations. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

As per this research, it seems that perpetrators of this kind of sexual exploitation are men, affiliated to ISIS. The majority of victims are women, but can also be men.

In official detention centres

Sexual exploitation also happens in official detention centres. As described in Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres can be sold by the guards and chiefs as slaves, for a day or for longer periods. A former translator who visited three detention centres in Libya said that detainees could also be sold into prostitution networks:

The Libyans are there for business. They dealt with the smugglers to bring sub-Saharan Africans there and direct them to the tasks they could do. [...] The ones that were proved to be homosexuals were sold into sexual labour. And the women are used to take care of the children or to be prostitutes in Europe. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

In such cases, the perpetrators are the guards working in the detention centres and the clients who come to buy sex slaves. According to several testimonies, in some prisons, there are places where the migrants and refugees are offered to clients. The victims are women and men. The former translator who worked in Libya recalled the following:

[In Sirtre] detention centre, there were a few rooms. You could feel the difference between these rooms and the others. There was an air conditioner, it was cleaned. There was security on the doors. I remember one time we had finished working late and I saw girls who looked like 15 to 20 years old, chained and guided there, right there, where there are these rooms. And then, they cleaned them with water, using a high pressure cleaner. Well, that's what I saw, after they got back there.

Once there was one of those girls who had internal bleeding. Apparently because of her bad luck, she had success. She haemorrhaged and was placed elsewhere until she left. That's what her sister told me. There. And then [she died and was buried] we dig a hole and it's finished. [...] I reported this to Amnesty, anonymously. I also reported it to Human Rights Watch, anonymously too, because I wanted to continue my work and at the same time try to help in my own way. Voila, there are a few performers who supported me and we tried to report on this. There was nothing we could do. It was a pretty huge lobby with some pretty powerful figures doing business. And with money, unfortunately, anything goes. The most beautiful left for Europe, and the others ... are exploited by the presumed leaders. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

More research is needed to understand the exact role of official detention centres in prostitution networks and sexual exploitation. However, those testimonies are clear: clients freely come to some official detention centres, to which international NGOs have only conditional access, and pay to rape the detainees.

Prostitution as a way to survive in Libya

Reports and interviews also show that people on the move sometimes sell themselves to Libyans, in exchange for something to eat or to

have money to survive in Libya. A refugee who spent about two years in the country testified as follows:

In Libya there is a lot of rape, even for men ... for kids, those who are younger. The kids, when the Libyans see them, they don't have a mind, they call them, they give them food because they are very hungry. Women, if for example you see a refugee, you have one spoon full of sugar, you give her a tea, you can do whatever you want. They follow the Libyans because of hunger. They are human beings. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Further investigation needs to be conducted to understand how migrants and refugees may negotiate their journey by providing sexual services. One interview with a Sudanese man in Tripoli shows that such deals exist, however, we do not have sufficient information to describe how this takes place:

Before entering the sea, I stayed in a camp for two months with Eritreans, Somalis, Egyptians, Nigerians, Bengalis, people from Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. There, they are just fucked people; they don't want anybody to talk. They use girls. They do bad things. They are fucking them. They use them. Some of the girls came without paying money. (Interviewee 1018, interview Wirtz, WhatsApp call, 2020)

In such cases, the perpetrators can be policemen working at checkpoints, drivers, smugglers, human traffickers or civilians who offer to pay for sex. Victims are of different nationalities. According to the information collected so far, the majority of them are women, but men can also sell themselves.

Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime

A large number of migrants and refugees in Libya face sexual violence because the perpetrator takes advantage of the situation. Migrants and refugees are easy prey. Adoum Moussa, a researcher based in Agadez explained:

Migrants are raped because they are vulnerable. Often, some drivers, they are not sober when they transport passengers through the Sahara. And, as those girls are

there, they just help themselves. [...] For the Toubou²²³ drivers, the girls who are going to Libya have the objective to work as a prostitute over there, so they don't have respect for them. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, Signal Call, December 2021)

Racism can also partly explain the sexual violence committed against migrants and refugees in Libya. As Adoum Moussa explain:

The drivers and Libyans continue to call and consider sub-Saharan as slaves. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, Signal Call, December 2021)

Victims of this kind of violence are usually women, of all nationalities. They are illegally in Libya and have no access to justice and nowhere to complain if they fall victim to any crime. This leaves them in a very vulnerable situation. The perpetrators are the drivers, their assistants, smugglers, people involved in human trafficking, guards, policemen, military men and even Libyan citizens. Most of the time, they have weapons. They have relations and contacts that protect them and can easily perpetrate sexual violence.

It is hard to distinguish this kind of sexual violence from the other types, for instance, sexual violence perpetrated as a tool of subjugation. Often the different situations overlap and it is impossible to know exactly what was happening in the mind of the perpetrator when the crime was committed. In this research, sexual violence was categorised as 'an opportunistic crime' when there was a selection among the potential victim, when the violence was not systematic, and when the violence was not accompanied by other forms of humiliation. In this form of violence, intercourse often occurred in private (not in front of other migrants and refugees).

This section presents the testimonies of sexual violence as an opportunistic crime in the Sahara desert, in the trafficking camps, the official detention centres, and the urban areas.

²²³ Here, Adoum Moussa is talking about drivers working for human smugglers or traffickers who are from the Toubou tribe, a nomadic tribe living in South Libya, North Libya, Chad and Sudan, for which crossing the Sahara is part of their culture.

On route in the Sahara desert

In the Sahara desert, the perpetrators of sexual violence against migrants and refugees as an opportunistic crime are all men. They are drivers, assistants, policemen and military men working at checkpoints. Victims are often women, but can also be men, and are of various nationalities. A smuggler operating between Agadez and Sabha confirmed this:

There are drivers who rape women on the road. In Libya you see them arrive, distraught, they are crying, saying that the drivers have taken them by force in the Sahara to have sex with them. Compulsory – because you can't refuse. The drivers keep all the weapons on the road. From a few kilometres after they left Agadez, they are all armed. If you refuse, they will kill you. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)²²⁴

However, a Nigerien who has been in the smuggling business for years said that raping a passenger is breaking one of the sacred laws to be respected when crossing the desert. He said:

A driver will never touch a woman during the journey. Because if you have sex during the journey, it's automatic, the car will have a problem. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, February 2021)

Adoum Moussa, a researcher from Agadez added:

This is why rape never happens in the car. They take the persons to a hidden place or under the car to abuse them. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2021)

An Eritrean woman described her journey between Khartoum, in Sudan, and Kufra, in Libya:

On the way so many things happened. For example, there were people dying. Compatriots were dying and when we told them, they just threw them, drop them from the car. They don't do any burial procedures for them and also... So many

²²⁴ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

problems were happening to women, even rape. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Like many others, this woman was raped during her journey to Libya, despite the fact that she was travelling with her husband. When asked about her relationship with him after this happened, she answered:

There was no option that we could do at that point so... (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

“We had no choice”; this statement accompanied each of the testimonies of sexual violence collected for this research. Facing weapons and in the middle of the desert, the migrants feel powerless.

Some, however, find ways to escape the sexual advances of the drivers and their assistants. Some dress like men to avoid the abuse. A young man, explained:

Before we reached Libya, they raped! They raped women from Somalia. The Eritrean ladies, because they were wearing trousers and they had dressed like men; covering their chest, wearing jackets, jeans, they didn't know, they left them. But they raped the Somalis. [...] They were single. Some of them, they were even virgins. They raped them. There was blood that was coming on the road. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sometimes the strategies put in place by the migrants to avoid sexual violence work, and sometimes they don't. The fact that such tricks are used shows that sexual violence has become so mainstream that strategies are planned in advance to try to avoid such violence.

By human traffickers

When they are in the hands of human traffickers, migrants and refugees are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. A smuggler, who stated that he is not a human trafficker and does not commit such acts, explained:

You go through a small door and you enter the room of people who have not paid. It is said that there, the detainees do not wear clothes. They stay in their underwear. They are undressed, because at every moment they are taken out to torture them so that they make their parents pay. [...] Of course they are raping. And over there,

there is no question of refusing! If you refuse, they will kill you. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)²²⁵

In the traffickers' camps, the perpetrators can just 'help themselves'. A refugee explained:

Every time new migrants are coming through the Sabara desert, the smuggler is just asking a beautiful woman or a beautiful girl. He is taking one. And tomorrow, when other refugees come, he changes. [...] As humans are changing their feeding every day, he is just changing the woman. Like he is changing his clothes. Without raping. He is not raping. He just says: "Come!" And they agree, the women they agree. Because they are afraid of him. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

A Senegalese man who was kidnapped in Sabha recalled the following:

God only knows what we went through there. To explain this, it is not easy. [...] You can go crazy. It is too hard for one man. There are women in the prison, but they are in a separate room. It is total violence. They don't know about human rights. Women, they want to violate them. They will do what they want, when they want. There are no human rights. (Interviewee 1075, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

The perpetrators are men – the guards, the people working for the human traffickers and the top human trafficker himself. As stated above, victims of this type of violence are mostly women, but can also be men.

In official detention centres

In official detention centres, refugees and migrants are highly vulnerable to sexual violence as an opportunistic crime. A migrant from Cameroon who was detained in Zuwarah explained:

In Zuwarah's prison and in Tripoli's prison, there are women and men. The Cameroonian women that I know and who have been imprisoned there say that the

²²⁵ This interview was also published previously (2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

Libyans were always asking to have sex with them. It also happens that men are raped, but I have not heard about this in Zuwarah's prison. (Interviewee 1036, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In the official detention centres, the perpetrators are male and mainly guards. The victims can be any detainee. A former translator working for an NGO in Libya stated:

2000: Everywhere. [In all detention centres] there is sexual violence.

Interviewer: Systematically?

2000: Yes, against everybody.

Interviewer: Women and men?

2000: Women, men and children.

Interviewer: Why are they raped?

2000: For them [the guards], it is for their own pleasure.

Interviewer: But if you rape everybody...

2000: For these kinds of people, pleasure doesn't come with a limit.

(Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Other interviewees explained that the detention centre guards selected women to take outside the cell and sexually abuse them (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

In urban areas

Most of the reports on the situation of migrants and refugees in Libya concern the conditions in official detentions centres or at the hands of human traffickers. However, the vast majority of migrants and refugees in Libya actually live and work in urban areas.²²⁶ As described in Chapter 14: *Dead-dead": Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in*

²²⁶ Among the 635,051 migrants, refugees registered in the country over the period from December 2021 to January 2022 (IOM, 2022), only 2,300 were in official detention centres (UNHCR 2022).

Libya, the lives of migrants and refugees are not easy and they can face sexual violence, even in urban areas.

Three interviewees reported having witnessed such violence or violent attempts. It was reported that sexual violence occurs mainly at work, for instance, while cleaning the houses of Libyans. The victims are women and men. The abusers are often Libyan men. But, as two male interviewees stated, Libyan women can also be abusers. The interviewees explained that they are not allowed to talk to Libyan women in the cities arguing it can lead to a confrontation with the male family members or other men. A Sudanese male refugee living for two years in Tripoli testified as follows:

Libya has beautiful girls. They like black people. But the problem is that Libyan guys are bad people. If they see you looking at any Libyan girl, they will shoot you. [...] One day, I was there and a friend of mine was looking at a pretty girl inside a car. His father stopped the car, came to my friend and said: "You should respect yourself" and he said: "I am not a bad guy. If I was a bad guy, I would shoot you." [...] If they catch a Sudanese guy with a Libyan lady doing sex, they kill him. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp call, July 2020)

An Eritrean refugee reiterates this as well, by explaining that men know that they cannot speak to the Libyan women in the city as they are afraid of the consequences.

Even last week! A Libyan woman came to a Sudanese man and she told him to have sex with him. He is a man. He is interested. But he is afraid of the Libyan family of this woman. So, he said no. The girl started shouting. "That guy raped me!" They beat him. They broke his head. He is full of blood. They brought him in the car and we have never seen him again. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, August 2020)

To avoid situations such as the one described in this excerpt, migrants and refugees tend to do not talk to Libyan women, nor to accept an invitation for sex, but this does not always guarantee their safety.

Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma

The consequences of rape are traumatic for the survivors. Many are ashamed of what they have suffered and refuse to talk about it. In the

centre for asylum seekers in Medinine, in southern Tunisia, several women have small children with them. They are mixed race. They are the children of their abusers. They explain that the family's reaction to the news of the birth of these children outside marriage can be devastating. For a young Congolese woman, living in Zarzis, this situation remains unresolved. She is the loving carer of her young daughter. She fell pregnant while being sexually exploited in Libya. Her family is still unaware of the existence of this happy little girl. In tears, this woman explained:

No, I didn't tell [my family I had a child]. I am afraid. I'm scared. What am I going to explain to them? What am I going to explain? What will I say? I don't know yet. That it's the child of rape... I'm afraid. Ah, God! (Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This woman had a particularly traumatic experience in Libya. However, she told her whole story without a tear. It is this last fact, the fact, that her family do not know about her child, that made her cry. Like others, the shame prevents her from asking for support from her family.

Rape is also painful for the relatives of survivors. In the testimonies collected for this research, several men testified to the pain they felt when they saw violence committed against their friends, wives, girlfriends or companions. Secondary trauma is defined as: "learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate" (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Relatives of survivors as well as witnesses of sexual violence in Libya may be subject to secondary trauma. This was the case for a young man from Eritrea who witnessed the rape of his girlfriend in a warehouse in Brak:

Most of them are Libyan. Libyans, they take drugs. They ... [sigh]. They abuse women. They grab them by the neck: "Let's go" They take them to the place where they are living. Then, when the women come back to us, they are crying. [Sigh]. Even for my girlfriend... We met there. This is criminal. It is incredible. It is a terrible life. When I am thinking about this... I don't forget that moment. Sometimes, I see

in night dreams. I was very scared. I was scared. I was shouting. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

One interviewee developed a strong desire for revenge after having gone through Libya and experiencing humiliation for about two years:

They made me suffer so much that if I meet one of them, when I am in Europe, I will kill him. A woman, I will rape her! I will rape her till she cries till she throws up! I will not use a weapon, only my dick. I will take revenge. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

It is often the impossibility of intervening that traumatises witnesses of sexual violence. In many cases, refugees in the hands of human traffickers develop empathy for each other. They seek to protect each other from abuse. As already mentioned, several men testified that they sought to come between the abusers and their fellow detainees. An Eritrean man recalled the following:

There is one person from Chad, working with Azziz [a famous human trafficker], he raped the ladies of Eritrea. [...] One day, he said to me: "I want this lady". That girl came with me from Sudan to Libya. It is a small sister. I consider myself as a big brother and I speak a little of Arabic. I said: "No. How do you dare to take that lady? She is my girlfriend. I will kill you", in the Arabic language. "She is your girlfriend?" "Yes, she is my girlfriend." He hit me! He beat me by the stick, by too much. If you say this is my girlfriend or this is my wife or this one, they will kill you also. I didn't forget this day. He hit me. And then, he took the lady. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Solidarity between men and women is not only expressed in the context of rape. Refugees take care of each other in the warehouses of the human traffickers. A young man, for example, recalled helping his companions to give birth:

There is something essential that I learnt in Libya. I learnt how to deliver [babies for] women. Because there is no doctor there, in the rooms. I helped them. I remove my shirt and I cover the baby with it. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

This young man was interviewed in Tunisia. He explained that he was just waiting for an opportunity to go to Europe and that, once in a

safe place, he would like to tell his story, so that the world knows about what happens to refugees in Libya.

Discussion

The causes of sexual violence in Libya

The first form of sexual violence analysed in this chapter was ‘sexual violence as a tool of subjugation’. This classification refers here to the acts in which the sexual violence is systematic (as a collective targeting of the victims) and/or combined with other humiliation. This can take various forms, as this evidence presented in the chapter showed, and includes perpetrating the rape in front of other potential victims or recorded it using ICTs.

The purpose of this violence is to destroy dignity and self-esteem, to make people obey or to accelerate the payment of ransom. It can also be a warning or a punishment. This form of sexual violence is often systematic, no passenger or detainee can avoid it. It may occur in front of other passengers or detainees, and sometimes phones are used to record the abuse. The spectrum of humiliation combined with sexual violence committed by human traffickers against migrants and refugees is large.

In this research, we came across both direct and indirect testimonies of:

- Public rape – which is also corroborated in the literature – including in front of family members (Interviews 1019, 1023 and 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, November, December 2019)
- Genital mutilation (Interview 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)
- Men forced to publicly perpetrate sexual violence against women or men (Interview 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021; see also Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Coercion into public masturbation in front of others (see also Mercier, 2018b)

In addition, the literature also discusses the following acts of sexual violence:

- Women forced to publicly perpetrate sexual violence against men (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Men coerced into sodomising opponents in the war (Allegra, 2018)
- Refugees forced to have intercourse with family members (Mercier, 2018b; Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Refugees forced to have intercourse with dead bodies (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)

According to the interviews collected for the purpose of this book, sexual violence is almost unavoidable for migrants and refugees in the Sahara desert. Other reports confirm these findings. The MMC and UNHCR state in their report, which is based on 16,000 interviews with migrants rescued from Libya, that: "The primary locations where respondents reported that incidents had occurred were in the desert (especially while crossing from Niger to Libya, and from Sudan to Egypt) (18%), Tripoli (6%), Khartoum (6%), Bamako (5%) and Sabha (5%)" (MMC & UNHCR, 2020, p. 20).

In many testimonies, the interviewees noted that their abuser was acting under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The inebriation of perpetrators seems to be one of the factors motivating sexual violence, especially particularly humiliating experiences.

The topic of sexual violence remains a taboo. For instance, it would appear that men are often victims of sexual violence, but in the interviews collected for this chapter, only two men clearly stated that they had faced such violence directly. The survivors feel dishonoured and they prefer to avoid the topic or to talk about others who have been raped, but not about their own experience. This research reported that women (are also forced to) perpetrate sexual violence.

Many interviewees avoided talking about sexual violence, because they were not in the right environment to do so. For instance, the people who were interviewed in Tunisia or Niger were still on their journey and many were not in a safe place yet. Even people interviewed in Europe would not easily open up on this topic, and it

is a very difficult topic to bring up in the interviews, causing much embarrassment.

The findings detailed in this chapter to describe sexual violence against migrants and refugees are not exhaustive. This chapter shows that it is possible to explore this topic, but it is challenging and the picture derived only scratches the surface.

Sexual violence as part of the human trafficking cycle

The research findings show the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence in Libya. The testimonies gathered so far are enough to understand the situation in which migrants and refugees find themselves in Libya. In their apartment in Zarzis, the couple from Guinea whose interview appears at the beginning of this chapter explained how they ended up in Tunisia. The husband shared the following:

We spent thirteen hours at sea looking for a rescue boat. There was no boat. Women were shouting everywhere. Some said we had to go back to Libya, others said it was better to die than to turn back, because women know the pain of Libya. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

By his side, his wife adds:

Hell. Better to die in the sea than to go back to Libya. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, Zarzis, May 2020)

The findings show that sexual violence is an important element of the human trafficking cycle. This chapter describes how various forms of sexual violence are perpetrated as part of human trafficking for ransom, both as part of the *modus operandi* and in a broader societal framework, as well as for exploitation before and after migrants and refugees are detained and ransom is extorted from them.

In Libya, sexual violence occurs and contributes to the dehumanisation of migrants and refugees in Libya, who have little if any access to human rights protection. It follows from the situation of hopelessness and vulnerability in which people on the move in Libya find themselves. This chapter helped to understand some of the sexual violence committed against migrants and refugees in Libya,

as a culture in which vulnerable people on the move can be subjugated through sexual violence, without any inhibition or recourse. The findings suggest that sexual violence is an important aspect to consider when exploring the human trafficking cycle.

Conclusion

Sexual violence is perpetrated against migrants and refugees throughout their migratory journeys in Libya. The interviewees in this research shared experiences that were difficult for them to share, and hard for the researchers to listen to. It appears from these testimonies that rape and sexual violence are commonplace in Libya – they are widespread, systematic, and considered by many to be part of the journey. The victims are both women and men. Sexual violence has become so common that some take precautions, such as carrying protection or using contraceptives, in order to avoid getting pregnant or contracting HIV.

This chapter described and compared three categories of sexual violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya. The first category is sexual violence as a tool of subjugation. The objective of this type of sexual violence is to degrade, humiliate and subjugate the victim. It is used to control the refugees, as punishment and perhaps to dehumanise them so that the traffickers can continue to treat them as a ‘commodity’. The second form is sexual exploitation for profit, for example, through forced prostitution. As well as profiting from the migrants and refugees by extracting ransoms, they are used to provide sexual services, by the guards of detention centres, the traffickers and others. As in many other situations in Libya, people on the move become merchandise. Sometimes the term of the transaction is an entire life, sometimes it is just moments. The third type is sexual violence as an opportunistic crime – just because the migrants and refugees are under their control. This is perpetrated by all and sundry, from drivers, to guards, traffickers and even Libyan civilians.

The position of vulnerability in which migrants and refugees find themselves in Libya makes them easy prey for those seeking to abuse

them sexually. Their illegal status and non-existent access to justice or protection are among the reasons why these crimes are so common. Finally, sexual violence is an integral part of the human trafficking cycle – it binds the victims, through shame, by degrading them and disempowering them – making it difficult for them to break free. By treating them like a commodity, and with nowhere to turn for help or to escape, migrants and refugees are trapped in a human trafficking cycle.

Acknowledgement

Testimonies of sexual violence are rare and precious. Often, the participants are affected by the interviews. Reliving the traumas and describing the events and places affects them deeply. Some asked to take several breaks. Others experienced headaches. Many cried. The author would like to thank the people who had the courage to testify.

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Ethical clearance

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Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz is the author of this chapter. Annelies Coessens contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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“Gate Closed”: The Situation in Libya during COVID-19²²⁷

Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction

All the borders are closed. It's not just Niger, it's Libya too. Before we understood the situation, we had left [from Niger to Libya] in four vehicles. [...] The Libyan security forces occupied the whole border; they said that everyone must get off. Everyone got off. They did the controls and then they told us to go back to Niger, all of us. They didn't let anyone in. It was from that moment that we knew that we had to look for new ways to enter. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

Sitting on the terrace of a restaurant in Agadez in northern Niger, a young Senegalese facilitator for people on the move – a ‘smuggler’ – explains how difficult the times have been for him since the outbreak of COVID-19. Faced with the closure of borders, he has had to adapt his business.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on movement, with the closure of borders and quarantines. But, did this stop the movement of people through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea? The push and pull theory of migration suggests that more obstacles would reduce the number of people making this crossing. However, this research found the opposite. From April to October 2020, over 24,000 arrived in Malta and Italy from Libya and Tunisia. This is three times the number for the whole of 2019. Hence, it appears that such theories do not explain the reality of migration as it happens on the ground.

²²⁷ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the first and second authors' PhD theses and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

Like the rest of the world, the Central Mediterranean region was touched by the COVID-19 pandemic. Libya, Niger and Tunisia identified their first cases in March 2020 (WHO, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). In Libya, the pandemic presented a real challenge, because the humanitarian situation was already critical, with the country in the midst of a civil war. Health infrastructure had been destroyed, notably in the fighting between the Libyan National Army, commanded by Khalifa Haftar, and the forces backing the Government of National Accord. To stem the spread of the pandemic, the Government of National Accord closed its air and land borders on 16 March 2020, even before the first case was identified in Libya. In March, April and May 2020, various lockdowns were imposed in several parts of the country (IOM, 2020a; 2020b). After July 2020, Libya witnessed an increase in cases. As at 31 October 2020, 60,628 cases had been confirmed and 847 deaths recorded (WHO, 2020a).

In Niger too, the news of the pandemic prompted concern. Niger is ill equipped to deal with such situations, having recorded a Human Development Index of 0.377 in 2019, which places it 189th out of 189 territories (Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement, 2019). To flatten the curve, on 17 March 2020, the government announced a health state of emergency and closed the border two days later. In addition, a curfew was put in place and movement between regions restricted. From mid-April, these measures were gradually relaxed (UNOCHA, 2020). As at 31 October 2020, the country had recorded 1,220 cases and 69 deaths since the start of the pandemic – 70% of these cases were in the capital, Niamey. The regions of Agadez and Zinder were the next most affected (WHO, 2020c). Niger reopened its air borders on 1 August 2020. During the entire period of data collection for this chapter, Niger's land borders remained closed.

Tunisia announced the closure of its maritime, air and land borders on 18 March 2020. Following the reopening of borders to a selection of countries on 27 June 2020, the number of cases in the country started to rise. As at 31 October 2020, Tunisia had recorded a total of 58,028 cases and 1,253 deaths since the start of the pandemic (WHO,

2020b). Tunisia and Niger (particularly the Agadez region in the north of Niger) are entry and exit gateways to Libya for sub-Saharan migrants and refugees.²²⁸

The security situation in Libya in 2020, combined with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to a deterioration in the situation for migrants and refugees. The situation became so hard for migrants and refugees in Libya that many left the country:

The economic downturn, including plummeting income-generating opportunities for migrant workers, tightened security controls and mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 are amongst the factors which have likely contributed to a number of migrants leaving Libya. (IOM, 2020d)

Migrants and refugees living in Libya found themselves trapped between the civil war and the coronavirus pandemic, at constant risk of falling into the hands of human traffickers and slavers. At that time, an estimated, 2,370 of them were held in official detention centres, often in perilous health conditions, making them susceptible to COVID-19 (UNHCR, 2020b). However, these are only the official figures; in Tunisia, Libya and the Agadez region of Niger, their irregular situation places people on the move far from official data.

According to journalist Sara Creta, speaking in a webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees, the situation during the peak of the pandemic was alarming:

It's important to consider that due to the COVID-19 and due to the restrictions, their life [of migrants and refugees] and their situation are directly affected. They cannot work and they cannot move. They cannot earn money. (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – North Africa, 2020 [transcribed and paraphrased by MW])

In October 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicated that:

²²⁸ 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).

A rise in the well-documented and constant risk of abduction, arbitrary arrest and detention which migrants face in Libya has been recorded in recent weeks. In late September, for example, more than 300 migrants were reportedly kidnapped when armed men stormed their homes in the town of Al Ajaylat and held in an unofficial detention site. During the raid, at least two people lost their lives. IOM medical teams provided assistance to those injured. (IOM, 2020d)

In July 2020, migrants and refugees released after the closure of Gharyan detention centre demanded to be returned to prison, claiming that Tripoli was not safe. In March 2020, the same happened in Sabha, with migrants asking to be returned to prison, not knowing where to sleep after their release (Tubiana, 2020).

For many migrants and refugees in Libya, the closure of borders has meant the tightening of a trap in which they were already stuck. With air borders closed, IOM was forced to cease its assisted voluntary returns between April and August 2020 (IOM, 2020e). In addition, all resettlement flights operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were postponed from 15 March until 15 October 2020. When those activities resumed, only 501 people were able to benefit from this programme from January till November 2020. This is a very small number compared to the 2,424 people resettled in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020e; UNHCR, 2020a).

Fleeing the country through land borders has also become more complicated since the pandemic. With the border checkpoints closed, people on the move have had to take other, more perilous, routes to escape to neighbouring countries. It was only in September and October 2020 that land border crossing points started to ease (IOM, 2020b).

Despite this, IOM noted that the number of migrants and refugees living in Libya has declined since the beginning of the pandemic, which indicates that they must have found a way to leave, even though the borders were closed. In September and October 2020, a total of 574,146 migrants and refugees from over 43 different countries were identified in Libya by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM, 2020c), compared to 654,081 migrants in October to December 2019 (IOM, 2019). An estimated 80,000 migrants and

refugees left the country between March 2020 and October 2020 to neighbouring countries or across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (IOM, 2020d).

Despite the closure of European borders and ports, the number of people who arrived in Malta and Italy after having crossed the Mediterranean Sea from the Libyan and Tunisian shores in 2020 was nearly three times higher than the previous year. A total of 27,834 individuals arrived between 1 January and 2 November 2020. 41.7% of these were Tunisians (UNHCR, 2020c). This is an increase of 16.56% compared to the same period in 2019. (UNHCR, 2020b). This raises questions about the effectiveness of border closures and other policies on stemming migration.

Hence, the research question examined in this chapter is: *Did the conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic when borders were closed and movements were restricted lead to a reduction in the movement of people in (and to/from) Libya and a decrease in the number of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe?*

To answer this question, this chapter looks at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures imposed to curb the pandemic on the movement of migrants in Libya and to Libya (from Niger and Tunisia), as well as from Libya and Tunisia to Europe. The first part of the findings is based on interviews with migrants, refugees, smugglers, journalists and other key people in Libya, Niger and Tunisia during the COVID-19 pandemic; the second part is based on a desk study of the relevant media reports at the time. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Before presenting the findings, the next section sets out the methodology for this research, which is followed by a brief discussion of the push and pull theory of migration. The hypothesis is that if the push and pull theory is correct, the COVID-19 situation should lead to a clear reduction of movement from Libya to Europe.

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*.

This chapter is based on ethnographic research to explore the situation of migrants and refugees in Libya, and neighbouring countries of Niger and Tunisia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is built on two distinct data-sets embedded in the local context. The first consists of interviews conducted with migrants and refugees, as well as other relevant participants. The second data-set is based on a desk study using material containing local descriptions of the situation of migrants and refugees during the pandemic, giving more of an outsider's perspective. The two sets allow for the triangulation of findings obtained through analysis of the two different data-sets.

The interviews and desk review were conducted from 1 May till 1 November 2020 in Libya, Niger and Tunisia, but covered the period from March to November 2020 (the early part of the pandemic). As it was almost impossible to travel during this time, very little information has been published on how the situation for people on the move was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 157 people were interviewed by Morgane Wirtz and Adoum Moussa.

In Tunisia, interviews were conducted in cities hosting large communities of migrants and refugees, such as Zarzis (46 respondents), Medinine (11 respondents), Sfax (24 respondents), Sousse (9 respondents), Tunis (24 respondents) and Djerba (3 respondents). Research was also conducted in Kerkennah (1 respondent), and Kelibia (4 respondents), from where boats leave towards Italy. In Niger, fieldwork was carried out exclusively in Agadez (35 respondents), which is the last stopover before the crossing the Sahara to Libya and Algeria. Due to the closure of borders and the security situation, in Libya migrants and refugees were contacted by phone. Interviews were conducted with migrants and refugees (3 respondents) when they were in Tripoli, Zawiya, Zuwara and Garabulli. Some respondents were interviewed multiple

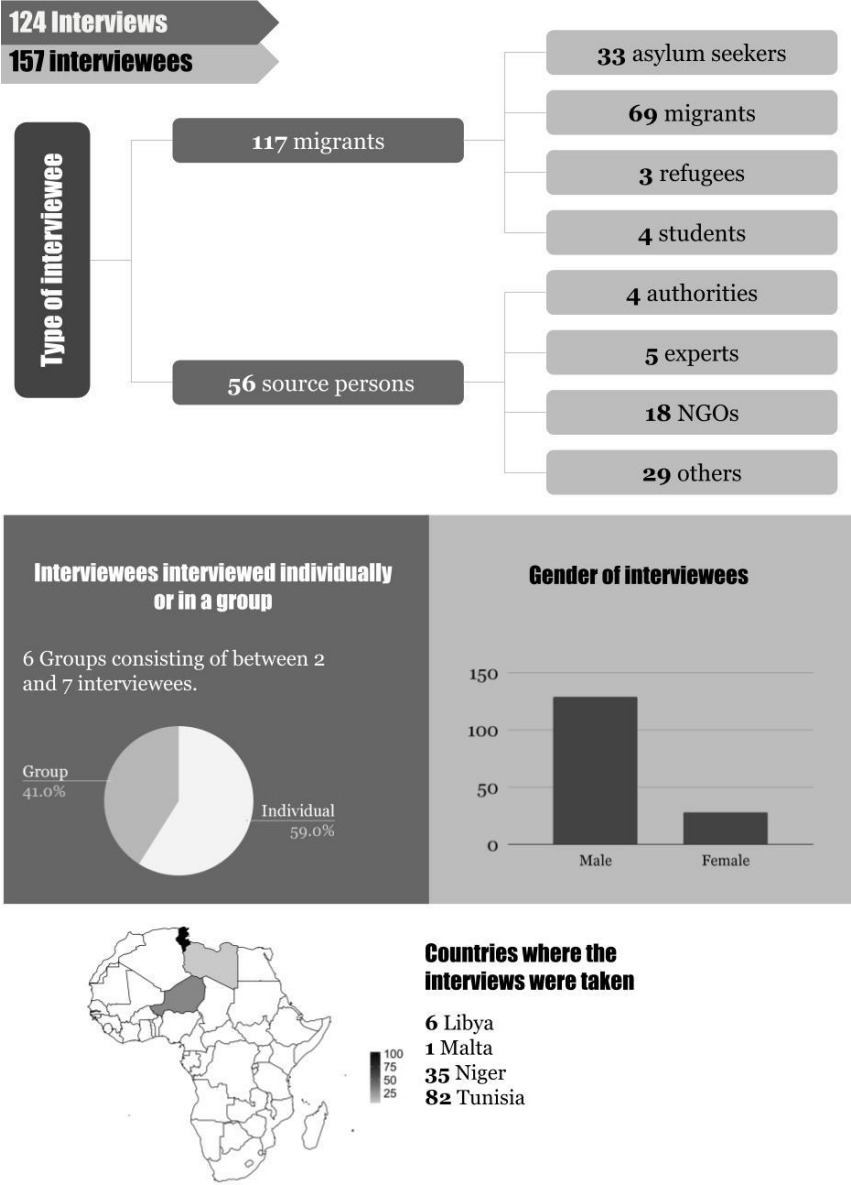
times in multiple locations, as they were followed in their journey. In this case, they were counted in multiple locations, but not double-counted for the total number of interviewees. The respondents were selected with the help of local people or people well integrated in the migrant communities in Tunisia and Niger. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a purposeful²²⁹ and open labelling strategy, by a team of researchers and assistants.²³⁰

In addition to the interviews, a desk study was carried out of a systematic collection of press articles, radio and video reports, webinars and research reports on the situation of migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean region during the study time from May to mid-September 2020. Wiem Ben Hamouda and Asma Ben Hadj Hassen (students of African Studies at the University of Sousse), and Ibrahim Diallo (Director of the *Air Info* newspaper in Agadez) systematically listed a total of 565 articles, videos and podcasts published on the research subject. The search included any publication on the topic of migrants and refugees in the region (Libya, Tunisia, Niger) related to the pandemic. The focus of the search was on the collection of articles from local media, in Arabic, Hausa and French, but they also extended to the international press, in French, English, Italian and Dutch. Just over a third (35%) of these articles concerned travel during the pandemic, despite the closure of borders.

²²⁹ The labels designed included the type of interviewee (migrant, refugee, expert, NGO, authority, other), type of shelter (detention centre, rented house, etc.), ill (yes/no), how many people known with COVID-19 symptoms, access to health care, fear of contracting COVID-19, help received, economic difficulties due to lockdown, willing to depart (no or legally to Europe, illegally through Libya, illegally through the sea in Tunisia, illegally through Algeria, return home), and reported as having departed after the interview.

²³⁰ The team was led by Morgane Wirtz and Dr Mariem Ghardallou and included: Zohra Touati, Sarra Achour, Whitney Atieno, Wejden Ben Aziza, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Wiem Ben Hamouda, Cyrille Bozon Seabe, Bryan Eryong, Kobe Goudo Désire, Francis Kinyua Gathua, Abir Menssi, and Anouk Smeets.

Figure 16.1. Overview of interview statistics²³¹



²³¹ Some interviewees were interviewed in multiple locations, but only counted once towards the interviewee total. Some interviews were held with more than one respondent. Some interviewees were both migrant/refugee/asylum seeker and

The articles were analysed using a closed coding labelling strategy.²³²

The next section briefly discusses the push and pull theory of migration, before the presenting the findings of this research (interviews and desk study).

Push and pull theory of migration during COVID lockdowns

The EU’s migration policy is underpinned by the logic that creating more obstacles will curb the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (see Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*). This approach is based on the logic of push and pull: if obstacles to reaching a particular destination increase, these act as a deterrent, a theory first presented by Lee (1966).



Figure 16.2. Push and pull theory of migration (adapted from Lee, 1996)

However, the concept of push and pull theory, which has its origins in an economic theory rooted in rational choice, has been challenged, as it does not always explain the behaviour seen on the ground. Kidane (2021) refutes Lee’s model of rational choice, pointing to the

source person – they were counted in both categories, but not double counted in the total interviewees.

²³² The articles were classified according to the topics covered; the impact of COVID-19 on the financial situation of migrants/refugees, on their access to health care, and on their movement.

psychological effects of trauma and how emphasis on dangers ahead can stimulate a flight response in some people. She argues that policies should aim at increasing resilience in a place where refugees and migrants feel secure and protected.

Brachet and Scheele (2019) speak of ‘remoteness’ to identify the fact that official policies and regulatory frameworks may play out differently on the ground than in the places (centres) where they are formulated. In some cases, these policies can have the opposite effect of what was intended. Remoteness, these authors argue, “translates both a structural vulnerability and is certain form of power – the power to make one’s self invisible, unpredictable and hence ungovernable” (Brachet & Scheele, 2019, pp. 168–169). Hence, the fact that something is unlawful or regulated, does not mean that it ceases to exist.

Confirming the observations of Brachet (2010) that the facilitation of travel was pushed in a sphere of criminality, Creta (2020) argues that the increase in obstacles to reach a safe place has had the opposite effect: by pushing the movement of people into the realm of illegality it has enhanced the scope for human trafficking. This position is also taken by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime:

Where migrants continue on their journeys, they will be increasingly reliant on smugglers to facilitate their journey through environments that are increasingly hostile to migration. This enhanced dependency, and decreased ability to rely on any state organs for support, compounds their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of their smugglers. (Wagner & Hoang, 2020, p.7)

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) demonstrated that human trafficking in Sinai was partly a result of a series of agreements between Italy and Libya that had made crossing the Mediterranean Sea extremely difficult. By studying the impact of the Libyan conflict and of the containment policies on migration, Morone (2020) found that paradoxically, European policies to contain migration have led to more African migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Morone found that these policies actually lead to a worsening of the

conditions for migrants in Libya and motivate many to leave, whereas their first motivation when deciding to go to Libya may have been to stay there and work as a foreign worker.

Castles set out the need for more research on migration from a social science perspective including: “Emphasis on the social meanings constructed by people in diverse communities and societies, and on the relativity and context-dependence of these meanings” (Castles, 2012, p. 21). Following the same rationale, Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere and Gebre-Egziabher (2019) advocate for research on migration as a social and ethnographic topic, but with a view to establishing common factors across specific situations located in time and space as a means of contributing to the understanding of it as a global phenomenon. Comparing studies set in time and space allows the development of theoretical frameworks that are relevant to describe (new) associations between (new) factors that are identified as relevant in the specific studies. Their conclusion is in line with Castles, who found “that attempts to create a ‘general theory of migration’ are unlikely to be helpful”(Castles, 2012, p. 31).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures implemented to restrict movement to curb the pandemic, provide a perfect opportunity to test the push and pull theory of migration. The following sections set out the findings of this study from the two data-sets – the interviews and the desk review – on the impact of the pandemic on the movement of people in (and to/from) Libya, as well as across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

Findings of the interviews

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it have had vast repercussions globally, for people in all countries, including migrants and refugees. From the interviews, the impacts can be grouped roughly into the following five areas, which provide the structure for the presentation of the findings of the interviews and the desk review: closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes; new health protocols and quarantine

arrangements; economic repercussions; access to support; and crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes

Given the climate of illegality created for migrants and refugees in Libya and the broader region, the migration routes have already changed over the past decade. The closing of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the situation, restricting movement and increasing the dependency of people on the move on those who facilitate such movement. However, in the early days of the pandemic migrants and refugees largely respected the measures taken by states to contain the spread of COVID-19. Mahgoub Hassan, the officer in charge of UNHCR in Zarzis in Tunisia, observed the following:

Very few people have arrived [from Libya to Tunisia]. As a matter of fact, two groups recently arrived. They were confined for 14 days and then released. But that happened in Sfax. Those people arrived by boat. [Also], since the eruption of this pandemic, no significant movement from Tunisia back to Libya has been observed. (Mahgoub Hassan, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Smugglers have also been affected by border closures. A smuggler in Agadez shared the following:

Really, COVID-19 has blocked our activities. Since coronavirus arrived, migrants have no road to get to Agadez. (Interviewee 1078, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, July 2020)

Located in the centre of Niger, Agadez is a gateway to the Sahara. It is an important stopover on the migration routes. It is where the tarmac ends and the desert begins. In Agadez migrants and refugees have to negotiate with smugglers to continue their journey to Algeria or Libya. With COVID-19 and the closure of borders, several interviewees explained that they felt trapped in the city. Many waited to continue their journey north or south. A Cameroonian woman explained:

Corona has delayed our trip. When I see that I have been here for three months... I would have saved maybe Central African Franc (FCFA) 100,000 [EUR 160] [if I had not stayed here]. So it has blocked us in fact. (Interviewee 1067, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

A man staying at the IOM transit centre while waiting to benefit from the assisted voluntary return to travel to the Ivory Coast explained:

This is not my home. [...] I'm a bit demoralised, because [...] I left for adventure, I couldn't enter [Europe]. I'm in Niger, I haven't returned home. It demoralises me. (Interviewee 1083, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

The feeling of being stuck in this city, at the doors of the Sahara, is exacerbated by the almost impossibility of crossing the border illegally. 'Almost', because, of course, while there have been much fewer illegal migrants arriving in Libya since the coronavirus pandemic struck, smugglers have found new ways to complete the journey. A smuggler in Agadez explained:

Before, we paid for each vehicle [at the Libyan border to enable it to cross]. It was 100,000 FCFA [EUR 154] per vehicle. But, since coronavirus, the police will not let us go through. They are a bit strict. So we bypass the checkpoints to pass. We have created new routes. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)

This quote suggests that the close of borders did not stop the transportation of people to (and from) Libya, but it changed the routes, increased the cost and the risks, and pushed such movement further in a sphere of illegality. The intensification of border controls places migrants who insist on leaving in a more vulnerable position. A smuggler shared:

[To get from Libya to Niger], if you had 60,000 FCFA [EUR 92], 75,000 FCFA [EUR 114], the smugglers would bring you. But now they are asking for 100,000 FCFA [EUR 153], because the driver pays [the customs officers] in Madama to enter [Niger]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)

In addition, the new routes that people on the move had to take during the border closures were longer. Smugglers took many

precautions to avoid the security checkpoints. One of them described the situation as follows:

It's more difficult for us to leave since the borders are closed. It's very difficult now. It's very difficult. Before, it took two days to get to Tamanrasset [at the border with Algeria] and now it's six days. We leave by steps now. We observe how the security forces are oriented and that's how we leave. We are looking for information on their position so that we can pass.

Before, the road [to Libya] took five or six days. Now it is a week in the desert. When you leave Agadez, you have to go around all the barriers until you reach the border with Libya [...]. Sometimes you even have to go through Chad to enter Libya. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

The new tracks made by the drivers in the Sahara are more dangerous than the usual roads. The smuggler explained:

If you break down there, don't even think of a vehicle passing by to help you out or to pick up passengers. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)

For safety reasons, given the length of the road and the increase in controls by security forces, this young smuggler decided to reduce the number of passengers per vehicle. Before, he used to load between 28 and 30 people into a Toyota Hilux that would take them across the desert. When the borders closed, he reduced it to between 23 and 25 people. This also led him to increase his price. He explained:

Now it's very, very expensive for migrants. Transport is more complicated, more expensive and more difficult. Before, when leaving Agadez to Libya, you paid the smuggler FCFA 250,000 [EUR 380] for Sabha, FCFA 200,000 [EUR 305] for Qatrun, FCFA 400,000 [EUR 610] for Tripoli. But at the moment, when you leave here for Sabha, they ask you for FCFA 300,000 [EUR 458]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

In Tunisia too, after the first months of stagnation following the outbreak of the pandemic, (illegal) movement restarted. Chiara Cavalcanti, Communications Officer for UNHCR in Tunisia, said

that, between January and April 2020, more than one hundred people crossed the border from Tunisia back to Libya. She explained:

It's really unfortunate. [...] We are raising awareness of the danger of returning to Libya. But we also know that in Tunisia the options are extremely limited. (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2020)

Ten migrants and refugees who were followed during this research decided to leave Tunisia for Libya. The lack of prospects in Tunisia pushed them to leave. An Eritrean refugee explained:

We don't have hope! We don't have a future. Instead of living for nothing, you have to die for something. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The return of refugees to Libya is quite alarming and shows their level of desperation. The ten people in this research who returned to Libya had experienced the conditions in Libya in the past, and some of them had been kidnapped for ransom or had been in official detention centres in Libya. However, the hopelessness of their situation led them to see Libya as the only option.

New health protocols and quarantine arrangements

When the pandemic started, some migrants and refugees were surprised to discover a health protocol on their arrival in Assamaka, in northern Niger, 15 kilometres from the Algerian border. A Cameroonian who arrived in April 2020 recalled the following:

When we were in Assamaka, on the way, we heard about the disease, "corona, corona, corona". I thought it was a joke. When we arrived, they took us to another camp. They took our temperature with a machine. We were put aside and confined. (Interviewee 1082, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

Confinement camps were set up across the Agadez region to accommodate migrants and refugees rescued in the desert. But the obligation to confine oneself has not always been well received by migrants and refugees. In Agadez, in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent need to take in people expelled from its northern neighbours. Those newcomers remained stuck in the region.

It is difficult to know how many migrants and refugees contracted COVID-19. Their precarious and irregular situation keeps them away from health facilities and they often prefer to treat themselves at home rather than entering a hospital. The UNHCR Communications Officer in Tunisia explained:

If people have symptoms, they can call our helpline. Some have approached us this way. In this case, they are tested and if they are positive [for COVID-19], we have provided apartments to isolate them. But, to my knowledge, those who have been tested through this device have all been negative. And if they do not approach us, we cannot know. (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, November 2020)

It is often when intercepted at borders that migrants and refugees are automatically tested and placed in quarantine:

For those who have been rescued at sea, around 10 people have tested positive since the beginning of the pandemic. Depending on the circumstances, those rescued at sea are hosted in government structures or by IOM for the quarantine period, which is why it is difficult for us to follow. They are placed in quarantine and tested, then they are taken to our shelters after profiling, if they expressed the intention to seek international protection. (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, by phone, November 2020)

Several people on the border between Tunisia and Algeria were also quarantined and tested. In Niger too, the closing of the borders did not prevent the arrival of several thousand people, expelled from Algeria and Libya. Lockdown centres had to be quickly established to place the new arrivals in quarantine. Azaoua Mahaman, the Senior Communication and Reintegration Assistant, IOM Niger, explained:

We had to manage lockdown sites for migrants. We have supported these sites by providing food, water, hygiene, health care. On average, we have injected over 200 million West African CFA franc (FCFA) [EUR 305,000] into the management of this crisis by supporting containment and the Nigerien government. (Azaoua Mahaman, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

From the fieldwork carried out for this research, it appears that the fear of contracting coronavirus is rarely a major concern for migrants and refugees. The closing of borders and the economic difficulties

resulting from the crisis are more worrying. Of the 117 migrants and refugees interviewed for this research, only 2 reported having seen migrants with COVID-19 symptoms. One was talking about himself, feeling ill when he crossed the border from Tunisia to Libya. Being in a totally irregular situation, he was unable to access treatment or be tested. After his recovery, he concluded that it was probably malaria. The other suspected case was in an IOM transit centre in the Agadez region. A young Cameroonian reported:

I have a friend, since we travelled together in the desert she has been coughing. But we do not know what she is suffering from as we have not yet taken her to the hospital for examinations or a test. Every day she goes to the hospital at the IOM centre and she is given medication, but she still coughs a lot, she is losing weight. (Interviewee 1063, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

A Somali refugee in Zawiyah said that:

Libyans, they think that Africans have corona. "Corona!", they call us like that. "Corona, go back to your room". Because we are black, I don't know... (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, April 2020)

The belief shared by many is that coronavirus is imported by foreigners, which has directly impacted on the access to work of migrants and refugees living in Libya. A smuggler who arranges the transfer of migrants between Agadez and Sabha in southern Libya shared the following:

There is so much mistrust between blacks and Libyans. You know the Arabs! When it comes to illnesses, they don't approach black people. It is so hard. Everything has changed. Even with your boss, whom you used to chat with, there's no such thing if it's not on the phone. Arabs are very suspicious of black people, that's why they don't want to take you, even to bring you to work. Everything has stopped. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)

The spread of coronavirus has aroused great fear that migrants and refugees may be infected. They are a highly mobile population, extremely vulnerable and with few resources in case of infection. In Libya, which is in the grip of armed conflict, the scarce health facilities are often inaccessible to migrants.

The spread of the virus in legal and illegal detention centres in Libya is a real risk and would be a disaster, exacerbated by overcrowding, lack of hygiene measures, and shortages of water. In Tunisia, several associations have highlighted the impossibility of migrants and refugees respecting social distancing. Speaking of urban migrants and refugees in Tunisia, Romdhane Ben Amor, Communications Officer from the Tunisian Forum of Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), talks about the risk of coronavirus spreading among migrant communities:

They live in small apartments. In most cases, these apartments are overcrowded.
(Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, phone, April 2020)

Some refugees also expressed fear of contracting the virus in IOM and UNHCR shelters. A young woman hosted in a UNHCR shelter in Medinine, South Tunisia, explained that the situation is extremely conducive to the spread of COVID-19:

The shelter makes us afraid. When coronavirus started to spread we kept doing things the same way, like 10 people using the same toilet and 10 people in the same kitchen. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Hence, the lack of access to a safe and healthy place is also a potential driver for people to move on.

Economic repercussions

Migrants travel clandestinely, from stopover to stopover, each time waiting to collect enough money, to continue their trajectory. For the majority of them, the end goal is to reach Europe. Their precarious economic situation and irregular status places them in a difficult situation, which the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated. The majority of migrants and refugees interviewed in Tunisia claimed to be in a difficult economic situation due to the lockdown:

Vulnerable people are becoming even more exposed and also the refugees who are usually self-reliant have become vulnerable. (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, April 2020)

A young Cameroonian resident explained:

Imagine, you are a migrant, you work in a cafe, then suddenly the cafe is closed. The boss calls you, he doesn't give you a salary. You are in a country where you have no one, and the landlord tells you to pay for the house. You have to pay the electricity and the water bills. For at least three weeks, he shut off the water. (Interviewee 1053, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In Agadez, seven migrants said they were suffering economically from the coronavirus crisis. Some migrants have been settled there for several years. The pandemic did not really impact on their employment, as there was no lockdown. However, they live in precarious situations and work mainly in restaurants, bars, or gold mining and construction sites. Due to the closing of borders, the price of foodstuffs increased and it was very difficult to find work:

Here, we live badly. We don't have a job. We don't make money. We have stayed here for two months, without work. (Interviewee 4004, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

In Libya, too, the economic situation of migrants and refugees has deteriorated because of the coronavirus pandemic. A young Sudanese man who had been living in Tripoli for almost two years said that he used to go to the 'station', a place where Libyans would recruit day labourers, every morning to look for work:

It is not easy to find a job. People talk, they say the number of infected people is increasing every day. But me, I don't see COVID 19. [...] Now, in the morning at the station, there are 500, 600 people. Before, it was not like that [...] I stay for hours at the station without finding a job. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, phone, July 2020)

The worsening of the economic situation of migrants and refugees is stressful. The majority of them left their country in order to help their families. They have pressure on their shoulders to send remittances. Many also have large debts to relatives who paid for their journeys or the ransom for their release from human traffickers. It has to be noted here that, despite the difficulties, a few interviewees in Tunisia said that the crisis actually improved their situation, as they finally received help due to the pandemic. This is developed in the next section.

Access to support

Migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean region usually do not have good access to medical facilities. This further deteriorated due to the pandemic, according to some of the migrants interviewed for this research. An Eritrean refugee in Tunis shared the following:

There was a guy among us who was sick a few days ago. He has diabetes and is 55 years old. We called the doctor, but he didn't want to come. They fear coronavirus. So no doctor would come and our friend died. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, phone, July 2020)

A Gambian migrant in Zarzis reported:

I have a friend who miscarried during the lockdown. When she went to the hospital, she was treated badly. They didn't even look at her because she doesn't have any money. (Interviewee 4005, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Returns to Libya continued unabated during COVID-19. However, the support structures for refugees and migrants were impacted. For example, a Somali refugee noted:

There is corona [virus] in Tripoli. The town [is closed]. But corona [virus] is not in every place. In prison, we don't see that. Among migrants we don't see corona [virus], but the UNHCR office is closed. (Interviewee 1027-2, Interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, April 2020)

Around half of the migrants and refugees interviewed reported poor access to health care. Many NGOs are present in Tunisia, Libya and Niger to support migrants. But in Tunisia, many of the migrants and refugees targeted by programmes said that they do not know how to benefit from these programmes. Others complain about unanswered calls for help and discrimination in hospitals. Some also fear seeking treatment because of their irregular situation. A Guinean man shared the following:

In Libya, I had a problem. One day, I was sitting. I felt that my chest was hurting. By that time, I was afraid to go to hospital. Because if you go there, maybe they can bring you to prison, because they don't care. [...] At that time, I didn't have a passport. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Some find support on the way. In an apartment on the outskirts of Tunis, the tenants (migrants and refugees) said that it was with the help of small associations that were able to get through this difficult period. One of the Cameroonians living there explained:

It is thanks to them [Cellule de Solidarité Africaine]. They are the ones who have given us great support – really, it must be said, in food, in kind, in cash. He said to us: “There you have it, you can buy something”. Because it was difficult. Even still, at this moment, we are still experiencing the immediate consequences of the lockdown. (Interviewee 4006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Many people, associations and NGOs were quick to help the most vulnerable people during the lockdown in Tunisia. Across the country, many operations were launched. The majority of the migrants and refugees we met in Tunisia said that they received extra help during the pandemic. One Ivorian migrant recognised the generosity that Tunisians have shown towards them:

The associations came from time to time, but the neighbours did a lot. For me, the Tunisians were perfect with us, I thank them very much. (Interviewee 4007-1, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

His friend added:

At home, we have a lot to eat. [...] Our neighbour prepares us food every evening. (Interviewee 4007.2, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Despite the wave of generosity expressed by Tunisian citizens towards migrants and refugees, many people lived through this period in fear of being put on the streets. Some were forced to find alternative solutions to survive. A family planning employee in Sousse said:

Of course, prostitution is increasing! Even for Tunisians. (Interviewee 4008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Large agencies, such as UNHCR and IOM also provided help to deal with the new challenges that migrants and refugees were facing. The UNHCR Communications Officer in Tunisia explained:

Vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers receive cash from UNHCR. Before the lockdown, we had 700 to 800 people benefiting from this assistance every month. During lockdown we reached around 2,500 beneficiaries. We recently received an additional contribution of EUR 750,000 from the European Union to respond to the coronavirus crisis. This will allow us to cover the expenses that we incurred in the emergency, but also to further expand the base of our beneficiaries and to improve access to healthcare and communication on risks. (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, November 2020)

However, more than half of the migrants and refugees interviewed in Tunisia stated that it was not enough. Compared to the size of these organisations, the actions they took in response to the crisis were generally considered insufficient. In Zarzis, nearly 700 people received vouchers worth 100 Tunisian dinars (EUR 30) from IOM during the lockdown. A Cameroonian woman complained:

The 100-dinar ticket, what do we do with that? When you buy the chicken, the milk, you can't buy the rest. The ticket ended two days ago. Humans must eat. Organisations must take care of that, but there is nothing. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

When asked about problems during the coronavirus crisis, a member of a Tunisian association said:

There is an association – the Tunisian Council for Refugees (CTR) [UNHCR partner] – it just takes pictures to say that it is working. It makes promises to migrants, but does nothing, despite receiving a large budget from UNHCR. The CTR contacts organisations like ours to ask them to distribute aid on their behalf. (Interviewee 4009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

An asylum seeker living in the UNHCR shelter in Medinine, southern Tunisia, reported:

They are doing something to say that they are doing something. But on the ground it is not enough. They do it, so that they can answer journalists. [...] At last, Tunisia

looks like a mental prison. With time, people start to lose their mind. (Interviewee 4010, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, July 2020)

United Nations agencies and their partners have stressed that everything is being done to meet the needs of migrants and refugees, within the limits of the allocated budgets and the legal framework. However, Krimi Abderrazek, Tunisian Council for Refugees project manager, warned:

The sharing of responsibilities starts with the countries of origin, and then the countries of transit, until it reaches the country of destination. As long as there is no sharing of responsibilities, the problem will persist and again thousands of young Africans will find themselves swallowed up in the Mediterranean [Sea]. (Krimi Abderrazek, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2020)

While migrants and refugees were happily surprised by the support they received from Tunisian citizen, they were quite frustrated by the lack of help from UN agencies. Many consider this kind of support as their right, due to their vulnerability, especially after what they have been through in Libya.

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea

As detailed in the introduction to this chapter, during the coronavirus pandemic many people attempted the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, despite the closure of borders. A young Somali man in Libya explained how he is prepared to take high risks to leave Libya:

Now, a lot of people are also leaving because of corona [virus]. Libya is like hell for refugees, like petrol. Corona [virus] is like the lighter. Refugees are all willing to leave this country. [...] I am going to cross soon insballah [God willing]. I am preparing. If God is willing, I will go to Sicily. (Interviewee 1090, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger call, April 2020)

During this research, a dozen interviewees with whom the researcher remained in contact, attempted the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Some started from Tunisia and then crossed the border to Libya before joining a smuggler to embark on a boat. One passed away. Two were still in Libya at the time of writing this chapter. Nine of them reached Europe. Before completing their odyssey, some passed

through detention centres in Libya. This was the case for one young refugee who communicated:

I was caught at sea. I went to a prison that is worse than all the others I have been to so far. It is more dangerous than Guantanamo Bay. People are so hungry there that they eat Colgate [toothpaste]. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

None of the migrants interviewed for this research highlighted specific measures taken by smugglers against the coronavirus. On the contrary, according to one testimony, the pandemic was a new way to swindle migrants:

Because of coronavirus, when you pay the money, they will chase you away. They say, "You have corona, go away!" If we ask for our money back, they will not give it to us. (Interviewee 1027-2, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger Call, April 2020)

The Mediterranean crossing is known as the most deadly migration route in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the negotiation power of migrants and refugees with the smugglers, thereby also worsening the conditions of their departure. Chamseddine Marzoug, a fisherman, activist, and rescue and burial volunteer confirmed that the coronavirus pandemic has changed the business and increased the power of the large human trafficking networks:

*The boats are no longer made in Libya. [Now the boats are imported] from Europe or Egypt. The majority are big [traffickers] who import inflatable boats and gasoline engines; *zodiacs* as they say. They import it as a fisherman, but they sell it on the black market. [...] But, with the Corona, there are no imports. The borders are closed. [...] What we are going to see shortly are things that we have never seen before, such as the overloading of the boats. The pity is that now, because of the Corona, I think, there aren't even life jackets. Before we had life jackets, even if they were not up to standard.* (Chamseddine Marzoug, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Marzoug is known for having set up a migrant cemetery in Zarzis, in the south of Tunisia. He pointed out that the NGO boats were forced

to stop their rescue activities at sea, because of the closure of the ports.

As in Libya, in Tunisia, the summer of 2020 was characterised by an increase in attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea. New migration dynamics emerged during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the closure of borders. Sub-Saharan migrants and refugees started to cross the Mediterranean Sea from the Tunisian coast and, some of them crossed the border to return to Libya, knowing the dangers they were about to face.

In March 2020, Romdhane Ben Amor, Communications Officer at the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) explained:

Immigration from Tunisia is more complicated, because the police checks are still a bit high and they cannot trust the smugglers. The smugglers are well aware that sub-Saharan migrants are the most vulnerable. They cannot file a complaint. They can't do anything. [...] Between 50 and 60% of the interceptions of sub-Saharans are done on the ground. There is a kind of complicity between the smugglers and the Tunisian police. (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020)

In Tunisia, many smugglers are fishermen in a vulnerable economic situation. Others are people who got into this business out of financial interest. A large part of the departures are also 'self-managed migration'. They make a group and buy a boat, which they themselves captain to Europe (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020). In recent years, the number of sub-Saharan migrants and refugees joining Tunisians in crossing the Mediterranean Sea has increased. Romdhane Ben Amor explained that:

More and more interceptions of departures concern sub-Saharans. We went from between 9 and 11% of interceptions, from 2010 to 2016, to 37% this year. This year, we have reached 37% of departures from Tunisia intercepted, including sub-Saharan passengers. (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020)

This trend increased during the summer, a favourable season for the crossing. Nourredine Gountri, a journalist in Zarzis, a coastal town in the south of Tunisia from where many departures are organised, explained:

The sub-Saharanans understood that they could leave with the Tunisians. They know the prices now. (Nourredine Gountri, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, August 2020)

This shows that, for migrants and refugees, lockdowns and border closures are often considered as just another obstacle. In Libya, as in Tunisia, the interviewees sketch a picture of ongoing movement, despite COVID-19 border closures and despite elements of the journey becoming more difficult, as well as changing circumstances in countries of transit.

Findings of the desk review

In order to complement the findings of the interviews, the researchers carried out a desk study of media reports (documents, newspaper articles, radio interviews, podcast and videos) collected during the first period of the pandemic, from May to mid-September 2020, focusing on reports on the local situation. The principal categories identified in the desk study correspond with those identified in the interviews: the closing of borders, increased deportations and the creation of new routes; new health protocols and quarantine arrangements; the economic repercussions; access to support; and crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes

In Libya, the pandemic meant the closing of a trap in which migrants were already stuck. However, as detailed above, the closure of borders did not mean the end of movement. Some smugglers were even able to take advantage of the situation and make more money, as one explained on Sahara FM radio in Agadez (Sahara FM, 2020):

Since the closedown of borders between Niger and Libya, it is necessary to take alternative routes to enter Libyan territory. It brings us a lot of money, because there are fewer smugglers. (Sahara FM, 2020)

However, as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime explains, the closing of borders makes migrants who persist in taking the road more vulnerable:

Where migrants continue on their journeys, they will be increasingly reliant on smugglers to facilitate their journey through environments that are increasingly hostile to migration. This enhanced dependency, and decreased ability to rely on any state organs for support, compounds their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of their smugglers. (Wagner & Hoang, 2020)

Smugglers have also been reported to have abandoned migrants and refugees in the desert in view of security patrols. On various occasions since the start of the pandemic, migrants and refugees have been found alive and dead in the desert. In September 2020, 83 migrants and refugees were found near Dirkou, in the north of Niger. This is in addition to the 321 people rescued by IOM in northern Niger since the beginning of the year 2020 (Reuters, 2020).

The road from Libya to Agadez has also become longer and more dangerous due to the closure of borders. Since the beginning of the pandemic, because of the difficulty of finding a job in Libya and because of the civil war, more migrants and refugees have tried to escape Libya. But this road has become illegal too, and smugglers take roads far away from the security patrols – which also means that they are far from help in case of problems. In May 2020, 20 corpses were found in the desert. These were migrants and refugees who were leaving Libya. After a breakdown, one car left to search for help and water, but meanwhile, some of those who had stayed behind perished. Desperately thirsty, they had drunk gasoline, perfume and shampoo (Wirtz, 2020).

On 2 April, more than 250 people were found near Madama, the last stopover in Niger before entering Libya. They were brought to Agadez and put in quarantine in the municipal stadium (InfoMigrants, 2020). On 10 April, 43 of them had escaped (DIM, 2020).

Neither illegal movement nor movement organised by the authorities ceased, despite the closure of borders. In April 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 1,400 people had been deported by the forces of Marshal Khalifa Haftar and left in the middle of the desert (OHCHR, 2020). COVID-19 was used as an excuse to expel those migrants to Niger, Chad and Sudan. According to a Facebook post, the head of the Shelter and Deportation Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Kufrah, First Lieutenant Muhammad Al-Fadil, stated that:

Those who were deported had entered Libya illegally and were arrested in several Libyan cities in the Eastern Region and also inside the city of Kufra. Among those migrants are people with infectious and dangerous diseases such as hepatitis and AIDS. Among them, there are also those who do not even have identity papers to prove their nationality. This deportation came urgently and quickly for fear of the spread of the coronavirus that spread in a number of countries in the world. (Shelter and Deportation Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Kufrah, 2020)

On 20 May, journalist Sara Creta quoted First Lieutenant Muhammad Al-Fadil on Twitter as saying that “deportations are faster than before”. She added that people were taken by truck to remote towns in Chad or to a Sahara border post in Sudan. Fifty migrants had left a few nights before (Creta, 2020).

Algeria too, expelled nearly 16,000 people to Niger between January and September 2020. Almost half of them were Nigerien. Some were already registered with UNHCR (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Migrants expelled from Algeria to Niger are dropped off at the border in the middle of the desert and then have to walk 15 kilometres to Assamaka, where they are taken in by IOM (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

So, despite the closing of its borders, Niger had to deal with the arrival of a significant number of migrants in 2020. In addition to the migrants abandoned in the desert by smugglers, they had to manage those expelled by Libya and Algeria.

In Tunisia, the end of confinement in May 2020 was marked by new population movements. As mentioned above, migratory movements

have been observed at the Algerian-Tunisian border. Hundreds of sub-Saharan Africans have left Algeria, fleeing the economic and health crisis (Blaise, 2020). Arrivals from Libya have also resumed, by land and sea. In the Tunisian town of Medinine, on the border with Libya, these new arrivals have posed a challenge in terms of finding suitable places of containment (Tuniscope, 2020; Blaise, 2020).

New health protocols and quarantine arrangements

It is impossible to estimate the suspected cases of COVID-19 among migrants and refugees, as access to health care is limited and, therefore, many cases go unrecorded. Some cases were recorded when quarantine was observed at the border crossings in Tunisia and Niger, and some cases were seen among migrants and refugees rescued at sea (Mourad, 2020d; Chabaane, 2020; Di, 2020). However, quarantines were difficult to organise, due to lack of facilities.

The obligations regarding confinement have not always been well received by migrants. In April, 40 people escaped from the Agadez regional stadium where they were being quarantined after being expelled from Libya (DIM, 2020). Protests also erupted at the Arlit transit centre, where migrants were protesting the endless quarantine and the lack of consideration by the authorities and IOM. After the migrants robbed one of the camp's stores to meet their needs themselves, the police intervened with tear gas and 13 people were arrested (Ben Hamad, 2020).

The figures for migrants who tested positive after crossing the Algerian-Tunisian border differ in the Tunisian media. According to these articles, it seems that around 20 migrants, mainly sub-Saharan Africans, tested positive at the beginning of July 2020. They were transferred to COVID positive centres (Aid, 2020; Watt, 2020; Ammari, 2020; C.B.Y., 2020; Mourad, 2020a; Mourad, 2020b; Y.N., 2020b; I.B., 2020). The Tunisian press also reported riots in quarantine centres, led by migrants who did not want to wait to be tested. Six migrants were reported to have fled such sites before receiving the result of their test (Mourad, 2020c; Y.N., 2020a).

In Libya, United Nations agencies and non-governmental (NGOs) distributed health kits and conducted sterilisations and awareness campaigns in migrant shelters (Qasim, 2020). But, in a country at war, where migrants and refugees are constantly at risk, these actions seem inconsistent. Journalist Sara Creta stated the following:

What is the point of keeping people in a detention centre that is close to weapons, and then making a campaign telling these people that are held within the hands of a military group how to wash their hands or how to protect against coronavirus? So, if we are really worried about their health and if we're really worried about their condition, we should shut down that centre or at least bring those people to safe place.

(Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – North Africa, 2020)

The fear of COVID-19 also exacerbated xenophobia among health care providers and others, worsening migrants' access to medical care.

Economic repercussions

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted on the economic situation of migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan countries in the Central Mediterranean region. In Libya, fear of COVID-19 has exacerbated xenophobia, leading to migrants and refugees living in urban areas to lose their jobs. As a result, they are unable to meet their basic needs. According to IOM, the migrant unemployment rate in Libya reached 27% in April 2020, increasing from 17% in February (IOM, 2020c). This is dangerous and can have further consequences, as IOM writes: "Virtually all unemployed migrants (95%) reported suffering from at least one difficulty including hunger, thirst, financial issues, attacks or lack of information, compared to 62 per cent of employed migrants" (IOM, 2020c).

In Tunisia, the lockdowns have put people, who were already vulnerable, in a more precarious position. In August 2020, IOM announced that 53% of migrants living in Tunisia had lost their job during the lockdown (ANSA, 2020). However, the numbers are difficult to verify, as nobody knows the exact number of sub-Saharan Africans living in the country.

Access to support

Reports on the support provided to migrants and refugees during the first months of the pandemic are many. Among other activities, in Libya, IOM conducted campaigns in different cities to raise awareness about COVID-19. Psychological support was also offered to 82 migrants in Tripoli (IOM, 2020f). Fumigation, disinfection, and cleaning interventions were conducted by IOM in four disembarkation points and three detention centres (IOM, 2020f). UNHCR distributed hygiene kits and sanitary cloth to detention centres (UNHCR, 2020d).

In Tunisia, IOM assisted migrants by offering cash vouchers to purchase critical medicine and hygiene products, in-kind donations, and medical and psychological assistance (IOM, 2020f). UNHCR donated and installed 14 Refugee Housing Units (RHU) to hospitals for the screening of patients and visitors (UNHCR, 2020g). As detailed above, in Tunisia, aid to migrants during the lockdown came from all sides. In Sousse, the municipality was at the forefront of operations to support these people (Boubakri, 2020). At the end of the lockdown, campaigns were launched by the sub-Saharan community to thank Tunisians (B.L., 2020). However, despite substantial aid, in May 2020, 70% of families of asylum seekers and refugees interviewed by UNHCR said they were unable to pay their rent and 45% claimed to be at risk of eviction (UNHCR, 2020f).

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea

Despite the lockdowns due to the pandemic, the summer of 2020 was marked by a significant number of illegal crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. In Italy, 27,834 people disembarked between 1 January and 2 November 2020, compared to 11,471 for the whole of 2019; 41.7% of these were Tunisians (UNHCR, 2020c). They were fleeing the economic, health and political crisis in search of employment, freedom and social protection. In addition, between January and October 2020, in this period of lockdown and closure of borders, the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted 9,506 people in Libyan waters and brought them back to Libya. This is an increase of 16.56% compared to the same period in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020b).

Malta is also reported to have hired vessels to intercept migrants and refugees and return them to Libya. The Guardian published the testimony of a woman who survived the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea in which 12 people died. She explained that the boat on which she was trying to reach Europe had been intercepted by a ship enlisted by the Maltese authorities, which returned the people on board to Tripoli. The passengers were then transferred to the Tariq Al Sikka detention centre (Tondo, 2020).

The closure of European ports at the start of the pandemic put migrants and refugees at sea in greater danger. Because of sanitary measure and the closure of ports, NGO ships rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea found themselves tied up (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The Director of Operations for SOS Méditerranée, Frédéric Penard, explained the following to the newspaper Le Temps in May 2020:

We have people who have been rescued by fishing vessels or merchant vessels. A freighter that was able to disembark people in Italy after being left on standby for several days in terrible conditions because a freighter is not made to accommodate more than ten people. There is no water, there is no food, there is no medical care. It is not an equipped ship. (Chave, 2020)

On 30 September 2020, according to the news website InfoMigrants, humanitarian vessels were no longer active in the search and rescue (SAR) zone:

The absence of NGO boats raises fears of an increase in the number of migrants and refugees who died at sea while the month of September was particularly deadly with nearly 200 deaths in the Central Mediterranean. (Carretero, 2020)

In 2020, 999 migrants and refugees were reported missing in the Central Mediterranean in 2020. This is a lot, but is not the high level that the activists expected. In 2019, 1,262 migrants and refugees were reported missing on the Central Mediterranean path and, in 2021, that number reached 1,553 people (Missing Migrants Project, 2022).

Hence, it can be seen that the coronavirus has not driven migrants away from their dream of a better life in Europe. Instead, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea has simply become more dangerous.

Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks

The assumption underpinning the push and pull theory is that the creation of obstacles diminishes the number of people on the move. Hence, the assumption was that the closing of borders and restriction of movement to contain the COVID-19 pandemic would result in a drop in the number of people on the move. However, this did not happen; the border closures, lockdowns and quarantines did not stop people from moving and did not result in fewer people arriving in Europe via the Central Mediterranean route (UNHCR, 2020c).

Although, initially, between March and November 2020, fewer people were able to leave their country of origin and make their way to Agadez in Niger and on to Libya, as the pandemic went on, smugglers adapted, including by increasing their prices and finding new routes. The situation changed quickly. Within the short time covered by this research, many new routes were developed. The migrants and refugees who decided to pursue their journey, despite the situation, took greater risks. This culminated in a peak in the number of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Between April and October 2020, a reported 24,713 individuals who had embarked in Libya and Tunisia arrived in Malta and Italy. This is almost three times more than the number of arrivals during the same period in 2019 (IOM, 2020d).

This research found that attempts to restrict movement flows result in people adapting to the situation, while still moving forward. The closure of borders under the extreme situation of COVID-19 measures did not stem the number of people on the move. Instead, it exacerbated the drive of people to move forward. The findings show a super-dynamic situation in which increased hardship, vulnerability and challenges drive migrants and refugees forward, despite the obstacles in front of them.

The pattern of desperation that drives people on the move and the psychological effects, as described by Kidane (2021), provide a better explanation for the facts occurring on the ground than Lee's push and

pull theory. The theoretical concept of Brachet and Scheele (2019) of ‘remoteness’ also helps to explain the distance of the measures conceived in capital cities and foreign centres from their implementation on the ground, leading to different, unintended and unexpected dynamics that traps migrants and refugees in a “circular and closed” system (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), without a way out and with few options of regularising their irregular status in the host country. Living on the margins of society leaves migrants and refugees vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, and this situation, perceived as dangerous, encourages the heart-rending response to seek security in Europe, despite all the risks.

Sometimes, as researchers, we have the feeling when we see migrants and refugees taking the road to Libya or across the Mediterranean Sea that we are witnessing suicide-migration. The people we encountered know that they risk their life: “It is 50/50; 50% chance of living, 50% chance of dying”, they keep repeating. For many of them, COVID-19 and the lockdowns have just been extra obstacles to overcome, like a new fence to climb. Maybe it will delay them; many will be discouraged – but many are still deciding to risk their life to escape the desperation situation they are in.

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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. Klara Smits provided input and background to the information presented in this chapter.

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Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya²³³

Sara Creta

Introduction

In August 2018, dozens of Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants and refugees²³⁴ staged a rare protest in a detention centre 20 kilometres from Tripoli, Libya. Trapped in a country devastated by civil war and at risk of human trafficking, they asked for help to leave Libya, as their requests to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had been unheeded. Among them was a 21-year-old boy who had been kidnapped, sold and exploited before escaping from traffickers and ending up in detention. On Sunday, 12 August, the group posted photographs and videos of the protest on Facebook, with the hope that they would

Refugees in Libya do not have easy access to the Internet and their voices are therefore often mediated by others. Humanitarian organisations and the traditional media speak on their behalf, and may be perpetuating their image as dependent and powerless. This study finds that through social media and digital spaces, migrants and refugees have made attempts to reclaim their own narrative, employing active agency. Even if the means to present their situation online is limited, they seek access to communication and social media. This allowed them to speak for themselves, and this has facilitated and expanded contestations of power.

²³³ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

²³⁴ 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).

be shared widely. They articulated their message using UNHCR's vocabulary: 'human rights', 'refugees', 'assistance', 'protection', 'justice'. In just a few hours, their post had reached a hundred thousand people around the world, including journalists and activists, who have since been mobilising to ask for their evacuation.

This protest was not an isolated event. Seeking better conditions and evacuation to third countries, refugees in Libya have been putting their lives on the line to exert political pressure on United Nations (UN) agencies and expose the violence resulting from the European Union's (EU's) practice of externalising border control.²³⁵ Such protests are an example of the political struggle for rights undertaken by refugees, migrants, and activists around the world. In Libya, like elsewhere, protests have become a new form of 'contentious politics' (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl, 2016) and claim-making that is questioning migration policies and surrounding practices and raising the visibility of migrants and refugees.

This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya are strategically mobilising resources, asserting claims, leveraging networks, and developing political strategies using digitally-supported processes of narrative and justice seeking. It discusses how digital media, in combination with supportive social relationships and opportunities for participation, are giving voice to agentive selves, mediated by digital interaction and connectivity. The conceptual framework for this chapter is drawn from recent scholarship on narrative, identity, and digital media, with an eye towards agency.

²³⁵ The term 'externalisation' is used by a range of migration scholars, policymakers and the media to describe the extension of border controls and other border functions to the territory of so-called third countries.



Figure 17.1. Photograph of a refugee protest in Libya in August 2018 shared on social media²³⁶

Within the context of this book, this chapter emphasises the potential of technology, particularly social media, to spread narratives that are usually hidden. When it comes to the digital future and its consequences for refugees in Libya (and elsewhere), multiple points demand attention. The violation of human rights and lack of visibility that refugees encounter in the digital era cannot be understood without considering algorithms and online platforms and the impact that digital technologies have on people's lives. Digital technology, as a tool for self-expression, can become a strategic means by which to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Creta & Denaro, 2022). It can also help refugees and migrants to take new forms of collective action, in which resistance and daily struggle are required. In this battlefield for visibility, voice, and recognition, the relationship between political self-construction, digital storytelling and identity need to be explored.

In precarious spaces, such as the detention centres in Libya, where violence and abuse are widespread, *how can access to communication or social media facilitate and expand practices contesting power?* This is the

²³⁶ Source withheld for security reasons.

research question addressed in this chapter. As there is little systematic knowledge about the digital practices involved in storytelling and documenting the experiences of refugees, this chapter examines the practices of Eritrean refugees in Libya, as a case study, in order to understand the broader implications of the digitalisation of refugees' narratives in situations of detention and human rights violation. Before presenting the methodology and findings, the following sections look at digital connectivity in exile and outline the Eritrean online public sphere.

Digital connectivity in exile: Power and agency

Early studies suggest that the reduction of participation costs enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) can promote participation and challenge conventional collective action theories. However, although smartphones have become ever more mobile and pervasive, including in developing countries (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011), little is known about how Internet access can affect the ability of marginalised groups to be part of mobilisation processes. In the last decades, the question of who has the 'right to have rights' has become increasingly important. The integration of digital connectivity into people's lives, often celebrated as liberating and empowering for marginalised groups, raises questions about how online engagement can bring about political change (Papacharissi, 2015). New technologies and new forms of connectivity are facilitating the creation of digital publics, in which the paradoxically precarious, 'speechless emissaries' and humanitarian subjects (Malkki, 1996) are engaging in new forms of resistance using digital tools. This effort to understand active agency, access and power begins with recognition that the existence and visibility of Eritrean refugees in Libya in the "new media, cultural and socio-economic order" (Appadurai, 2005) allows for the interpretation of new 'forms of existence', which are shaping politics from the margins.

Previous studies (Creta, 2021) have explored how digital media can become a 'space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958, p. 195) that allows people on the move to reclaim their narratives and convey their

struggles, as existing in the European communicative order (Georgiou, 2018). At the same time, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have provided a space for civic engagement, in which collective production gives rise to a self-organised social system that can mobilise people (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013) and which offers opportunities to construct a “new distribution of power” (Borkert, Cingolani & Premazzi, 2009). Research has also found that exiled communities and activists play an important role in mediating political practices and mobilisation (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). In this global network of information flows, rethinking the public sphere concept is fundamental, as digital technologies have brought distant ‘others’ into the space of deliberation. These developments have transformed many aspects of economic, social, and political life (Castells, 2001; Silver, Massanari & Jones, 2006), facilitating socio-culturally marginalised voices to be expressed, heard and shared in the public space (Ponzanesi, 2020).

Transnational media flows have mediated people’s participation in the public sphere, allowing the deliberation of socio-political issues and developing transnational connections, creating a cross-border dialogue. For example, Volkmer (2008) describes how international affairs are now mediated through a variety of platforms in a decentralised “globalised public space”, amid shifting “cultures of proximity” (Volkmer, 2008, p. 92). In this decentralised environment, the boundaries between the public sphere and public participation become little more than clusters or nodes in the wider network; citizens are actively and visibly involved in the processes of public communication and deliberation, seemingly without a need for intermediaries to act on their behalf (Bruns, 2008). In documenting the digital traces that transcend the bounds of both nations and states, scholars commonly refer to concepts such as a ‘networked public sphere’ (Benkler, 2008), ‘transnational public sphere’ (Fraser, 2007), ‘extraterritorial public sphere’ (Crack, 2008), ‘diasporic public sphere’ (Appadurai, 2010), and ‘global public sphere’ (Castells, 2008). Central to these concepts are efforts to understand the political dimensions that underpin and sustain transnational networks, virtual communities, and digital cultures of media and communication.

In discussing transnationalism and the way exiled communities can use social media for ‘transnational justice’ (Hodzic & Tolbert, 2017), it is important to analyse how this can enable a process that champions the right of victims to pursue truth and justice – or to at least ensure that such violence does not recur. Previous research has found that media and communication technologies are important, both to the perpetration of mass rights violations, as well as to the promotion of transitional justice responses to them; as Price and Stremlau put it, they “often serve as both a weapon and a mirror of violence” (2012, p. 1078). Questions of access, digital capabilities, infrastructure, platforms and agency, such as raised in this chapter, need to be discussed when developing new theories on how digital media and the ongoing struggles of people on the move intersect with new forms of freedom and agency in our global era, in particular in precarious settings like refugees camps or situations of forced exile (see also Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*).

This is particularly pertinent for Eritrean refugees in Libya, as well as other groups living in exile outside of Europe. What does the new digital media ecosystem offer to Eritrean refugees in Libya? How does it create collective identities and actions that can enable mobilisation? In particular, it is interesting to understand how user-generated content has emerged as a key mode of mediation, allowing an eyewitness view of events taking place in worldwide locations (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Bruns, 2018; Meikle, 2018). Critically, however, to sustain practices of bearing witness, it is fundamental to understand how suffering and violence can become an aesthetic presentation of the self-narrative. Barbie Zelizer (2002, p. 698) suggests that one of the key functions of bearing witness is that it helps return a community to a state of unity that existed prior to whatever trauma might have befallen it. Similarly, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) suggests that media coverage of suffering must be brought into a narrative – or else the audiences will not be morally activated.

In the following section, I discuss how political self-construction, digital storytelling and identity play a role in the formation of exiled

publics, and, through Arendt's (1958) understanding of political action as narrative, how the political act of reclaiming voice can expand the idea of 'the political'.

The Eritrean online public sphere

In discussing transnationalism and, in particular, the Eritrean dynamics of deterritorialisation and the online construction of nationhood, scholars have highlighted how new forms of collective expression are created and how virtual spaces have become territories of (political) struggle and identity claims. Although inside Eritrea access to the Internet and social media remain extremely limited, the Eritrean online public sphere needs to be understood in relation to the transnational field of Eritrean politics of which it is a part (also see Bernal, 2004; 2014; 2020).

Bernal takes the Eritrean cyberspace as a case in point to analyse "ordinary people inventing a public sphere that made possible the articulation of ideas and sentiments that could not be expressed elsewhere" (Bernal, 2005, p. 662). Within the Eritrean community, complex intersections of technology, culture, identity, distant authoritarianism, and agency exist, which are both diverse and constantly evolving. The Eritrean online public sphere created outside the country has been described as able to "extend the nation and state sovereignty across borders, and at other times can be used as an extraterritorial space that is safe for civil society and dissent because of its location outside Eritrea and beyond the reach of the state" (Bernal, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Zere noted that although activists could not bring lasting political change to the country, their efforts are "motivating many to stop paying the diaspora tax; and denied the regime the platforms to conduct their yearly festivals, seminars and cultural shows in the diaspora" (Zere, 2020).

Consistent with the results of other studies, Internet-based Eritrean networks have been able to break the cycle of silence in the diaspora, mobilising protests and consolidating clear political opinions (Tewelde, 2020). By focusing on a popular PalTalk chat-room called Smer, Tewelde (2020) identified how new media can contribute to

peace and national healing. The Eritrean transnational community and their political behaviour has been widely studied (Belloni, 2019; Hirt & Mohammad, 2018) and various scholars have documented how Eritreans refugees use a range of digital affordances and platforms, including diaspora websites, PalTalk, YouTube, and Facebook, to navigate their difficult circumstances, help fellow refugees, and agitate for change in their homeland. However, the ‘cyberactivism’ of refugees has not been systematically studied.

Recent research on Eritrean refugees in Israel sees digital media as crucial, because “online spheres provide spaces for diasporic politics that cannot exist in ‘offline’ spheres”, where Eritreans face repression (Dubinsky, 2020, p. 91). While Eritrean communities living in exile create public political spaces that cannot exist in their homeland, the case of Eritrea is in many ways paradigmatic to understanding the dynamics of co-optation, loyalty, and resistance that characterise many diaspora-state relationships (Müller & Belloni, 2021; Belloni, 2020).

At the same time, recent studies (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019) have highlighted how digital architecture and its historic development is based on the information networks of colonial times. Hence, structures like the Internet reflect biases in social and political connectivity and can lead to the emergence of ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape,²³⁷ in which people are disconnected from the global digital infrastructure and depend on ‘gatekeepers’ for information. These structures also keep refugees in a ‘black hole’, which plays a vital role in their repression and human trafficking. On their migratory journeys, many Eritrean refugees face imprisonment in underground cells and systematic torture, and phones are often used to extort money from relatives. In this context, Van Reisen *et al.* (2019) highlighted that refugees have very limited

²³⁷ ‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

access to digital networks to send and receive information and easily fall prey to gatekeepers, who are often the facilitators of human trafficking organisations. Digital technologies provide opportunities for human traffickers. This includes using Facebook or other messenger applications like Imo or WhatsApp, which allow refugees to send images of torture to crowd fund ransom payments.

The dynamic nature of communications created by the Internet also opens up new opportunities for authoritarian states to control dissent outside their territory, expanding authoritarian power and practices beyond borders (Michaelson, 2018). Bots and other autonomous players are also challenging the logic of online communication, and researchers of digital activism have noted the increasing salience of bots in digital organising (Ross *et al.*, 2019). The boundaries between human and technological agents in collective organising are shaped by artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, which are not only changing the nature of organising, but also the tactics used by authoritarian states, including ‘troll armies’ and ‘digital armies’; this has been explored in recent studies by Bradshaw *et al.* (2020), who describe how Facebook has removed hundreds of accounts associated with the United Arab Emirate’s trolling activities, many of which were run by an Eritrean task force. Other authors (Shearlaw, 2015; Zere, 2020) also mention that pro-regime agents are constantly targeting Eritrean dissidents overseas with death threats or physically attacking independent researchers and activists who work on behalf of Eritreans in the diaspora. This suggests that the tactics employed by the Eritrean regime and its varied agents are common to other non-democracies and, accordingly, affect communities living in exile.

Methodology

This article adopts a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010), which is a specific form of ethnography for researching in and about digital landscapes. While observing both content and interactions on the Internet and social media, this method is used to gain an embedded understanding of individual and collective action. Initially, due to the difficult and limited physical access to Libya for fieldwork-based

researchers, I began exploring the subject of this research remotely. By exploring digital and visual methods, I started collecting digital content and categorising it into themes. As I intended to engage with digital methods as well as taking a field critical ethnographic stance (Carspecken, 1996), I decided to continue my research on the ground in Libya. It is important to mention that conducting fieldwork in Libya posed several dilemmas, but also presented opportunities to work against power and oppression by revealing and critiquing it.

A central element in both ethnographic and critical ethnographic research is immersion in the local context (Castagno, 2012). Such immersion allows the researcher to generate insights and explore from the inside how and why people think and act in the different ways they do (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001). According to Madison (2011, p. 5), the researcher “uses resources, skills, and privilege available [...] to break through the confines in defense of the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach [...] the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice”.

The material I present here is the result of two years of fieldwork among Eritrean refugees in Libya and online. Although my work started abroad, it built on my long standing friendships with several young Eritreans whom I had met in person in detention centres in Tripoli, Al-Khoms and Zintan and in houses in Tripoli between September 2019 and March 2020. One of my Eritrean friends, a 32-year-old refugee from Asmara, Eritrea, was living in an occupied building on the outskirts of Tripoli. Through him, I gained access to a variety of informal occupied buildings in which Eritreans live in the city together with other refugees. I also met many other Eritrean refugees, mostly men in their late 20s, in detention centres. The discussions we were able to have in such circumstances were quite limited, but they helped us to build a trusting relationship in the online conversations that followed. My role was often seen as taking the voices of those encountered to the outside world.

In Libya’s highly-controlled setting, entering a detention centre to have discussions with refugees requires planning strategies to gain

access from ‘gatekeepers’, as well as addressing issues to do with ethics and data security. In the field, I was continuously confronted with ethical and practical dilemmas around confidential and sensitive issues, which remain largely under-theorised, as very little research has been done in these spaces (detention centres and prisons). My approach is partly influenced by Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and considers all inquiry, both political and moral. This position recognises that oppressed people often have no alternative, but to wage struggles for their rights. It recognises the social movement as the starting point of inquiry. At this level, critical qualitative research is always already political. Through these multiple focuses, I compared the claims and views.

Unlike other studies based solely on interviewing refugees who have already reached Europe, using this multi-sited netnographic approach, and from the multiple rounds of in-person and virtual discussion, a grounded interpretation has emerged, which has allowed me to identify recurrent social and cultural tendencies within the digital practices of the Eritrean community. The following sections present the findings of this research on how Eritrean refugees in Libya have engaged in digitally-supported narratives and justice seeking.

The aim here is not to map or categorise the digital practices of Eritrean refugees in Libya, but to provide some insights into the experiences of Eritrean refugees in Libya and explore the interactive space enabled through social media, which has become a battlefield for visibility, voice, and recognition. It analyses this space and the narratives it creates, shifting the border of self-representation through meaningful digital practices aimed at fostering community engagement. Furthermore, it follows Leurs and Smets' call (2018) for more research on the role of ICTs in the lives of migrants wanting to move to Europe, as “refugee voices and experiences are lacking” (Gillespie, Osseiran & Cheesman, 2018, p. 1).

Findings

Bearing witness and self-representation

As access to Libyan detention facilities remains limited for journalists and human rights organisations, social media platforms and phones have become important tools (when available) for detained migrants and refugees to connect with journalists, advocates, activists, legal representatives and families. Access to social media networks has enabled Eritrean detainees to expose violations, protest their situation and record human rights abuses. Considering the way that “self-represented witnessing” (Rae, Holman & Nethery, 2018) is performed, circumventing the usual mediation of their stories, Eritrean refugees in Libya have documented their own suffering and are communicating this directly to online audiences. This practice, similar to the strategy developed by asylum seekers in other places, such as Manus Island and Nauru (Australian-managed offshore detention centres), has enabled collaborative filtering that allows effective engagement with the public. Their pictures and videos while in detention centres and their attempts to protest their situation have been posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, to capture their experiences over time and create a community of support. This collective experience of shared feelings and traumas has opened the way for strong human rights claims and social justice.

Eritrean refugees in Libya have used social media as a platform to communicate their struggle and their experiences in detention. An Eritrean refugee held in Khoms detention centre wrote on his Facebook personal wall: “I am giving my words by putting my life in danger. I posted my pictures on Facebook so the world can see our situation” (Wariki, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli December 2020). This appeal was accompanied by a self-shot and edited video in which the corpse of refugees can be seen on the beach nearby the detention centre. Using a hidden phone, the Eritrean refugee, who had been detained in Khoms for several months, managed to go out to the beach and record a video of him digging up sand in an attempt to cover the body of a dead person, with the main aim of exposing and challenging the EU’s deadly border practices.

The following message was posted, with a photograph, by another Eritrean asylum seeker being held in Qasr Ben Ghashir detention centre, south of Tripoli:

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, from Libyan detention center. WE REALLY MISS TO SEE OUTSIDE OF LIBYA. Would they resettle us from this hell this year? What will they tell us? Wait in dark, get torture, experience terrible sexual violence, rape or not? What are the European countries doing so far? What's UNHCR's aim? Dear new year, we have been going through an awful life. What will you say to us? We don't know. We can try to survive because we have our family waiting for us.*²³⁸

An important element that must be considered is how digital tools are affecting and fostering new networks to facilitate the claims of Eritrean refugees, as well as increasing their visibility.

Reclaiming narratives

While for years, agencies such as UNHCR have mediated refugees' narratives; these self-represented narratives of refugees offer a significant counter-narrative and provide individual stories, as opposed to collective narratives. At stake are issues of ethics, voice, power and agency, all entwined in the struggle, mediated by the narratives created by the refugees themselves. Another Eritrean refugee wrote the following on Facebook on his personal wall, while

²³⁸ Source withheld for security reasons.

sharing a photograph of Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

I have been looking for help after I was released from prison. But unfortunately, I didn't get any help from the UNHCR. They did nothing more to me. Can you please help? ²³⁹

One of the criticisms of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations is that, although they aim to help, they have been oversimplifying the claims of refugees, while ignoring vital geopolitical interests, and idealising and representing refugees by focusing on their vulnerability.

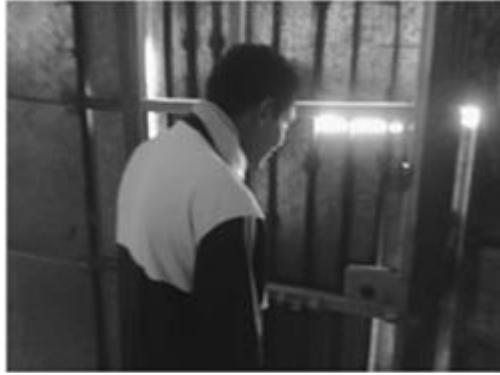


Figure 17.2. Photograph of a refugee in a detention centre in Libya spread via social media (Source withheld for security

If these life narratives are geared at denouncing injustice and calling for change, it is interesting to explore if they can also resist power. In an era of increasing emancipatory practices enabled by information and communication technologies, these digital practices constitute new opportunities, in a logic of control, questioning restrictive migration regimes. The lived experiences shared via social media provide a window into their personal existence in detention, that runs counter to the dominant discourses in the media and by humanitarian organisations and governments, who currently act as gatekeepers.

²³⁹ Source withheld for security reasons.



Figure 17.3. Photographs spread by refugees via social media²⁴⁰

Hence, refugees have created a space in detention for the emergence of practices of articulation, claiming and renewing group rights in and through the appropriation of their own narrative. The act of posting and denouncing violations allows detained Eritrean refugees to capture their experiences over time and create a community of support. This was the case in August 2018, when an Eritrean refugee, after an escape attempt from captivity conditions by human traffickers west of Bani Walid, Libya, posted photographs of people being shot on his Facebook wall.²⁴¹ He, together with dozens of asylum seekers and migrants, were wounded after trying to escape captivity and were referred to the General Hospital in Bani Walid. After a few weeks, on 8 August 2018, while still in need of help and support, he publicly shared his story. “We are in Tripoli. Please share our problem and pray for us”,²⁴² he wrote, while publishing the pictures on his Facebook wall.

²⁴⁰ Source withheld for security reasons.

²⁴¹ A. (2018). [Facebook], personal wall, posted on 8 August 2018

²⁴² A. (2018). [Facebook], personal wall, posted on 8 August 2018

An Eritrean refugee explained the vital role that the Internet played in reaching out for help. He said: “This was our true life. We decided to post it as we couldn't get any help from UNHCR and we wanted to move from that hell” (Yonas, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli, December 2020). Other protests followed in Zintan, Tajoura, Zawya, Sabha and Tarik Sika in Tripoli:

In Zintan we organised a lot of protests. We urged UNHCR, human right organisations, IOM and others to see our sufferings. It was heard and even some representatives from different organisations like UNHCR and IOM visited us. They made a promise to see our case in priority. But no positive result on the ground. (Yonas, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli, December 2020)

To investigate the ways in which the visual is mediated by Eritrean refugees in Libya, it is necessary to recognise why people want to ‘capture’ or share their lived experiences. Although the practice of storytelling can become a ‘healing’ aspect of narration, it is also a way to frame a collective identity, which is used to shape online political identity construction. At any level of analysis, from the individual to the collective, in efforts to mobilise, narratives and visual elements play a central role in the formation of the ties that

constitute networks. They become matters of vital necessity, offering visibility to ensure survival or to expand the visual and discursive modes of expressing politics. From these mediated performances of



Figure 17.4. Facebook post on the wall of a refugee in Tripoli (Source withheld for security reasons)

collective action in detention centres, Eritreans refugees have built new forms of political interaction from the margins. The idea that human rights are shaped through collective action fits with Arendt's (1958) view of human rights and political resistance. For Arendt, the most fundamental right, and a precondition for other rights, is the *right to have rights*, or the right to membership of a political community. This membership means having "a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (Arendt, 1958, p. 296).

However, while visibility and protection are important, they alone are not enough to guarantee the right to have rights. Some protests in Libya have turned violent. On 26 February 2019, guards at Tariq al Sikka detention centre in Tripoli used indiscriminate violence resulting in the injury of a large number of detainees. Immediately following this event, up to four buses with around 130 detainees were relocated to Sabha and Ain Zara detention centres (also in Tripoli). Approximately 22 detainees were separated from those remaining in Tariq al Sikka and taken to underground cells where they continue to be subjected to systematic beatings and torture (IOM, 2019).

In this incident, hundreds of Eritrean refugees were brutally beaten with metal bars and batons by the Libyan police and their phones taken away. Many were badly injured. A small group of them were detained in an underground cell. They were hurt and bleeding and had only one phone left. United by the will to be safe and free, they shared their photographs to testify about their situation and call for action. The following message was shared by a member of the Facebook group ኮሚቴ ኤርትራውያን ስደተኞች ኣብ ሊብያ ትረፖሊ (Committee on Eritrean Refugees in Libya Tripoli) on 28 February 2019:

These Eritrean refugees, injured and terrorized, all registered with UNHCR for months, are being told they will never have a chance to be relocated to safety. We are concerned about their life and health. This torture was perpetrated in full daylight in

*an official Detention Centre partly funded by Europe and the UK, who are fully complicit of these atrocities.*²⁴³

His appeal for help was followed by numerous posts and messages by members of the diaspora who “were desperate begging for help”.²⁴⁴

Eritreans in Libya, like elsewhere, have built a strong system of connection with members of the Eritrean community abroad. They have been successfully able to speak out against human rights violations and abuses, such as arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, disappearance, torture and the need for fair review of their applications by the UNHCR and others. A major Facebook campaign was created in September 2018 with the slogan ‘Evacuate Eritreans from Libya’.²⁴⁵ This campaign has gathered Eritreans all around the world to express their indignation in the face of the grave abuse perpetrated by traffickers in Libya. Using the message “with the knowledge of the international community, innocent individuals continue to be subject to the most inhumane treatment”, hundreds of Eritreans, followed by other citizens, have explored the potential of digital media to develop new ways of mobilisation and civic engagement.

A few months later, Eritrean refugee activists from all over Europe arrived on bicycles at the European Parliament in Brussels to raise awareness of the situation of asylum seekers currently trapped in Libya (European Interest, 2019). The initiative #Ride4Justice has been calling for an immediate and non-discriminatory evacuation of people trapped in Libya’s detention centres and investigation into international crimes – potentially amounting to crimes against humanity – committed against migrants in Libya. Their calls have echoed those in detention centres: “this is an immediate result of the

²⁴³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1664329077199738>

²⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1664329077199738>

²⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/EvacuateEritreansFromLibya>

EU's politics of containment", explained one of the organisers of the initiative (European Interest, 2019).



Figure 17.5. Photograph shared online by Eritrean refugees detained in Zintan²⁴⁶

This campaign has helped Eritrean protesters to mark their affiliation with a collective and to identify their position in a political public self-representation. Digital tools and platforms have extended this opportunity for self-representation, where the imagineering of dissent and visual symbols play a central role in a call for justice: “We are being starved to death”²⁴⁷ was written on a mattress used during a protest organised by Eritrean refugees in Zintan Detention Centre.

²⁴⁶ Source withheld for security reasons.

²⁴⁷ Photograph shared with the author.



Figure 17.6. Photograph published by refugees via social media²⁴⁸

Discussion

Framed within notions of agency, access and power, this chapter focuses on active citizenry and online participation among Eritrean refugees in Libya, mediated by smartphones and tempered by online platforms, as valuable sites of the production and dissemination. The insights generated by this research provoke questions about digital capacities and connectivity that are relevant to understanding how technology can enhance new forms of connectivity for migrants and refugees in Libya, and around the world. In particular, although the provision of technology does not by itself necessarily enable security, freedom or emancipation, it is interesting to explore how refugees' voices on digital platforms can "potentially enable both new ways of being political and new visions for the type of politics we wish to imagine in the world" (Nyers & Rygiel, 2012, p. 9). This is especially the case because their voices are often mediated by humanitarian organisations and the traditional media and, hence, channelled in ways that perpetuate their image as dependent and powerless (Kisiara, 2015, p. 163).

²⁴⁸ Source withheld for security reasons.

While observing the digital practices taking place in Libya, a few questions arise. Can this self-represented witnessing establish some common ground that allows for a better understanding of the ‘other’? And, can these self-represented narratives bring readers/audiences closer to the person, whose life is often being retold by others?

This chapter suggests that any attempt to theorise and study connectivity, especially when refugees are trapped in abusive and violent situations, should encapsulate a social justice lens, echoing Leurs and Smets’ (2018, p. 10) view on the “particular urgency to assert more firmly our social justice orientation”, as researchers dealing with questions of migration. If oppression, exclusion and injustice are not researched, scholars can fall into what Georgiou (2018, p. 46) calls, “symbolic bordering”, which she describes as “the hierarchical ordering of Europeans’ and migrants’ humanity that subjects migrants to danger, controlled mobility, and conditional recognition”. When Eritrean detainees document their experiences in Libyan detention centres, they challenge mediated refugee narratives and engage in self-represented witnessing. While many Eritrean refugees consider themselves refugees without a voice in Libya, their digital traces are challenging traditional narratives. With very limited access to journalists or lawyers, migrants and refugees use digital platforms to communicate their own digitally-supported processes of narrative and justice seeking.

These lived experiences can be considered ‘reclaimant narratives’ that contest for rights under conditions of oppression – forms of activism from the margins. They define a space for claim-making, re-defining who is allowed to speak as a political subject. While at the national and international levels the political and social rights of refugees are often questioned, here, they themselves articulate their demands for recognition, from the margins.

Conclusion

Digital tools and platforms have extended the opportunity for self-representation for migrants and refugees. These attempts to participate in the digital landscape and in news-making are challenging

the ways that individuals and communities interact, create, and perform their identities during their migration journeys to safety and freedom. In relation to this, it is important to question how agency, access and power are negotiated through digital practices, which have enabled a plurality of voices and levels of participation.

In Libya, Eritreans refugees have created new spaces of hope that can help refugees' voices to be heard and understood. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that barriers to social participation and adequate self-expression still persist. Without access to the Internet, Eritrean detainees held in Libyan detention centres lose the ability to document and expose violations. As authorities and militias control detention centres – and the refugees and migrants in them – they also seek to restrict access to smartphones and stop refugees from documenting, verifying and publishing their experiences, once again lapsing them into silence. Journalists, lawyers, researchers, and other refugee advocates are constrained from accessing Libya's detention centres. The effect is that people seeking asylum are hidden from the public. Unable to engage in public debates, social media platforms become a new space on which to document their experiences and interact with a wider audience. When they do so, Eritrean refugees circumvent the usual mediation of their stories, and engage in self-represented witnessing, while developing political strategies and become visible in a digital mediated world.

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Sara Creta is the sole author of this chapter.

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