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# The Plight of Eritrean refugees

Presented by Meron Estefanos at the EU Parliament Hearing: Eritrea - Refugees, Child Soldiers and European Policy, Nov 29, 2010

## 1. Introduction

The case of Eritrean refugees is a human tragedy in the making and the world is watching quietly. The plight of Eritrean refugees is far from over even if they manage to run away, despite a shoot-to-kill policy for escapees. Most refugees' immediate destinations are either Ethiopia or Sudan en route to Libya, Egypt, and Europe. But getting out of Eritrea itself is no guarantee of change for the better, due to flawed international responses. Hundreds of Eritreans have been forcibly repatriated from Libya, Egypt, and Malta in the past few years and have faced detention and torture upon their return. The plight of Eritrean refugees is as what one writer described "having jumped from the frying pan to the fire, you are often returned to the place of your departure and thrown back into the frying pan."<sup>1</sup> The answer is far complex and full of political, social and economical explanations which are far from the scope of my presentation.

## 2. Why an Eritrean refugee decides to live his country?

Eritrea's extensive detention and torture of its citizens and its policy of prolonged military conscription are causing Eritreans to flee the country. Arbitrary arrest, torture, appalling detention conditions, disappearances, forced labour, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and worship forces the youth to take any desperate measure in search of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Military service is compulsory for all men and women aged 18 to 40. There is no limit on length of service. There is no exemption for conscientious objectors.<sup>3</sup> If you try to flee you risk the possibility of being shot by Eritrean border guards. The government also punishes your family if you manage to escape or desert from national service with fines or imprisonment. However, being an Eritrean youth the only choice you have is either to take the drastic decision to leave your country on this perilous journey or spent years in trenches facing Ethiopian forces dug-in across the border.<sup>4</sup> Out of necessity and survival it's no wonder that you will decide to undertake perilous journeys in search of a better life.

## 3. The perilous journey to Sudan or Ethiopia

Once you decided to go out of the country the immediate destinations are either Ethiopia or Sudan. However, you have to accept the fate of being a victim of a shoot-to-kill policy of the government and decide to either find a way through the mined and patrolled border with Ethiopia<sup>5</sup> or find a smuggler who can help you cross the Sahara on foot to Sudan. As was the case in the long past, you still have to take pains and risks to reach the Eritrea-Sudan border and become a refugee in hiding – in hiding because of the existing irony: the UNHCR and the Sudan do not recognize Eritreans fleeing from 'their own' regime as refugees. You do not feel safe due to the constant movements of the

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<sup>1</sup> G. E. Gorfu "The Plight of Eritrean Refugees" Dec. 05 2009 at [http://tigraionline.com/eritrean\\_refugees.html](http://tigraionline.com/eritrean_refugees.html)

<sup>2</sup>Yohannes Woldemariam 'Why Eritrea's refugees shouldn't accept their fate' 2009-10-29, Issue 455 at <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59828>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Khataza Gondwe, 'The plight of Eritrean refugees' [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), 20 Jun 2009 available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/20/eritrean-refugees-misghina>

Eritrean security officials who enter the camp at night and capture the people trying to escape.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as a refugees you are not welcome by the Sudanese security forces and were subjected to verbal and physical abuse from time to time.<sup>7</sup> Hence you decided to travel further to Libya.

#### 4. The Journey to Libya

Putting your live in the hands of people smugglers you try to escape to Libya where you face severe mistreatment, racial discrimination and harsh detention.<sup>8</sup> If you are one of the luckiest travelers, the road usually takes five or more days, depending on correct knowledge of direction and sheer luck. You can face mechanical failures in the trucks and waited several days until rescued trucks arrived from Libya. You run out of drinking water. The suffering and fear from always pending death is enormous.<sup>9</sup> No statistics are taken but many young people disappeared in the desert. It is an ongoing tragedy.

If you managed to enter Libya and get caught you will be detained by the Libyan authorities under varying circumstances.<sup>10</sup> The conditions in the Libyan detention centers are inhumane, and police exercise repression, rape and extortion.<sup>11</sup> At best, you are subject to indefinite warehousing in remote areas without access to courts or due process.<sup>12</sup>

If the incoming trucks are apprehended by the Libyan police, then you will be returned to Eritrea forcibly. You either have to hijack the aircraft that is forcible returning you<sup>13</sup> or accept your fate to be imprisoned and tortured in worst case scenarios execution back in Eritrea.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5. Risk Journey to Italy

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Plaut 'Eritreans risk death in the Sahara' Africa regional editor, BBC News 25 March 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6492961.stm>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Sudan Tribune 'Eritrean refugees in Libya under continuous inhuman treatment' July 10, 2010 (ADDIS ABABA) <http://www.sudantribune.com/Eritrean-refugees-in-Libya-under.html>

<sup>9</sup> Martin Plaut "We started the journey and it was very difficult and very bad. Nobody can cross the Sahara, it's too difficult. We had water but finished it. The car was spoiled (broke down). "We stayed three nights and three days - we couldn't do anything. The driver had a phone. He tried to call, but the satellite communication was no good. We lost three friends there. But before that, we'd seen several dead bodies in the Sahara." Burying his three companions, Haile's only option was to remain by the truck in the scorching sun. Finally, on the fourth day, another truck appeared.

<sup>10</sup> [Sudan Tribune](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MUMA-87A52M?OpenDocument&RSS20=02-P) 'Eritrean refugees in Libya under continuous inhuman treatment' 10 Jul 2010 at <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MUMA-87A52M?OpenDocument&RSS20=02-P>

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) Eritrean Refugees in Libya Facing Torture / Forcible Return to their Homeland 10 July 2007 <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/show.php?id=2835>

<sup>12</sup> AFP 'Eritreans hijack plane after expulsion from Libya' August 28, 2004. (AEST) at <http://www.ehrea.org/eriliby.htm> "Four Eritreans, among a group expelled from Libya, have given themselves up after hijacking a plane flying them home and forcing it to land in Khartoum, a Sudanese police commander said."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Yohannes Woldemariam 'Why Eritrea's refugees shouldn't accept their fate' 2009-10-29, Issue [455](http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59828) at <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59828>

Like every survivor of the desert trip and the threat of deportation you soon start the third round of preparation for another risky journey, usually to Italy, which is a spring-board for travel to other destinations. You need to prepare yourself to cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels hoping for refuge in Europe, where asylum is far from assured.<sup>15</sup> A journey in smugglers' boats going to Italy costs US\$1,000 per person. In the Mediterranean the primary source of deaths is drowning in storms, though you sometimes can be attacked by smugglers and murdered or raped.<sup>16</sup> When the smugglers are in trouble, they throw you overboard into the shark-infested waters to avoid getting caught.<sup>17</sup> You can also die from thirst, hunger, or heat.

## **6. Unintentional landing in Malta**

If your boat landed in Malta unintentionally you end up in a jail in the military barracks of Malta without getting the very basic human needs for livelihood was extremely depressing and damaging to the human person, both physically and mentally.<sup>18</sup> You expect decent treatment as asylum seekers but were treated as sub-humans and as criminals. You feel your human worth taken from you. If you are one of the unlucky Eritreans you will be deported to Eritrea though you pleaded that you be deported not directly to Eritrea but at least to the Sudan or Ethiopia. You either will be taken away from the Asmara airport to unknown prison and nobody knows your whereabouts or you will be detained in the detention centers in the dry Dahlak islands.<sup>19</sup>

## **7. The other harrowing journey to Egypt**

If you are among those who cross the Sahara to enter Egypt, you risk fines for illegal entry, harsh imprisonment and, worse forcible return to Eritrea.<sup>20</sup> If by any chance you cross into Israel run into the harsh reality of the modern state, where an anti-infiltration law may soon criminalize asylum seeking, and where they are either imprisoned or forced to live in slums.<sup>21</sup> Similar to that Libya you face a harrowing journey on your way to Israel. In addition to physical ailments, punishing heat and exhaustion, you are often subject to physical and sexual abuse from smugglers, who demand payment of between \$2,000 and \$2,500 to take you from Sudan to Cairo and then on to Israel.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> Yohannes at <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59828>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL- PRESS RELEASE 'Malta: The government should suspend deportations of Eritreans' 10 October 2002 at <http://www.ehrea.org/malta.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid "Amnesty International said that in the current human rights crisis in Eritrea, anyone deported to Eritrea who was suspected of opposition to the government or having evaded military service or deserted from the army would be arrested and possibly subjected to torture or ill-treatment. They could be detained for an indefinite period without charge or trial, without any protection against unlawful detention. If tried, they would face lengthy imprisonment or possibly the death penalty. Their relatives could also be detained on suspicion of assisting them to escape."

<sup>20</sup> Releas Eritrea 'Eritrea Refugees in the Aswan Region of Egypt are on Hunger Strike Protesting Gross Violations of Refugee Rights' 25 October 2010 at <http://www.asmarino.com/news/815-eritrea-refugees-in-the-aswan-region-of-egypt-are-on-hunger-strike-protesting-gross-violations-of-refugee-rights->

<sup>21</sup> [BEN HARTMAN](#) 'UNHCR: Eritreans by far largest refugee group in Israel' Jerusalem Post, 03/10/2010 at <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=170593>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

smugglers would often hold you for ransom in Sinai; they subject you to abuse until they received further money from your families.<sup>23</sup>

## 8. Life in Europe and its hurdles

If you arrive in Italy as soon as you arrive in Medusa you will be received by Eritrean Government agents and get an orientation and warning not to say anything bad about Eritrea. Life in Italy is a very harsh you live like a god. For instance, if you manage to go out of Italy without asking protection and arrive in Sweden, you need an interpreter that can help you with your case. If you speak the truth about the situation in Eritrea you will be threatened by interpreters or forced to change your case into something that is not related to politics.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, after being recognized by the emigration authority, you are asked to get a passport from your country of origin for you to have a Swedish nationality. Therefore, to get an Eritrean passport means to go to Eritrean embassy, where you are forced to pay 2% of your income tax, worst of all to fill out and sign a blanket prepared by the Embassy, where you have to apologize and admit that you have committed a crime for evading military service and betraying your country.<sup>25</sup> After passing through a life-threatening experience, to go again and plead guilty for a crime that you haven't committed and apologize to the very Government who caused and the very source of all your misery, is not only psychologically traumatic, heartbreaking and humiliating experience but tamper with your human dignity. Thus, the Swedish immigration without knowledge is acting as an accomplice for forcing us to go to the government we escaped from.

## 1. Life in Ethiopia

The alternative route rather than Sudan is Ethiopia. After accepting your fate of being a victim of a shoot-to-kill policy and made it safe way through the mined and patrolled border with Ethiopia, you arrive at the camps such as Shimelba and Mai-Ayni in the Tigray region and the isolated camps of Asaayta...Berahle far in the Afar region. The camps are located thirty kilometers from the Eritrean border, and there are concerns for refugee protection in the event of another war.<sup>26</sup> By virtue of its remoteness, little is known about the latter.

Few months before 1,458 Eritrean refugees from various camps in Ethiopia were resettled to the United States (US) recently, the Ethiopian State [Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs](#) (ARRA) disclosed.<sup>27</sup> Last week, a group of 130 Eritrean refugees, after years of exile in Ethiopia, were flown to the US as part of the ongoing resettlement operation. Recently the Ethiopian government reviewed its refugee policy and allowed Eritrean refugees to live outside refugee camps and settlements. If you are one of the lucky Eritrean refugees you will be a beneficiary of either the

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<sup>23</sup> EveryOne Group '80 Eritrean refugees seized at the border between Egypt and Israel' November 24, 2010, at [http://www.everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2010/11/24\\_80\\_Eritrean\\_refugees\\_seized\\_at\\_the\\_border\\_between\\_Egypt\\_and\\_Israel.html](http://www.everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2010/11/24_80_Eritrean_refugees_seized_at_the_border_between_Egypt_and_Israel.html)

“This situation also the result of the closure of the borders of Europe through bilateral agreements, which did not offer alternatives to asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa, now increasingly forced to rely on these brokers in human flesh, human traffickers. The policy and rejections of closure, is favoring the enrichment of traffickers and criminals who deceive the desperate people fleeing war, persecution, famine.”

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview of the Author with Eritrean refugees

<sup>25</sup> EveryOne Group '80 Eritrean refugees seized at the border between Egypt and Israel' November 24, 2010, at [http://www.everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2010/11/24\\_80\\_Eritrean\\_refugees\\_seized\\_at\\_the\\_border\\_between\\_Egypt\\_and\\_Israel.html](http://www.everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2010/11/24_80_Eritrean_refugees_seized_at_the_border_between_Egypt_and_Israel.html)

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR Sheraro <http://www.unhcr.org/BasicFacts/Docs/Eritrean%20Refugees%20in%20Ethiopia.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Tesfa-Alem Tekle, 'Ethiopia: Over 1000 Eritrean refugees resettled to a third country' September 6, 2010 (ADDIS ABABA) <http://www.sudantribune.com/Ethiopia-Over-1000-Eritrean.html>

resettlement policy or be free to work and study in accordance to the newly introduced scheme, which came into force after talks between the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR, allows Eritrean refugees residing in camps to live anywhere you chose in Ethiopia, provided that you can sustain yourself financially.<sup>28</sup> The move should be lauded and encouraged by Eritreans and the international community at large.

However, as far as Shimelba camp is concerned, the following could be said.

1. To make matters of control straight these camps are located in areas far from neighbouring communities in the area.<sup>29</sup>
2. Refugees are given 15 kilo grams of wheat per month one litter oil and a small hip of salt.<sup>30</sup>
3. Being located in a deforested area, the fellow refugees had to go a long distance to collect fire-wood, which in return has led to clashes with neighbouring suspicious communities.<sup>31</sup> Eye witness accounts reveal that such clashes that erupted over fire-wood collection have led to the murder of an Eritrean in Mai-Ayni camp, who was stoned to death by the neighbouring communities.<sup>32</sup>
4. Refugees are demanded to stay in the camp. Several of those found roaming in big cities end up being imprisoned on suspicion. The permission regarding movement to other cities such as to visit relatives or the like is given in return for loyalty.
5. As far as resettlement is concerned it is rumoured that nearly 50% of those who get the right to it are believed to be fellow Ethiopians from the Tigrinya speakers of Tigray who have their relatives in high government posts or with in the Ethiopian refugee agency aka ARAA.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Conclusion

Last but not least, on those high risk trips from Eritrea to the Sudan and Ethiopia, then life in the Sudan, the life-or-death journey on the Sahara Desert, life in hiding inside Libya, the risky boat journey across the Mediterranean, and then landing in the Maltese barracks as a detainee without a known crime and the fear of deportation back to Eritrea. Deportation from Malta, Libya and Egypt; and disembarking at the airport of Asmara, loaded into military trucks and literally disappear. After long years of imprisonment, a fresh start to take the perilous Journey again. The story of an Eritrean refugee is like a roll-coaster.

Desperate situations demand desperate measures. Therefore, out of despair, Eritrean refugees will continue to escape and take the perilous journey until their last birth. By now it is obvious that deportation will not deter Eritreans who have nothing to lose. Therefore,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> UNHCR Sheraro <http://www.unhcr.org/BasicFacts/Docs/Eritrean%20Refugees%20in%20Ethiopia.pdf> “The camp is located thirty kilometers from the Eritrean border, and there are concerns for refugee protection in the event of another war. Camp management should be seen in the context of the proximity to the border, the steady flow of new arrivals and the overall environment of the area. A strong national security interest on the part of the Ethiopian government restricts movement in and out of the camp. This is enforced by limited access to resettlement and possible refoulement.”

<sup>30</sup> Video clip that explains the situation of Eritreans in Ethiopian refugee camps  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnktEsUpK2c>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid “Refugee women have special protection needs in Shimelba camp as they are facing increasing sexual and gender-based violence, ranging from domestic violence in the home, to rape and assault in the community and violence committed by local people when women travel to collect firewood.”

<sup>32</sup> Personal Interview with an eye witness account.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

This being the fact in the ground, the international community in general and the European Union countries in particular shall take a different approach and come up with the solution that deals with the root cause. First and foremost, the root cause of that is driving Eritreans to escape in masses, among other things, are excessive militarization and prolonged military service. At the root of the problem is also the unresolved border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia for which Ethiopia is largely to blame. The militarization of the region is partial caused by Ethiopia refusal to implement the border demarcation decision of an independent UN commission, which awarded the disputed area of Badme to Eritrea.<sup>34</sup>

- The EU need to take a diplomatic offensive to compel Ethiopia's compliance with the Hague verdict.
- The EU can play a positive role by helping break the impasse and thereby depriving the Eritrean government of the pretext for conscription of the population and the 'no war no peace' footing.
- The EU can also play a role using its diplomatic ties to stop the human rights violation in Eritrea and push for the restoration of peace and respect of human rights through the implementation of the Constitution.
- To inform the life of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia is hard as the word connotes. The money given by international donor and refugee organizations to the Ethiopian governments in the name of Eritrean refugees is not known where it ends up. So we urge all concerned parties and organizations to scrutinize the destination of this purse, and introduce control mechanisms to make sure that those given rights to resettlement to the US or the west are purely Eritreans but not Ethiopians.
- To also encourage and raise funds introduced scheme the Ethiopian Government which allows Eritrean refugees residing in camps to live anywhere they chose in Ethiopia, provided that they can sustain themselves financially

In addition, after arrival in Europe, Eritrean refugees face extortion, blackmailing and intimidation by the Eritrean authorities into pay a 2 percent "tax" of their income to the regime back home. Those who fail to pay will not obtain visas to Eritrea to visit family members, and cannot even send parcels through the post to their friends and relatives in Eritrea; the passports of those who fail to pay will not be renewed etc...

Thus, the EU must take the following actions:

- To inform European Union countries emigration authorities from forcing Eritreans to bring passport from their Embassy which is the root cause illegal extortion.
- Order the Eritrean Embassies in Europe to stop illegal extortion of funds, including the 2% taxation of people's monthly income;

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