

Understanding why Eritreans go to Europe

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Why do Eritreans risk their lives on perilous journeys to Europe? Why don't they stay in neighbouring countries where they could get safety and protection?

Criticism is growing against EU leaders for failing refugees by neglect at a time of increased number of refugees. Simultaneously, many questions are being asked as to why people – especially from Sub-Saharan Africa – come to Europe.

Eritreans constitute the second largest group of refugees in Europe and form a significant proportion of those still coming to Europe. Especially since 2001, the human rights situation in Eritrea has shown a rapid and significant deterioration, with the Constitution suspended and no political opinion other than the government's ideology tolerated inside the country. A report issued by the United Nations Human Rights Council details the harsh political

realities in the country and concludes that the country is ruled by fear, not law.¹

Between 2006 and 2012, Eritreans used to take a route through Sudan (possibly via Ethiopia) and Egypt to reach Israel. However, in 2012 the Israeli government renewed its anti-infiltration law and fenced its border with Egypt in order to deter the flow of African migrants. Egypt was also implementing a shoot-to-kill policy on its borders to prevent African migrants crossing into Israel. These two measures brought about a significant reduction in the number of migrants while leading to a shift to Libya as the main route to Europe. Due to its geographical proximity to Europe and the vacuum created by large-scale violence and political crisis inside



People fleeing Eritrea, crossing the Sinai Peninsula.

the county, Libya has now become a hub for both migrants and organised criminals who operate in trafficking and smuggling.

Why Europe?

Interviews conducted with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Sudan and the UK demonstrate that Eritreans are forced to continue their journey because they cannot secure safety and security in Israel, Ethiopia or Sudan. In all three countries, a large number of Eritreans live in refugee camps. Despite the unresolved animosity with Eritrea, Ethiopia hosts 131,660 Eritreans who fled the repressive regime. However, most of the refugees do not wish to stay in the camps, as poor living conditions threaten their survival, or they settle in the cities. The ration distributed to each refugee is below the daily average necessary for any healthy person, leading to malnutrition, especially of children and women. Lack of adequate health facilities and housing and the generally dismal conditions in the camps add to the challenging situation. Eritrean refugees are not allowed to work inside or outside the camps. They spend their time doing nothing but “struggling with boredom and distress”.² Even though Eritrean refugees are entitled to resettlement, there are many allegations of corruption by Ethiopian officials undermining this in practice. The inability to provide for the family leaves them with no option but to continue their journey to countries where they think they can ensure their and their families’ survival.

Refugees who flee to Sudan are faced with similar challenges there. As of late 2015, Sudan hosts 125,530 Eritrean refugees, a significant proportion of whom have been settled in various camps and cities for more than three decades. However, since 2006, with a new wave of refugees, Eritreans have begun to be targets of organised criminals who abduct, kidnap and take them hostage in order to extort ransom money from their relatives. Hostages are then trafficked to other criminal groups and the chain of deals extends up to Egypt.

About 41,000 Eritreans and Sudanese nationals live in Israel. However, almost none of them are recognised as refugees. With no

legal status or freedom to move and work, Eritreans are subject to detention by the Israeli authorities following the amendment of the Prevention of Infiltration Law in 2012. Despite opposition by international humanitarian agencies, the authorities have deported around 3,000 Eritrean and Sudanese refugees to Rwanda and Uganda. Once in Rwanda and Uganda they find it difficult to stay as they are subjected to corruption and robbery as a result of the money given to them by the Israeli government to facilitate their removal.³ Since they cannot return to their country for fear of reprisals, most move on to South Sudan, Sudan and then Libya to enter Europe.

In general, the desperate situation in the above-mentioned countries not only pushes them to move on in the hope of finding better conditions but also aggravates Eritreans’ vulnerability, making them easy prey for smugglers who lure them with false promises of opportunities for leading safe and secure lives in Europe.

Thousands of Eritreans, however, have died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. To date, there is no legal or safe way to reach Europe. Having landed in Malta and Italy, Eritrean refugees have had once again to escape harsh conditions and border controls and travel on to other parts of Europe. The movement of Eritreans into Europe is just one aspect of their search for a secure and peaceful life, something which was not achievable in the countries neighbouring Eritrea. As long as the reasons for migration are left unaddressed, and their safety and a decent life are unattainable closer to home, desperate migrants will continue to risk treacherous crossings on unseaworthy boats.

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1. United Nations Human Right Council (2015) *Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea* www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf

2. Interview with Mehari, Eritrean refugee in Adi Harush camp (true identity withheld)

3. Interview with Teklemariam, Eritrean refugee in UK (true identity withheld)