



# DYING TO REACH EUROPE

ERITREANS IN  
SEARCH OF SAFETY



---

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>ESCAPING ERITREA</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>NO SAFE ALTERNATIVES</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>ERITREANS DESERVE SAFETY, PROTECTION AND HUMANE TREATMENT</b>	<b>40</b>

---

---

## **CREDITS**

© 2017 Médecins Sans Frontières

**Cover image** © Gabriele François Casini/MSF  
*An Eritrean woman sings a prayer with other women  
and children after being rescued from Mediterranean  
by Médecins Sans Frontières, 2 September 2015*

**Art Direction & Design:** Atomodesign.nl

**Médecins Sans Frontières**

Plantage Middenlaan 14,  
1018 DD Amsterdam  
Tel: + 31 (20) 520 87 00  
Fax: +31 (20) 620 51 70  
W: [www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)

 [www.facebook.com/msf.english](https://www.facebook.com/msf.english)

 <https://twitter.com/MSF>



“On 3 October 2016, a joint team from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and SOS Méditerranée rescued 721 people from an overcrowded wooden boat drifting off the coast of Libya. Of these people, 685 (95%) were from Eritrea, and 197 (25%) of the Eritreans were unaccompanied children. Of the women on board, several were pregnant and others were severely sick. Many of those we rescued demonstrated physical and psychological trauma from beatings, rapes, threats and deprived living conditions throughout their journey – from Eritrea, through Ethiopia, Sudan and the Sahara desert to Libya. They showed us their scars and told us their terrible stories. We identified their ailments and treated them as best we could. The majority said they were aware of the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but considered it their only option to seek safety and protection.”

MSF cultural mediator, on board Aquarius  
search and rescue vessel, 6 October 2016

Eritrean migrants on a boat in distress before being rescued by the Bourbon Argos, a search and rescue vessel operated by Médecins Sans Frontières, 27 July 2015.



# **INTRODUCTION**

1

Eritreans were the largest group crossing the Central Mediterranean to Europe in 2015, and the second largest after Nigerians in 2016.<sup>1</sup> This is remarkable given that the total population of Eritrea is just five and a half million.<sup>2</sup> Ninety percent of Eritreans who manage to reach Europe are granted asylum.<sup>3</sup> Yet the routes to eventual safety are extremely dangerous and at times deadly.

Since 2015, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has provided assistance to more than 65,000 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants as they try to reach Europe – in Ethiopia, in Libya and at sea. Every Eritrean interviewed by MSF teams on its search and rescue vessels in the Mediterranean Sea<sup>4</sup> has reported being either a direct victim or a witness to severe levels of violence, including torture, in multiple locations throughout their harrowing journey from Eritrea to Europe. Every Eritrean interviewed has reported being held in captivity of some kind, while over half have reported seeing fellow refugees, asylum seekers or migrants die, most often as the result of violence. Every Eritrean woman interviewed by MSF has either directly experienced, or knows someone who has experienced, sexual violence, including rape, often inflicted by multiple perpetrators. In MSF's clinics, Eritreans arrive with heavy scarring, wounds and other medical conditions, including severe psychological illness, that are consistent with their testimonies.

Eritreans have told MSF that they left Eritrea for a variety of reasons including mandatory military conscription for an indefinite period of time; violence; fear of the government; lack of freedom; and poverty. *"In Eritrea, you don't live like a human being. The government can send you to prison; they can send you to death."*<sup>5</sup> Some report having been tortured, while the practice of forced labour with minimal remuneration for indefinite periods of time is widespread.

When a person decides to flee Eritrea, they encounter danger and potential abuse at every turn. Those fleeing to Ethiopia or Sudan risk being shot by Eritrean border guards. In Sudan, Eritreans face the possibility of being forcibly returned to Eritrea, while in Ethiopia they struggle to subsist without work or education opportunities. For many Eritreans, putting themselves in the hands of smugglers and heading to Europe via the Sahara desert and Libya remains the only option.

Without exception, the journey is grim. Crossing the Sahara desert, Eritreans and others are at high risk of violence, including kidnappings, torture, sexual assault, robbery and extortion. MSF patients frequently report witnessing deaths as smugglers try to maximise their profits with no regard for their passengers' lives. Eritrean and other refugees and migrants fall off overcrowded vehicles while driving through the desert and are left to die in the blistering heat. Others become sick and sometimes die from a lack of food and water over a sustained period of time.

Once in Libya, Eritreans and others face abuse at the hands of smugglers, traffickers, armed groups, militias and security officers. Torture and violence, including sexual violence, is *"as common as eating a meal."*<sup>6</sup> People interviewed by MSF described being shot at or having witnessed shooting. In 2016, graphic videos emerged of the beheading of Eritreans in Libya

1 UNHCR, [data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php](http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php)

2 [data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=eritrea](http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=eritrea)

3 [ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report#Decisions\\_on\\_asylum\\_applications](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report#Decisions_on_asylum_applications)

4 On board Aquarius search and rescue vessel in 2016 and on board MY Phoenix search and rescue vessel in 2015

5 Thirty-six-year-old Eritrean woman interviewed in the Tigray region, Ethiopia

6 23-year-old Eritrean man, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 5 October 2016

by the Islamic State group, along with reports of the capture and enslavement, including sexual enslavement, of Eritrean women.<sup>7</sup>

The perpetrators of the diverse types of violence and cruel acts faced by Eritreans throughout their journeys include the authorities, at times alongside armed groups. Some of these same authorities are now financially supported by the EU to prevent Eritreans and others migrating to Europe. Non-state armed groups – such as smugglers, traffickers, kidnappers, armed gangs and individuals – are also frequently reported as perpetrating violence. Weapons and tools used include firearms, knives, stones, metal poles, cables, gun butts, ropes, wires, pipes, sticks, the perpetrator's own hands and feet, and verbal threats, including death threats.

With this report, MSF seeks to examine in more detail the hardships faced by Eritreans, both in Eritrea itself and in the course of their journeys in search of safety. These journeys, alongside those of other refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, are direct testament to today's bankrupt asylum system. Currently there is no way for Eritreans to seek asylum in Europe without risking their lives. The EU and its member states are currently strengthening their collaboration with governments such as Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea to effectively prevent people from fleeing and transiting through these countries to reach Europe.<sup>8</sup> This reckless policy will further harm Eritreans seeking international protection. Specific calls directed to the EU, European states, the Libyan authorities, Sudan and Ethiopia are presented in the report's final section.

7 OHCHR, December 2016 'Detained and Dehumanized' [ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised\\_en.pdf](http://ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf) and [www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-slave-special-report-idUSKCN10T137](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-slave-special-report-idUSKCN10T137)

8 [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication\\_external\\_aspects\\_eam\\_towards\\_new\\_migration\\_ompact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_external_aspects_eam_towards_new_migration_ompact_en.pdf)



An Eritrean refugee looks out of his cell in a detention centre in Gharayan, Libya, 22 April 2014.






© Daniel Eter

# **METHODOLOGY**

# 2



While the particular focus of this report is Eritrean refugees and their experiences within Eritrea and while transiting through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, MSF is equally concerned about other groups of people facing similar situations, both in the Central Mediterranean and in other locations.

This report draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected by MSF since 2015 in Ethiopia, Libya and on the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>9</sup> Through its programmes, MSF has gathered both medical data and first-hand information from hundreds of conversations held with Eritrean refugees, including 106 in-depth testimonies (57 males and 49 females).

All interviewees giving an in-depth testimony understood that an excerpt could be used for external purposes, and that all information would be anonymised. Information was also obtained through meetings with Eritrean experts, with authorities in Libya and in Europe, and with other humanitarian agencies. The report does not include any information from MSF patients obtained while receiving psychosocial, mental health or psychiatric care.

The report does not focus on the situation of Eritreans after arriving in Europe. As MSF does not operate in Eritrea, information on conditions inside Eritrea is based solely on testimonies from Eritreans who have left. Some academics have criticised both the media and human rights groups for relying solely and uncritically on interviews with refugees. It has been argued that there is the potential for bias in interviews with asylum seekers, who may consider it necessary to emphasise certain elements of their stories in order to maximise their chances of being granted asylum.<sup>10</sup> However, through its medical programmes, MSF has treated and seen the wounds, scars and other physical and psychological traumas on its patients which are consistent with their testimonies. Information about the situation in Sudan was not collected in Sudan but from interviews held on board MSF search and rescue vessels. The report includes information received up to 31 January 2017.

The report is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on Eritreans seeking to leave Eritrea. The second section explores the lack of safe alternatives which prompt them to travel to Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya. The third section contains an analysis of the EU's strategy of externalising migration control, followed by concluding remarks and MSF's calls for change.

9 On board Aquarius search and rescue vessel in 2016 and on board MY Phoenix search and rescue vessel in 2015

10 See for example "Representing Eritrea: geopolitics and narratives of oppression." *Review of African Political Economy* (2016): 1-10

A billboard poster outside barracks in Asmara, Eritrea depicting a male and a female soldier from the Eritrean Defence Forces

“

In a normal country, military service has a limit. In Eritrea, we do not know when or if the [military] service will end. Working without payment under these conditions is like slavery.

35-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 5 July 2016

”





**ESCAPING  
ERITREA**

3

Eritrea is “one of the world’s fastest emptying nations.”<sup>11</sup> At the end of 2015, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that more than 411,000 Eritreans of a total population of five million lived as refugees outside the country.<sup>12</sup> Approximately 5,000 people flee Eritrea every month. Ethiopia and Sudan host the majority of Eritreans. In 2015, 39,162 Eritreans entered Italy. In 2016, Eritreans were the second most common nationality after Nigerians crossing the Central Mediterranean, departing from Libya and, to a lesser extent, from Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

The large majority of Eritreans interviewed by MSF report they are escaping widespread violence and indefinite mandatory military service. In its June 2015 and June 2016 reports, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea provides extensive documentation of what it refers to as “a system of governance by fear”.<sup>14</sup> One of the most common phrases interviewees use when asked about Eritrea is, *There is no freedom.*”

*“You live the government’s way. You cannot decide by yourself what to buy, where to go, what to do. You are forced into something that makes you unhappy and powerless. You are forced to not support your family. My husband was already a fighter at the time. They took him back to the army after the children were born. We didn’t have an income. How could I live? He escaped [from the military] and the government officials came to my house looking for him. ‘Tell us where he is or you will be under arrest,’ they said. If he did not go back to the military, I would have to pay 50,000 Nakfa [3,000 Euro] or go to prison. I did not have that money, so I escaped.”*

30-year-old Eritrean woman, Tigray, Ethiopia, June 2016

Eritrea’s mandatory military service for prolonged periods of time affects almost all families in the country. The programme, initially created after Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia in 1993, allows the government to conscript people for an 18-month period, which in practice is extended arbitrarily.<sup>15</sup> All young people are sent to do military training at the age of 17 (generally at the SAWA Defence Training Centre, a military academy in the Gash-Barka region of Eritrea), which counts as the twelfth year of high school. Without completing this training, students do not receive their examination results. Training conditions are reportedly harsh. Interviewees describe inadequate food and water, forced manual labour which they compare to slavery, arbitrary and severe punishment and sexual assault of women. According to testimonies collected by MSF, these conditions have caused physical and mental disabilities amongst students, as well as death.

After completing military training, a privileged minority with the highest grades can attend government-run colleges and are later designated a profession. The majority of students, however, are deemed ineligible for further education and are forcibly posted on active military duty with no end date.<sup>16</sup>

11 [www.wsj.com/articles/eritreans-flee-conscription-and-poverty-adding-to-the-migrant-crisis-in-europe-1445391364?alg=y](http://www.wsj.com/articles/eritreans-flee-conscription-and-poverty-adding-to-the-migrant-crisis-in-europe-1445391364?alg=y)

12 Horwood, Christopher with Kate Hooper: 2016. Protection on the Move: Eritrean Refugee Flows through the Greater Horn of Africa. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

13 UNHCR, [data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php](http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php)

14 [www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx)

15 The program’s stated initial intent was to renovate infrastructure, modernise agriculture, develop the mining industry and raise industrial output. In 1995, the Eritrean government passed the Proclamation of National Service (No. 82/1995), requiring all persons aged 18 to 50 to conscript to national service for a total of 18 months. Three years later, the national service demobilisation was suspended.

16 Interview with members of Eritrean diaspora in Sweden, October 2016

*"I was a student up to sixth grade. I was forced into military training. We trained in the heat. There is not enough food, not enough clothes, there are no trees, and there are sandstorms. They trained us for 10 months, and then they made me a construction soldier. In Eritrea we are all soldiers. I never got permission to see my family, so one time I went without permission. They took me to prison. After that, life became worse. I had to flee – flee for a better life."*

27-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 12 July 2016

*"My two sisters and I were living together. My mother died giving birth to me. My father was a soldier, so we were living with a cousin. She also died. I tried to help my sisters. I farmed in the rainy season and we had cattle. I was so young. They wanted to take me to become a fighter. I was 16 years old then, so I fled across the river."*

25-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 21 June 2016

Older Eritreans are also forced into active military duty for years and even decades beyond the official 18-month limit. Conscripts do not know when, or even if, they will be demobilised. Interviewees describe how they wanted to defect from military service, but feared a life lived in the shadows, at risk of being rounded up, imprisoned, tortured or killed. One Eritrean refugee interviewed by MSF teams in the Tigray region of Ethiopia said the army conscripted him in 1997. He served for more than 15 years, but the army salary was not enough to support his family. He escaped and spent a few years in hiding, finding illegal work in the mining industry, but this also paid next to nothing, and severe drought made things worse. In the meantime, the military hunted for him, appearing at his family's house and threatening his wife. In February 2016, the government issued a demand that every defector from the army who was living in hiding should report to the authorities; the man decided to flee what he said was a scheme to torture and imprison defectors.<sup>17</sup>

The testimony of this man, and those of hundreds of other Eritrean refugees spoken to by MSF, show the combination of factors that propel many Eritreans to make the difficult decision to flee, including forced military service, fear of the government, harsh climactic conditions, economic difficulties, family disruption, and the threat of violence.

*"When I was 17, I went to military training for the twelfth grade. I hated life. We were forced to work. We did not have freedom. You have to follow the military regulations or they beat you and make your life difficult. In Eritrea, life is military. I left because of that."*

21-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 12 July 2016

*"They [the military] pay 500 Nakfa [30 Euros] per month. It is nothing. It is not even enough for food and rent. How can you take care of your family or your baby? In a normal country, military service has a limit. In Eritrea, we do not know when or if the [military] service will end. Working without payment under these conditions is like slavery."*

35-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 5 July 2016

*"I was born and grew up in Sudan, but returned to Eritrea with UNHCR in 2004. I was married at the age of 17. My husband was taken to the military. I have not seen him for five years. He earns 300 Nakfa [19 Euros] per month. Life was hard. I could not survive and had to escape with my children."*

28-year-old Eritrean woman, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, October 2016

Leaving Eritrea is extremely risky. Country exit visas are very difficult to obtain, while leaving the country without an exit visa is a criminal offence. Those who attempt to flee illegally across the border to neighbouring Ethiopia and Sudan risk being shot at by

<sup>17</sup> Testimony by 40-year-old Eritrean man, 6 June 2016 in Tigray refugee camps, Ethiopia



While in prison for having attempted to flee Eritrea to Sudan in 2008, Shewit Hadera, 25, was regularly tortured by prison guards. On one occasion they poured scalding tea on his leg, causing severe burns which were never treated, 25 August 2015.



© Nichole Sobocki

border officials.<sup>18</sup> If caught crossing the borders, people are usually either tortured and imprisoned or forced to pay large ransoms. Yet, in spite of these risks, thousands of Eritreans still leave every month.

*"They caught me the first time I tried to escape. I was taken to prison, just a few kilometres from where I lived. It was crazy – I never knew these places were there, so close to the streets. It was really hard. There was no space. We had to sleep holding each other's feet. We went to the toilet in an open barrel. It was in the same room, two metres from my head. Imagine the smell. We all had diarrhoea, we were all sick. We did not get enough food. By the time I came out I weighed 49 kg. We were interrogated. I heard people scream. A friend of mine disappeared one day. He was a strong and healthy guy. He called me years later. When I saw him he was a changed man and walked with a stick."*

Eritrean man in his early 30s, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 24 July 2015

*"I'm seeing the pictures in my head. I was underground, 11 ladders down. A lot of prisoners are held like that, without any space. During the day we were forced to work with no light, and at night we were so squeezed. It was impossible to lie down."*

33-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 16 June 2016

*"I'm sick and I'm stuck. I fled towards the border, but I was caught and put in prison for two years. The people managing the prison treated us so badly. They threatened and tortured us in many different ways. They used a lot of violence towards my genital parts. This caused infertility – which is what they wanted. They think that if a man cannot conceive, he will be less eager to leave the military service and instead will continue to serve the country. It is a tactic. After a long time, I managed to escape the prison and flee to Ethiopia, where I have been for 10 months now. I have seen many doctors for my infertility problems, but it seems that no one is able to help me. This gives me a lot of anxiety. I cannot go back to Eritrea, and I do not have money to flee elsewhere."*

28-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 29 November 2015

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty, Annual Report on Eritrea 2015/2016, [www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/report-eritrea/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/report-eritrea/) and BBC, June 2015, Eritrea ruled by fear, not law, UN says, [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33047544](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33047544)

**NO SAFE**

**ALTERNATIVES**

**4**

Eritreans who manage to flee their country can be divided roughly into three groups: children and young adults escaping forced recruitment; military service defectors escaping severe abuse and imprisonment; and elderly people hoping to be reunited with family members.

Until some five years ago, Eritreans who fled Eritrea moved along four major routes: east, to Yemen and Saudi Arabia; north, through Sudan and Egypt into Israel; south, via Kenya towards South Africa; and northwest, moving overland from Eritrea to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Libya/Egypt before crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. In recent years, routes have shifted in response to changing conditions in transit and host countries.<sup>19</sup> Eritreans today cannot reach Israel due to a physical fence constructed by Israel to prevent migration,<sup>20</sup> while the eastern route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia has become almost impassable since the escalation of war in Yemen in March 2015. Consequently, the northwest route to Europe is increasingly seen as the most viable option, despite the high risks of death and disability that the journey poses.

## ERITREAN REFUGEE ROUTE TO EUROPE



## HARROWING JOURNEY



Every Eritrean interviewed by MSF teams on its search and rescue vessels in the Mediterranean Sea has reported being either a direct victim or a witness to severe levels of violence, including torture, in multiple locations throughout their harrowing journey from Eritrea to Europe.



Every Eritrean interviewed has reported being held in captivity of some kind, while over half have reported seeing fellow refugees, asylum seekers or migrants die, most often as the result of violence.



Every Eritrean woman interviewed by MSF has either directly experienced, or knows someone who has experienced, sexual violence, including rape, often inflicted by multiple perpetrators.



In MSF's clinics, Eritreans arrive with heavy scarring, wounds and other medical conditions, including severe psychological illness, that are consistent with their testimonies.

19 Frouws, B. "Going West: contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe." (2014). Derived at: [regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/rmms\\_publications/Going\\_West\\_migration\\_trends\\_Libya\\_Europe\\_final.pdf](http://regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/rmms_publications/Going_West_migration_trends_Libya_Europe_final.pdf).

20 [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/31/israeli-fence-cuts-migration-egypt](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/31/israeli-fence-cuts-migration-egypt)

# ETHIOPIA



In November 2016, 783,401 refugees from neighbouring countries were residing in Ethiopia, including 162,176 Eritrean refugees, making Ethiopia the largest refugee hosting country in Africa.<sup>21</sup> Since 2015, MSF has been providing mental health and psychiatric care to Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. MSF is alarmed at the high number of patients with stress, anxiety and depression, linked to the situation in Eritrea, their traumatic escape and the current conditions in the camps in Ethiopia.

Eritrea's border with Ethiopia is extremely dangerous. Eritreans must walk for hours in the dark to avoid being shot at by border guards, crossing rivers where they risk drowning and encountering wild animals. Some people tell MSF that they travelled with friends; others say they made the journey alone; some presumably receive help of some sort from smugglers or border guards in exchange for money. Being shot at, or witnessing others getting shot at, is a common occurrence. MSF teams have encountered and treated Eritreans with physical and psychological complaints related to shootings.

*"We were four in total, all young. We spent the day hiding in an underground place until nightfall. After dark, we continued our journey by help of the moon. We walked for a long time and reached the border. There was a fence of bushes. The military guards were asleep so we made a gap in the fence. We tried to be quiet. 'Stop!' the military said. We ran fast. We*

*were so afraid and didn't know the place, the stones, the river. The military ran after us for a while, but then stopped. We didn't believe it and thought we were still being followed. After a while we heard dogs and chickens and hoped we had reached Ethiopia. We waited in the dark under a tree. A hyena came. In the morning we started walking and reached a reception centre. Looking towards the fields we had come from, we saw three other Eritreans crossing. They were shot at. I watched one person die. Another was shot in the foot."*

19-year-old Eritrean woman, Tigray, Ethiopia, 3 June 2016

*"One night, while we moved by train from Mora to Assab, I was on night watch as a guard. That's when I escaped. I was very scared because, to cross the border, I had to cross Eritrea's largest river. When I crossed, the Eritrean military shot at me. I dived underwater and swam for my life."*

38-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 7 June 2016

Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region of Ethiopia generally report arriving along three routes. The vast majority cross directly from Eritrea into Ethiopia, while others travel via Sudan. MSF has also spoken to people who were returned to Ethiopia from Egypt, after being kidnapped and held in the Sinai desert as they tried to reach Israel.

A significant number of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia are children, teenagers and young adults, often travelling alone. An estimated 300-400 unaccompanied minors (under the age of 18) arrive in the Tigray camps each month, while approximately 200 children depart the camps each month. The average family size in Hitsats, the newest camp in Tigray, is 1.5, which is very low in comparison to other camp settings in Ethiopia and in other parts of the world. This camp has a turnover – measured as the percentage of people leaving the camps without permission within a short period of time – of more than 80 percent.

21 [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EthiopiaFactSheetNovember2016.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EthiopiaFactSheetNovember2016.pdf)

On arrival in Ethiopia, Eritreans are interviewed by Ethiopian authorities and taken to reception centres before being taken to one of the camps in the Tigray and Afar regions. Eritreans are typically granted asylum automatically. However, Ethiopia maintains two reservations to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees' rights to "wage-earning and self-employment" and to public education higher than elementary education are largely restricted. These limitations make self-sufficiency almost impossible for refugees and seriously impact their ability to integrate locally. Ethiopia also imposes certain movement restrictions on the majority of refugees, including Eritreans, which further fosters isolation.<sup>22</sup> Eritreans require special permission from the government to pursue education, work or leave the camps; as a result, most are confined in camps and completely dependent on aid. Eritreans interviewed by MSF report that aid is chronically insufficient. Numerous Eritreans also express fears that the Eritrean Intelligence Service has a presence in the camps, reportedly monitoring, kidnapping and forcibly returning people to Eritrea.

At the 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn, described a range of initiatives planned to improve the lives of refugees in Ethiopia. These include expanding Ethiopia's 'out of camp policy' to all refugees; providing work permits; providing farming land for refugees; and improving essential social services for refugees, including access to comprehensive healthcare.<sup>23</sup> If implemented, these policies could greatly improve the lives of Eritrean, and other, refugees residing in Ethiopia.

*"It is bitter to be a refugee. I want to improve my life, livelihood and ability to support my family. I have no opportunity to work here – that's why I have to go to other countries. It is a political problem that brought me into this poverty and health problems. I'm eating the ration from UNHCR but I cannot help my mother. This aggravates my stress and anxiety. I have nothing. It is very difficult."*

27-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 9 June 2016

## **MSF IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA**

*MSF first worked in Ethiopia in 1984. In February 2015, MSF opened a project focusing on mental healthcare for Eritrean refugees in camps in the Tigray region. Outpatient psychosocial and psychiatric services are available at MSF's clinics in Shimelba and Hitsats camps, complemented by community-based care in Hitsats camp and a psychiatric care centre in Shimelba for inpatient treatment. In 2016, MSF teams provided more than 4,000 individual mental health counselling sessions and 150 group counselling sessions. MSF teams also provided community education and awareness activities to reduce stigma around mental health issues and to increase the uptake of services for those in need. In 2016, MSF also treated 1,700 patients suffering from malaria and admitted more than 1,200 people for inpatient care at its clinic in Hitsats.*

22 UNHCR Ethiopia, Annual protection Report 2007 [www.unhcr.org/4848fe3a2.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/4848fe3a2.pdf)

23 Public Summary Overview Document on the Obama Leaders' Summit on Refugees, November 2016, [refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/public\\_summary\\_document\\_refugee\\_summit\\_final\\_11-11-2016.pdf](http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/public_summary_document_refugee_summit_final_11-11-2016.pdf)

*"The authorities here know everything that happened to me in the Sinai desert. They know I was kidnapped, tortured and forced to pay ransom to survive. They say, 'We are hearing you, be patient, your resettlement application is in process,' but nothing happens. I have a lot of things to stress about. First, I stress about the money. I have not repaid my family for what they did to get me out of Sinai. As long as I'm in the camp, I cannot. Second, there are other guys from Sinai – 'returnees' – who started resettlement, but not me. Third, I have a lot of wounds in my body, a lot of trauma, but I don't have proper medical treatment. People in the community know we were raped in the Sinai and talk about us. We distance ourselves."*

36 year old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 13 July 2016

However, these initiatives have not yet been implemented, and the Ethiopians camps currently fail to offer adequate safety, protection or assistance, or hope for a dignified future. As a result, people continue to search for alternatives. As conditions in Eritrea are not conducive for voluntary repatriation,<sup>24</sup> resettlement and family reunification remain the only viable solutions that are both legal and durable. Yet resettlement possibilities are very limited, even for specifically vulnerable groups, including 'women at risk', unaccompanied minors, victims of sexual and gender-based violence, survivors of torture and people with serious chronic diseases.<sup>25</sup> While some Eritreans have family members in the diaspora and

24 UNHCR Ethiopia May 2016 factsheet

25 UNHCR Factsheet Ethiopia November 2016

26 For more detailed information see section on Role and Responsibilities of the European Union



© Nichole Scheeki

attempt family reunification procedures, few succeed. Family reunification is also extremely expensive for refugees, and some countries are increasingly limiting the right to family reunification; in other countries it is not available at all. Additionally, many refugees do not have a valid passport, and are therefore excluded from the family reunification process.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, a large number of Eritrean refugees embark on what is referred to as 'secondary movements' rather than wait out their lives in a refugee camp. Many move to cities in Ethiopia where they spend their lives in hiding. Others leave Ethiopia for neighbouring countries or other destinations. High interest in 'secondary movements', combined with the



A family carries their belongings through Adi-Harush refugee camp at dusk. Ethiopia is the largest refugee hosting country in Africa with 162,176 Eritrean refugees residing there.

lack of safe and legal routes by which to travel, has resulted in a flourishing market for people smugglers. Smugglers take refugees to the Ethiopian border by car or guide them by foot for a lower price. In an attempt to protect themselves from kidnapping en route to Sudan, Libya and Europe, people try to secure their safety by collecting information in advance from friends and family about the routes, smugglers and dangers. But these efforts are often futile; people desperate for better futures make easy targets for trafficking networks in Ethiopia and beyond. According to Unicef, unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable and often fall victim to abuse and human trafficking as they head north.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> [www.unicef.org/emergencies/childrenonthemove/files/Child\\_Alert\\_Final\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emergencies/childrenonthemove/files/Child_Alert_Final_PDF.pdf)

# SUDAN



In 2015, an estimated 108,000 Eritrean refugees were living in Sudan, although the number may be much higher as many Eritreans do not register themselves on arrival. According to Eritreans interviewed by MSF on the Mediterranean Sea, crossing into Sudan is slightly easier and less dangerous than crossing into Ethiopia.

For Eritreans in Sudan, life is insecure and difficult. Protection and humanitarian assistance is limited, while the Sudanese authorities return some Eritreans back to Eritrea, endangering their lives. According to interviewees, forced returns to Eritrea have increased since the EU and its member states started funding regional programmes for better migration management (Khartoum Process Framework).<sup>28</sup> UNHCR has expressed great concern in this regard.<sup>29</sup> Unregistered Eritreans in Sudan run the highest risk of deportation, but even those registered as refugees may be deported. Whilst registering with UNHCR in Sudan does not offer full protection, it does lower the chances of ending up in detention in Sudan.

*"I reached Sudan and was taken to one of the camps. I waited there for more than two years. I tried to continue my journey to Israel. This was in 2011. We drove towards Egypt for a long time but we were caught in northern Sudan and taken to*

*prison. They said, 'If you don't have a refugee ID card, you will go back to Eritrea'. They took me back to Eritrea where I immediately was imprisoned. I was in a security prison for one month, and then moved to another prison where I stayed for six months. A new commander came to the area; this is why we were released. They told me to return to my working place in Sawa. I went to my family instead. It became a problem for everyone, as people started to ask questions, so I escaped again."*

28-year-old Eritrean man, Tigray, Ethiopia, 13 July 2016

Even though UNHCR data indicates that approximately 80 percent of newly arrived Eritreans stay only temporarily in Sudan<sup>30</sup> the majority of Eritreans interviewed by MSF on the Mediterranean Sea spent months and sometimes years in Sudan. On arrival in Sudan, many stay in refugee camps in Kassala state, close to the Eritrean border, while they wait to be registered. Sudan is signatory to the Refugee Convention; however, Eritreans and other refugees do not have the right to move outside camp settings, access adequate assistance or work. In the camps, harsh living conditions, limited access to food and medical assistance, as well as fear of being deported, kidnapped or forcibly returned to Eritrea, lead Eritreans to leave anyway, moving to Khartoum and other cities. Because of insecurity and multiple checkpoints along the way, smugglers often facilitate the trip from eastern Sudan to Khartoum.

While marginally safer, life in Khartoum is hard. Eritreans report being imprisoned for being 'illegal' migrants; many report being robbed on multiple occasions, while others live in fear of raids by the immigration authorities. People interviewed on the Mediterranean Sea told MSF that the only way to get out of Sudan's prisons was to pay bribes to prison officials. Meanwhile resettlement and other legal opportunities to relocate elsewhere, as in Ethiopia, remain very low.<sup>31</sup>

28 [europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-15-6026\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-6026_en.htm)

29 UNHCR June 2016, UNHCR concerned by expulsions from Sudan, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/6/574fed7d4/unhcr-concerned-expulsions-sudan.html>

30 UNHCR (2015), Sudan factsheet, September, Geneva: UNHCR

31 Horwood, Christopher with Kate Hooper: 2016. Protection on the Move: Eritrean Refugee Flows through the Greater Horn of Africa. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



*"I was so scared when I fled across the border into Sudan from Eritrea. It took me over two months to reach Khartoum; I crossed seven different cities. My father knew people in some of the cities, so I stayed with them. In Khartoum I found a part-time job working in the reception of a hotel and I was a teacher at the Eritrean school. Even if I was doing much better in Khartoum than Eritrea, life was still very hard. Officials often stop you, and only let you go if you give them money. No money means prison and possible deportation."*

26 year old Eritrean man, on board the Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 5 October 2016

*"Once in Sudan, my family and I stayed in a refugee camp for some time. There were a lot of armed people that committed acts of violence in the camps. We were afraid to be sent back to Eritrea, so we decided to go to Khartoum. My wife was too weak to leave, so she might still be there – I have lost contact with her. I managed to work a bit in Khartoum, but I got arrested after only three months. I spent one month in a Sudanese prison, and then I was asked to pay US\$2,000 to be freed and taken across the border to Libya."*

25 year old Eritrean man, on board the MY Phoenix search and rescue vessel, September 2015

Eritreans told MSF that hiring smugglers was the only way to leave Sudan and head north towards Libya and Egypt. The journey from Sudan into Libya is highly dangerous, crossing thousands of kilometres of harsh desert. From the departure point in Sudan, people are squeezed into small trucks that in theory will take them to the Sudanese-Libyan border. This journey entails days of traveling through the Sahara, often with no water or food. Temperatures often reach 50 degrees Celsius during the day but drop below freezing at night.

Almost every person interviewed on the Mediterranean Sea reported having witnessed multiple deaths during the journey across the desert. Many die from dehydration while fatal injuries from violence also are common. Others have severe symptoms from infections or diseases caused by inhumane living conditions, but have no access to medical care. Pregnant women risk suffering complications and giving birth prematurely in the desert.

The risk of Eritreans ending up in the hands of traffickers in Sudan is also high. Between 2011 and 2014,<sup>32</sup> thousands of Eritreans were kidnapped from within, or nearby, refugee camps in southeast Sudan, or while travelling with smugglers towards the north of the country, and then sold to other armed groups who tortured and detained them for ransom.<sup>33</sup> Since 2016, there have been increasing reports from refugees and migrants using this route of kidnappings in northern Sudan, including the kidnapping of girls and women for trafficking and forced prostitution.

*"My husband and I fled Eritrea many years ago. We lived in Sudan for over 20 years. I have four daughters. They were all born in Sudan. Two of them, 19 and 21 years old, went missing. One day they went to school in Khartoum and they never came back. I never heard from them. People tell me they have been kidnapped and sold. I'm desperate to find them."*

42-year-old Eritrean woman, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, September 2016

<sup>32</sup> Initially Eritreans were captured when crossing Egypt en route to Israel.

<sup>33</sup> van Reizen, Mirjam, Meron Estefanos, and Conny Rijken. "The Human Trafficking Cycle." (2013).

A group of men interviewed on the Mediterranean Sea said they left Sudan because raids, round-ups and imprisonments of Eritreans were becoming increasingly common. On their trip from Sudan to Libya, they were kidnapped by a criminal gang as they crossed the mountains near the border. For two days, the criminal gang and the smugglers negotiated their release, with the smugglers finally refusing to pay, forcing the passengers to pay instead. After that, the smugglers treated them even worse than before, screaming at them, shooting into the ground next to their feet, and finally raping the women in the group. The men described how their sisters, friends and mothers were raped in front of their eyes. Eventually they were taken to the border with Libya, where they were sold on to another group of smugglers or traffickers. One of the men said, “Witnessing the sexual violence done to our women and sisters was the worst. If you tell them to stop they will kill you, or drop you off to die in the desert.”

Eritreans interviewed by MSF report that nomads living in the Sahara desert are also a threat, especially for women. These groups know the desert better than anyone else and are often armed, showing up in unexpected locations where they demand large amounts of money from refugees and migrants. If they are not satisfied with the amount paid, they rape the women and steal people’s belongings.

Eritrean women have told MSF that they were aware of the high risks, including of sexual violence, prior to undertaking the journey. Many of them state that, before leaving Khartoum to cross the desert towards Libya, they received injectable contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancy in case of rape. They are aware that either they or their friends are likely to be raped or sexually harassed, often multiple times and by multiple perpetrators. And still they say they have no choice but to take the risk, rather than staying in Eritrea, Ethiopia or Sudan.

## SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING NETWORKS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

People smuggling has become the preferred trade of a growing number of criminal networks worldwide. Although hard facts about human smuggling and trafficking are difficult to obtain, the amounts of money involved in transporting Eritreans, as well as other African refugees and migrants, from the Horn of Africa to Europe are remarkable. The journey often starts off “voluntarily” as people contract smugglers to facilitate their journeys, but turns into trafficking throughout the course of the trip. People are reduced to the role of merchandise that may be exchanged, bought or sold between networks and intermediaries. People en route are often reluctant to speak about the networks and how they work. What is clear, however, is that smuggling and trafficking networks rely heavily on intermediaries, often from the same countries as the target population. These networks are frequently organised in a pyramidal structure, where those on the higher levels never have contact with the “customers.” People contact the middlemen by phone, through numbers obtained prior to leaving or from other refugees and migrants they meet on the journey. Alternatively, smugglers may contact people in detention centres or along borders to offer their services, suggesting that Smuggling networks may have connections with authorities, militias and criminal groups.<sup>34</sup> People either pay for their journey beforehand, throughout or on arrival. At the same time, there are other, parallel networks which frequently seek to exploit the vulnerable situation of refugees and migrants by intercepting them during their journey and forcing them to pay multiple times. There are strong indications that smuggling networks are cross-continental, typically using multiple smugglers, with handovers between smugglers often taking place in border areas.

<sup>34</sup> Björklund, L and Hassan, A, ‘The Journey to Dreamland Never Ends: A Refugee’s Journey from Somalia to Sweden’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2016, 35, 116-136



A man walks past a billboard set up by Ethiopian authorities in Adi-Harush Camp as part of a campaign to alert refugees against smugglers. The board reads: "Illegal movement is like walking blindfolded. Let's stay alert." 26 August 2015.

# LIBYA



Hundreds of interviews conducted by MSF on the Mediterranean Sea since May 2015 have exposed the alarming level of violence, extortion and exploitation that Eritreans and others are subjected to in Libya. The majority of Eritreans interviewed by MSF report experiencing and witnessing extreme violence, including killings. Eritreans held by the Islamic State group have been targeted for severe violence, including because of their faith.

The ongoing conflict and prevailing lawlessness in Libya are difficult for ordinary Libyans. For Eritreans and other refugees and migrants in transit, Libya is a dangerous trap. State institutions are weak and the authorities are unable to confront militias, criminal gangs and smuggling networks. While Libya is a state party to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) convention on refugees, it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, does not have a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR, and has no national asylum law, instead criminalising irregular entry and stay in Libya.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, Eritreans and others rarely find protection or assistance in Libya. Arbitrary and indefinite detention is widespread,<sup>36</sup> Libyan authorities regularly flout the principle of non-refoulement [by which refugees and asylum seekers may not be returned to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution], with Eritreans reportedly returned to both Sudan and Eritrea.<sup>37</sup> A UN report published in December 2016 draws a chilling picture of the abuse faced by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Libya at the hands of smugglers, traffickers, armed groups, criminal gangs and state officials alike, in an environment where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between them.<sup>38</sup>

All Eritreans interviewed by MSF report having been detained for months during their stay in Libya, often in two or three different



Eritrean men gather around a passed out cell-mate in a detention centre in Gharayan, Libya, 22 April 2014.

locations. They are held in a variety of places, most commonly in 'smuggling camps', but also in houses, detention centres and prisons. In captivity they experience a continual and diverse range of violations at the hands of guards, as well as abuse by armed groups, private individuals and smugglers, including Libyan and Eritrean nationals.

35 Law No 6 (1987) Regulating Entry, Residence and Exit of Foreign Nationals to/from Libya as amended by Law No 2 (2004) and law No 19 (2010) on Combatting Irregular Migration

36 [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf)

37 EastAFRO, April 2016, Libya departs more than 200 African migrants, [www.eastafro.com/2016/04/21/video-libya-deports-200-africans-from-eritrea-mali-niger](http://www.eastafro.com/2016/04/21/video-libya-deports-200-africans-from-eritrea-mali-niger)

38 [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf)



In 'smuggling camps', Eritreans are asked to pay large sums of money to continue towards Europe (sometimes up to US\$7,000). If they cannot pay, they remain in captivity for prolonged periods of time while money is extorted from their families. Many Eritreans report being held for extended periods in Bani Walid, a town in northwest Libya some 120 km inland from the coast, before being moved closer to the coast to wait for a boat.

Many Eritreans also speak of being handed over to armed men by the smugglers, or sold while they are in captivity. Others say they were left in border areas between Sudan and Libya before being picked up and held. Some report escaping 'smuggling camps' to board boats toward Europe, only to be intercepted at sea by the Libyan coastguard, who returned them to Libya where they were arbitrarily detained in detention centres, without being told exactly why or for how long.

*"The smugglers told us we owed them US\$5,500 and that we would have to pay before we could proceed towards the coast and Europe. I contacted my family members and friends for help. It took me two weeks to raise the money but I stayed in Libya for three months. I was lucky. Other people I met are still there and had been there for more than a year when I arrived. Some women were raped, got pregnant and gave birth there. The place where I was held is horrible. It is secret, no one knows about it. Getting beaten is something normal; it is as frequent as having a meal."*

23-year-old Eritrean man, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 5 October 2016

*"I was taken hostage the moment I entered Libya. They kept me in a camp until they knew I did not have the money. They just keep people there and torture them to make their families send money. Many times they beat me, but I did not have any family to call. They use whatever they have in front of them. If they have an iron bar they use it. They hit you with the back of the gun. They tie your hands and legs together and put you on the stomach, sometimes for days. The sun hits down on you in the day and at night you will be freezing cold. You have nothing to eat. This is the kind of torture I'm talking about. They kept saying, 'You will never get to Tripoli and to the Mediterranean Sea!'"*

23-year-old Eritrean man, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 3 June 2016

People held in the detention centres run by Libyan authorities are often malnourished due to the very limited food available. When MSF started its programmes in Libyan detention centres in June 2016, it found that detainees often received less than 800 calories per day – when healthy adults need 2,000 to 2,500 calories a day to maintain their weight. MSF witnessed cases of severe malnutrition, which is highly unusual in adults. Skin diseases, respiratory tract infections and acute watery diarrhoea caused by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions are common.

MSF medical teams on the Mediterranean Sea treat people fleeing Libya for a range of injuries, including infected machete wounds, head injuries, severe swelling to the groin, broken collar bones and extensive scarring as a result of prolonged beatings. Teams hear many accounts of sexual violence, harassment and unwanted pregnancies due to rape. Against the backdrop of the inhumane conditions of captivity in Libya and widespread abuse at the hands of a range of perpetrators, Eritrean refugees who escape Libya describe diverse situations of violence, killings, imprisonments and starvation. Many compare the situation to slavery.

*"They would tie us upside down by our ankles and beat the bottom of our feet. This place was run by Libyans, but smugglers from different countries were coming and going. The abuse is unbearable. We are slaves in their eyes. They sell us, often in groups of 15. Nigerians and Ghanaians are sold for 600 Dinars [US\$400] and Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians for US\$2,000. One day a group of men came to the prison. At first we thought they were police or 'buyers', but when they got closer they covered their faces in black scarves. They started to fight with the men managing the prison. Many bullets were fired. Seven people were killed. I wanted to escape. After seven months, I was sold to a Libyan man, but another man came and stole me and a few others after only a few days. All he fed us was three dates per day. We were so desperate that we decided it would be better to die while trying to escape than to live like we did. We ran and ran, until we found a watermelon farm. We ate some for energy. An elderly Libyan man gave us some bread and drew a map in the sand showing the way to Tripoli."*

27-year-old Eritrean man, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 29 July 2016

*"I was healthy when I left Eritrea. Now I'm sick and weak. There was one toilet where we were held, and it was leaking into our small and overcrowded room. My whole body is covered in boils and other skin infections, including scabies. Look at my feet: they are very swollen and covered in rashes. Imagine that I have had this for months without any medical care. It is killing me. There were many messages in many languages, like 'Don't give up', written on the walls – these helped me."*

Eritrean woman, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, 5 October 2016

*"Bani Walid is where I was first held. From there we were taken towards the coast to go to Europe, but the police stopped us. They shot towards us. I lost my baby from the fear and stress. I was six weeks pregnant. My friend also lost her baby, and a nine-month-old baby who was sick died. We were taken to a prison called Tarhuna. It is inhumane. I spent one month there. Our children would be hit if they made too much noise. They would hit them like animals. I was almost raped by one of the guards. He had a gun. He touched me and offered me money to have sex with him. I cried so much and later reported it to the chief officer. Officers and guards rape, but they are scared of their chief officer. The next day they transferred me and 260 other Eritrean women to prison in Tripoli. It was filled with different nationalities, only women. We were all beaten. Two Nigerian women and one Somali woman were shot dead. I stayed two months before the smugglers came to buy me. I was taken to a private house and then to the coast."*

22-year-old Eritrean woman, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, September 2016

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of people, including Eritreans, have arrived in Libya. Tens of thousands of them have managed to embark on boats toward Europe. Many have been rescued at sea and taken to Europe where, while they are safe from violence, the hardships often continue. Thousands, however, were not rescued and died painful, and too often unnoticed, deaths on the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>39</sup>

Looking at the numbers of Eritreans who have left Eritrea, transited through Ethiopia and Sudan, and arrived in Europe in recent years suggests that tens of thousands could remain in captivity in Libya. Thousands more are likely stranded, missing or dead from violence, starvation and inhumane conditions. The families of Eritreans who have escaped the country are often unaware of their whereabouts and live with the hope of one day receiving a call from their loved ones with news of their "successful" arrival in Europe.

*"When I left Sudan, I knew the journey through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe would be very dangerous and difficult, especially for my little daughter. But what is the alternative? We could not survive in Eritrea or Sudan. There is no other way to go to Europe. Europe represents hope for a better life. Now, having survived this journey of death, I would advise anyone against it. I would not wish the journey on my worst enemy. It makes you feel worthless, totally put down and degraded."*

20-year-old Eritrean woman, on board Aquarius search and rescue vessel, September 2016

39 IOM Missing Migrant Project, [missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean](http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean)

## MSF IN LIBYA AND ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

*MSF first worked in Libya in 2011. In June 2016, MSF started a medical programme in detention centres in Tripoli and the surrounding area. MSF currently provides healthcare in seven detention centres under the administration of Libya's Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). Between July and December 2016, MSF teams provided 6,993 medical consultations, including 41 consultations for children under five. Forty-nine pregnant women in detention received antenatal consultations and 115 detainees were transferred to hospital. MSF also provides drugs and vaccines to hospitals in the cities of Al Beyda and Al Marj, and has donated supplies such as chlorine, masks and protective gloves to the local crisis committee at Al Marj, in northeast Libya near the Mediterranean coast, where the dead bodies of people who attempted to cross the sea often wash up. In response to the continued conflict in Benghazi in 2015, MSF increased the capacity of Al Abyar field hospital so that it could stabilise the wounded, donated drugs to other hospitals in Benghazi and distributed food to 2,400 displaced families in partnership with a Libyan non-governmental organisation. MSF, in collaboration with other organisations, started search and rescue operations on the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 in an attempt to reduce loss of life at sea and provide emergency aid to survivors. Since 2015, MSF teams on board three boats patrolling the Mediterranean Sea have assisted more than 65,000 people on boats in distress, either by directly rescuing them or by transferring them from or to other vessels. Medical teams provided 10,000 outpatient consultations on board the search and rescue vessels in 2016. The most common complaints were seasickness, skin infections including scabies, headaches, general body pains and acute upper respiratory tract infections. In 2016, MSF medical teams also provided assistance to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and assisted deliveries on board the boats. MSF has communicated widely on the health conditions of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>40</sup>*

<sup>40</sup> See for instance [msf.exposure.co/trapped-in-transit](http://msf.exposure.co/trapped-in-transit) and [blogs.msf.org/en/staff/authors/sarah-giles](http://blogs.msf.org/en/staff/authors/sarah-giles)





MSF medics onboard Dignity 1 attend to a woman and child who were among 435 people rescued from Mediterranean, 17 May 2016.



**THE ROLE AND  
RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE  
EUROPEAN UNION**

5

Thousands of Eritreans consider Europe to be their best chance of finding safety, freedom and potentially a better life, according to interviews conducted by MSF with Eritrean refugees. Those who manage to find their way around the multiple obstacles and reach Europe by their own means have – until recently – had a good chance of obtaining asylum.<sup>41</sup>

But for Eritreans, the chance of reaching safety in Europe is diminishing, as the EU embarks on a dangerous path. Its attempts to ‘externalise its borders’ and prevent people from reaching its shores is causing further harm to highly vulnerable populations. Primarily the EU’s approach involves setting up agreements with refugee producing and transit countries to stem migration in exchange for funding.<sup>42</sup> As these countries strengthen border controls to fulfil their agreements with the EU, criminal smuggling and trafficking networks grow stronger. At the same time, the EU has deprioritised the development of legal options for people to seek safety and protection, actively contributing to the factors that systematically put hundreds of thousands of human beings in the hands of criminal networks and governments with questionable human rights records.

EU funding agreements to prevent migration present a mix of positive and negative incentives to governments. According to the EU Partnership on Migration, the EU is “*standing ready to provide greater support to those partner countries which make the greatest efforts, but without shying away from negative incentives, EU assistance and policies should be tailored to produce concrete results in stemming the flow of irregular migrants.*”<sup>43</sup> The fundamental thought behind this and similar policies is the more-for-more principle or, as the EU Council frames it, “*to create and apply the necessary leverage, by using all relevant EU policies, instruments and*

*tools, including development and trade.*”<sup>44</sup> With this logic, the EU and its member states have in recent years rushed to set up agreements and other arrangements with African countries to deter people from reaching Europe, while largely increasing the risks for Eritreans who should be entitled to asylum in Europe.<sup>45</sup>

The Khartoum Process, the Valetta Summit and the New Migration Partnership Framework are cornerstones in the EU’s recent strategy to externalise the management of migration to East and North Africa.

Following the Valetta Summit in November 2015, Ethiopia signed an agreement with the EU and received funding from the EU’s Emergency Trust Fund for Africa linked to the Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility. The EU-Ethiopia agreement contains general clauses both on development and migration, but emphasises the latter. In exchange for the money, Ethiopia is expected to strengthen its asylum system, provide support for a regional border control

41 According to Eurostat data from December 2016, the average first instance acceptance rate for Eritreans applying for asylum across the European Union is 90 percent, [ec.europa.eu/eu/eurostat/data/database/](http://ec.europa.eu/eu/eurostat/data/database/)

42 Den Hertog, Leonhard, November 2016, Money Talks: Mapping the funding for EU external migration policy, CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe, No 95 [www.ceps.eu](http://www.ceps.eu)

43 COM(2016) 385 final: Communication from the European commission on establishing a new Partnership

44 EU Council conclusions 28 June 2016. [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/06/28-euco-conclusions/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/06/28-euco-conclusions/)

45 Hargrave, K and Pantuliano, S with Idris, A, HPG Working Paper September 2016 “Closing Borders - The ripple effects of Australian and European refugee policy: case studies from Indonesia, Kenya and Jordan, [www.odi.org.uk/hpg](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg). Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration. [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016DC0385](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016DC0385)

## OUTSOURCING MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

**The Khartoum Process** is a high-level, inter-continental political process that harmonises existing African Union (AU) and EU-led migration components. It was initiated in 2014 and focuses on people trafficking, smuggling, lawful migration and protection issues in the Horn of Africa.<sup>46</sup> Since 2014, states in the Horn of Africa, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, have attempted to monitor and prevent migration from the region, including information campaigns to discourage people from leaving their countries of origin.<sup>47</sup>

**The Valletta Summit**, held in Malta in November 2015, focused on relations between the EU and African countries, with an emphasis on migration. It concentrated on five key areas: addressing the root causes of migration; improving legal migration channels; enhancing the protection of migrants, asylum seekers and particularly vulnerable groups; tackling more effectively the exploitation and trafficking of migrants; and reaffirming the key role that return and readmission agreements play in migration control policies.<sup>48</sup> The most significant element of the Valletta Summit was that EU Emergency Trust Funds for Africa (EUTF) totalling 1.8 billion Euros were made available during the negotiations to be distributed in countries along the Central Mediterranean route and the Horn of Africa, specifically for preventing onward migration.<sup>49</sup>

**The New Migration Partnership Framework** with third-party countries, adopted in mid-2016, is the most recent EU migration deal.<sup>50</sup> Following the logic of the infamous EU-Turkey deal of March 2016, which aims to stop the arrival of people in the EU, the New Migration Partnership Framework establishes a cooperation framework with the main countries of origin and transit for the Central and Eastern Mediterranean migration routes. The framework – which according to the European Commission has already been a success – aims to deepen cooperation in order to stem migration flows. Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan are among the 16 priority countries.<sup>51</sup>

46 European Parliament Directorate, October 2015, EU cooperation with third countries in the field of migration, Study for the LIBE Committee, [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/536469/IPOL\\_STU%282015%29536469\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/536469/IPOL_STU%282015%29536469_EN.pdf)

47 ARCI, October 2016, Steps in the process of externalization of border controls to Africa, from the Valletta Summit to today, [www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc\\_externalisation\\_ARCI\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc_externalisation_ARCI_ENG.pdf)

48 Valletta Summit on migration, 11-12 November 2015, European Council, Council of the European Union: [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/internationalsummit/2015/11/11-12/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/internationalsummit/2015/11/11-12/)

49 ARCI, October 2016, Steps in the process of externalization of border controls to Africa, from the Valletta Summit to today, [www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc\\_externalisation\\_ARCI\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc_externalisation_ARCI_ENG.pdf)

50 Also referred to as the “new EU framework to address migration”, [ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication\\_external\\_aspects\\_eam\\_towards\\_new\\_migration\\_ompact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_external_aspects_eam_towards_new_migration_ompact_en.pdf)

51 [europa.eu/rapid/midday-express.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/midday-express.htm) and [eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/com\\_2016\\_700\\_f1\\_communication\\_from\\_commission\\_to\\_inst\\_en\\_v8\\_p1\\_english.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/com_2016_700_f1_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v8_p1_english.pdf) [ec.europa.eu/news/2016/10/20161018\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/10/20161018_en.htm)



“

Despite mounting evidence of the inhumane and often deadly conditions that people face in Eritrea and en route to Europe, the EU is doing all it can to prevent Eritreans from reaching its shores.

”

system, and facilitate the readmission of migrants and “failed” asylum seekers from Europe. According to testimonies collected by MSF on the Mediterranean Sea, since the deal came into effect, it has become harder for Eritreans to leave Ethiopia and seek asylum elsewhere due to tighter exit controls en route.

Agreements signed with Sudan, including those related to the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (of 45 million Euros), Regional Development and Protection Programmes (RDPP) and a conditional aid package (of US\$112 million), similarly seek to address the root causes of irregular migration from and through Sudan. The deals call for strengthened border controls, police training and the construction of closed migrant detention centres.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, there are increasing reports of Eritrean refugees being systematically rounded up, arbitrarily detained and forcibly deported to Eritrea. Sending Eritreans back to Eritrea against their will violates the non-refoulement principle of the UN Refugee Convention.<sup>53</sup>

In January 2016, the Government of Eritrea and the EU concluded a new cooperation agreement resulting in a five-year assistance package (of 200 million Euros) from the European Commission. The funding is allocated for energy, governance and economic development, emphasising the need to address the root causes of Eritrean migration to Europe.<sup>54,55</sup> This framing suggests that the main driver of Eritrea’s current exodus is economic. Poverty is indeed *one* factor, yet the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that Eritreans primarily flee mandatory military conscription, forced labour, arbitrary detention, torture, killings, and a general lack of freedom, as documented by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, MSF testimonials and medical data.

The EU has recently focused its attention on Libya. In February 2017 the Italian government announced a Memorandum of Understanding with the Libyan government and the EU reinitiated its will to collaborate with Libya to stem irregular flows of people along the Central Mediterranean route and to break the business model of human smugglers and traffickers, collaboration with the Libyan “authorities” and the Libyan coastguard; and strengthening the national legal framework.<sup>56</sup> While the EU presents the training and support to the Libyan coastguard as a measure to save lives, elsewhere it has described the training as a measure to “prevent illegal sea crossings”.<sup>57</sup> By providing resources (training, equipment and support) to help Libya prevent refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from leaving the country, and to intercept them at sea only to return them to Libyan detention centres, the EU is directly enabling the prolonged suffering of Eritreans and other people on the move. At the time this report went to press, draft EU plans had also emerged to use the Libyan coastguard to increase the capture of refugees and migrants at sea and return them to Libya to be screened for asylum. Given conditions in Libya, the EU plans would put the lives of refugees and migrants in immediate danger, limiting their ability to seek protection and likely condemning them to further detention.

52 [europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-6050\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6050_en.htm)

53 Nyabola, N and Anyadika, O, 26 May 2016, Why EU Migration Deal with Sudan is so Dodgy, [www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/05/26/why-eu-migration-deal-sudan-so-dodgy](http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/05/26/why-eu-migration-deal-sudan-so-dodgy)

54 Eritrea Profile, Asmara, 30 January 2016. [50.7.16.234/hadas-eritrea/eritrea\\_profile\\_30012016.pdf](https://www.refugees.org/hadas-eritrea/eritrea_profile_30012016.pdf)

55 European Commission, 11 December 2015, EU announces support for poverty eradication in Eritrea, [europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-6298\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6298_en.htm)

56 ARCI, October 2016, Steps in the process of externalization of border controls to Africa, from the Valletta Summit to today, [www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc\\_externalisation\\_ARCI\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.integrationarci.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/analysisdoc_externalisation_ARCI_ENG.pdf)

57 [eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/13195/eunavfor-med-operation-sophia-starts-training-of-libyan-navy-coast-guard-and-libyan-navy\\_en](http://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/13195/eunavfor-med-operation-sophia-starts-training-of-libyan-navy-coast-guard-and-libyan-navy_en) : [static.council-tvnewsroom.eu/ac247f86-be28-11e6-afc0-bc764e092fac/09-12-16-113133-EU\\_Council-Preview\\_Update3\\_PRV.mp4](http://static.council-tvnewsroom.eu/ac247f86-be28-11e6-afc0-bc764e092fac/09-12-16-113133-EU_Council-Preview_Update3_PRV.mp4)

Although the EU is careful to pay lip service to human rights and legal migration alternatives in its agreements and public communications, in practice these components are peripheral. In recent years, the EU has failed to make any substantive progress in saving lives, improving protection in the region or creating new legal migration mechanisms to Europe. Instead its efforts have largely been focused on stemming the flow of people to Europe by preventing departures. One glaring example of the EU's priorities is the chronic underfunding of its efforts to resettle refugees from Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere.<sup>58</sup>

Out of 14.4 million refugees of particular concern worldwide,<sup>59</sup> less than one percent was submitted for resettlement in 2016. The total number of people deemed by UNHCR to be in need of resettlement in 2016 was 1,150,300, but UNHCR was given resources to resettle only about one in ten of these, and between January and November 2016 just 115,000 people were resettled.<sup>60</sup> In 2015, the European Commission recommended an EU resettlement scheme for a mere 20,000 people in need of international protection<sup>61</sup> in North Africa, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. As of October 2016, the EU had only resettled 10,659 people. The majority of EU states participating in the scheme prioritised Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.<sup>62</sup> No Eritrean refugees were resettled in Europe in 2016.<sup>63</sup>

In 2016, resettlement needs in Ethiopia, the largest refugee hosting country in Africa, stood at 50,200 people (following very restrictive needs assessments), amongst whom only 6,465 were prioritised.<sup>64</sup> The extremely low number of resettlement cases from Ethiopia and all other large refugee hosting countries is a consequence of limited political willingness by third countries – such as members of the EU, the US, Canada, Australia and the Gulf states, among others – to share responsibilities and receive more refugees in their territories. UNHCR's weak position in pursuing states to increase resettlement quotas, and its lack of internal focus on resettlement programmes, further feeds the problem.

There are also troubling indications that certain EU countries are tinkering with asylum procedures to deny refugee status to Eritreans who do make it to Europe. The UK, for example, has taken deliberate measures over the past two years to downplay human rights issues in Eritrea in order to make it harder for Eritreans to obtain asylum. These egregious efforts have resulted in a higher rate of denied asylum claims (many of which were later overturned in a higher court), and in the UK not accepting unaccompanied Eritrean minors from the Calais camp in 2016.<sup>65</sup> Such actions further erode Europe's commitment to human rights and the Refugee Convention, while generating staggering levels of suffering.

58 [www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/23/eu-policies-put-refugees-risk](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/23/eu-policies-put-refugees-risk)

59 Including vulnerable groups including victims of torture, unaccompanied minors and people with chronic diseases

60 [www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement.html)

61 [europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-829\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-829_en.htm)

62 [ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160928/sixth\\_report\\_on\\_relocation\\_and\\_resettlement\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160928/sixth_report_on_relocation_and_resettlement_en.pdf)

63 [www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/resettlement/575836267/unhcr-projected-global-resettlement-needs-2017.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/resettlement/575836267/unhcr-projected-global-resettlement-needs-2017.html)


64 UNHCR Factsheet Ethiopia November 2016

65 [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/22/home-office-eritrea-guidance-softened-to-reduce-asylum-seeker-numbers](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/22/home-office-eritrea-guidance-softened-to-reduce-asylum-seeker-numbers)

**ERITREANS DESERVE SAFETY,  
PROTECTION AND HUMANE  
TREATMENT**

6





People will continue to flee Eritrea and seek international protection as long as military service is forced and indefinite, violence is widespread and freedom is severely limited. Still, in spite of mounting evidence of the inhumane and often deadly conditions that people face in Eritrea and en route to Europe, the EU is doing all it can to prevent Eritreans from reaching its shores.

MSF recognises that migration cooperation deals between the EU and African states contain an increasing number of references to protection and the need to respect human rights and asylum and refugee laws. But the EU's strategy of externalising migration controls to Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and Eritrea itself generates life-threatening impediments for Eritreans who wish to flee their country and seek safety elsewhere. Attempts to stem migration through strengthening national borders and increased detention do not curb smuggling and trafficking operations, but fuel them, leaving people with no choice but to pay smugglers and traffickers, who bribe officials to get them past checkpoints, across borders, through fences and out of prisons.

Moreover, the extremely limited opportunities of resettlement to third countries, family reunification and other legal alternatives to seek asylum beyond Ethiopia and Sudan leave Eritrean refugees with no other option but to embark on hazardous journeys. Through directly assisting Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Libya and on the Mediterranean Sea, MSF witnesses the medical and humanitarian consequences, including death, of the situation Eritreans face in Eritrea itself; of protracted encampment in Ethiopia; of physical, psychological and sexual violence, arbitrary detention and deportations in Sudan and Libya; and of the dangerous sea crossings to Europe.

The plight of Eritreans described in this report is indicative of an international refugee protection framework that fails to meet the needs of those seeking safety outside their countries of origin. The current refugee regime, and state interpretations of it, is structured around the false notion that most conflicts and other reasons people flee are short-term, and that people will eventually return home; that refugees should be hosted in countries neighbouring their own, where their rights will be safeguarded; that the most vulnerable refugees have access to resettlement and family reunification; and that those who leave the camps in a country of first asylum for Europe without authorisation are committing an offence that should be countered with police and military force.

In the light of the suffering faced by Eritreans and other refugees, asylum seekers and migrants at the hands of state officials, border and detention guards, smugglers, traffickers and other armed groups and individuals in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and on the Mediterranean Sea, **MSF calls on:**

- Libya, Sudan and European states to stop forcibly returning Eritreans to Eritrea or to a third country from which they may be sent back to Eritrea, in accordance with the internationally recognised principle of non-refoulement.
- The EU and its member states to stop brokering migration agreements with third countries that do not offer adequate protection to Eritreans and other refugees and asylum seekers, and to stop making aid funds conditional on preventing migration.
- The government of Ethiopia to fulfil the pledges made during the September 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees, including the expansion of the out of camp policy, provision of work permits, and improved access to comprehensive healthcare for refugees.
- The government of Sudan to ensure access to essential social services for refugees, including basic healthcare, in camp, detention and urban settings.
- Libyan authorities to refrain from detaining refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, in the light of the inhumane conditions of detention and the arbitrary nature of the detention. Libyan authorities should urgently release vulnerable groups including children and unaccompanied minors, pregnant and lactating women, elderly people, people with disabilities, people with serious medical conditions including mental health problems, victims of trafficking, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, torture and other grave violations.
- Libyan authorities to facilitate access by UNHCR and its implementing partners, other UN agencies and civil society organisations to ensure that refugees and migrants residing or transiting through the country are provided with basic levels of protection and assistance, including access to healthcare.
- The EU and European states, in accordance with previous commitments, to develop and improve legal migration alternatives, including resettlement for Eritreans and others recognized as refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan.
- UNHCR, with the support of the international community, to radically increase the target resettlement quotas of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan, through allocating adequate resources and strengthening pressure on states with the capacity to receive higher numbers of resettled refugees to do so.
- Australia, Canada, the US, Gulf states and other countries with the capacity to do so, to increase their formal resettlement and family reunification quotas so that Eritreans and others in need of protection and asylum do not have to risk their lives to reach safety.



