

A photograph of two women sitting on the steps of a doorway in a weathered, yellowish wall. The woman on the left is wearing a white headscarf and a black and white polka-dot dress, looking down. The woman on the right is wearing a white headscarf and a light-colored top, covering her face with her hands in a gesture of distress or grief. The doorway is dark, and the wall shows signs of peeling paint and age.

LETTERS FROM ERITREA

REFUGEE WOMEN TELL THEIR STORY



The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA)

Table Of Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>Acronyms</i>	7
<i>Introduction</i>	8
<i>Testimonies of Eritrean Women</i>	14

Foreword

The independence of the Eritrean state, achieved in 1991, induced within the population a sense of optimism that would be thereafter held in the collective conscience of the generation that fought for it. SIHA as a network of women's organizations in the Horn of Africa came to life only a few years after the independence of Eritrea. The Eritrean Women Union at the time was instrumental in supporting the network formation with many of our meetings taking place in Asmara. Surrounding populations looked on with great enthusiasm at the new born state, hoping that it would contribute to stability in a region of constant turmoil and that its government would learn from the past mistakes and the failed experiences of its neighbouring countries.

Years down the road, things in Eritrea have deteriorated rapidly. The regime's engagements in regional conflicts and its focus on the militarization of society, as opposed to development and good governance, has seen the optimism turn into anxiety with the future of the country becoming uncertain. For the past 20 years, extreme isolation from the international and regional arena, alongside a lack of democracy and severe crackdowns on civil rights and freedom of expression, have been characteristic of the Eritrean regime. As a result, the Eritrean people live under severe poverty combined with harsh repression, extreme human rights violations and an absence of basic services. Together, these factors have led to instability and mass migration away from the country. Besides economic hardship and repression, the social and cultural hierarchy deprives Eritrean women of equal access to land, resources and more importantly women have limited control of their lives as human beings.

During the struggle for independence, the women of Eritrea equally participated. Although the Eritrean state has signed and claimed to domesticate the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), issues of social justice and equality are still far from being exercised under the current regime. According to testimonies from Eritrean women who undergo compulsory military service, which can be indefinite, they are exposed to years of abuse, sexual assault and exploitation to the point that many young women leave school and marry young to avoid entering national service in a bid to escape the sexual exploitation by high ranking officers. This booklet is SIHA's attempt to bring the case of the Eritrean women out

of the shadows and into the light. During the past 20 years, increasing numbers of Eritreans have fled through fear of persecution and have crossed land borders to Sudan and moved on to other countries in the region. Women in this context have frequently found themselves the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Their stories reflect their exposure to grave violations of human rights and lack of protection inside their own country. This abuse continues in first asylum countries like Sudan which is the primary transit point for Eritrean refugees but also a country where women are subject to great repression due to its regime's ideology. Furthermore, the stories of the women reflect the great risks they are exposed to while fleeing for their lives; dehumanization and abuse by their traffickers have become a norm in recent years through kidnapping, enslaving, sexual violence and organ harvesting.

The process of collecting testimonies was at times difficult and harrowing for both the women interviewed and the interviewers and facilitators involved. At times, the explicit details were unforthcoming, with the retelling of brutal experiences re-traumatizing the survivors. It is hoped that in spite of these challenges, and all the more in light of these challenges, the testimonies succeed in conveying the harsh realities faced by the women of Eritrea, and provide a personal insight into the struggles and abuses they have endured in the hope that such testimonies may activate those in the human rights field to respond.

During the period of research for this piece, it must be noted that the UN Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur for Eritrea, Ms Sheila B. Keetharuth. Such developments are welcome, however it is important to acknowledge that the impact of the rapporteur will only ever be as great as the efforts of the broader international community, who even the UN have acknowledged to have done too little on the issue of Eritrea .

Finally, having completed this booklet, SIHA too hopes to work more on providing support to, and to advocate on behalf of Eritrean women and to facilitate their role in strengthening women's human rights in their country.

SIHA Secretariat

¹OHCHR, Human Rights Council Session, (5th July 2012)





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Finally I am very grateful to the SIHA team who pursued this initiative patiently, sometimes beyond their working hours, without their enthusiasm this booklet would not have seen the light.

Hala Alkarib, Director
SIHA Network



MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Tel Aviv
Al arisha
ISRAEL

JORDAN

SINAI

SAUDI ARABIA

RED SEA

TO LIBYA

EGYPT

ERITREA AT A GLANCE

Population: 6,086,495 (July 2012 est. CIA World Factbook)

Capital: Asmara

Nine recognized ethnic groups: Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Kunama 2%, Rashaida 2%, Bilen 2%, other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera) 5% (2010 est.)

Languages: Tigrinya, Arabic, English, Tigre, Kunama, Afar, other Cushitic languages

Predominantly Muslim in the lowlands and Christian in the highlands.

Borders Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti as well as having more than 1000Km of Red Sea Coast.

SUDAN

Wadi Serifay Refugee Camp

ERITREA
Asmara

Teseneay
Aalla

Shagarab Refugee Camp

Khartoum

TO SOUTH SUDAN, UGANDA

TO ETHIOPIA, KENYA

ETHIOPIA

YEMEN

DJIBOUTI

Source: The Guardian-July 17 2012

Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
SIHA	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Introduction

ERITREA'S rich and complex history sets the backdrop to a period of sustained and concerted abuse of human rights for many of its population. The breadth of repression and the scale of cruelty can at times be overwhelming. However, it is important to note that the abandonment by the Eritrean government is by no means solely responsible for the brutality faced by the population, but is only the starting point. Many other actors inclusive of traffickers, other states such as Israel and Sudan have facilitated or actively contributed to the abuse of Eritrean population who even once outside the country face numerous threats to their physical, emotional and economic well-being.

A Background to Present Day Eritrea:

Eritrea's militarised and authoritarian regime is rooted in centuries of regional conflict. Its current repressive and isolationist politics however stem from more recent conflicts involving Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti which have characterised much of the post-colonial period. None has impacted Eritrea so much as it's turbulent relationship with its neighbour, Ethiopia.

Modern Eritrea and its boundaries were established during the European colonial period with the British, Italians and French carving up the region. Initially becoming an Italian colony in 1890, it passed to the British in 1941 during the Second World War. Finally, the United Nations in 1952 would position Eritrea as a federal state with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Emperor.

The threat posed by Emperor Haile Selassie to the federation saw liberation movements emerge from 1958 onwards with a further strengthening

and development of these during the 1960s by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Eventually, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), under the leadership of Isaias Afewerki, came to prominence in the 1970s. Such armed independence movements laid the foundations for a military culture that would become entrenched and pervasive across the state for decades to come.

Finally, after more than 30 years of protracted conflict with Ethiopia, Eritrea finally gained independence. A UN backed referendum took place in April 1993, and, with over 99% supporting independence, Eritrea was declared an independent nation. In spite of secession, the country's fluid ethnic composition and boundaries would not make for a unified nationalist sentiment. Instead, through the EPLF positioning Eritrea as a state continually under threat and at odds with its neighbours, a military and authoritarian state philosophy could be imposed and legitimated. Actual conflicts and the associated/on-going threat of conflict, with Djibouti, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Sudan since independence, provided a premise for forced conscription and a strict security regime. Such control of the population extended to restrictions on freedom of religion, movement, association, freedom of the press and media alongside many other constraints. In line with this, the state escalated

"I was arrested the first time in 2003, when I gathered with some other young people to pray, even though we were in a private house. A group of paramilitary police raided the house and arrested everyone there. I was held in May Srwa prison for two weeks and only released on condition that I leave the Pentecostal church."

Medhin

the level of surveillance upon the population with an extensive secret service, network of informants and prison system to coerce compliance by its population.

Despite provisions for the creation of a multi-party democracy within the 1997 Eritrean constitution, the country has been strictly ruled as a one-party state. Since independence, national elections have never taken place even though they have been scheduled to do so (most recently in 2001). The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) led by President Isaias Afewerki stands alone and unchallenged in its ability to rule.

Human Rights in Eritrea:

The Eritrean population find their human rights subject to numerous threats by an autocratic government seeking to sustain military and political domination over a populace with diverse backgrounds, religions and ideologies. Coupled with the perceived existential threat posed by Ethiopia, the Eritrean government has legitimated its repression against society at large, often with women and young people the most vulnerable to abuse. Where the regime relies upon a sense of national unity to preserve itself, dissent or deviance is viewed negatively, with opposition voices, military deserters and refugees labelled traitors and subject to brutal treatment².

1. Civil and Political Rights:

From 2001 the government led a concerted attack on freedom of speech, closing down non-government media outlets and arresting critics of its policies. This militant repression of freedom of speech, in contravention to Eritrean legislation which provides such liberties, has seen Reporters

Without Borders classify Eritrea in 2012 as the worst country in the world for press freedom³. Journalists, critics and social commentators are all constrained and face arbitrary arrest and detention. Civil rights movements are repressed and freedom of association is limited to state sanctioned institutes.

2. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, Torture and Disappearances:

Unapproved political activities, criticism of the president, evasion of national service, attempts to desert, practice of non-sanctioned religion and actions that may appear contrary to the state objectives may result in arrest, detention and torture⁴. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of arbitrarily arrested government officials, leaders of government-controlled labor unions, business people, journalists, and national service evaders or escapees ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 – excluding national service evaders and deserters, who may number tens of thousands more⁵.

Once in prison, conditions are brutal. Prison cells are frequently converted freight containers in the desert where overcrowded inmates suffer extreme heat during the day and cold at night. Similarly, cement bunkers are frequently used and overcrowded with 200 prisoners in each with limited ventilation. In this environment, inmates were commonly known to lose consciousness from the heat⁶. Despite legislation prohibiting torture, it is a common practice deployed against prisoners⁷. Practices include the binding of hands and feet in contorted positions, suspension from trees with hands tied behind the back, and tying people in the desert with sugar on them to attract biting insects⁸.

Even without physical violence, the poor sanitation, food and conditions alongside scant medical attention has led to many deaths. Frequently,

²Human Rights Watch, *Service for Life State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptioin in Eritrea* (2009)

³Reporters Without Borders, *Press Freedom Index* (2011)

⁴HRW (2009) *Op Cit*

⁵HRW *World Report: Eritrea*(2012)

⁶US State Department Report: *Eritrea* (2011) p4

⁷*Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*

however, individuals simply disappear, with no record or information to indicate what happened, where or why.

3. Military Service:

Eritrean law requires that students cannot graduate high school without completing their final year in the Sawa military and education camp in the west of the country. Although intended to be 18 months long⁹, it can become indefinite up to the age of 50 years¹⁰, though most women interviewed suggested an average term of around 5 years. During this period they receive a token wage. One of the few exceptions is if a girl is married. As a result, many students choose to drop out after 11th grade¹¹, get married, or flee the country to avoid conscription, though there are reports of women from families connected to the ruling party or the old liberation movement receiving shorter terms of service or greater opportunities for study.

"Things got worse when we reached Port Sudan. Here we met a tall man with one Rashaida (tribesman). He told us to call our family members who lived and worked abroad and tell them to send \$5000 within 3 days, otherwise we would be killed and left in the desert."

Aster

Within the military, dissent is not tolerated, criticism of the government is punished and those who attempt to flee face detention, torture and forced labour. For many women, the military is a place of sexual violence and abuse¹², with senior officers exploiting the vulnerability of girls, in the knowledge that non-compliance could see them arrested and thrown in prison for dissent. The reluctance of conscripts to enter into such a brutal

environment has served to reinforce greater threats against those who have entered and who may desert or not-comply with military service. Where conscripts are able to desert, relatives are frequently punished in lieu. In addition, the Eritrean government vigorously pursues anyone attempting to evade conscription. Punishments are arbitrary and without due process and prison sentences frequently last around two years¹³. The widespread abuse of conscripts has furthermore resulted in numerous deaths and instances of suicide as conscripts seek ways of escaping¹⁴. Even if a conscript manages to negotiate such an abusive environment, conscripts find themselves, in their prime, underemployed and with no choice of livelihoods or chance to contribute to the economic growth. Few economic opportunities and poor wages see two thirds of the population classified as poor, with slightly more than one-third of them living in extreme poverty¹⁵. Even well educated citizens are forced to work below their qualifications, for poor pay in government jobs. Domestic and foreign policies which see military spending taking precedence over infrastructure or social services have crippled its economy¹⁶. Consequently many Eritreans depend heavily on remittances from its extensive diaspora to exist.

4. Women in Society:

Despite the technical provisions within the constitution to protect women's rights which were implemented to reflect the status attained by female fighters during the struggle for independence, the rights of women across the country in reality are barely acknowledged. Eritrea has signed, ratified or acceded to multiple international human rights treaties inclusive of the International Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW)¹⁷, the Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights among many others. There exists however a significant

⁹Eritrea: Proclamation of National Service (No. 82/1995) accessed via UNHCR

¹⁰HRW (2009)Op Citp 43

¹¹Approximately 16-17 years of age, also known as Secondary school Grade 6.

¹²HRW (2009) Op Cit p46

¹³HRW (2009)Op Cit p 28

¹⁴US State Department (2011)Op Citp2

¹⁵UNDP Eritrea Poverty Reduction(last accessed 17th December 2012)

¹⁶Although currently estimates place military expenditure as around 6.3% of GDP (CIA World Factbook), it is known to have reached 39.9% in 1999 (SIPRI). The most recent health expenditure figures suggest 2.7% GDP expenditure on health (World Bank).

¹⁷University of Minnesota, Human Rights' Library Ratification of International Human Rights Treatises: Eritrea (Last accessed 2nd January 2013)

disparity between the written commitments and the actualisation of these in Eritrean society.

Many of the worst stories are those of sexual violence, with women at particular risk of rape and sexual abuse in prison, during national service, in their marriages, and in their communities. A culture of shame around rape often leads to the silence of the victim. In a region of the world where the value of a girl is tied to her virginity and perception of purity, where rape renders a girl un-pure, it further renders her as “unmarriageable” and subsequently of lesser value. In this context, support for rape survivors is often un-forthcoming.

Traditional practices such as early marriage (the ideal age for a girl is widely seen as between 12 and 18), polygamy and domestic violence are commonplace. The prevalence of female genital mutilation has been estimated to be as high as 97 per cent¹⁸, despite it being illegal.

A Desperate Flight:

Although legislation permits freedom of movement and foreign migration, in practice many restrictions apply. Persons who are undertaking national service for example are routinely denied permission to leave¹⁹. Even for average citizens between the ages of 18-50, it is difficult to obtain permission to leave. In spite of this, Eritrean women and men are increasingly fleeing the limitations of their home country, placing themselves at great risk at the hands of smugglers, traffickers and middle men who may enable them and their children to escape.

Summary executions at or around the border areas for those caught

Difference between Trafficking and Smuggling:

Smuggling: A defining aspect is the crossing of borders. People smugglers are service providers; they facilitate the movement of persons who wish to move from one location to the other but would face bureaucratic, logistical or legal challenges to do so independently. The relationship between smuggler and smuggled ostensibly ends once the people reach their final destination and the relationship is consensual. Although the journey may be difficult and at times in degrading conditions (eg, in cramped conditions or hidden in lorries without access to sanitation) the individual had consented to this.

Trafficking: Trafficking doesn't necessarily entail border crossing, the primary focus is upon the exploitation of the individuals involved and either doesn't entail consent, or where initial consent is gained, it is made irrelevant by later use of force or coercion at any stage of the process. Trafficking is therefore less about the movement of persons and more about coercion, exploitation and the shadow economy of illegal trading in people and their forced servitude.

Information compiled from Anti-Slavery International, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, European Commission, US Department of State and the Mixed Migration Task Force.

attempting to leave are commonplace, and even where individuals are able to flee their country, relatives are subject to imprisonment, fines and other punishments in place of the individual that has fled²⁰.

¹⁸Worku Zerai A Study on Female Genital Mutilation in Eritrea(2003)

¹⁹US State Department (2011) p17Op Cit

²⁰HRW (2009)Op Cit

According to UNHCR, up to 3,000 refugees are leaving Eritrea every month, fleeing forced conscription, ethnic and religious persecution and a host of other human rights violations in their home country²¹. The UNHCR estimates as of January 2012, there were 251,954 Eritrean refugees and 14,172 asylum seekers²² spread across the Horn of Africa.

Leaving Eritrea is the first hurdle, with smugglers and traffickers acutely aware of the unrelenting number of Eritreans seeking to find a way out. With such tight constraints on movements of person, smugglers are often essential to the plan. The risks, however, are high, and it is hard to know when the smuggler entrusted with arranging and facilitating the departure will turn trafficker and brutally exploit their vulnerabilities. A primary destination, due to geographical proximity, is Sudan, and once across the border many end up in refugee camps such as Shagareb on the eastern border with Eritrea. It is anticipated that by January 2013, around 115,000 Eritreans will be inside Sudan²³. Despite the UNHCR presence, the international body tasked with provision of support is only able to assist 68,000 of those by that time, and only 1,000 more by the end of that year²⁴.

With the heaviest concentration of refugees in the country, eastern Sudan has become a veritable hub of potential victims for human traffickers and smugglers. Eritrean refugees looking for work or to reunite with family members are at increased risk. In particular, Sudan's legislation relating to refugees is restrictive. Despite having ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Refugees, Sudan made a reservation to article 26, which relates to freedom of movement, has meant that Eritreans find themselves formally restricted to camps with few economic options available²⁵. The policy environment therefore encourages the use

"The Rashaïda (tribesmen) found me and captured me and my daughter. We were locked in a house for a month and they told me that I had to find money to pay a ransom if I wanted to be freed. They raped me and they threatened to kill me. They also threatened to cut out my kidney and sell it, if I couldn't find money for a ransom."

Aska lu

of smugglers to enable Eritreans to move on to major economic centres such as Khartoum as a means to earn a living. Although not limited to them, the Rashaïda Bedouin²⁶ clans who live in and around the border area between Sudan, Eritrea and further up towards Egypt are frequent actors in the kidnapping and trafficking business. Often, Eritreans are lured by the prospect of moving onto Khartoum or towards South Sudan, but have also known to be kidnapped around the edges of the camps²⁷. Ransoms are frequently set at exorbitant fees, and hostages are often tortured to "convince" family members to get the money²⁸ and killed if the ransoms cannot be met with their organs harvested and sold on the lucrative black market²⁹. Women are most vulnerable, finding themselves subject to gang rapes, beatings, unwanted pregnancies, burns and other forms of torture³⁰. A UN security council report this year found Eritrean official, Sudanese and Egyptian smuggling gangs collude in a human trafficking industry estimated to generate more than US\$10m annually³¹.

Once in Sudan, Eritreans find themselves moving either South towards South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda, or North, towards Egypt, Israel, Libya and Europe all in search of greater security and life opportunities. However the regional approach to refugees is varied and key actors often defy

²¹ Amnesty International Annual Report: Eritrea(2012)

²² UNHCR Regional Operations Profile: East and Horn of Africa: Eritrea(2012)

²³ UNHCR Sudan Global Appeal 2012-2013 (2012)

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ UNHCR, Submission by the UNHCR to the OHCHR Compilation Report – Universal Periodic Review: Sudan (2010) p2

²⁶ The Rashaïda are a Bedouin clan predominantly based around the Eritrean/Sudan border stretching up towards Egypt and the Sinai, they are closely related to the Bedouins from Saudi Arabia. They are nomadic

people who are primarily pastoralists and merchants who move around the Eastern Sudanese region. It is important to note that not all smugglers involved are Rashaïda and not all Rashaïda are smugglers. Rachel Humphris, Refugees and the Rashaïda, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Eritrea to Sudan and Egypt UNHCR (November 2012)

²⁷ Ian Timberlake People Traffickers Stalk Eritreans in Sudan Desert (14th January 2012)

²⁸ Mirjam van Reisen, Meron Estefanos & Conny Rijken Human Trafficking in the Sinai Refugees between Life and Death European External Policy Advisors (2012)

²⁹ Fred Pleitgen, Death in the Desert, CNN Freedom Project (2nd November 2011)

³⁰ Mirjam van Reisen et al (2012) Op Cit

international human rights and refugee standards.

In Sudan, a chronic lack of documentation among refugees means they are constantly at risk of being arrested or deported back to the Eritrean regime, where attempted escape is punishable by prison. Sudan's indifference to human rights standards, especially with respect to non-refoulement saw more than 300 Eritreans forcibly returned without screening them for refugee status, defying a UNHCR agreement³².

In June 2012, Israel announced it would begin to implement an anti-infiltration law, amending its 1954 Prevention of Infiltration Law to define all asylum seekers for crossing into Israel unannounced as "infiltrators". Since 2006, tens of thousands of migrants have crossed the border from Egypt into Israel with the US State Department estimating two-thirds as Eritrean. They enter an increasingly xenophobic society where violence and opposition to immigration has escalated in recent years with anti-immigration race riots taking place in Tel Aviv³³ and houses with Eritreans being firebombed in 2012³⁴. While the government has not moved to deport current refugees, neither has it granted them refugee status.

However in Ethiopia, the government has introduced an "out-of-camp" policy for self-sufficient Eritrean refugees who are able to live outside camps without assistance. The UNHCR and more welcoming host countries such as Uganda or Kenya receive many Eritreans, however they are already overwhelmed with the thousands displaced every month from Somalia, Sudan and the DRC as a result of regional conflicts. Despite the urgent need for a stronger regional approach to refugees, most Eritreans who manage to make it out find nothing more than uncertainty at the end of the line, with no authority looking out for their wellbeing in the long term.

Theirs are stories of abandonment – by the Eritrean government, by the smugglers who have promised to safely transfer them, as well as by the host governments and international agencies that have committed to supporting them at the end of their harrowing ordeals.

³¹Phoebe Greenwood, *Eritrean Regime Cashes in on Arms and Human Trafficking*, says UN report *The Guardian* (17th July 2012)

³²Human Rights Watch *Sudan: End Mass Summary Deportations of Eritreans* (25th October 2011)

³³Conal Urqhart, *African asylum seekers injured in Tel Aviv Race Riots* *The Guardian* (24th May 2012)

³⁴Harriet Sherwood, *Jerusalem Apartment Housing Migrants Firebombed* *The Guardian* (4th June 2012) and Harriet Sherwood *Israel Turns on Its Refugees*, *The Guardian* (4th June 2012)

TESTIMONIES OF ERITREAN WOMEN

The stories presented here are nine of fifteen that were collected during the primary research. They were drawn from women currently situated in Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya. The selection set out to emphasise the three key aspects of the issue at hand; the backdrop as to why they left Eritrea, the journey leaving Eritrea and their experiences once outside Eritrea, in their host country as refugees. Many of the stories reflect the situations or abuses that were common to many of accounts and testimonies given to SIHA.

MEDHIN

I belong to the Pentecostal church, which is not registered in Eritrea and is subject to persecution. I was arrested the first time in 2003, when I gathered with some other young people to pray, even though we were in a private house. A group of paramilitary police raided the house and arrested everyone there. I was held in May Srwa prison for two weeks and only released on condition that I leave the Pentecostal church. I agreed to the terms, but I would not really leave my church.

I got married in early 2005 - my husband is in the same church. Not long after our marriage we attended the wedding of a fellow Pentecostal. The government forces raided the wedding and arrested all of the guests, including me and my husband. We were put in a prison camp called 'Camp No. 5' and were held there for two months. They put us under great pressure to leave our church.

After two months we were transferred to AdiAbeito prison, about (less than 10) kilometers from Asmara, where we were kept for another month. From there we were still not released, and were instead transferred to Wi'a, the hottest place in Eritrea. Here they made us stay for two months before bringing us back to AdiAbeito prison again.

Finally we were released, but they took my husband away and put him back into military service, even though he had already served since 1998. He escaped the military shortly afterwards and, to avoid another arrest, we decided to leave the Asmara area.

In mid-2006 our first son was born, but he developed several health problems. My husband could not work, due to problems with his back and legs. We decided we had to leave Eritrea for Sudan. We used family connections to find people to smuggle us to Khartoum. While in Khartoum I gave birth to our daughter.

However we had no papers in Khartoum so we decided to go to Shegereb camp. Here, life was very difficult - it was overcrowded, there was not enough food, we feared being taken hostage by Rashaida, and UNHCR did not help us, even with my son's health problems.

Finally we returned to Khartoum with a bigger group. Although my husband still cannot work, I have found work as a washwoman in people's houses and as a hair-braider. Sometimes people try to convert me to Islam but, generally, people accept my Christianity.

HAYAT IBRAHIM

When I was still in high school in Asmara one of my friends introduced me and some others to a guy called Mohammed who began to tell us how tough life would be in Eritrea. We spent some time with him among our group of friends. After three months of knowing him, Mohammed said he could get us to Sudan and then even to the United States to find a better life. Some of my friends and I decided to take the opportunity.

Mohammed had told us that he could take us out of the country for free, and even help us with visas and everything we needed. He told us he'd put us in touch with his brother, who would take us all the way to Sudan.

In the run up to our departure, Mohammed would ask us about our family; if we had any relatives abroad, what jobs they did, that sort of thing. The day before we left, he suddenly told us we'd need to take money for the journey. He told us to bring 40,000 Nakfa³⁵ between the three of us who were travelling, and also not to forget phone numbers for our family members.

The day we left we were so sad and scared to leave our families and homes but also excited about the future. I only took one blouse, one pair of trousers and 500 ml of water with, along with my money.

We began to chat in the car but the driver told us to keep our mouths shut. He and another man were seated in front, and they spoke to each other in a language we didn't understand.

We drove for days and days. At some point we stopped, and a guy came to us holding a gun and forcing us into a pickup truck, shouting at us in this language we didn't know. They forced some of us to sit down in the pickup and others into the back of the pickup, and covered us with a blanket.

Around this point I started to get really thirsty and hungry. We had never thought it would be this far or take this long. Then the car broke down, and the driver was shouting and screaming in his language, trying to fix the car but also getting angry with us. He shouted at us, and we didn't understand. Then he hit our friend who was helping him repair the car.

³⁵40,000 Nakfa is approximately \$2,667

We had to sit in the desert for the whole day with no food or water. One of my friends fainted but the driver told me not to help her. I was exhausted and terrified, and even started to pray that intelligence agents would find us and arrest us.

The driver began to take our belongings - our phones, our bags, anything we had - and threatened us with his gun to make us hand them over. Just as I gave up hope, another pickup arrived. They forced us in and we carried on.

Later we reached a hut where they told us to drink from a big five-litre container. But they laughed so much as we went to drink that we became afraid of what they'd done to the water, and only took a little.

Things got worse when we reached Port Sudan. Here we met a tall man with one Rashaida. He told us to call our family members who lived and worked abroad and tell them to send \$5000 within three days, otherwise we would be killed and left in the desert.

I called my sister. I hadn't even told her I was leaving. I told her she had to find the money and send it, or they would kill me.

They separated us and told us not to talk until the money arrived. I was scared to death. One of my friends was unwell, the stress and the conditions had made his body swell up. He asked me to stand on his back. I stood up to help him but the Rashaida man came and smashed me in the face with his gun, and knocked out one of my teeth.

They spoke to my sister who told them to put me on the phone. They let me just say hello then took the phone back and demanded money. We had to wait four days surviving on only two litres of water and a little bread.

Finally they received some of the payments. They took the ones who had paid to Kassala and then on to Khartoum. From there I left to Kenya, and finally managed to make it to Kampala.

Now I just want those people who cause so much suffering in this way to be found and to have to face justice for what they do.

TSEGA

I am the only child in my family. I left school early to help my mother, and both of my parents were very worried that I would have to leave the home to do national service. The police came to search for me several times, but I always hid at my friend's house. My father said he would die if they took me to do national service.

So in August 2011 I decided I had to leave. Our neighbors' son told me that he could get me to Sudan, so I agreed to go with him. I did not tell my parents, but when I escaped they were both arrested in my place. They will not be released until someone can pay a 50,000 Nakfa fine³⁶.

It was in September 2011 that I left home with the neighbors' son. We and four others - two men and two women - shared a car from Hagaz to Barentu. From Barentu we walked for four nights to reach Sudan. After crossing the border the group separated; we were told to each go by ourselves to Shegareb camp.

I went with the neighbors' son, and when we arrived at our camp he told me I had to pay him 12,000 Sudanese Pounds (SDG³⁷) to cover his expenses. I explained that I had no money and nobody to pay for me, and that he hadn't said before that I would need to pay. I have no idea if the others had paid. He just said "nothing in life comes for free" and 'gave' me to a group of Eritrean boys; I don't know if they paid him for me.

At first they kept me in shackles. They gave me drugs, partly because I was suffering a lot of pain from the abuse they were inflicting on me. But then I started to pretend that I would stay with them of my own free will, so they released me. But they still kept me locked in a house, usually with a scarf wrapped tightly around my head.

After about two months, a small local boy noticed me in the hut where I was kept. One day I was only guarded by one of the kidnapers, so when he went to the bathroom I locked him inside and escaped with the help of the local boy. I went to the UNHCR office; the kidnapers followed me there but I'd met some people

³⁶ 50,000 Nakfa is approximately \$3312 USD.

³⁷ 12,000 SDG is approximately \$2721

from my hometown who protected me from them. At UNHCR I got my refugee ID card but I never said what had happened to me, because I didn't want it to be public and I knew UNHCR wouldn't do anything anyway.

I did tell the people from my hometown what had happened, though, and from then on we all stayed together and they protected me. I would sleep indoors with four other girls, while four boys would sleep outside to protect us. The kidnappers came often and they would see me, but they didn't dare to try to take me again.

I still feared being taken from Shegerab, though, so me and my friends decided to continue towards Khartoum. We paid smugglers 300 SDG³⁸ per person, although my friends paid for me. We left Shegerab on foot up to the river, which we crossed by boat. We then took a boksi (pick-up) with 10 people and drove three nights until we were on the outskirts of Khartoum. From here we continued separately on rickshaws.

I found work at a house but the job was very hard so I left. However I had to return as it was impossible to find other work. I earn 200 SDG³⁹ per month for cleaning, washing and ironing. I do have my own room, which I can lock, but I don't really speak to the family. I only have one day off a month. At first the family shouted at me a lot, but now they are beginning to speak to me more normally.

I do not want to stay in Sudan, but I have no other options. I have no direct contact with my parents back in Eritrea, but I know from a friend that they are still in prison, unable to pay the fine and punished for my own escape.

³⁸ 300 SDG is approximately \$68 USD

³⁹ 200 SDG is approximately \$45.35 USD

KEDUSAN

I got married in 2006, while my husband was doing his military service. In 2010 my husband escaped to Ethiopia, leaving me at home with our two-year-old daughter. He had told his superiors that he was going on holiday to see his wife and child, so when he disappeared they came to my house and accused me of assisting him. That was the first I heard about his escape. They put me in prison for a month until I paid a fine of 50,000 Nakfa⁴⁰.

After this my husband contacted me through his family, and I also decided to escape, but I would go to Sudan. I left with two of my husband's friends. We went to Tessenei, where I was handed over to a Sudanese man, an Eritrean man and two Adarob⁴¹ who would take me and my daughter to Kassala. We paid them 30,000 Nakfa⁴².

We walked at night through the forests from Tessenei towards Kassala, until we reached Qulsa, a border village. The two Adarob left to find water and the Sudanese man went to bring a car, leaving me and my daughter with the Eritrean. This man raped me in the forest. I tried to fight him but he was too strong. He blindfolded me with my scarf and didn't care about the screams of my terrified daughter. After he raped me he left. An hour later the Sudanese man returned with the car to find me crying, but I couldn't tell him what had happened.

In Kassala I was taken to a Sudanese family home, where they gave me food and a room. The Sudanese man told me he would take me to the refugee camp, but that I couldn't go there with my Eritrean ID, cell phone, money or my bag. He took them and said he would keep them for me, and then left.

I waited a week but he never returned. An Eritrean lady in the neighborhood translated my story for the Sudanese people and they said the man would not return. The next day I was taken to Shegerab.

⁴⁰ 50,000 Nakfa is approximately \$3,312 USD.

⁴¹ Adarob is a term used to describe any person from Eastern Sudan regardless of their specific ethnic or tribal background.

⁴² 30,000 Nakfa would approximately be \$1986.75 USD.

I spent two and a half months in Shegerab. I reported my case to UNHCR but they didn't seem to care. I was pregnant from the rape but UNHCR did nothing except give me a refugee card. Luckily some Eritrean families I stayed with paid my costs to take me and my daughter to Khartoum.

I reached Khartoum and found some work, and then my husband came to find me there. By that stage I was three months pregnant from the rape in the forest. My husband abandoned me after he found out about the rape and the pregnancy. I was shocked, and I became very sick and weak.

The people who brought me to Khartoum contacted my father, who came to see me. My father asked my husband to support me, he explained that I am the victim in this situation, but my husband refused and demanded a divorce. I was still weak and unwell, and needed a blood transfusion. My father stayed with me until I had recovered.

In March 2012 I gave birth to a beautiful and healthy baby boy. He had all his vaccination shots on time. I loved him very much; he had suffered so much with me and was completely innocent.

One day in September he started wheezing and had a fever, so I treated him with some sesame oil. The next day he was still unwell so I took him to the hospital. Suddenly he lost consciousness due to a sharp drop in his blood circulation, and he died. I was devastated. I was desperate to give my baby a good life.

My husband never supported me or asked after me. I don't want to stay in Sudan, but I haven't found a way out. I am so upset about my baby son, but now I must focus all of my energy on my daughter. I only want for her to be healthy and smart.

ASLI

When I was in 11th grade at high school my family arranged my marriage. In our tradition a girl should not be unmarried in her 20s. I was married within three months of the day I was told about the wedding.

Early in our marriage, while pregnant with our first child, my husband was called to join the military due to the border conflict with Ethiopia. At that time everyone joined the military, even my younger brother was there at the front.

The conflict dragged on and life was tough, constantly waiting for money from my husband, which was too little in any case. I couldn't support my children on my husband's salary alone - just 500 Nakfa⁴³ to pay for rent, food and clothing. It was impossible. We moved back in with my family but I couldn't bear to see myself unable to support my kids and my mother. I became angry and depressed, I cried for days.

Then I heard through my neighbour about jobs in Arab countries that paid well that would allow me to support my family. Using a loan from one of my relatives, I organised the people to take me there, a sponsor, money for my medical check-up, an air ticket and a contract fee for the agent. My mother tried to stop me but I had to go. I sent a letter to my husband and my brother telling them I was leaving, and without waiting for their reply I left.

Leaving my children and mother behind was the hardest decision of my life, but I went to Saudi Arabia in March 2005 to start working as a maid in a family home. I had to wake up at 4am every day, earlier during Ramadan, and wouldn't finish until 1am. The days were incredibly long, and I was only allowed to have a day off once a month. My monthly salary was \$100.

⁴³ 500 Nakfa is approximately \$33 USD

At first things were okay in the job but after a while I became very upset at the way they all treated me and with the workload. In the second year of the job the wife of the family didn't send my wages to my family. I challenged her over it but she said she'd sent it. After that she began to nag me and throw things at me. She was always angry and would shout at me, saying she would have me put in jail and that I would rot in prison. I knew no one and had no rights there; I didn't know where to turn. I became depressed and just wanted to die.

Then one day I received a call - it was my husband saying he had escaped to Sudan and that he was going to head for Italy. He asked me to send him \$500 so he could get to Libya then cross the Mediterranean. He let me know he had arrived safely in Libya and had found a place in a boat, and that in a week he would be in Italy.

I heard nothing for a month. Then one day I received a call from someone I didn't know in Italy. He told me he had been with my husband in Libya, and that the boat my husband had been on had sunk. Everyone aboard drowned. I was out of my mind with grief.

When I left school I worked as a cleaner in a chicken farm. There I started a relationship with a co-worker who said he wanted to marry me, but when I got pregnant he left me. My family also threw me out of the home when they found this out.

After the birth of my daughter in March 2005 I went to Asmara and took a job as a domestic worker. I was treated badly by the family and was scared that I would be called for national service, so I decided to leave. I went to the border town of Tessenei and worked selling water at the bus station. The money was barely enough for me and my daughter to survive, and I could not save anything.

So in August 2010 I left on foot for Sudan, carrying my daughter on my back. I met some nomads on the road and walked with them to their destination. From there they showed me the way and I continued alone.

ASKALU

However the Rashaida found me and captured me and my daughter. We were locked in a house for a month and they told me that I had to find money to pay a ransom if I wanted to be freed. They raped me and they threatened to kill me. They also threatened to cut out my kidney and sell it, if I couldn't find money for a ransom.

While we were captured by the Rashaida my daughter asked me why we were locked up like this, and said: "It's because you don't have money, isn't it?"

I had the number of a friend in Khartoum, and this friend contacted my sister. My family had thrown me out, but my sister stayed loyal to me and went to the mosque to collect 2500 SDG to buy my freedom - back then in 2010 the ransoms were much lower than they are today.

Once they received the money, the Rashaida released me close to Kassala. My sister sent me some money there. I'd heard that Shagarb is very bad so I decided to go straight to Khartoum, where I have found work and my daughter is now in school. However my status is still uncertain, I still have no papers.

I just want my daughter to have a better life than I have had.

AWATIF ABDELA

After the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out I was assigned to the military hospital in Ala, because I had first aid training. It was an awful experience, beyond what I could bear. I was far too young and unprepared for what I saw there. Watching the young men and women suffer and die terrified me.

I decided I absolutely had to avoid national service, because at that time the fighting was very bad and I would likely have been sent to the front. I moved to Asmara, where my brother lived, and started class there. When school finished and I was expected to start national service, I hid at home.

It was very stressful to live in hiding from the authorities. I always had to keep a look out for military police in the streets before I left home, and it was impossible to leave Asmara as there are so many checkpoints around. I felt like a prisoner in my own country.

At first I got through security checks using my high school ID, and once that expired I had to rely on luck. Once I had to run away from the military police, and another time they came to my house in the middle of the night but I'd hidden between the bed and the wall. Luckily they didn't search too thoroughly. I gave thanks to Allah after each escape. We have all seen so many lives ruined by national service.

After I got married, I had to carry my marriage certificate with me as a pass. After many years my husband won a scholarship to go to South Africa to study for his masters. While he was there the political crisis in Eritrea worsened, especially between students and the government, so it wasn't safe for him to return. Because I hadn't done national service I wasn't officially allowed to leave the country to join him.

A man I was introduced to offered the possibility of escaping to Ethiopia. I hadn't made any decision, but a week later two security agents came to my house early in the morning and arrested me. They put me in a cell with three women, and told me I was arrested for trying to leave the country.

It turns out they had found my name and address with someone who had tried to escape with the man I'd spoken to. They were caught crossing the border, and must have said something because now the security agent was certain I was leaving too. Later they accused me of working with the man who was helping people to escape. Maybe one of the people they caught said this; the security agents will interrogate prisoners until they give up names - any names. They did the same to me, interrogating me endlessly asking for names of the people I was working with.

They moved me to a new prison where the interrogator was very harsh. He slapped me a couple of times, threatened and humiliated me, talking to me as if I were trash. They expected me to break at some point, but I had nothing to give them so they decided to move me to the worst prison, a detention centre called Mai-Srwa.

At Mai-Srwa the rooms are metal containers. There were nine women in one container. Most of the others were there because of their religion, and some had been there for six months. We were only allowed out twice a day, for 30 minutes. It was unbearably hot in the day and freezing at night. The food was terrible, and visitors weren't allowed to bring food to us. Most prisoners weren't even allowed visitors.

I'd spent the previous four weeks hoping to be freed because I knew I was innocent. But at Mai-Srwa I lost all hope. They had moved me here even though they had no proof and I had denied all their accusations.

In Eritrea the authorities don't need to file charges to arrest you or to keep you in prison. That is the way the system works and no one complains in public; you can't rely on someone in the outside world to take up your case. Some of the prisoners didn't even know why they were in jail.

Often someone from national security will arrest you and put you in jail. Even the police officers may not know why you are there. The police are not supposed to ask you anything or interrogate you. They will just keep you under custody until the person or unit in charge comes for you. These things are handled mostly by the military officers and not the police.

They put me in the police station and no police officer ever talked to me about my case or why I was there. When I ask them why I was there, the police officers told me they didn't know anything and that those who put me there will come to open my file and interrogate me.

I was held there for over three months. They interrogated me at random times, any time of the day or night, and always asked the same questions.

They told me that if a sentence was passed on my case I would be in prison for two years. I was desperate and pleaded for my family and friends to find a way to get me out. Finally a friend made a breakthrough and convinced a high-ranking official to secure my release. But I knew that I could be arrested again at any time. I had to escape my country - there was no authority in Eritrea to protect me.

At first they refused me an exit visa because my husband was out of the country. Eventually I had to divorce my husband to obtain an exit visa, and I escaped.

I left Eritrea to escape national service, because everyone knows the terrible conditions of the training and the horrible treatment by the officers.

In the big towns it is sometimes possible to escape national service, but where I come from everyone knows everyone so it is impossible to hide; someone will report you to the authorities. I tried to escape once in 2009 but was caught with fake papers and sent back (to an underground prison Aderser and latter to Wia - a prison and military training camp). I left again in July 2010, through the Tesenai border. I was told we would take a car but we had to walk all the way to the border. We started at 8pm and didn't arrive until 9am the next day. Eventually we made it to Shegerab refugee camp in Sudan.

HIWOT

SENT TO BOTH PRISONS AND
MILITARY TRAINING AND
THEN ASSIGNED TO DO HER
NATIONAL SERVICE

I didn't stay long there because I heard people talking about a better life in Israel, so I made connections to go there.

Some men separated those of us who wanted to go to Israel and kept us in a hut for a couple of days. From there we walked for three days and were transferred to other Rashaidas who had a pick-up truck. They made us all get in - there were 20 of us in total.

We drove through the desert for eight days and nights with no rest. We were given just a small piece of cake for each day, and there was hardly any water. They even mixed some kerosene in the water so that none of us drank too much of it.

The pickup was far too overcrowded; the route was long and we were exhausted and terrified. The desert was so tough; it was so sunny, hot and windy. I couldn't see anything but sand. I have no idea how they knew the road. We were so scared that we would get lost out there.

We have heard that so many people lost their lives in the desert for different reasons: cars that break down in the middle of nowhere where you can't get help; sometimes the car has too many passengers and they just force some out and leave them behind, or the car gets stuck and can't move anymore; some who got lost and didn't know the way back; others who finish the water or didn't bring water at all, to save space to take extra passengers. Even if you get sick on the way no one will care for you. They'll just leave you in the desert.

We saw so many human skeletons on the way. All we could do was pray to get out of that desert quickly and safely.

Finally after eight days and nights we reached the Sinai. After three days there 60 of us were transferred from a small town back to the desert. From there we were made to walk for 13 hours to reach the Egypt/Israel border.

The route from Sinai to the Israeli border is very risky. Sometimes the two sets of soldiers - Egyptian and Israeli - open fire and kill refugees. The Egyptian soldiers are almost always the ones who shoot. Sometimes the Israeli border guards give the refugees cover by firing back. I don't know why the Egyptian soldiers hate us so much, even when we are leaving their land. They just don't want us to reach Israel safely; they do whatever they can to stop that.

Once we made it to the border we were handed over to Israeli border guards, who kept us there for a few days before transferring us to a camp. After two weeks in the camp I was able to go to town, but we weren't given permission to work in Israel. We had to work, though, so while evading authorities we did jobs like cleaning, working on construction sites and in kitchens.

However the people in Israel hated refugees and wanted us to leave their country. The future wasn't promising; I felt permanently insecure because the citizens didn't want us there. And now we hear about the race riots in Tel Aviv, so I'm glad I left to come to Kampala instead.

NEBIAT

I was born and grew up in Ethiopia, but when Eritrea won independence my family and I went there. I studied at the University of Asmara and earned a degree in animal science. While in Eritrea I had to do military training and then national service.

I ended up at the Eritrean Naval Base at the port city Massawa, working as a telephone operator. I'd studied for four years for a degree in animal science, and now my assignment was to transfer calls. Anyone can do this work. It was a real setback for me. I had asked to do something related to my studies but they ignored me. I was so frustrated.

Worse, the government was arresting all the Christian people on the base. By the time I arrived, almost all the Christians had been locked up. I am also a Christian, and they took away my bible and some spiritual song cassettes. I was threatened and told never to talk about Christ or act like a Christian, and to never associate with other Christians who live on the base.

The authorities were arresting Christian students who were serving in the chapel at the University of Asmara. They would interrogate people and intimidate them, demanding the names of other Christians. They forced Christians to denounce their religion and sign a paper never to practice their religion again. Those who refused were taken to military prisons in remote areas and treated very badly. They won't set you free unless you accept their terms; it's not like you've been sentenced and will be released after a certain time.

I was in the choir in (university) chapel, so I felt very threatened. Life became very difficult for the Christians on the base. The authorities closed all the evangelical churches. We couldn't read the bible or listen to gospel songs, and we were getting arrested just for being Christian. Not only was I working in a field I didn't want to be in, but now I felt threatened due to my belief.

I feared arrest every day. Eventually, I decided to leave the country. I needed a good reason to get an exit visa, so I signed marriage papers with a friend and managed to escape to Kenya. Life in Kenya is so expensive, so I had to find a job. It is very difficult to find work in Nairobi. I worked in a restaurant kitchen chopping onions and tomatoes and cutting beef into pieces, and got paid \$50 per month, which didn't even cover my rent. For my \$50 I had to work Monday to Sunday from 7am to 8pm.

Later I found another job in an Internet cafe. I worked Monday to Sunday, from 8am to 10pm. The pay was better here but my boss began abusing me. He didn't pay me on time, and then he began to abuse me. At first he would just say, "you are beautiful, you are smart," that kind of thing. But later he began to try holding my hand and touching me here and there. I didn't like to be treated like that and I told him so, but he didn't stop. Eventually one evening he turned up when I was closing the cafe. There was no one but me. He tried to rape me. I got away but I couldn't take it anymore and even though I needed the job I had to leave.

It is so annoying. Many men who have money think that they can just buy a girl. I've faced many different kinds of abuse, all of which undermined my dignity.

The incident also made me feel very insecure. He is a man; he's physically stronger than I am so I feared that, if he got the chance, he would come and attack me again. It makes me feel very insecure around other men as well. I stay home most of the time and avoid him as much as I can. I never answer his calls or talk to him; I try to keep myself safe.

Of course I can't go to the police about this; the police are the number one enemy of the refugee population.

The walk home from work was always very difficult for me because I would usually get stopped at least two or three times by police who demanded money simply because I'm a refugee. If you say you don't have money they tell you to call someone to bring cash. If you say you don't know anyone to pay for you they say they'll throw you in jail. Once you're in jail it's even worse, because you'll need to pay higher officials a large sum of money to get out.

Even if you have official papers to live in the country as a refugee, or with a valid passport and visa, once you are in the hands of the police, none of that will help. Passports and refugee papers get torn up by the police so no one dares show or give their papers to them. Negotiating and paying the agreed amount of money is the only way out.

There are also many thieves who carry guns or other weapons. If someone is attacked in the middle of the road no one here tries to stop the thief or help the victim. Even if you're in an accident the people here will rob you instead of helping.

There are also numerous reports of rape, which makes life very tough for women. Even if it hasn't happened to a particular woman, she always fears that she may be the next victim, especially because you can't rely on the police or the law for protection.

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