
Middle East Research and Information Project

Eritrean Refugees' Trek Through the Americas

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TAPACHULA, MEXICO—It is not hard to find the Eritreans in this low-key town near the Pacific coast a few miles north of the Guatemalan border. They gather on the front steps of the Palafox Hotel with the only other Africans here—Somalis, Ethiopians, a handful of Ghanaians, all of them migrants—or they crowd into the bustling Internet café across the street.

On a recent afternoon, I met two who had been released from a maximum-security detention center here the night before. They were surprisingly at ease, giddy at the thought that they had passed over the last major hurdle to reaching the United States. All they had to do now was fly to northern Mexico and walk across a bridge. But it had been a long, arduous journey, and I could see they were still jumpy.

Tesfay, a Catholic from the market town of Keren, a crossroads for Eritrea's diverse cultures and religious faiths, left his country in 2007 at the age of 20 after being caught in a *giffa* (roundup) and taken to the Sawa military training center for induction into Eritrea's "national service" together with thousands of other young men and women. Most of his cohort feared they were in for an indefinite term at pay so low their parents would have to subsidize them for the foreseeable future.

But there was nothing they could do, as dissent had been crushed a decade earlier when thousands were jailed, the independent press shut down and protest of any kind strictly prohibited. The only legal political party was the ruling liberation front, renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, and no non-governmental organization was permitted that was not under state or PFDJ control. Even religious practice was restricted to four denominations, all of which were to a degree controlled by the state.

At the end of his training, Tesfay walked out of the camp and kept going until he reached Kassala, Sudan. He was one of thousands who have done so over the last decade, making Eritrea, with a population of less than 5 million, one of the largest producers of asylum seekers in the world, after such hot-war zones as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Over the past year, I have interviewed hundreds of refugees in camps and communities in North America, Europe, Israel and Africa to ask why they left. Most cite indefinite national service, but many also mention intolerable abuse, humiliation and punishment for things like raising a question about their status, suspicions they planned to leave or abetted someone else's flight, or just praying while in the service. Such offenses, real or imagined, are almost never prosecuted at a military hearing; the accused simply vanishes into one of Eritrea's many secret prisons to languish for years with no one tracking them and no hope of release but by escape.

Hundreds do escape every year, which may seem incongruous for such a tightly controlled state. But those I have spoken with who did so describe a growing breakdown in discipline and security in situations where those guarding them are themselves untrained and poorly motivated conscripts. In some cases, the guards leave with them.

Search for a Safe Haven

After a year in Sudan, Tesfay became ever more frustrated at his lack of prospects and fearful of Eritrean security forces who frequently crossed the border in search of escapees. He got on the phone to relatives and raised \$3,500 to pay smugglers to take him to the Egyptian Sinai so he could cross into Israel. In September 2008, he reached Tel Aviv, where he joined a growing number of Eritreans who were coming since a clampdown on migration through Libya, the route most Eritrean refugees had taken in years past to get to Europe, where they thought they would be safe.



But after six years of relative quiet, he was swept up in another *giffa*, this time directed by Israeli authorities, who were corralling Eritreans and sending them to the newly constructed Holot detention center in the Negev desert. By then there were 35,000 in the country, along

with 15,000 Sudanese, and anti-African sentiment was reaching a fever pitch, as demagogic politicians stoked the anger among ultra-nationalists who wanted the Africans out. One member of Knesset from the right-wing Likud Party, Miri Regev, had termed the refugees “a cancer in our body.”

At the end of 2012, the government began to implement measures to reverse the influx. The first step was the completion of a high-security border fence running from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The second, a year later, was the Holot detentions. Deportation or “voluntary” departure was to be the final one.

Holot is a desolate place with no facilities for its inmates apart from a cafeteria and beds, though its gates are open during the days and evenings, so residents can go in and out, as long as they get back for roll calls. In this respect, Holot functions as a kind of halfway house, designed to quarter refugees for limited periods while pressuring them to leave—but only under Israeli auspices.

When Tesfay joined a protest in June 2014 and marched to the Egyptian border with hundreds of other detainees to demand they be allowed to leave then and there, he was jailed at the maximum-security Saharonim prison across the road from Holot for three months. When he was released, he decided to go on Israel’s terms.

The choices he and others were offered were: Self-deport directly to Eritrea or accept a deal Israel worked out with Rwanda and Uganda to go to one of those countries. In either case, the refugees got \$3,500 in cash and temporary travel documents that would be taken from them upon their arrival.

Tesfay took Rwanda, and the money. As soon as he got to Kigali, however, he arranged to go to Uganda to meet his wife, who had come from Sudan to escape what she had said was harassment and abuse because she was an Eritrean Christian. No place seemed safe, so they agreed that he would try to get to the United States and send for her.

The Circuitous Route to America

Once he had arranged air tickets and forged travel documents with smugglers in Kampala, he flew to Turkey, then to Brazil and finally to Ecuador, taking this roundabout route because the flights on Turkish Airlines were cheap. From Quito, he went by bus and foot across Colombia and up through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala to the Mexican border, following a well-trodden path used by hundreds of Eritrean refugees each year, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Tapachula.

His friend Ghebre was from Adi Quala in south-central Eritrea, close to the Ethiopian border. He had been sent to Sawa for military training in 2010, but on his first home leave 12 months later, he refused to go back. Three months later, he was arrested and sent to the notorious Aderser prison near Sawa, where he spent the next two years in what he described as unrelentingly harsh conditions. He escaped in 2013 by going to the hospital and slipping out with a guard he had befriended.

Ghebre and the guard went straight to Khartoum, Sudan, where the guard, also a national service conscript, arranged to be smuggled to Libya. Ghebre, who had fallen ill, stayed behind. He choked up as he told me he learned a few months later that his new friend had died in the Mediterranean trying to get to Italy, the route of choice once again by 2013, despite the dangers, now that Israel’s border was closed and Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime was gone.

Others he knew had been detained in Sudan and sent back to Eritrea, leaving him scared to stay and scared to go to Libya. He said he had heard about the option of flying to South America to get to the United States and decided to try it. It took him several months to raise the money, but once he had it he flew to Brazil and followed the same route through Ecuador and Colombia as Tesfay had. They met in Panama and traveled the rest of the way together. By the time I encountered them, they were describing each other as “family.”

“Every Day Scared”

Ghebre and Tesfay moved along this modern-day underground railroad with dozens of refugees and migrants from Somalia, Pakistan and India, as well as Eritrea, traveling in small groups that met up at major transit stops. All the movement was coordinated by a network of smugglers—“agents,” they called them—who got the migrants through checkpoints and led them along little-used footpaths to bypass border posts.

In Colombia the travelers boarded boats for an eight-hour, middle-of-the-night ride on a small fishing boat to reach Panama, where they had plunged into the dense, largely uncharted wilds of the Darien Gap. Some of the time they walked; some they rode in long wooden canoes paddled by indigenous Panamanians whom the smugglers hired.

For two days, they were awakened before dawn to slog through undergrowth so tangled with vines and brambles they often could not see where they were putting their feet. The thick canopy overhead blocked the sun, but punishing temperatures and suffocating humidity left them drenched in sweat. Brief but intense bursts of rain offered some letup but left them dripping even more. No one wore long pants or long-sleeved shirts, the two men said, because it was too hard to move in wet clothing. Hence they were vulnerable to a hundred cuts and bruises from the spiky vegetation and razor-sharp grasses.

Some threw away clothes, food and even water when these items became too much to carry, forcing the migrants to drink from rivers the color of cappuccino. But if they did so, they paid the price with crippling bouts of diarrhea. At least one in Ghebre’s group gave up, he said.

Throughout the trek, the migrants kept as quiet as they could to avoid attracting the attention of Colombian drug runners who use the trails or the heavily armed border police who hunt them. When they emerged from the jungle, though, they stumbled on a military camp and were immediately detained. They were also fed. It was a relief, Ghebre said.

After four days he was loaded onto an army truck and taken to another camp, the second of four en route to Panama City. Each time he moved, he was asked for a bribe. At the fourth camp, he met Tesfay.

In Panama City the migrants were questioned and photographed, and then issued ten-day passes to get to Costa Rica. It took six days to get the money from relatives to pay for the trip. On day seven, a local “agent” put them on a bus.

For the next two weeks, they worried about being detained in one of the other countries they had to pass through or, worse, taken off a bus by one of the many drug-smuggling gangs that operate there. “I’m every day scared,” said Ghebre. “I’m not ever relaxed.”

None of this ordeal was made easier by their lack of Spanish. “We had very little contact with the people,” he said.

As it happened, the journey was uneventful—harrowing midnight hikes along barely marked mountain tracks, a pickup truck jammed with migrants careening along back roads in Nicaragua, hour after hour on rickety hand-me-down school buses in Honduras and Guatemala, but no hostile confrontations.

Jail Was a Relief

Detention finally came in Tapachula, just as they had expected. Nearly all of the migrants are aware of what awaits them at the Mexican border. Many Central Americans, fearing they will be turned back at Tapachula, slip into Mexico to the north near Tenosique so as to catch a freight train known as "the Beast" to the US border. Most African and Asian migrants, coached by the smugglers, go to the authorities instead.

Mexico gives them two choices: Petition for asylum, which is not difficult to get if you have a good case for it and can wait two to three months, or plead your case, ask for a travel permit and promise not to remain in Mexico. Take the second option and you are granted safe passage, with 30 days to get out of the country.

Mexico detains more refugees and migrants than nearly any country in the world—90,000 (not all at once) in 2012. In the first 11 months of 2014, the number jumped to 117,00, most from violence-plagued Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala. By way of contrast, Britain detained 25,000 over a similar period.

The Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI in Tapachula is the largest detention site in Mexico, with a capacity of 960, but many people are held a week or less, giving the place a revolving-door feel. Most Eritreans view this delay as a minor irritant, after all they have been through.

The UNHCR also has an office here, but staff there can only guess at the number of Eritreans who come through based on detention statistics from the federal government, as almost none register as refugees. "They don't approach the UN," said Ana Silva Alfonso. "They know the way, and they are very well organized."

I met Tesfay and Ghebre after they had been inside for seven days. Neither was fazed. All they were talking about was where to go next, California or Texas. They appeared to have no plan and no relatives to call upon in either state, but they had been reading posts on Facebook. They inclined toward the Hidalgo Bridge at McAllen, Texas, as their crossing into the United States.

Asked why the US, Tesfay merely shrugged and said, "I like freedom."

Image: The Darien Gap.

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