

Crushing repression of Eritrea's citizens is driving them into migrant boats

To stem the tide of Eritrean asylum seekers heading for Italy, policymakers need to ensure the country is really on a path from dictatorship to nascent democracy

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Monday 20 April 2015 11.38 EDT

Abinet spent six years completing her national service in one of Eritrea's ministries, but when she joined a banned Pentecostal church, she was arrested, interrogated, threatened, released and then shadowed in a clumsy attempt to identify other congregants. She arranged to be smuggled out of the country in 2013 and is now in a graduate programme in human rights in Oslo.

Like Abinet, hundreds of Eritrean asylum seekers are landing on the shores of Italy. Eritreans are second only to Syrians in the number of boat arrivals, though the country is a fraction of Syria's size and there's no live civil war there.

Many Eritreans are feared to have drowned in Sunday's shipwreck in the Mediterranean, from which the death toll could reach 950, with more migrant vessels reported in distress on Monday - the weekend's incident has caused EU ministers to hold emergency talks on the growing migration crisis.

The reason most Eritreans cite for leaving is conscription for national service of indefinite duration, with pay so low their parents have to subsidise them.

There were other reasons I heard during the hundreds of interviews I conducted over the past year with Eritrean refugees in North America, Europe, Israel, Africa and Central America.

Refugees cited unrelenting abuse and humiliation, constant threat of imprisonment or torture for offending someone in authority, often without even realising how they had done this, or for abetting someone else's escape or practising a banned religious faith.

The EU and a number of its member states are responding to this crisis by offering aid to Eritrea with the aim of reinvigorating its stagnant economy based on unofficial assurances that national service will be scaled back in the future. But they are missing an essential point: the crushing repression of Eritrea's citizens, especially its youth, is as much a driver of the outflow of people as the lack of economic prospects. Nor are they separate, as the economy is almost completely dominated by the state and ruling party. Money alone will not change this.

However, despite the country's belligerent behaviour in the region and its egregious human rights record, which have long left it isolated, there is an opportunity for engagement given that prominent regime officials have indicated a willingness to reform.

But if the EU and individual states jump too rashly and simply throw money at Eritrea, they risk entrenching the very practices that lie behind much of the exodus, while doing precious little to stem it.

Eritrea is dominated by its self-appointed president, Isaias Afwerki. He has surrounded himself with weak institutions, and there is no viable successor. Although the three branches of government - cabinet, national assembly and high court - provide a facade of institutional governance, real power is exercised through informal networks that shift and change at the president's discretion. The assembly has not met in a decade, and there is no published national budget. Every important decision is made in secret.

Under these circumstances, taking private pledges of reform at face value is a risky proposition. As a minimum, a date for an end to the practice of indefinite national service should be announced, along with a plan for a rolling demobilisation of those who have already served longer than the 18 months designated when the programme was set up in the 1990s.

Making this public would make it difficult - not impossible, but harder - for the government to renege on a promise it is quietly making to visiting delegations but not telling its own conscripts. Given President Afwerki's unbending resistance to such moves in the past, there is reason to be sceptical. Such an announcement would be likely to slow the migration rate of those in military service, and preparing to be called up for it, but more is needed to stem the flow.

When I've asked refugees, especially recent arrivals, what it would take to get them to go back, there are two things they mention right away: the release of political prisoners, including those jailed for their religious convictions, and the implementation of the constitution, which was ratified in 1997 but has sat on a shelf in the president's office ever since. It is deeply flawed and needs revision, but it would be a start.

Many also talk about the need for basic freedoms - of press, of speech, of movement, of religion - but the rule of law tops the list, as everyone wants to know what the rules are and that those in power have to play by them, too. Without this, few are likely to take promises of reform seriously.

Those policymakers in other countries inclined to re-engage with this regime and offer aid need to use this opportunity to demand hard evidence that change is coming and that it's more than cosmetic.

There are more steps needed to ensure that Eritrea is really on a path from dictatorship to some form of nascent democracy with increased transparency in state affairs, reform of the deeply flawed judicial and penal system, and the nurturing of a political culture in which stable political institutions can take root.

Eritrea also needs a structured process of truth and reconciliation to give people back their history and start a process of healing on which this once promising new nation can build a future. And there has to be movement toward normalising relations with its neighbours, including Ethiopia. But one step at a time.

One thing is certain: if the wrong steps are taken at the outset - or false hope is raised and no steps taken - what little hope still flickers within the younger generation inside Eritrea will be further dimmed, more will flee, and it will be much, much harder to convince any of them to go back soon.

. Dan Connell is a visiting researcher at the Boston University African Studies Centre, who has been writing about Eritrea for nearly 40 years

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