



Nitzana border crossing, Israel.

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Refugees, Ransoms and Revolt

An Update on Eritrea

Dan Connell

Filmon, a 28-year-old computer engineer, fled Eritrea in March 2012 to escape political repression. Several weeks later, he was kidnapped from Sudan's Shagara refugee camp, taken with a truckload of others to a Bedouin outpost in the Sinai, not far from Egypt's border with Israel, and ordered to call relatives to raise \$3,500 for his release. "The beatings started the first day to make us pay faster," he told me.¹

Filmon's sister, who lived in the Eritrean capital of Asmara, paid the ransom, but he was sold to another smuggler and ransomed again, this time for \$30,000. "The first was like an appetizer. This was the main course," he said. Over the next

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month, he was repeatedly beaten, often while hung by his hands from the ceiling. Convinced he could never raise the full amount, he attempted suicide but failed. "I dreamed of grabbing a pistol and taking as many of them as possible, saving one bullet for myself." Early on they broke one of his wrists. Later, they dripped molten plastic on his hands and back, during many of his forced calls home to beg for money. "One guy with me from Shagara died," said Filmon. "He just gave out."

Back in Eritrea, his family sold virtually everything they had and his relatives chipped in, finally raising the full \$30,000. But the damage was done. When he was released and taken to the Israeli border, Filmon could no longer walk; he had to be carried. Because he was a torture victim, he was not held in detention, like other new arrivals. Instead, he was issued papers,

sent to a shelter in Tel Aviv and offered medical care. In this respect, Filmon was one of the lucky ones. For some 35,000 of his compatriots who have come to Israel as refugees over the past six years, each day is suffused with uncertainty, as an anti-immigrant backlash gathers momentum. The government now calls them “infiltrators,” not refugees, and threatens them with indefinite detention or what many fear most—deportation to their home country.

A River of Refugees

Refugees have been fleeing Eritrea since the mid-1960s, often in spasms that reflected the ebb and flow of war with Ethiopia—first over Eritrea’s independence and then over its boundaries. For the past decade, however, the primary driver has been the new nation’s own government, cobbled together out of the liberation front and led by the guerrilla army’s commander, Isaias Afwerki.

What began as a trickle in 2001 after a bloody two-year border war and a crackdown on internal dissent quickly turned into a flood as the regime brandished the threat of renewed conflict with Ethiopia—or even reconquest—as a rationale for turning Eritrea into a police state and forcing its youth to remain in open-ended and largely unpaid “national service.” Questioning this policy led to detention and, often, to beatings and torture. Political prisons proliferated and thousands of suspected dissenters disappeared. By the middle of the 2000s, Eritrea, whose population is 4 or 5 million, was hemorrhaging young people.² At the start of 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated the number of refugees from Eritrea at more than a quarter million.

Most fled to Sudan, the site of the first UN-supplied camps, though by 2004 they were turning up in ever larger numbers in, of all places, Ethiopia.³ Some continued on to the Middle East or other African states—Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, lately South Sudan—to find work. A few took circuitous flight paths to South or Central America and traveled north to the United States or Canada to plead for asylum. Others risked grueling desert journeys and dangerous sea crossings to get to Europe.

The preferred route was through the Sahara to Libya and thence to Italy, but a 2006 pact between Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi and Libya’s Mu’ammar al-Qaddafi dammed the river of people at the Mediterranean. Then Libya, which was one of Eritrea’s few supporters, began arresting and deporting Eritreans, as did Egypt. The result was a shift in the flow toward Israel, where the refugees at first found a warmer welcome. But with the door to Israel closing, those trying to transit the Sinai today—or those kidnapped from Sudan and taken to the Sinai against their will—find themselves trapped in a horrifying cul-de-sac with nowhere to go.

It’s not easy being Eritrean.

The only solution to this nightmare is a change at home that would open the way for their voluntary return, which is what most refugees say they want. Recent events suggest they may

yet get their wish. An armed protest by a unit of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) in January—the first instance of open opposition to the regime since 2001—could signal the beginning of the end for the Afwerki regime.

Eritrea Today

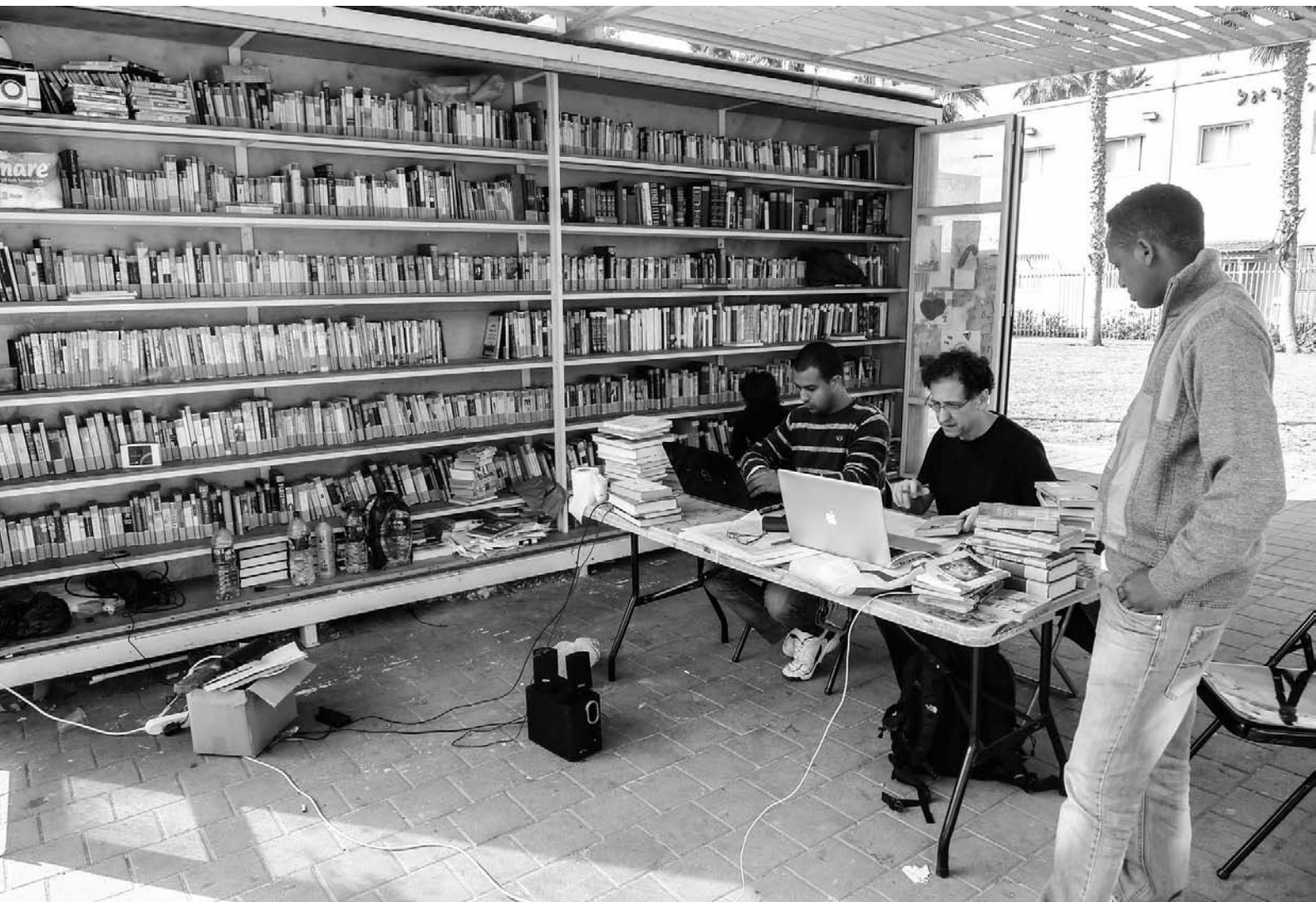
Eritrea is dominated by a single strong personality, Isaias (Eritreans traditionally go by first names), who is surrounded by weak institutions, with no viable successor in sight. The three branches of government—nominally headed by a cabinet, a National Assembly and a High Court—provide a façade of institutional governance, but power is exercised through informal networks that shift from node to node and individual to individual at the president’s discretion. There is no organizational chart; nor is there a published national budget. Every important decision is made in secret.

The ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), a retooled version of the liberation army, functions as a mechanism for mobilizing and controlling the population and is sustained by coercion and patronage, without which it would be a hollow shell. No other parties are permitted. Nor are non-governmental organizations not controlled by either the PFDJ or the state—no independent trade unions, media, women’s organizations, student unions, charities, cultural associations, nothing. All but four religious denominations have been banned, and those that are permitted have had their leaderships compromised. Even the authority of traditional elders has been undermined.

Thus, the state rests on an extremely fragile foundation, and the society lacks vibrant non-state institutions through which to build an alternative. Nor does the externally based opposition, deeply fragmented and long characterized by vituperative rivalries, offer a coherent alternative. The strongest institution in Eritrea today is the EDF. The country has been thoroughly militarized, not only through the expansion of national service among the youth, but by the creation of popular “militias” by presidential order. All able-bodied adults not in the EDF have been issued AK-47 assault rifles and given limited military training. By default, any significant change in Eritrea’s governance will almost certainly come from within the armed forces, as the brief January uprising demonstrated. Refugees across the region hope this change comes soon—nowhere more desperately than in the Sinai.

Sinai Trafficking

Amanuel, a 31-year-old refugee from Keren, fled Eritrea in March 2012 after spending three years in a military prison for an earlier escape attempt. This time he made it, but he left his pregnant wife behind. A month later, she tried to follow but was caught by Sudanese soldiers, sold to Rashayida smugglers and sent to a Bedouin camp in Sinai, where her captors asked \$30,000 for her release. Amanuel, distraught, then chased her, reaching the Israeli



Israeli volunteers manage a lending library of donated materials for refugees from Eritrea, Sudan and elsewhere in Africa.

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border only to be put in detention there. Working with Israeli and Eritrean human rights activists, however, he connected with his wife via cell phone and raised \$20,000, which the kidnapers settled for. But by this time a new border fence made entry to Israel nearly impossible, and she was stranded in Egypt.

The Sinai trafficking operation, now big business, had started slowly with smugglers collecting larger and larger fees for helping refugees to traverse the peninsula. First came southern Sudanese, then Eritreans. The rate from Khartoum to Israel was \$1,200 in 2006, according to refugees now in Israel. Within two years, the amount tripled. In 2009, it went through the roof, as the smugglers discovered they could get more by holding the refugees for ransom than by helping them get to Israel. Payoffs started at \$3,500–5,000 but quickly rose. By 2012 they routinely topped \$30,000, a monumental sum for people coming from a country where, according to World Bank data, the average annual income in 2011 was only \$430. But Eritreans found ways to come up with the money, either by liquidating life savings or by tapping relatives in the diaspora.

As profits soared, the operation was extended down the smuggling chain to Sudan and even inside Eritrea through links with criminal gangs who began kidnapping unsuspecting refugees and trundling them off to the Sinai for a cut of the ransom.⁴ Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, which tracks the operation, put the number of torture victims in Israel in 2012 at more than 5,000. They estimated the number who disappeared en route at close to 4,000. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, which runs a clinic for refugees in Tel Aviv, also relayed that the majority of women captives were serially raped; many came for help with abortions. A crew from the Israeli television program *Uvda* reported in December that some who were unable to raise the ransoms were harvested for their organs.

In 2011, Berhe, now 15, was kidnapped in the fields near his home on the border with Sudan and taken to the Sinai. But he was from a poor family and had no way to raise the sum for which his captors asked. He had a facility with languages, however, and his captors spared him to act as a translator for those being tortured. “They tied their hands and feet and held

burning plastic that dripped on their backs,” he said, going silent and retreating into himself. After an interval of perhaps a minute, he added, “We will have our revenge one day.”

Eritreans in Israel

Tesfay, 27, fled his hometown of Senafe in 2004. He said that seeing the surge of political arrests and facing an indefinite stint in national service left him feeling he had no freedom and no future. Others trying to flee were beaten and paraded through the streets, but the display failed to dissuade him. “I was lucky because I was near the border so I knew my way,” he said. Once in Ethiopia, he was met by farmers and welcomed. He spent almost three years in the Shimelba refugee camp and nine months at a similar camp in Sudan before deciding to make for Israel. He paid Sudanese smugglers \$600 to get to Egypt and another \$600 to Bedouin traffickers to get to Israel. On both legs, he and other refugees were crammed into fast-moving pickup trucks that traveled at night, carrying illicit drugs, alcohol and weapons. The refugees were simply added value.

The journey took four nights. “It was very difficult,” he said. “We drank bad water and ate once a day.” They walked across the border into Israel one morning at dawn and were met immediately by Israeli soldiers, who held them for four days and then turned them loose in Beersheva, saying: “Just go.”

Tesfay got as far as Tel Aviv before he was arrested for having no papers and sent back to the Ramla prison near where he crossed the border. There, he said, he was visited by a judge who told him he could spend the rest of his life in prison if he did not sign a paper authorizing his deportation to Ethiopia. Once he signed, the document was filed away for future use, and he was given a “conditional release” that prohibited him from working and had to be renewed every four months. He has lived from day to day ever since. He has plenty of company. There are 60,000 refugees in Israel today, 35,000 of them from Eritrea, making them the largest non-Arab minority and a highly visible presence in all of Israel’s major cities. Adi Lerner, with the Hotline for Migrant Workers, which focuses on rights promotion and status issues, charges that Israel has constructed a mechanism to preserve the illusion that the refugees are economic migrants, not asylum seekers, so as to gull the public and the courts. Until 2009, the UNHCR determined the status of those claiming to be refugees, but starting in July 2009, the Israeli government took over the task. Not a single Eritrean has been granted asylum since then. “It’s a sham of a system that doesn’t really distinguish between those who are bona fide refugees and those who are not,” Lerner said.

Most who arrived prior to December 2007 were given “amnesty” and issued work permits. Those who came later were given temporary releases. Lacking “group protection,” they were also prevented from traveling on to a third country, meaning they were left in legal limbo. Meanwhile, as the numbers rose, an anti-African backlash set in. By 2011

right-wing politicians were calling for the influx to be stopped and the “infiltrators,” as they called them, deported.

In January 2012, a 1954 anti-infiltration law originally targeted at Palestinian “terrorists” was amended to cover the new refugee flows. Among its key provisions: the construction of an electrified fence the length of the border with Egypt; the expansion of detention centers at the border coupled with legislation to permit long-term imprisonment for illegal “infiltrators”; the punishment of Israelis who hire “infiltrators”; and the securing of agreements with countries of origin to send them back. That spring and early summer, Israel experienced a wave of xenophobic violence targeting the refugees.

I caught up with Tsegay and his wife Mahawit in HaTikva, six months after their Jerusalem apartment was firebombed. A former soldier in the EDF, Tsegay came to Israel in 2008, paying smugglers \$3,000. He said he was treated well upon his arrival and found work as a day laborer. By the time he got his wife to Israel, the cost was up to \$13,000, which he was working to pay off. But they were happy and at least felt safe. “We had a small garden and used to drink coffee there with our neighbors who brought food and invited us to events,” he said.

At 3 am on July 12, arsonists set their wooden front door on fire. Mahawit was five months pregnant. There was no rear exit. “When the door started to burn, it made a loud sound that woke us up,” Tsegay said. “When we heard it, we were shocked. I tried to open the door. I banged on it to get

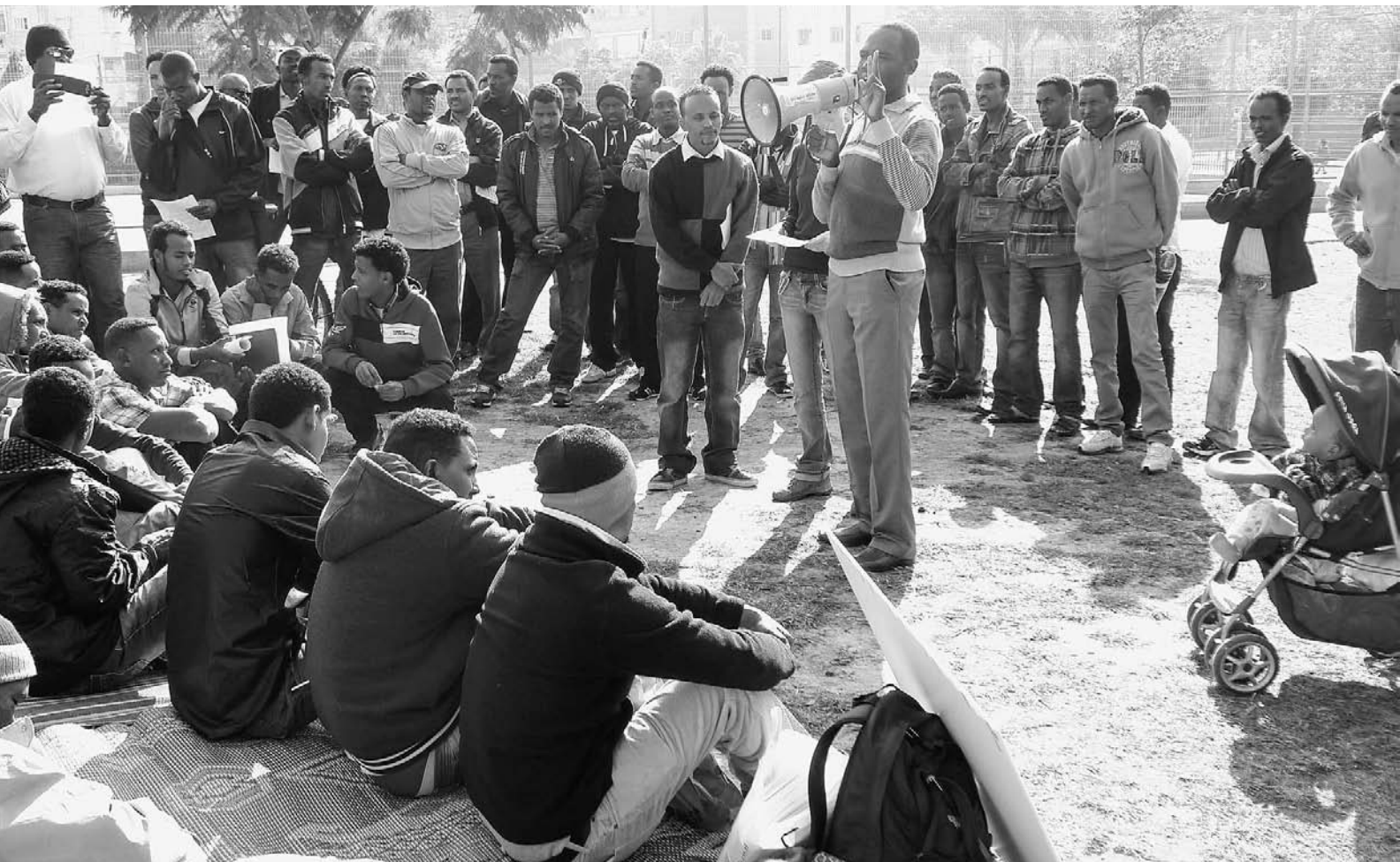
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Activists address a crowd of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees on their rights under Israeli law in Levinsky Park, Tel Aviv.

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help, shouting.” Neighbors came to help, but not before he suffered third-degree burns over three fourths of his body. To this day, he has no idea who did it or why. He remains in recovery and cannot work, but he and Mahawit and their infant child are being supported by a sympathetic Israeli who read of the attack and came to their aid, paying his hospital bills and their rent in HaTikva. “It was too hard to stay in Jerusalem,” said Tsegay.

Most Eritreans say they do not want to stay in Israel at all, but they fear the alternative more. Tsegai, in her mid-thirties, is typical. She did her national service before the border war and mustered out after the requisite 18 months. Nevertheless, as a much maligned Jehovah’s Witness—sect members did not vote in a 1993 referendum on Eritrea’s independence—she faced a wall of ostracism and could not find employment. In 1998, she went to Bahrain to work as a housemaid. There, she faced new travails. “I was cleaning, washing, everything, from 5 am to late at night. I was never outside except when I took out garbage,” she said. The man for whom she worked beat his wife and Tsegai and, when his wife was absent, sexually abused her. “I cannot eat. I am crying all the time,” she said.

One day in 2001, she became ill and was taken to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with severe anemia, but her master refused to permit treatment. “I decided I had no choice but to go back to Eritrea. If I die there, it is better.” But in Eritrea she was told to report again for more national service. At this order, she abruptly flew back to Bahrain. Again, she was overworked, beaten, abused and locked in the house. When her master’s wife became sick, however, he took her to Cairo for help, with Tsegai in tow. There, she escaped and found an Eritrean who connected her to the refugee community.

Six years later, having saved the money to reimburse her mother the 50,000 *nakfa* fine (\$3,500) because Tsegai had fled, she paid a smuggler to get her to Israel, arriving at the end of 2007. She, too, was given a “conditional release” permit, renewable every three to four months. Today, she works off the books as a cleaner and translator to pay off her debts. She wakes up each morning unsure where she will be that night. “Our future is uncertain—we may be put into camps, we may be sent back to Eritrea, we cannot make plans,” she said. “But if something happens in Eritrea, we need to go home. We miss our country, we miss our families.”

A Glimmer of Hope

On January 21, 2013, a mechanized unit of the EDF occupied Eritrea's Ministry of Information and forced state TV to broadcast demands for the implementation of a long-stalled constitution and the release of political prisoners. That was as far as they got before the station was abruptly taken off the air, but the incident reverberated there and abroad. Disgruntled soldiers, led by highly respected war veterans, were fed up with the dictatorship and wanted everyone to know it. The ensuing standoff lasted all day, after which one protesting officer took his own life and several others were jailed. More arrests followed, but the message was out.

In a country where chatting about politics at open-air cafés is an arresting offense, the only way people with a grievance could get attention was to join a large group with guns. Their point was to start a national conversation where none was allowed, and they did. The government at first admitted an "incident," then denied anything significant had happened, while Eritrea's global diaspora lit up the Internet with debates and celebrations. One group placed 10,000 robo-calls to Asmara urging people on; thousands of protesters in London, Stockholm, Rome, Berlin, Geneva, Washington and other cities picketed or occupied Eritrea's embassies to show support. Three weeks later, as the protests continued, President Isaias assured the Eritrean state news agency, ERINA, that "there is no reason for apprehension." The interview was published in all the country's state-run papers, which was news in itself because he deigned to comment.

Whether or not it was a frustrated coup attempt, as foreign media first reported, it was a major signal of the depth of dissatisfaction within the country and, specifically, within the military. Until January, Eritrea had seen only three instances of public protest since the 1960s: a 1993 demonstration carried out by mechanized army units, another a year later by disabled veterans and a third by university students in 2001. Shortly after the student protest, the government broke up the University of Asmara into a dozen components and scattered them around the country. The EDF is the one internally coherent national institution left. Opposition within it appears to run horizontally among mid-level officers and among low-level conscripts. The latter have shown their disaffection by leaving in droves. The former appear disinclined to flee but no longer willing to accept things as they are. Under these circumstances, the likelihood of similar eruptions in coming months is high, coming from similar sources. The question now is where and when the tipping point will be reached. ■

Endnotes

1 All refugees quoted were interviewed by the author in Tel Aviv during December 2012-January 2013.

2 See Human Rights Watch, *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscripted in Eritrea* (New York, April 2009).

3 Dan Connell, "Escaping Eritrea: Why They Flee and What They Face," *Middle East Report* 264 (Fall 2012).

4 See Mirjam Van Reisen et al, *Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees Between Life and Death* (Brussels, October 2012), available online at: <http://www.ecpa.be/wcm/human-rights/3177-human-trafficking-in-the-sinai-refugees-between-life-and-death.html>.