



Refugees recreate favorite cafés and restaurants in Mai Aini camp, Ethiopia.

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# Escaping Eritrea

## Why They Flee and What They Face

Dan Connell

Said Ibrahim, 21, orphaned and blind, was making a living as a singer in Adi Quala bars when a member of Eritrea's national security force claimed one of his songs had "political" content and detained him at the Adi Abieto prison. After a month Said was released, but he was stripped of his monthly disability payments for two years when he refused to identify the lyricist. "I went back to my village and reflected about it," he told me over tea at an open-air café in the Adi Harush camp in northern Ethiopia. "If the system could do this to a blind orphan, something was very wrong." After appealing to his neighbors for help, two boys, aged 10 and 11, sneaked him into Ethiopia and all three asked for asylum.

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Binyam Zaid, 22, a conscript in Eritrea's national service, was caught trying to get away from his army unit and jailed for 18 months at the Halhal military prison. On May 24, he was released in an amnesty that marked the twenty-first anniversary of Eritrea's independence and sent back to his post. Three days later, he walked into the bush to relieve himself and never turned back, hiding by day and moving at night to avoid border patrols that have orders to shoot to kill anyone trying to cross illegally.

Tigiste Beyene, 35, was pregnant with her second child when she was sent to a desert prison in northern Eritrea for attending a banned Pentecostal prayer meeting. Upon release, she was given ten months to renounce her faith and pressed to do so by the local Eritrean Orthodox priest, who had turned her in, and by her family, who had to guarantee the state 50,000

nakfas (about \$3,300) to get her out. Four months later, she paid a smuggler 30,000 nakfas to take her to Ethiopia. “The dark side of my life was not the year in prison, but the time I spent at home with my family,” she said as she sat on the dirt floor of her cramped mud-brick house. “It was a torment I could not bear.”

Over the past decade, tens of thousands of Eritreans have fled their country to seek sanctuary in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan, often at great personal risk. But for many, the odyssey has just begun. Once over the border, they face new trials and hardships in arid, overcrowded camps. It gets much worse for those who continue north through Egypt toward Israel, once a favored route that has turned into a hellish nightmare for a growing number captured by Bedouin traffickers in the Sinai and serially abused while family and friends are repeatedly hit up for exorbitant ransoms. This operation has become so lucrative that traffickers now extend their reach as far back in the chain as Sudan, and occasionally inside Eritrea, where kidnapping rings grab potential asylum seekers and pass them along to the Sinai and beyond, exacting payments along the way.

Twenty years ago, the situation was reversed, with thousands of Eritreans returning from both Ethiopia and Sudan to help rebuild the new country after nationalist guerrillas won a 30-year independence war against successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian regimes and gained widespread respect for their simultaneous commitment to social transformation, a rarity among such movements, which typically postpone radical social change until political objectives are met.

By the close of the war in 1991, more than one third of the Eritrean combatants were women, including several in leadership positions; members of ethnic minorities—Eritrea has at least nine—held key posts in the political and military command structure; land reform had been tested in large swaths of the country under guerrilla control, as had the reform of marriage traditions and village administration; and social services like education and primary health care had been extended to remote areas of the country that had never had them before. A UN-monitored referendum over the territory’s political status in 1993 drew more than 98 percent of eligible voters, over 99 percent of whom chose sovereignty. Ethiopia’s new government, led by allies of the Eritreans, not only endorsed the outcome but assumed the financial obligations of the previous regime, leaving Eritrea debt-free. A fierce dedication to self-reliance by the Eritrean leadership and a remarkable degree of volunteerism within the society augured a decidedly different trajectory from most other post-colonial African states.

But if it seems too good to be true....

The turning point came in 2000 with Eritrea’s defeat in the last round of a two-year border war with Ethiopia that had unmasked both the long-standing tensions between the movements now governing the two countries and the deeply entrenched authoritarian political culture within Eritrea’s

ruling circle. A struggle inside that circle, largely hidden from public view, peaked a year later with a sweeping crackdown on dissent that left the country a tightly controlled one-party state on a permanent war footing, with no independent press, no non-governmental organizations of any kind outside of government or party control, and a ban on unsanctioned religious groups. The government also rounded up thousands of young people to serve under duress in an open-ended program of “national service,” which was launched in 1995 with 18-month terms of service but was suddenly extended to ten years or more. It did so under an undeclared state of emergency in which a previously ratified constitution was left unimplemented, national elections were indefinitely postponed, and all suspected acts or expressions of dissent or disloyalty were regarded as treason. Today, Eritrea competes with North Korea and Turkmenistan for last place on most global assessments of human rights and democratic governance and it has become one of the largest producers of asylum seekers in the world.

The first thing one notices on entering the refugee enclaves in northern Ethiopia is the presence of hundreds of young males, highly unusual in such camps whose populations are typically dominated by women, children, and the elderly or infirm. Refugee authorities say that men between 17 and 25 constitute over 40 percent of camp residents. Most say they are fleeing national service—not the obligation itself, with which most seem to agree, but its degrading conditions and prolonged duration, which leaves them with no way to contribute to families struggling to get by while they are in service and with nothing to show for it at the end. What they describe in lengthy and often emotional interviews, many conducted in English, are conditions of indentured servitude during which they are frequently humiliated—often sexually abused in the case of women—and brutally punished if they express even a hint of criticism or misgiving.

## A Revolution Hijacked

In the early post-war years, Eritrea showed exceptional promise of dynamic growth, anchored in an egalitarian social framework inherited from the liberation struggle and accompanied by a good deal of public discussion about building a constitutional democracy, leading observers like President Bill Clinton to dub it part of an “African renaissance.” The victorious Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), under the command of Isaias Afwerki, had mobilized support across ethnic, religious and gender lines, and it began the transition to statehood with low levels of crime and corruption, an educated diaspora eager to help with reconstruction, and a commitment to political pluralism and the rule of law written into the ruling party’s 1994 National Charter. But as the country embarked on a three-year, highly participatory constitution-making process under the direction of internationally known legal scholar



Distribution of UNHCR supplies in Shimelba camp, Ethiopia.

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and long-time EPLF supporter Bereket Habte Selassie, who, at Isaias' request (Eritreans traditionally go by first names), took a leave of absence from his newly endowed chair at the University of North Carolina to chair the Constitutional Commission, it also fought a series of regional conflicts over relatively minor issues, capped by a border war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000. These conflicts, particularly the last one, provided a hardline faction in the ruling party with the rationale for reversing progress toward democracy, militarizing the society and crushing all dissent.

Throughout this transition, two trends contended over the shape of the new political landscape. One was more democratic than the other, though both had roots in the liberation front's authoritarian culture. The man who had commanded the EPLF and now served as the state's interim president, Isaias, and a small circle of military and political leaders loyal to him, were committed to what they called "guided democracy," a highly centralized form of control through which they proposed to reconstruct and develop the economy and to unify and transform society before relinquishing the reins of power. Democracy in this view had more to do with participation (voluntary or not) than

accountability. In the tradition of state-centered authoritarian socialism, they relegated political democracy to the status of a luxury, appropriate to Eritrea only after substantial economic growth and development.

Contesting this outlook were critics within the leadership whose commitment to an open society had either been on hold during the struggle or had evolved; members of rival nationalist organizations eager to return to Eritrea and participate in the construction of the state; new institutions in Eritrea's fragile civil society; and prominent individuals associated with the constitution-building project, as well as artists, entrepreneurs and others who had tasted liberty in their personal or political lives and believed in its value without having a fully formed ideology. Though they were traveling in the same political direction, these groups rarely talked with one another, were not organized, had no clear strategy (or at least no effective one), and were thoroughly isolated from one another. Those who challenged the emerging autocracy were easily identified and quickly crushed. The outcome, once the struggle was joined, was the quashing of all democratic initiatives and the consolidation of dictatorship.

The crackdown began in July 2001 with the arrest of a University of Asmara student leader after a commencement address criticizing the inhumane conditions of forced "national service." It climaxed in September with the closure of the press and the arrest of top government officials who had criticized the president. Soon after, the government began rounding up young people accused of avoiding national service, with many beaten in public before being taken away for semi-permanent service in either the army or government departments and party-owned businesses. Over the next decade, dozens of new prisons were established to deal with the growing number of political prisoners, with every town and military unit having its own jail.

In 2008, Human Rights Watch reported that prisoners "are packed into unventilated cargo containers under extreme temperatures or are held in underground cells. Torture is common, as are indefinite solitary confinement, starvation rations, lack of sanitation and hard labor. Prisoners rarely receive medical care, even when severely injured or deathly ill. Death in captivity is common." In 2009, Human Rights Watch added: "Those who try and flee the country are imprisoned or risk being shot on sight at the border. Refugees who fled to Malta, Sudan, Egypt, Libya and other countries and were forcibly repatriated have faced detention and torture upon return to Eritrea." As a result, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) advised against all deportations to Eritrea.

## The Politicization of Religion

Eritrean society is ethnically and religiously diverse. Tigrinya speakers, mostly Christian sedentary farmers and urban dwellers concentrated on the highland plateau, make up

nearly half the population. Tigre-speaking Muslims, many of them agro-pastoralists living in the western lowlands and the coastal plains, are the second-largest group, making up close to one third of the population. The remaining fraction comprises six mostly Muslim minorities, plus the Kunama, some of whom practice traditional religious beliefs.

This ethnic potpourri is almost evenly divided between Sunni Muslims and Christians, most of whom are Orthodox, along with Roman Catholic and Protestant minorities rooted in the pre-colonial period. There is little institutional discrimination based on faith among the historically present groups, although Orthodox Christians of the Tigrinya-speaking ethnic group dominate the economy and hold most high-level political posts. But the government actively suppresses evangelical Protestant denominations that have made recent inroads, such as the Pentecostals.

Although the as-yet-unimplemented constitution guarantees all citizens “the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest that practice” (Article 15), the government in 2002 banned what it termed “new churches”—referring to minority evangelical Christian denominations and mission groups. Such groups have experienced rapid growth, though there are no reliable figures, as they have been forced underground. The government has also intervened directly in the affairs of those churches with legal recognition to replace leaders it found disloyal. Members of prohibited denominations are forbidden from worshipping anywhere in Eritrea, even in private homes. Since then, at least 26 members of the proscribed clergy and more than 1,750 parishioners have been detained, along with a smaller number of Muslims, many of them taken prisoner during clandestine wedding ceremonies and private prayer meetings, according to Amnesty International. Among them are members of at least 36 evangelical and Pentecostal churches, along with Jehovah’s Witnesses and followers of the Baha’i faith.

Detainees are held incommunicado alongside political prisoners and are frequently ill treated or tortured in an effort to force them to renounce their beliefs and sign documents pledging not to attend future religious meetings. Many jailed evangelicals who were later released showed evidence of severe physical maltreatment. Two members of an evangelical church south of Asmara were tortured to death on October 17, 2006, while a third died after persistent torture in an Assab prison four months later. The government, however, does not appear to be concerned about the religious orientation of those it punishes. The ban on unsanctioned sects is instead aimed at people the state believes it cannot control and, as such, is essentially political.

Authorities even stripped Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Antonios of his ecclesiastical authority and placed him under house arrest in 2005, after he protested government interference in Eritrea’s largest legal religious institution, and they effectively took control of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, appointing a lay administrator to manage the

church’s finances. In September 2005, in the first such action ever, the State Department sanctioned Eritrea under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act for failing to address violations of religious freedom. Nevertheless, the persecution has continued unabated, according to human rights monitoring groups.

## The Origins of Autocracy

The roots of the present despotism lie within a movement that formed under conditions of unrelenting political repression necessitating secrecy and subterfuge for its very survival, that came under attack at one time or another from nearly every major regional and global power, and that, like most of its liberation movement contemporaries, drew on Leninist traditions of highly centralized authority for its inspiration. In Isaias’ case, this tendency was reinforced by training in China at the height of the Cultural Revolution, during which he received intensive exposure to Maoist doctrine whose themes of extreme “voluntarism” and populism continue to define his worldview.<sup>1</sup> But Eritrean authoritarianism is not just an import.

London-based researcher Gaim Kibreab’s analysis of the poisonous obsessions with control that plagued both the EPLF and the original independence movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), from which the EPLF split, is instructive. Each tried to monopolize the national movement. In the ELF’s case, this attempt began with the eradication of the rival Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) in the 1960s, followed by an unsuccessful three-year effort to crush the breakaway factions that evolved into the EPLF in the 1970s, all the while insisting “there can be no more than one struggle, one organization and one leadership in our country.”<sup>2</sup> A decade later, the EPLF turned the tables and—with the help of its ally, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, which now dominates the government in Ethiopia—drove the ELF out of Eritrea. The EPLF and its successor, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), has steadfastly refused to allow the ELF—or any other organized political force—to return ever since, leaving the victors the only legal party. Kibreab’s point—one too often overlooked—is that the drive for a political monopoly was not exclusive to the EPLF, even if the EPLF perfected it.

Challenges to the EPLF’s autocratic proclivities occasionally surfaced, but they were repeatedly suppressed in the interest of maintaining the unity and discipline needed to win the war—a difficult argument to refute when new enemies kept appearing from all directions and former allies kept turning on them. A defining moment for the EPLF came in the early 1970s with the brutal suppression of a dissident trend calling for limits on Isaias’ authority whose members were known as *menqae* (those who move about at night—bats) and accused of being “ultra-left.” Isaias ordered the execution of its leaders and the imprisonment of dozens of fighters deemed



Hundreds of unaccompanied minors live in a special section of Mai Aini camp, Ethiopia. DAN CONNELL/THE IMAGE WORKS

sympathetic to them. Among those killed was one of Isaias' childhood friends, Mussie Teklemichael, who bore the scars of a capital E carved onto his upper arm where in 1965 he had taken a blood oath with Isaias and another comrade to commit their lives to Eritrea. Kibreab calls the crushing of the *menqae* a seminal event "that has left a lasting impact on the psychology and subsequent behavior of the EPLF/PFDJ leadership, particularly on Isaias' attitude toward any form of dissent or opposition to his method of leading the Front, and now the country."<sup>3</sup>

The *menqae* crisis led to a resuscitation of a clandestine Marxist-Leninist party that Isaias and a handful of comrades had formed in 1971—the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP)—but which had been dormant since then. Once reestablished, it ran the EPLF throughout its existence, drafting its program in secret, choosing its leadership prior to elections and managing its day-to-day affairs. It also carried out extensive surveillance on EPLF members to identify signs of dissent or disloyalty before they could develop, using an internal security force known as *halewa sowra* (shield of the revolution) to enforce its judgments. Though the EPRP was officially dissolved on Isaias' orders

in 1989, its utterly opaque top-down management style has been systematically replicated within the new state structures, leading many to speculate that there is another clandestine party running the PFDJ and the state, which would help to explain the anomalies in the way Eritrea appears to be governed.

The National Assembly, which, like the Cabinet of Ministers, only meets when called into session by the president, has been at best a rubber stamp for proclamations drafted in the president's office, but it has not even convened a formal session in more than a decade. The judiciary lacks independence and is routinely bypassed through a system of "special courts" and clandestine prisons. All media are controlled by the state and all public debate over government policy or program has been smothered.

Now, as during the liberation struggle, hidden networks are far more important than visible institutions. In this and other respects, Eritrea functions less as a modern state than as a guerrilla movement headed by a single charismatic figure holding a liberated zone. Control rests almost entirely with Isaias, who has spent decades maneuvering to reach this point, aided by a shifting coterie who either share his values or tolerate them in the naïve hope of his transcending them one day. The inner circle today consists primarily of top-ranked military officers and a handful of advisers in the presidential office, the security services and the upper tier of the PFDJ, which maintains a system of informers and enforcers that reaches into every village and town through party-run neighborhood committees called *kebeles*, as well as into diaspora communities through an overseas network of supporters who monitor dissent among Eritreans living abroad and report on them to their local embassies. The result is a façade of institutional normalcy that masks a remarkably efficient tyranny.

## What Awaits Those Who Escape

Despite great personal risk, thousands of young people continue to flee Eritrea each month, according to UN officials, who earlier this year estimated the total in Ethiopia at 76,000—the majority in camps near the border—and forecast more than 90,000 by 2013. This inflow far surpasses the coping capacity of existing facilities, according to UN Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees Erika Feller, who visited the camps in 2011. She said the challenges were on a scale she had "never seen in my long years with UNHCR."

Those refugees with means—usually from family members—make their way to the capital, Addis Ababa, where until recently they were met with anger, resentment and even physical violence over their country's hostile acts toward Ethiopia in the years since the border war, in the midst of which more than 76,000 Eritreans were expelled from Ethiopia in indiscriminate roundups of suspected "fifth columnists." In 2008, Eritrean residents with Ethiopian

citizenship told a researcher for Refugees International they felt compelled to conceal their background, saying they “are treated as foreigners. They get work permits but must not bring attention to themselves.”

This situation changed in 2010 when Ethiopia abruptly changed its policy toward the refugees as part of a broad reassessment whose outcome appears to have been an abandonment of a strategy of “containment” in favor of one of regime change. The shift was announced after Ethiopia uncovered an alleged Eritrean bomb plot intended to disrupt an African Union summit in Addis Ababa. “They wanted to transform Addis into Baghdad,” said Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia’s prime minister, in a two-hour interview. “This made it impossible for us to ignore what they were doing.”

Since then, Ethiopia has tried to increase pressure on the Isaias regime, first lobbying for sanctions at the UN and then launching a series of lightning attacks on “hard targets” inside Eritrea, while waging a hearts-and-minds campaign aimed at the Eritrean public. These attacks have not yet generated an Eritrean response, both because the Asmara government fears that a resumption of war could disrupt the development of lucrative mining operations and frighten away foreign investors and because the vaunted Eritrean armed forces have been seriously degraded by the outflow of conscripted soldiers and the defections of mid-level officers, leaving the country less able to defend itself. Under such circumstances, the increased pressure appears intended less to trigger a war than to foster a revolt against Isaias.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian media have toned down their once vitriolic coverage of Eritrea—or simply ignored it—and Eritreans deported from Ethiopia during the border war have been urged to return to reclaim seized assets. But the most dramatic shift was the announcement of an “open camps” policy permitting refugees to live anywhere so long as they prove that they have the means to support themselves. More than 1,000 Eritreans now attend Ethiopian universities, refugee officials say.

But conditions facing Eritreans have gotten far worse in Sudan, Eritrea’s western neighbor and for years the primary destination for those fleeing war, repression and hunger. The numbers have steadily climbed over the past decade, but with Sudan and Eritrea—pariah states dealing with what each perceives to be internal and external threats—now tactically aligned, Sudan has become a dangerous and increasingly inhospitable place. Eritrean security officials often cross the border with Sudanese approval to search for escapees, especially those deemed political enemies, and the Sudanese government, facing an intensifying economic and political crisis triggered by the secession of South Sudan in 2011, has stopped welcoming newcomers. But these hardships and risks have been lately eclipsed by a gruesome kidnapping and trafficking operation based in the Sinai that initially targeted Eritreans and Sudanese trying to get to Israel but has now extended its reach backward into Sudan and even Eritrea.

Would-be refugees can fall prey to rogue elements of the Rashayida, an Arabic-speaking minority in both Eritrea and Sudan whose forebears migrated to the region from the Gulf in the nineteenth century, as soon as they cross the border. If captured—or if turned over to Rashayida intermediaries by smugglers operating inside Eritrea—they are held for ransom. Much like such operations elsewhere, they have expanded as word has spread of the high returns for crimes that neither Sudanese nor Eritrean officials seem especially concerned to halt. Reports indicate that refugees are being grabbed in the Shagara camp, where new arrivals are processed, often with the collaboration of corrupt refugee officials. An estimated 700–1,000 are held by kidnappers at any given time. They typically ask for \$3,000–5,000, then pass their victims up the chain to others who ask for more.

An annex to a July 2012 UN Monitoring Group’s report on Eritrea’s compliance with Security Council sanctions that implicates Sudanese officials and Eritrean provides wrenching firsthand accounts of trafficking victims:

May 2012 [name withheld]: I was in Shagara refugee camp in Sudan when they kidnapped me. I had only been in the refugee camp for two weeks. The ones who have been there longer don’t fall for the trap. Some Rashayida came into the camp saying: “Come quickly, come with us, there is work.” A few of us followed them and suddenly they jumped on us and forced us into cars...

I was taken to a place in Kassala and held there. There were four guards—different ones every day. There was one guy controlling everything, the big boss, but I only saw him once and I didn’t catch his name. From there, we were taken to the border with Egypt. We were two cars with 15 people in each—we were stuff[ed] in together. There were Kalashnikovs, RPGs and grenades in both cars...

We switched cars two times on the way to Sinai. The first switch was a handover from the Rashayida to the Bedouin, after a two-day drive from Kassala.... Then we were put in a big truck and the weapons followed us in another smaller car. We drove for two days and two nights, then we met up again with the smaller car with the weapons and drove down a hill directly into Sinai.

We were held in the camp in the middle of a big open area in the desert.... I was in a camp with 60 others. I don’t know how many people were in the other place, but I know that 17 people who arrived at our camp were sent on there. All of us were from Eritrea. There was a house that we would call “the weapons house.” We could see from our building men would walk into this house empty handed and leave with weapons.

I had to pay a fee to leave but only the regular smuggling fee \$3,100. I was lucky. I heard that the people who were taken from our group were sold for a lot of money so they could be ransomed.

April 2012 [name withheld]: I lived in Sudan for two years. A human trafficker promised to take me to Sinai for \$3,000.... As soon as we left the car, guards with guns started beating us. We were chained by our hands and legs.... They tortured us because we said we could not pay the \$40,000 [they were now asking]. They told us that if we would not pay they would kill us. My hands are swollen. It took time until all of us paid. They were beating us every minute. It took time for our families to pay the money. The beatings continued.

I found it very difficult because I have no one in Israel. They were demanding a phone card from me to call my family. All the Bedouin guards were beating me, torturing me with electricity because I did not have money to pay for the telephone cards to call my family.

I never went out. I did not see the sun for ten months. Sometimes they would blindfold us. I was beaten on my head and my face. They tried to give us drugs to smoke, but we refused. I was whipped, I have lashes all over my back. I was burned with plastic on my back. I have burn wounds all over my arm. My fingers are swollen, my nails are black because of the repeated beatings.

Five people died of the 29 people that stayed with us. Ten of us were girls. The five people that died were all boys. The other 24 left after three months or six months. I was the last one to leave.... Three people were hanged. They were hanged for ten days for the new people to see what they would do to them if they would not pay. Two people that were hanged with me died. My hands were almost separated. We were tortured while we were hanged from the ceiling.... [They] were too young to bear all the hardship. I was in the army so I was able to survive the torture. I was beaten on the soles of my feet. I have trouble walking. Even now I cannot stand because of the hanging. I was not able to cross the border on my own. The people carried me across.

Israel now hosts more than 60,000 refugees from Eritrea and Sudan, with Eritreans making up the majority, according to refugee authorities there, who have begun repatriating Sudanese, most of whom are economic migrants, and have threatened to send back Eritreans as anti-immigrant sentiments have intensified. In 2012, resentment boiled over in a series of violent incidents. Harriet Sherwood, writing for the *Guardian*, reported the June firebombing of a Jerusalem apartment building housing Eritreans and other Africans where the arsonists scrawled, "Get out of our neighborhood," on the outside wall.<sup>4</sup> Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told her: "This was a targeted attack, which we believe was racially motivated." Sherwood also interviewed an Eritrean who had been living in Israel for 14 years. "People look at you, they curse you. They say, 'Go back to your country.' We are very afraid," he told her. But, according to Sherwood, it is top government officials who set the tone for the anti-immigrant attacks:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said Israel's national identity was at risk from the flood of "illegal infiltrators." Interior Minister Eli Yishai suggested that AIDS-infected migrants were raping Israeli women, and all, "without exception," should be locked up pending deportation. They do not believe "this country belongs to us, to the white man," he said in an interview. And, while touring the fence that Israel is building along its border with Egypt to deter migrants, MP Aryeh Eldad said: "Anyone who penetrates Israel's border should be shot—a Swedish tourist, Sudanese from Eritrea, Eritreans from Sudan, Asians from Sinai. Whoever touches Israel's border—shot." He later conceded that such a policy might not be feasible "because bleeding-heart groups will immediately begin to shriek and turn to the courts."

Since the *Guardian* report, there have been more such attacks: An Eritrean and his pregnant wife were injured in another fire set by arsonists in Jerusalem in July; a 68-year old Eritrean man was beaten by drunken youth in the Machane Yehudah market; an Eritrean was shot as he slept in the hallway of a building in Tel Aviv's Shapira neighborhood; and three more were stabbed by an unidentified Israeli male at an Internet café there.

As bad as life in Israel is, an even worse fate awaits escapees who are deported back to Eritrea, as has happened to hundreds in Egypt, Malta and Libya (before Qaddafi's fall) and as now faces thousands in both Egypt and Israel. This prospect so terrified a group of 76 Eritreans being forcibly repatriated from Libya in 2004 that they hijacked their plane at knife-point and forced it to land in Khartoum, where the ringleaders were jailed for five years (a relatively light punishment under Sudan's anti-terrorism laws, which carry a maximum sentence of 14 years, due to the judge's determination that prosecutors had failed to prove the convicted hijackers intended an "act of terrorism," only that they had rejected going back to Eritrea). Their fears arose from well-documented accounts before and since of the torture and abuse visited upon unwilling returnees, who are routinely sent to remote prisons already brimming with political detainees, including one in the Dahlak archipelago once used by Eritrea's colonial rulers, Italy and Britain.

Former prisoners and escapees tell disturbingly similar stories about torture techniques commonly used against political and religious dissenters, including the "helicopter" in which the victim is stripped of his clothing, tied with arms behind his back and either laid on the ground face down or hung from a tree branch and left for several days and nights in succession. In one well-documented and widely publicized incident in November 2004 dozens of young conscripts were killed at a prison camp at Adi Abieto when they protested their treatment. More than 160 were reported executed in 2006 when they tried to flee from the infamous Wia army camp in the blistering Massawa coastal lowlands, and at least a dozen died there in 2007, according to Human Rights Watch. In 2008, Amnesty International

wrote: “Torture by means of painful tying, known as ‘helicopter,’ continued to be a routine punishment and means of interrogation for religious and political prisoners.... Military offenders were tortured. Many were young people who had tried to flee conscription or who had complained of harsh conditions and the indefinite extension of their national service.”

Hanna and Zeray were 11 years old when their father, former minister of both foreign affairs and defense and a popular liberation army commander, was arrested on September 18, 2001, for joining other top government and party officials—the so-called Group of 15—that criticized President Isaias in a private letter for his procrastination on implementing the constitution, his authoritarian control over the party and his conduct of peace negotiations with Ethiopia, among other issues. The Group of 15 had gone public after Isaias rebuffed them by publishing the letter on the Internet. But, as Hanna told me, they were at least fortunate not to witness the event, as he was taken prisoner while he was out of the house on his morning run. Nor did they witness the moment when their mother, Aster Yohannes, returned to Asmara from a period of study in the United States on December 23, 2003, with a promise of “safe passage” from then Eritrean Ambassador to the US Girma Asmorem only to be seized at the airport and imprisoned—like her husband—in secret and without a trial. The two detentions left the twins to be raised by their grandmother and other relatives, along with two other brothers, one older and one younger.

The three older children were arrested when, after graduating high school in 2009, they sought to escape Eritrea only to be caught and jailed like their parents and bounced from one military prison to another to prevent them from escaping. (Their grandmother and younger brother got away.) Once the twins were released—their older brother remains behind bars—they tried again, one at a time in this instance, rather than as a pair. They made it across the border to Sudan and then to Ethiopia where they have been since May 2011. I spoke with them in Addis Ababa where they are waiting to hear back on requests for asylum farther afield. In the meantime, they move about far more freely and easily than they ever did at home, in possession of temporary residence permits and left on their own to do as they wish. In an ironic twist, the safest place for them right now may be the country their government insists ought to be their arch-enemy, Ethiopia. ■

## Endnotes

1 See Dan Connell, “From Resistance to Governance: Eritrea’s Trouble with Transition,” *Review of African Political Economy* 129 (September 2011).

2 Gaim Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* (London: James Currey, 2010), p. 173.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 278.

4 Harriet Sherwood, “Israel Turns on Its Refugees,” *Guardian*, June 4, 2012.