Mounting Crisis: How Perpetrators are Exploiting the Current Situation in Ethiopia and Sudan for profit

Policy briefing, October 2022

This briefing is part of a research 'Research to Action (RTA)' project funded through the International Labor Organization and the US Department of Labor. The RTA project more broadly commits to engaging researchers and promoting new interest to strengthen the evidence base for achieving SDG 8.7. The report was prepared by Audrey Lumley-Sapanski with research assistance from Eyob Ghilazghy.[i]

This briefing provides a high-level summary of a selection of the key findings from structured interviews with survivors and stakeholders.

Executive Summary

What's happening? Eritreans are being abducted in Sudan and taken to Libya where they are hostaged for an average price of $5,500 during which time they are tortured and abused.

Why? Conditions in Eritrea have deteriorated due to COVID-19 restrictions on mobility and livelihood opportunities, and more significantly the increase in round ups and forced conscription for armed service driven by the conflict in Tigray. As a result, more Eritreans are migrating to avoid lifetime conscription or to supplement incomes. Yet, exit is difficult. Eritrea operates a 'shoot to kill' policy at the border, and it is no longer considered possible to cross into Ethiopia.
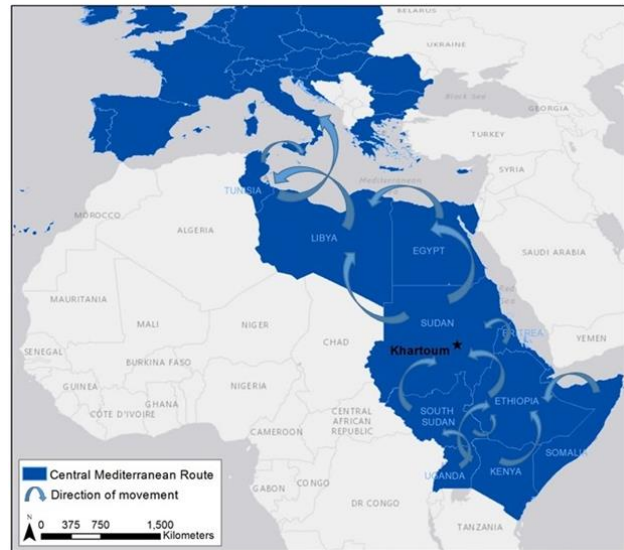
Sudan, the more common destination, has been destabilised by the recent military coup. This particularly de-securitized life for migrants. Migrants report an increase in round ups, harassment, and detention by police as well as extortion contributing to aspirations for onward migration. However, during migration in, to and through Sudan, migrants are often abducted and taken to Libya. There, Eritreans were held hostage with the goal of extracting money from familial and diasporic connections upon promise of release. Severe forms of violence and sexual violence are perpetrated against them, videotaped, and sent to family, often with knowledge or participation of security or militia forces.

Significantly, the research points to three macro level factors which intersect with individual attributes to increase vulnerability across these three contexts. These are:

- In Eritrea, unilateral migration decision making leads to reliance on unknown smugglers to evade Eritrea's shoot to kill policy
- In Sudan, the encampment and registration policies for refugees and corruption within humanitarian and government entities, leave migrants exposed to risks of trafficking and exploitation with complicity of state/humanitarian actors
- In Libya, the lack of a functional central state or an effective independent humanitarian governance presence, within an ongoing state of conflict, leave many victims of trafficking trapped in untenable conditions.

Diagramming where the risks to abduction and hostaging lie shows how migratory status creates vulnerabilities for Eritreans who lack the protection of a state actor and receive inadequate protection from humanitarian organizations. With few if any options for safe migration, Eritreans are increasingly likely to rely on an intermediary (smuggler) and, as a result, are more likely to fall victim to exploitative actors. Further, given reductions in opportunities for third-country resettlement, more refugees and forced migrants have considered onward migration. The situation is dire, mounting and requires an urgent response.

Methodology and Participant Profile

This study employed qualitative methodology to understand the vulnerabilities to trafficking faced by Eritreans who are migrating in, to and through Sudan. Data was collected via interviews conducted online.

The team collected 9 interviews with survivors in Sudan and 3 with migrants in April of 2022. Interviews explored participants' own perception of risk factors to human trafficking based on their experiences, as well as the impact of COVID-19. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Simultaneous interpretation was used. Thematic analysis of the interviews was undertaken.

The research also incorporates insights from two other research projects conducted in 2021. For the first, twenty-two in-depth interviews with stakeholders in Sudan were conducted in Arabic and English, focusing on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerability and risks of human trafficking. A systematic evidence review mapped the current state of knowledge, compiling and analysing academic and grey literature, as well as relevant legal, regulatory, and policy standards. A total of 94 pieces of evidence were selected for inclusion and thematically coded. Evidence reviewed was limited to that published in English from 2018-2021 and accessible online.

Building on this initial research, a further targeted evidence review and 12 additional interviews were conducted with stakeholders working in migration and women's rights within Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan (September 2021). This supplementary research focused specifically on impacts on migrants and migrating populations, and the role of gender in shaping vulnerabilities and risk in the pandemic world.

The Eritrean Garrison State and Blind Migration

My father was in the army, and they kept him the army most of the time my father was not in the family and the last few months, also he was taken to Tigray in the war. So, he was away from us, and the family was suffering from economic problems. Nobody takes care of the family and we have our mother who got sick and we have to look after her. I dropped out and …my sister as well. They rounded me up. It was very difficult to live in Eritrea. Finally, I had to escape the country. –

Woman, Khartoum (18yo)

Since 2000, an estimated 350,000 forced conscripts—of a population of 3-6 million—have served in the Eritrean army or a government post at any given time.[1] Service is not limited to the 18 months cap set out in law and in practice some individuals serve up to 30 years.[2] The implications of this approach have led to a breakdown of social functioning wherein families are separated, financially unable to support themselves, and conscripts are subject to forced labour and torture.[3] A UN Commission of Inquiry (COIE) was led on the situation in July 2014, a mandate that was extended by a further year following initial findings.[4] The COIE found systematic and widespread gross human rights violations and that there was no accountability for them.[5]

Eritreans are reliant on irregular migratory routes to leave the country

The impact on the livelihoods and well-being of those forced to serve as conscripts, and their families—combined with human rights abuses, and political, economic, social, and environmental factors—has contributed to the out-migration of millions of Eritreans. However, Eritreans have few options for leaving the country, as the government exacts strict control over borders and emigration, and limits access to passports. More specifically, the government operates a 'shoot to kill' policy.[6] The border to Sudan remains closed and the border to Ethiopia, which had been opened briefly in 2018, is no longer open.[7] That pathway has been unilaterally closed[8] and crossing irregularly complicated by the Tigray conflict. This forces many Eritreans to rely on irregular migratory routes, and often to engage smugglers to navigate exit from Eritrea.

Wages for forced conscripts are not sufficient to meet basic needs

Of the nine survivors interviewed for this research project five had migrated in the last two years. These survivors reported that their migratory decisions were driven by deteriorating conditions within Eritrea itself. The war in Tigray increased demand for forced conscripts. Yet, wages paid to conscripts, estimated at 25 USD per month, are insufficient to meet basic needs.[9] As the interviewee above describes, the lack of resources necessary to care for her ailing mother drove her to leave the country with the help of a smuggler.

COVID-19 restrictions affected capacity to meet basic needs

A further factor was the role of COVID-19 restrictions. Prior to the pandemic, Eritrea had implemented mobility restrictions nationwide that required prior permission to move between areas. COVID-19 increased mobility restrictions and the number of roadblocks, as well as placing further limitations on the ability to work. These restrictions affected households' capacity to meet their basic needs.

Eritreans migrate with limited knowledge of conditions they will face outside the country

The choice made by interviewees to exit the country were made with a degree of blindness. Out-migration from Eritrea is technically illegal under threat of death and lack of access to the internet or cell phones, combined with an active surveillance state makes it difficult to seek advice from others. The combined effect is that people are forced to make migratory decisions without consultation with prior migrants or family members. This contributes to use of smugglers who are linked to human traffickers. Interviewees who crossed from Eritrea to Sudan in the last two years were categorically sold at the border by the smuggler to traffickers who then took them to Libya.

De-securitization of Sudan

I have a refugee card. I have status, because when I was in the refugee camp I got it. But in the city of Khartoum, having refugee status or not does not help you at all, because the security forces have, aggressive attitude towards the refugees. They see them as subjects to exploit to take money and they abuse their rights and restrict them. When they round them up, when they arrest you, they ask you for money for your registration. In most cases, if you show your card, they tear it (up).

Male, Khartoum, 41yo

Eastern Sudan is host to hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom have been held in camps for over four decades. As of May, there were 130,379 registered Eritrean refugees or asylum seekers.[10]

The rights of Eritrean refugees in Sudan are restricted

Conditions within Sudan are difficult for Eritrean refugees. While they generally apply for, and receive, refugee status within Sudan, their rights are limited. Sudan practices a strict encampment policy.[11] Refugees are denied the right to free movement within the country, most lack access to education beyond primary school, and refugees cannot legally work.[ii]

The military coup in Sudan in 2021 exacerbated risks for refugees

Refugee encampment policies, corruption within the Sudanese security forces, and a lack of security at the

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[ii] Work is not entirely unauthorized for refugees, it is made impossible by access to work permits however. In 2013, UNHCR secured 30,000 work permits but in the period since continue to report that few people could access those and attention seems to have shifted to training refugees for agricultural production outside of formal work structures. Similarly, though there is a strict encampment policy, about

60% of refugees live in urban spaces technically illegally (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiy0rLYwNf4AhVTQEEAHcgfCa8QFnoECAUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F85783&usg=AOvVaw0cF72dpfr_EBpiZ_Szi9-9)

border were already known to create risks to trafficking.[12] The Sudanese military coup in October 2021 exacerbated the risks within these geographies, removing a semblance of oversight from the security forces or police who, instead of protecting at risk populations, increased their targeted hostility towards Eritrean migrants. The deterioration of the security conditions in Sudan were manifest predominately in Khartoum, where refugees were living in fear. Refugees and refugee NGO workers described experiences of constant harassment by police and military personnel who arrested or detained them in exchange for a bribe. The excuse used by security forces to target them was their migratory status—they were frequently stopped and asked to show their refugee card. However, even upon doing so, the card was ripped up and a bribe of approximately $500 USD was demanded (Interview, Male, Khartoum). Eritreans may be jailed and detained until they pay. They may be beaten. Failure to pay results in threat of expulsion to Eritrea.

Border forces complicit in kidnapping, abduction, and trafficking of refugees

In addition, former refugees report being kidnapped and abducted at the border and from camps and trafficked or sold to traffickers by border police ostensibly responsible for taking them to camps.[13] Others had to return to the camps to register after departing—one was required to do so in Shagarab camp in Eastern Sudan—and were abducted on the way.[14]

Outcomes of Disorder and Lawlessness in Libya

From Sudan to Libya, I was kidnapped in Khartoum. The kidnapping happened at some people offered a job to work, and when we went to work in the city of Khartoum it was a trap. We ended up in Libya. They put us in a warehouse in Libya, a lot of beating and torture. They made us communicate with our family members and friends. To raise money. But I don't have anyone to pay. I suffered for a long time, handing over from one warehouse to another.

Male, Khartoum, 40yo

The most common and defining experience of trafficking described by Eritrean refugees and migrants was forced abduction from Sudan to Libya for a protracted period. This normally occurred at the Sudanese-Eritrean border or from within Khartoum. The interviewees were deceived by smugglers and sold or traffickers posing as employers and taken to Libya for a period of between eight months and four years. Interviewees described conditions in Libya

of mass detention in warehouse type facilities, physical abuse, and sexual violence in line with experiences detailed by UNHCR and IOM (see UNHCR 2020). Abductees were kept with dozens of others in the dark without access to the outside. Several experienced violent clashes between armed groups that resulted in deaths, and occasionally they traded hands.

Opportunities for intervention were often missed

In these detention situations, migrants at times interacted with authorities—be it international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) or state entities. Evidence indicates that these interactions took several forms. When migrants were transported to Libya, they went through military check points where officers were either complicit or did not engage. One woman gave birth in a Libyan hospital where, due to complications, she was forced to stay for several days. When she recovered, she was released with the baby to the people who had abducted and detained her. Another man was 'rescued' from one centre by UNHCR and taken to a government detention facility run by security forces, where conditions were worse. Interviewees described a fear of disclosing or attracting attention reinforced by warnings of friends.

Use of technology facilitates exploitation

During these experiences, Eritrean migrants and refugees were forced to solicit money from their networks using technology. Kidnappers would call family members or message people through Facebook to extract the sum 'owed.' The average sum extracted was $5,500 to be released. Occasionally, torture sessions were broadcast to family members live to encourage faster response. Once refugees had paid, they were transported by the same individuals back to Khartoum. In Khartoum, they did not seek or receive medical treatment due to fears of interacting with security forces or a lack of knowledge of available resources. They had no access to social welfare and continued to suffer trauma and ongoing physical disabilities from torture.

Recommendations

Evidence collected by others suggests these experiences are common. Estimates from IOM surveys in 2016 indicated 73 percent of migrants along the Central Mediterranean route experienced human trafficking or a form of exploitation.[15] Migrants experience torture, extortion and forced exploitation (sexual or labour) up to and including death.[16]

The policy recommendations named here are intended are intended to help alter conditions that produce or contribute to exploitation of victims. These recommendations follow and expand on those made

by the ILO in their PROSPECTS report on Sudan and the Country Response Plan Refugee Consultation Forum/UNHCR.[17] The recommendations reinforce their urgency given recent changes in governance and emerging conflict.

a) Refugees report diminished trust in the refugee system and a lack of ability to survive given allocated resources and are migrating as a result. Durable solutions to resolve protracted displacement situations are needed. This involves commitment by third country states to accept refugees as well as committed investments that make local integration feasible, such as investments in security within camps, education systems, infrastructure (health systems and socioeconomic systems), access to work permits and livelihood training that would contribute to a tenable local integration options. INGOs and partner states, in addition, should work with Sudan to end encampment, including permitting work, education and to access travel documents.

b) Nominally, refugee status determination processing times are said to take 30 days in Sudan, but this this is uncommon as noted by UNHCR, the US DOS, and interviewees. Granting refugees arriving from Eritrea access to humanitarian protection upon entry would significantly reduce fear of deportation, sense of liminality, and improve access to resources.[18]

c) Migrants describe being picked up at the Eritrean-Sudanese border by traffickers and taken nearly immediately to Libya. Though UNHCR has a number of reception units at the border, additional international organizational presence in border areas in Eastern Sudan and access to support services for arriving Eritreans, would reduce risks of trafficking.

d) Refugees described corruption within gatekeeper roles at international governmental organizations responsible for allocating refugee services including eligibility for third country resettlement. Perceptions of corruption deterred trust in the organization. Improving perceptions of the UNHCR and other INGOs in Sudan and Libya by addressing previously stated concerns and communicating with whistleblowers, would help to reestablish trust.

e) Opening more refugee registration sites across Sudan and removing requirements to travel to Shagrab Camp to file for status will help eliminate abduction hotspots.

f) Promote positive reception attitudes towards refugees through awareness raising within the host communities to combat negative stereotypes and xenophobia, including by working with police and border forces.

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