

Update Briefing

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Eritrea: Ending the Exodus?

I. Overview

The large emigration of youths is the clearest sign of extreme domestic discontent with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki's government. Social malaise is pervasive. An ever-growing number of young people have fled over the last decade, frustrated by open-ended national service – initiated in 1995 and expanded during the war with Ethiopia (1998-2000). Yet, this flight has resulted in neither reforms nor a viable movement to create an alternative to the current government. Once outside, the ties that bind émigrés to their birthplace are strong and lead them to give financial support to the very system they escaped, through the 2 per cent tax many pay the state as well as remittances sent home to family members.

Asmara's response to the exodus, though always focused on mitigating its effects so as to ensure regime survival, has evolved in recognition of its uses. After initial, sometimes brutal attempts to obstruct emigration, a symbiotic system has emerged that benefits a range of actors, including the state. The government ostensibly accepts that educated, urbanised youths resistant to the individual sacrifices the state demands are less troublesome and more useful outside the country – particularly when they can continue to be taxed and provide a crucial social safety net for family members who stay home. Meanwhile, those who remain tend to be the more pliant rural peasant and pastoralist population. Yet, the exodus is not limited to urbanised and educated youth; migrants, including an increasing number of minors, now come from a wider cross-section of society.

Official recognition is growing in Eritrea that despite the side-benefits, the level of the exodus is unsustainable, not least for maintaining support from political constituencies at home and in the diaspora. The burden of ever greater numbers arriving in neighbouring countries and further afield – including on Europe's southern shores, where over-filled boats regularly sink, drowning many migrants – also demands action by affected states. Ending the exodus requires greater engagement with Eritrea – potentially ending a decade of isolation that has been both self-imposed and externally-generated – as well as ameliorating a growing internal crisis.

Crisis Group reporting has previously outlined the regional implications of that growing crisis and recommended that, in order to confront the problems of which the continuing human exodus is a clear sign, Eritrea, with help from international partners, especially the European Union (EU) and UN, should consider:

- ❑ re-visiting previous plans and updating options for gradual demobilisation, especially of national servicemen and women;
- ❑ re-opening political space gradually by implementing the long-delayed 1997 constitution; and
- ❑ allowing for a gradual restructuring of the economy to enhance job prospects for the youth, and following through on offers to the diaspora to encourage direct investment.

To assist in easing the internal crisis, the Ethiopian government and other IGAD members, especially Sudan, should consider:

- ❑ adopting a comprehensive strategic approach toward Eritrea aimed at relaxing bilateral relations – including a creative, mediated way to resolve the boundary dispute with Ethiopia that removes any external obstacle to demobilisation in Eritrea – and consequent normalisation of regional relations.

Likewise, the broader international community, led by the EU and Italy (currently EU president), and coordinated on the ground by the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, should:

- ❑ develop a comprehensive and coordinated policy on Eritrea and support regional efforts to improve Eritrea-Ethiopia relations, including resolution of the boundary dispute.

II. Emigration in Peace and War

Eritreans have been leaving their home for much of its short and troubled modern history.¹ After the 1952 federation with Ethiopia, and then post-1962 “annexation”, many migrated to the “imperial” capital, Addis Ababa.² During the 1950s, others – especially less privileged Muslims – left for nearby Arab countries, first as migrant labour, but in the 1960s, as Eritrea’s nationalist struggle against its absorption by Ethiopia took shape, increasingly as political refugees.³ Over time, this created a large global diaspora, most members of which maintained close political and economic links with their homeland.⁴ When, in 1991, the Eritrean People Liberation

¹ This briefing should be read in conjunction with Crisis Group Africa Report N°200, *Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition*, 28 March 2013, which touched on the youth exodus but did not explore it in detail, as well as Africa Report N°163, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, 21 September 2010. Permission to do research in Eritrea was not granted, but interviews were conducted in person or via email/phone primarily with over 200 Eritreans currently residing in Ethiopia, Sudan, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Italy, Sweden, the UK, Norway, the U.S., Canada, Australia and Germany. Over 150 were former national army recruits who left since 2001. Due to security concerns, Crisis Group has withheld most of their identities and locations.

² For the standard account of Eritrea’s independence struggle, see David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front* (Oxford, 2001).

³ Abbebe Kifleyesus, “Women who migrate, men who wait: Eritrean labor migration to the Arab Near East”, *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2012); Dan Connell, “Refugees, Ransoms and Revolt – An Update on Eritrea”, *Middle East Report*, no. 266 (spring 2013), p. 35.

⁴ One million individuals of Eritrean origin are estimated to live outside the country across Africa, the Gulf, Middle East, Europe, the U.S., Canada, Australia and Israel, where many have citizenship.

Front (EPLF) won de facto independence from Ethiopian rule (de jure after a 1993 UN-organised referendum) hopes were high that a new era of freedom and development had begun, and a growing number started to return home.⁵

Yet, despite some initial promise, independence did not bring an opening of political space; authoritarian attitudes formed during the guerrilla period persisted.⁶ Contrary to the EPLF's promises, a multi-party system and governance reforms failed to materialise.⁷ Nonetheless, though scepticism slowly grew, the majority kept faith with the liberation struggle's leadership,⁸ and the social pact between the ruling party and the population was still largely intact when the border war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998. Eritreans at home and around the world united behind the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – as the EPLF was renamed in 1994 – against what they perceived as renewed Ethiopian imperialism.⁹ Defence of the nation against the larger, former political master was seen to justify the curtailment of promised democratisation and a return to militarisation.¹⁰ Intense fighting lasted for two years, ended returns and generated further displacement and refugees.¹¹

The 2000 Algiers Agreements ended the fighting but did not resolve the conflict.¹² The consequent state of “no-war, no-peace” continues to be used to justify mobilisation and authoritarianism,¹³ and though there have been few internal security threats,

Crisis Group interviews, Italy, April 2013. For a brief summary of Eritrea's reliance on the diaspora in times of war and peace see, Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

⁵ There were waves of return from 1993 to 1998, though few resettled permanently. Crisis Group analyst's interviews and observations in another capacity, 1994-1997. Repatriation of Eritrean refugees from the U.S. proceeded slowly. An estimated 180,000 (of some 342,000) returned from 1991 to 1996. “U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 1997 – Eritrea”, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 1 January 1997.

⁶ Many partisans of the EPLF's rival, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) – perceived as a stronghold of Muslim Eritreans – never returned, since the two fronts remained unreconciled.

⁷ Promised national elections were not held, and the constitution drafted in 1997 was subsequently ratified and adopted but never fully implemented. Eritrean authorities blamed the hostile regional environment. Lionel Cliffe, “Regional Implications of the Eritrea-Ethiopia War”, in Dominique Jaquin-Berdal and Martin Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business: Eritrea and Ethiopia at War* (Trenton, 2004), pp. 151-168.

⁸ For an overview of post-independence events and issues, see Crisis Group Reports, *Eritrea: The Siege State* and *Eritrea: Scenarios*, both op. cit.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopia, March 2013; Italy, April 2013; Sudan, May 2013; Kenya, August 2013.

¹⁰ The lack of a conventional democratisation process, continued centralised decision-making and quashing of dissent were arguably all part of the political culture of the liberation struggle. See Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: Scenarios*, op. cit., p. 11; and Petros B. Ogbazghi, “Personal Rule in Africa: The case of Eritrea”, *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2011), p. 8.

¹¹ Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (London, 2000).

¹² The Ethiopia-Eritrean Boundary Commission (EEBC) was mandated to bindingly arbitrate the original boundary dispute. It did so in 2003, but Ethiopia initially rejected its findings, then accepted “in principle” but refused to implement them on the ground without further conditions. Eritrea refused further discussion without prior implementation. The commission's critical finding was that the village of Badme was in Eritrea. Asmara bitterly resents the reluctance of the Algiers Agreements' international guarantors to force Ethiopia's compliance. See Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: Scenarios*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

¹³ There have been a number of border incidents with Ethiopia since the 2000 ceasefire. In 2008, Eritrea also had border skirmishes with Djibouti. Asmara refused UN mediation and accepted Qatari-led arbitration, which is yet to be fully implemented. The UN Security Council imposed sanc-

Eritrea remains one of the world's principal sources of refugees.¹⁴ According to UN estimates, around 300,000 have fled since 2000, and roughly 4,000 still flee each month.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence suggests the real numbers may be higher.¹⁶ The outflow, whatever its precise numbers, is a significant percentage of the small national population.¹⁷

III. National Service and “the State of Exception”

The government used the border stalemate to maintain mass conscription and – much less convincingly – justify postponement of the new constitution's implementation, including introduction of a multi-party system. In 2001, prominent *tegadelay* (liberation fighters), who became known as the “Group of 15” (G15), criticised the government's handling of the war and its aftermath, prompting a wholesale and enduring crackdown against dissent.¹⁸

The post-war period saw entrenchment of the idea that *tegadelay* were the “vanguard of the people” and must decide the destiny of liberated Eritrea without debate, until new generations have been imbued with the same values forged during the guerrilla period. The president and an inner circle of *tegadelay* further concentrated

tions on Eritrea in 2009 for its refusal to withdraw troops from the contested borders and its support to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: Scenarios*, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ Eritrea is not the biggest source of irregular migrants from the Horn of Africa. In 2012, 78 per cent of 107,532 Horn of Africa migrants who crossed the Red Sea to Yemen were Ethiopian. Some 334,000 Ethiopians have emigrated via this route since 2006 (according to semi-official figures; the real number may be much higher). “Blinded by Hope: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of Ethiopian Migrants”, Study 6, Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, June 2014. The core steering committee and founding agencies of this small body located in Nairobi are the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Intersos and the Yemen Mixed Migration Task Force.

¹⁵ Assefa Bariagaber, “Globalization, Imitation Behavior, and Refugees from Eritrea”, *Africa Today*, vol. 60, no. 2 (winter 2013), p. 7. In 2008, Eritrean refugees were estimated at 186,400, “yet in light of continuous human rights violations in the country this number grew by more than 121,000 persons worldwide over the past five years”. “UNHCR Global Trends 2013: War's Global Cost”, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 20 June 2014, p. 16. “The majority of Eritrean refugees reside in Sudan (109,600), Ethiopia (84,400) and European countries (65,300)”. Ibid. “Nearly 4,000 Eritreans flee each month, says UN”, Agence France-Presse, 19 June 2014.

¹⁶ Most exit first via Sudan and Ethiopia, where major UNHCR camps host Eritreans, and they are counted, but many who attempt to travel onwards to countries in the European Union (EU), the U.S., Israel, Australia and Canada do not register with the agency, so do not obtain official refugee status from it. There are also many Eritrean refugees and migrants in Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya and South Africa. Another secondary route is via Yemen to the Gulf states, but the economic prospects there reportedly are poor and refugee status difficult to obtain. Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR personnel, refugee lawyers and Eritrean refugees, Khartoum and Port Said, Sudan, May 2013; Nairobi, May-June 2013.

¹⁷ What was to be the first census since independence was scheduled for 1998 but was delayed because of the war with Ethiopia and has not yet been held. According to World Bank (2013) estimates, the current population is just over 6.3 million (<http://data.worldbank.org/country/eritrea>); the UN (2011) estimated 5.4 million (<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=eritrea>).

¹⁸ For details on the G15 and the closure of political space, see Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: Scenarios*, op. cit., pp. 11, 16-20; and Petros B. Ogbazghi, “Personal Rule in Africa”, op. cit., p. 8.

power and created “a state of exception”, in which rule of law was dismissed for emergency reasons, and the country was ruled by decree.¹⁹

The outcome was a highly militarised state, “shaped by war and run by warriors”.²⁰ If peasants and pastoralists silently accepted these measures,²¹ urbanised and better-educated sectors increasingly did not.²² This was especially true for urban youth, who were most affected by the national service that was instituted in 1995 to promote “nation-building, imbue the youth with loyalty and discipline, as well as stifle regionalism and create national consensus to build a national identity”, but was broadened into conscription during the 1998-2000 war.²³

Once the peace agreements were signed, many soldiers expected to return slowly to normal life;²⁴ however, gradual demilitarisation announced after the cessation of hostilities never materialised.²⁵ Instead, the government expanded national service to boys and girls in their last years of high school. From 2002, national service was tied to the “Wefri Warsai Yika’alo”, a development campaign.²⁶ Many national service men and women were deployed in parastatal companies controlled by senior army

¹⁹ The state of exception theory was formulated by the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt and later elaborated by the Italian Giorgio Agamben. It argues that a sovereign may suspend the rule of law in the name of a more urgent (self-proclaimed) public interest. On the state of exception applied to Eritrea, see Tekle Woldemikael, “Introduction: Post-liberation Eritrea”, *Africa Today*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Winter 2013), pp. ix-xi.

²⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: Scenarios*, op. cit., p. 14.

²¹ Some now question the official narrative of voluntary EPLF fighters, arguing that the front was, since the 1980s, “mainly composed of helpless peasants abducted from their villages”. According to the same source, the earlier *giffa* (forced conscription in Tigrinya) involved tens of thousands of peasants, lasted for more than a decade and ravaged entire rural areas. See Yosief Gebrehiwet, “Eritrea: forced peasant conscripts that sustained the Eritrean Revolution”, Asmarino (a diaspora website, www.asmarino.com), 18 December 2010.

²² Crisis Group interviews, former soldiers from Asmara and Massawa, Italy, April 2013; Sweden, April 2013; Khartoum and Port Sudan, May 2013; Addis Ababa, July 2013; Dubai, August 2013.

²³ National service is legally an eighteen-month commitment, consisting of six months of military training and one year of voluntary service. “Eritrea: Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 of 1995”, at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3dd8d3af4.html. See also Gaim Kibreab, “The national service/Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2013), pp. 4-6. During the border war, people largely supported conscription; the diaspora raised money and championed Eritrea’s cause. Crisis Group interviews, Italy, April 2013.

²⁴ “We had dreams and ambitions for the future and halted everything, first to wait for the liberation, then to fight Ethiopian invasion. When war ceased, we wanted to enjoy our civilian life. It never happened”. Crisis Group Skype interview, Eritrean refugee in the U.S., April 2014.

²⁵ In November 2000, following deployment of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) peacekeeping force and significant progress in the peace process, the Eritrean government announced a demobilisation and reintegration program. It planned to reduce the army by two thirds and demobilise 200,000 troops within two years. The troops to be demobilised were re-mobilised ex-fighters, people serving in the national service program and soldiers from the regular armed forces. See “Eritrea – Demobilization and Reintegration Program”, World Bank, vol. 1, no. PID99999, 6 April 2001.

²⁶ The campaign was approved by the cabinet on 7-8 May 2002. Wefri Warsai Yika’alo means literally “those who follow the powerful”. The *warsai* are youths who have come of age since independence; the *yika’alo* are the *tegedelay*. See Tekle Woldemikael, “Introduction: Postliberation Eritrea”, op. cit., p. xv; and Kale Meteyik, “Isaias Afwerki (Interview with the President)”, *Handas Eritra*, 11 May 2002.

and party officers.²⁷ To ensure compliance, travel within the country and beyond was restricted and severely regulated.²⁸

The University of Asmara was all but closed and replaced with tertiary colleges located outside the capital, run by army officers and conducted “more along the lines of a military camp than an institution for further education”. Their creation evinced “a more general unease within the [ruling party] about the aspiration of the younger generation which it suspects of being less concerned with the ‘revolution’ and more with individual achievement”.²⁹ It was increasingly evident that the PFDJ viewed urban, middle-class youths, mostly from Asmara, with particular suspicion.³⁰

The more the PFDJ tried to extort loyalty from the population and forge an “experiential” link between young people and *tegadelay* by militarising Eritrea, the more urbanised youths felt alienated.³¹ The alternative to indefinite service was to join the *segre-dob* (those who crossed the border).³²

IV. The Refugee Racket

Internally, the exodus is symptomatic of social malaise and growing disaffection with the regime. Externally, such a substantial, unending stream of young people from a country essentially at peace is at odds with the official self-image of a proud, self-reliant young nation.

To stem the flow, the president reportedly initially turned to Brigadier General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”.³³ Manjus fell back on his guerrilla instincts, allegedly impos-

²⁷ Gaim Kibreab, “Forced Labour in Eritrea”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2009), p. 42.

²⁸ “Emigration is effectively illegal in Eritrea, exit visas are required to leave the country, and completion of national service is a prerequisite for receiving an exit visa or a passport”. Jennifer Riggan, “Imagining Emigration: Debating National Duty in Eritrean Classrooms”, *Africa Today*, vol. 60, no. 2 (winter 2013), p. 86; “Proclamation on National Service”, op. cit., Article 7.

²⁹ Richard Reid, “The Politics of Silence: Interpreting Stasis in Contemporary Eritrea”, *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 120 (2009), p. 216.

³⁰ As a former Asmara University student put it, “we believed in the revolution, but also in education to promote ourselves and support the nation. Instead, Isaias militarised education to force us into another passive part of the regime’s mechanisms”. Crisis Group interview, former conscript from Asmara, Sweden, April 2013.

³¹ A refugee recalled: “[We had] individual and collective expectations from independence and peace. When the war [against Ethiopia] happened, we fought. Then, we just wanted to live as part of the Eritrean nation, but according to our will and skills. Instead, we found ourselves demoted to the lowest rank of the society, forced to dig useless trenches and treated like animals in a cage, forever, in the name of the revolution. We lost faith in [the *tegadelay*], and we felt so depressed”. Crisis Group interview, Italy, April 2013.

³² Diaspora youth obtained exemption from conscription by offering money to the nation and were allowed to return. Crisis Group interviews, Italy and Sweden, April 2013. A common joke was: “A group of people tries to escape from Eritrea and is caught at the border by soldiers. The soldiers ask them, ‘Why do you want to leave?’ They answer, ‘We have been giving one hundred percent to this country and this has not been recognised, those already outside the country just give two per cent [the tax paid to the Eritrean State by those living in the diaspora] and this is being recognised, they can come and go, they can buy houses, they can do everything – so we want to join those who give only two percent”. Recollected in Tanja R. Muller, “Beyond the siege state – tracing hybridity during a recent visit to Eritrea”, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 39, no. 133 (2012), pp. 460-461.

³³ Brigadier General “Manjus”, for years the Eritrea Defence Forces’ Western Military Zone commander, is perceived as one of the officers most loyal to the president. Several reports of the UN

ing a shoot-to-kill policy for deserters and retaliation against their families.³⁴ But the prevalence of conscripts in the army made implementation difficult, since it required targeting peers and undermined morale. Border garrisons faced a surge in insubordination, and more conscripts absconded.³⁵

In the face of growing desertions, Manjus allegedly sub-contracted border policing to remnants of the Rashaida paramilitary groups active in eastern Sudan that were previously trained by Eritrean forces and were backed by Asmara before the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement).³⁶ They reportedly deployed on both sides of the border to fire at deserters.³⁷ “Unlike the conscripts, they had little compunction in killing deserters. But soon, they started detaining them, and ordering [them] to contact families inside [Eritrea, asking] for a ransom to avoid execution”.³⁸ The money reportedly was paid in Eritrea to Manjus’s representatives, mostly members of the Eritrean Defence Forces.³⁹

Once money was involved, business interests rapidly expanded in both Eritrea and Sudan.⁴⁰ “These people paid ransoms first [to avoid being shot]; they were willing to

Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea have described his and other senior security officials’ involvement in the trafficking of weapons and people from Eritrea into Egypt (the Sinai) via Sudan, en route to Israel, for example, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2002 (2011)”, UNSC S/2012/545, 13 July 2012.

³⁴ “An unknown number of people have been shot near the Eritrean borders with Djibouti, Ethiopia and the Sudan, allegedly for attempting to cross illegally. Border military personnel have standing orders to implement a shoot-to-kill policy to those attempting to flee”. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth”, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/23/53, 28 May 2013, p. 9. Eritrea’s UN ambassador, Arya Desta, denied there is a shoot-to-kill policy. “Eritrea’s human rights record comes under fire at United Nations”, *The Guardian*, 25 October 2013. Relatives of those who flee are detained, as a punishment and to deter others. In time, deserters who reach their destinations are often able to have their relatives released by paying “fines”. Crisis Group interviews, former Eritrean soldiers, Italy and Sweden, April 2013.

³⁵ “Careless of the harsh punishment in place for those disobeying, many of us refused to shoot. Senior officers didn’t know what to do to implement orders from Asmara and at the same time avoid mutinies”. Crisis Group email correspondence, former conscript currently living in Europe, September 2013; interviews, former Eritrean soldiers, Italy and Sweden, April 2013.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum and Port Sudan, May 2013; Connections between Eritrean officials and Raishada gangs are noted in “Report of the Monitoring Group” (2011), *op. cit.*, and “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2060 (2012)”, UNSC S/2013/440, 19 June 2013. For general background on the armed groups and Eritrea’s abiding role in eastern Sudan, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°209, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, 26 November 2013.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former army officers posted at the Eritrean-Sudanese border, Italy, Sweden, Sudan, and Ethiopia, March-July 2013. For further background see “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 1916 (2010)”, UNSC S/2011/433, pp. 108-110.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Dubai, July 2013; supported by Crisis Group interviews, former army officers posted at the Eritrean-Sudanese border, Italy, Sweden, Sudan and Ethiopia, March-July 2013. For more information on human smuggling from a Sudan perspective, see Crisis Group Report, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Dubai, July 2013; former army officers posted at the Eritrean-Sudanese border, Italy, Sweden, Sudan and Ethiopia, March-July 2013; “Report of the Monitoring Group” (2011), *op. cit.*, specifically paragraph 424.

⁴⁰ Rachel Humphris, “Refugees and the Rashaida: human smuggling and trafficking from Eritrea to Sudan and Egypt”, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, UNHCR, research paper no. 254, March 2013.

pay [even] more to continue their [e]migration".⁴¹ Deserters and the growing number of other Eritreans fleeing civilian national service obligations saw Sudan, as well as Ethiopia or Djibouti, as mere transit points to third countries where Eritrean communities already existed, and they believed they could find political asylum and better economic opportunities.⁴² The economic logic for all actors has been to facilitate the exit of ever greater numbers.⁴³

The apparent shoot-to-kill policy evolved into a chaotic "pay-to-leave" trade in which the threat from the Rashaida ex-paramilitaries "was crucial to generate revenues".⁴⁴ Connections were established with other Sahelian and Saharan criminal elements (already active along traditional smuggling routes toward Europe) to establish a complex smuggling network through which Eritrean migrants were channelled.⁴⁵ The situation rapidly degenerated into vicious human trafficking that exposed migrants to gross human rights abuses.⁴⁶

V. "Where is Your Brother?"

Witnesses inside Eritrea say youths are extremely scarce not only in the capital, Asmara, but also in villages and towns, especially in the highlands (*kebessa*) as well as the borderlands next to Ethiopia and Sudan.⁴⁷ "When a child reaches the age of fifteen, no matter the sex, it's clearly time to leave before getting trapped in the military service", one said.⁴⁸ Anecdotal information is increasingly supported by UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data from Ethiopia, Sudan, Malta and

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Port Sudan, Sudan, May 2013.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopia, Sudan, Dubai, Israel, Italy, Sweden, and Kenya, March-June 2013. Many Eritrean emigrants in the region do not bother to register as refugees; when they do, they remain "in transit" while they assemble money to continue the journey. Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, Sudan, May 2013; Adigrat, Ethiopia, June 2013.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Sweden, April 2013.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Dubai, May 2013. For more on reported Rashaida abuses of Eritrean migrants and ransom demands on family members, see "I Wanted to Lie Down and Die": Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt", Human Rights Watch, February 2014; also, for a more nuanced analysis of reported Rashaida involvement, Rachel Humphris, "Refugees and the Rashaida", op. cit. The Rashaida's leading politician and Sudanese minister, Mabrouk Mabarak Salim, denies any involvement of his community, "Sudan blames foreigners for proliferation in human trafficking", Al-Monitor, 31 January 2013.

⁴⁵ There had been two main routes toward Europe: through Libya to reach Italy and via Egypt to reach Israel (see fn. 16 above). Crisis Group interviews and field observations, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Israel and Italy, March-June 2013. Since Israel began to implement new anti-immigration policies in early 2012 (the most recent allowing the return of many illegal migrants to their countries of origin), routes toward Europe's southern shores have become more prominent, especially following the reopening of Libyan routes to Italy after the fall of the Qaddafi regime. See "Lampedusa, the Italian island thousands are dying to reach", *Time Magazine*, 3 October 2013; "Italy seeks EU funds as migrant flood rises", *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2014; "Surge in refugees: 1,000 a week come to Holland, says minister", DutchNews.nl, 15 May 2014.

⁴⁶ For fuller treatment of human trafficking via east Sudan and beyond, see "I Wanted to Lie Down and Die", op. cit.; and "Report of the Special Rapporteur", op. cit.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, 2013-2014. Those living near the border can leave the country due to knowledge of the local terrain. Crisis Group interviews, Eritrean businessman, April-May 2014.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Eritrean who frequently visits the country, April 2014. "Especially in highland Eritrea, the kids are very much aware that their destiny after eleventh grade is a military camp, and flee". Crisis Group Skype interview, U.S., May 2014.

Italy that show a rising number of unaccompanied minors crossing the border.⁴⁹ Such numbers, their demographic profile and individual well-publicised tragedies have led the government (and some approved internal critics) to address the problem publicly.⁵⁰ The government has understood that the youth exodus is decimating Eritrea's human capital, including its once formidable military capacity. Reports that since January 2013 civilian militias are being armed may be a sign of the toll desertions are taking on the largely conscript army.⁵¹

Though their departure is in large part driven by the regime's policies, many emigrants end up contributing to its survival.⁵² Their remittances inject hard currency into the country's meagre foreign exchange reserves, while bolstering the economic resilience of the families left behind.⁵³ Remittances are sent mostly through regime-controlled channels, compounding the benefit it derives.⁵⁴ The scant economic data suggests that since the end of the border war with Ethiopia "the government has become increasingly dependent on Eritreans abroad as a source of capital".⁵⁵

The general view of those who have left is that officials recognised the exodus was both a social safety valve for frustrated youthful constituencies and a lucrative side-business for the state and some individuals. In the end, "it was better to let the boys go, and use them".⁵⁶ From a political perspective, the more urban youths left, the greater

⁴⁹ Crisis Group Skype interview, May 2014; "Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia get new camp in north of country", UNHCR, 13 June 2013; "Italy rescues 6,000 people crossing Mediterranean in four days", UNHCR, 11 April 2014. See also fn. 15 above.

⁵⁰ "Lampedusa boat tragedy: Migrants 'raped and tortured'", BBC News, 8 November 2013. In a 38-page letter addressed to the Eritrean people, four Eritrean Catholic Archbishops (of Asmara, Keren, Barentu and Segeneiti) described the situation in the country and appealed to the faithful to solve the economic crisis, exile and other predicaments from which they suffer. "Eritrean Catholic Bishops Ask: 'Where Is Your Brother?'" , Awate (awate.com), 7 June 2014.

⁵¹ There is widespread anecdotal testimony as well as reports on opposition websites of the arming of civilian militias; evidence is also recorded in "Report of the Monitoring Group" (2012), op. cit., p. 9. There are likewise uncorroborated reports on opposition websites that armed operatives from the Tigray People Democratic Movement (TPDM), an ethnic Tigrayan, Ethiopian rebel group hosted by Eritrea, have been deployed against apparent civilian resistance to further round-ups of military conscripts. "A mercenary army: Isaias Afwerki's last stand", Gedab News (awate.com/author/gedab), 30 October 2013. For more on the TPDM, see www.tpdm.org; and "Report of the Monitoring Group", 13 July 2012, pp. 14-15.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Eritrean observer in exile, Ethiopia, July 2013; Israel, Dubai, Italy, and Sweden, March-July 2013; phone/Skype, Eritrean refugees in U.S., Canada and Australia, March-April 2014; Amanda Poole, "Ransoms, Remittances, and Refugees: The Gatekeeper State in Eritrea", *Africa Today*, vol. 60, no. 2 (winter 2013), p. 74.

⁵³ Even if some refugees probably do not pay the 2 per cent tax levied on the diaspora for consular services and to avoid problems for families at home, "everyone sends remittances to the families on a regular basis". Crisis Group interview, Eritrean analyst in exile, May 2014.

⁵⁴ "Until few years ago there were independent means to send money back home escaping regime-controlled channels, including the black market. However, currently the regime is maximising efforts to monopolise control of remittances channels, and *tegedelay* fully control the black market". Crisis Group Skype interview, May 2013. On remittances in general, see David Styan, "The Evolution, Uses, and Abuses of Remittances in the Eritrean Economy", in "Eritrea's Economic Survival: Summary record of a conference held on 20 April 2007", Chatham House, pp. 13-22.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Riggan, *Imagining Emigration*, op. cit., p. 92. While IMF and World Bank remittance data are not available, it is estimated that approximately one-third of Eritrea's 2005 GDP came from remittances, and this may have increased. Mussie Tessema, "Causes, Challenges, and Prospects of Brain Drain: The Case of Eritrea", *International Migration*, vol. 48, no. 3 (June 2010), pp. 131-157.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Italy, Sweden and Dubai, March-April 2013; Sudan, May 2013. In connection with his political asylum application, a former – and ultra-loyalist – minister asserted: "When-

was the proportion of young people with a more pliant pastoralist and peasant background who remained.⁵⁷ Society, both urban and rural, as well as the rank and file of the army, thus became less politically aware, engaged and active.⁵⁸

Many youths in the diaspora seem lost between agendas that range from vocal criticism of the status quo to total disengagement from the politics of their homeland. Others seem drawn to ethnic and religious identities that Eritrean nationalism did much to inhibit and that are becoming increasingly important, despite a general residual allegiance to the Eritrean nation-state.⁵⁹

Moreover, once they embark on life as émigrés, the strength of their common experience dissipates in the face of new daily challenges. Most do not intend to go back or fight for change inside Eritrea.⁶⁰ As one put it:

Let's be honest, we talk a lot about regime change. But in the end, we are just very busy trying to make it in host countries, for ourselves and to support families back home and allow younger relatives to flee. We feel [we've already] paid a huge price. No one is ready to go back and fight: this is not political activism, but pretending [to it] helps a lot to get asylum".⁶¹

While many are processing claims for asylum or are awaiting determinations, few seem to have a real interest in changing Eritrea's internal situation.⁶²

VI. An Exodus Too Far

Recently the Eritrean government's calculations of the cost of exodus versus the benefit it accrues from émigrés appear to be changing. The political reputational cost is of particular concern, especially for the still critical diaspora support. Instead of its previous dismissal of a problem, Asmara is keen to absolve itself from any political or criminal responsibility for the exodus and accompanying racketeering. The government officially condemns smuggling rings on its border with Sudan; several army

ever I raised the issue and my concern – of Eritreans that were disappearing by the tens of thousands in order to escape conscription – in one of the Cabinet [meetings] of Ministers, the President would say: 'Let them escape, the dirty skins can get lost!'. "Ali Abdu Ahmed, former Minister of Information of the State of Eritrea, Statutory Declaration to seek political asylum in Australia", October 2012; copy on file with Crisis Group.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group Skype interview, March 2013.

⁵⁸ Similarly to the 1980s, the ELPF decided to build on rural society for its survival and for the core of the army. For historical background, see Richard Reid, "The Politics of Silence", op. cit.

⁵⁹ "The Somalization of Eritrea: Stuck at Its Fluid Stage of Totalitarianism", Asmarino, 18 February 2014. Despite vocal nationalism, it is rare to find any confidence in Eritrea as a viable nation, Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopia, Sudan, Israel, Dubai, Italy, Sweden and Kenya, March-July 2013; phone/Skype, U.S., Canada, Australia and UK, March-May 2014.

⁶⁰ Though Eritrean opposition parties based in Addis Ababa have made several recent attempts to form militias among refugees in Ethiopian camps, it has never been a priority for most camp youths, "because they see [Ethiopia] just as a launching pad to the 'global North'". Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopia, May 2013.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Italy, Israel, and Sweden, March-May 2013.

⁶² Anecdotally at least, Eritrean migrants appear to have an advantage over other Africans in receiving political asylum on the grounds of resisting military conscription and political or religious persecution. Crisis Group interviews, Sweden, April 2013; European lawyer working on Eritrean asylum requests, Italy, 2013.

officers allegedly involved in the trafficking are reported to have been detained.⁶³ Officials have also participated in regional meetings on human trafficking, in cooperation with Sudan and Egypt. Many question, however, whether these acts are a late attempt to “genuinely reverse the situation” or “cosmetic actions to show activism to the international community”.⁶⁴

Despite his long antipathy to multilateral organisations, the president requested a UN-led investigation.⁶⁵ Instead, the Security Council’s Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea has uncovered government complicity in arms and human trafficking.⁶⁶ In June 2014, the UN Human Rights Council “decided to establish, for a period of one year, a commission of inquiry, to investigate all alleged violations of human rights in Eritrea, and for a period of one year [extend] the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea”.⁶⁷

The head of the National Security Service, Brigadier General Abraha Kassa, recently said that “the migration of Eritreans is not a phenomenon driven by an economic pull factor as it is usually the case in our contemporary times”, and that the human trafficking is a crime against Eritrea “conceived and orchestrated by the United States with other collaborating states, organisations and agencies”.⁶⁸ Political rhetoric aside, the statement contains a germ of truth, in so much as the exodus is not only driven by internal political discontent and official complicity with illegal networks, but also facilitated by the regional and wider international infrastructure that supports refugees, as well as the relatively welcoming asylum policies of the U.S. and EU member states.⁶⁹

Nevertheless there are clear signs immigration and asylum policies are changing: Israel, for example, has toughened its immigration policy with dramatic effects.⁷⁰ In

⁶³ Uncorroborated reports on opposition websites assert some 30 Eritrean military commanders were arrested in May 2014, including Major General Fitsum (aka Wedi Memhr); Grmai Msegna, head of Brigadier General Manjus’s office; and border guard unit head Idris Muhammad. The arrests of Manjus’s staff were allegedly carried out by a special unit led by Chief of Staff General Philippos Woldeyohanes, with the president’s blessing and acting on human trafficking intelligence from an unnamed neighbouring country. See Meskerem (meskerem.net), 1 June 2014; and “Some 30 Eritrean military commanders said arrested”, Ethio Somali Democratic Council (www.ethiosomali.com), 1 June 2014.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat working in the Horn of Africa, May 2014.

⁶⁵ According to a presidential adviser, Yemane Gebre Meskel, a senior delegation from Asmara participated in a conference on tackling human trafficking in Khartoum, Sudan, on 22 May 2014. The president’s requests in 2013 and 2014 for a UN investigation into smuggling appear a change from his denial in a 2010 interview of a migration problem. See “Eritrea: President Requested an investigation on Human Trafficking”, Geeska Afrika Online, 31 May 2014; “President Isaias Afewerki interview on Talk to Al Jazeera”, Al Jazeera (online), 22 February 2010.

⁶⁶ See fn. 36 above.

⁶⁷ “Human Rights Council creates mandate on persons with disabilities and establishes Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea”, press release, UN Human Rights Council, 27 June 2014.

⁶⁸ “Eritrea: Intelligence Briefing by The Director of National Security”, Geeska Afrika Online (www.geeskaafrika.com), 2 June 2014.

⁶⁹ The EU is especially affected, since its southern borders are where Eritrean migrants first attempt to arrive (Italy, Malta) or aspire to relocate from third countries so as to gain political asylum in countries with better social security support and more jobs and other opportunities.

⁷⁰ The official Israeli position on political asylum or refugee status for Eritreans is that “the applicants do not fulfil the criteria of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR)”. According to the interior ministry and the Advisory Committee for Refugees’ Affairs, “draft evasion or desertions are not sufficient to establish political persecution justifying a refugee status”, and applications “based solely on economic motives and not on political persecution” are rejected. The

early summer 2014, a Norwegian minister discussed in Asmara the repatriation of around 500 Eritrean migrants who “have been found not to have a need for asylum”, and a visit by the Italian deputy foreign minister to Asmara was focused on the migration issue.⁷¹

VII. Conclusion

Though clearly part of a larger global socio-economic phenomena, the Eritrean youth exodus is particularly acute, exacerbated by the government’s proclivity for large-scale social engineering like the Wefri Warsai Yika’alo campaign and powerful vested interests’ unwillingness to demobilise a sizeable standing army – though one increasingly shown to be wanting even in defensive capacity. Meanwhile, Ethiopia’s talented diplomatic corps continues to evade its country’s commitments to demarcate the border according to the EEBC decision, thus providing the Eritrean government plausible justification to continue its “state of exception”, an official mind-set that is further encouraged by a UN sanctions regime and monitoring group, a special rapporteur and an official UN investigation/inquiry on human rights.

Eritrea and the 30-year struggle that shaped it have always confounded expectations of how long apparently pathological trends can be endured. The flight of the youth is just the latest example of country’s contradictions: “[i]nstead of being dismantled by the flight of its citizens, [the regime] has been sustained” by it.⁷² However egregious human rights abuses presently are, Eritrea, both in pre- and post-independence and in peace and war, has always exported a significant portion of its population, which in turn has provided critical support to those who remained at home. The exodus follows traditions and well-trodden paths not easily shut down.

For many reasons, legal and practical – including risking exceptions to extensive, internationally-binding observances and obligations – unilateral refoulement to discourage and reverse the flow cannot be the answer. Instead, there is an ever-greater urgency for the Eritrean government, its regional neighbours and other international partners to reset their relations.

The context for this re-engagement may not be as tough a sell as it once was, in spite of the UN sanctions and human rights investigations. Neighbours’ attempts to make political capital from fleeing Eritreans, including marshalling the quarrelsome opposition, have not produced viable alternatives to the current government. Border

government affirms that, after stopping the flow of new migrants, it intends to solve the issue of those residing illegally, an estimated 37,000 to 40,000 mostly in southern Tel Aviv’s working class suburbs (the Shkhunat Hatikva, Quarter of Hope). During the December 2012 election campaign, an alleged rape of an 83-year-old Israeli woman by an Eritrean there sparked riots. The Supreme Court has ruled that irregular migrants, including minors, may be detained for up to three years. The Knesset approved an act in December 2012 to detain illegal residents, eight months after passing a law severely limiting the ability of migrants to remit funds to their home countries. In May 2013, the government said it was likely to reject all Eritrean asylum requests and that it had reached agreement with an unspecified African state willing to absorb illegal Eritrean migrants. Crisis Group interviews, Tel Aviv, May 2013.

⁷¹ Mark Anderson, “Norway minister threatens to deport Eritrean migrants”, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2014; “Deputy Minister Pistelli’s mission to the Horn of Africa. Visit to Eritrea”, foreign ministry, Rome, 2 July 2014.

⁷² Amanda Poole, “Ransoms, Remittances, and Refugees”, op. cit., p. 69.

camps will become more burdensome than tactically beneficial, especially when onward migration rather than pure escape seems to be their inhabitants' ultimate goal. The impact of the exodus on final destination countries – especially in a Europe where immigration policies are increasingly in question – demands a more creative approach to the current Eritrean government. For all sides, finding ways to end the exodus potentially could replace continuing sterile confrontation with fertile ground for cooperation.

Nairobi/Brussels, 8 August 2014

Appendix A: Map of the Horn of Africa

