

Statement of Kai Smits, PhD fellow Tilburg University

**Enslavement and Human Trafficking for Ransom of Eritrean
Asylum-Seekers and Collusion of the Eritrean Regime**

European Parliament Roundtable on Eritrea

25 October 2023

I would like to thank MEP Langensiepen and the European External Programme with Africa for inviting me to speak here today.

All protocols observed.

My name is Kai Smits, PhD researcher at Tilburg University. Together with my colleagues, we have researched human trafficking routes from the Horn of Africa, particularly Eritrea, to Europe. In these human trafficking networks, refugees are detained and tortured to extract ransom from their families and communities. They are forced to contact relatives and they are forced to beg for ransom payments of thousands of US dollars. Instead of being released after payment, the asylum-seekers are often sold on to other traffickers, and forced to extract more ransoms from relatives. The situation in which they are held are inhumane and we are told of grave human rights violations in the places where they are held. They have no escape.

With Prof Van Reisen, Prof Mawere and Morgane Wirtz, I published this year the book: *Enslaved – Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes. Human Trafficking in Libya*. The book is available online.

We looked at a five-year period in Libya and have conservatively estimated that at least 200.000 refugees and migrants have become victims of trafficking or ransom, with most of them being Eritreans. It is a highly lucrative criminal enterprise – we estimate that a conservative value of 1 billion US dollar in ransoms has been extracted from them. This is outrageous as they are vulnerable asylum-seekers and their families are also in extremely fragile situations. They need protection.

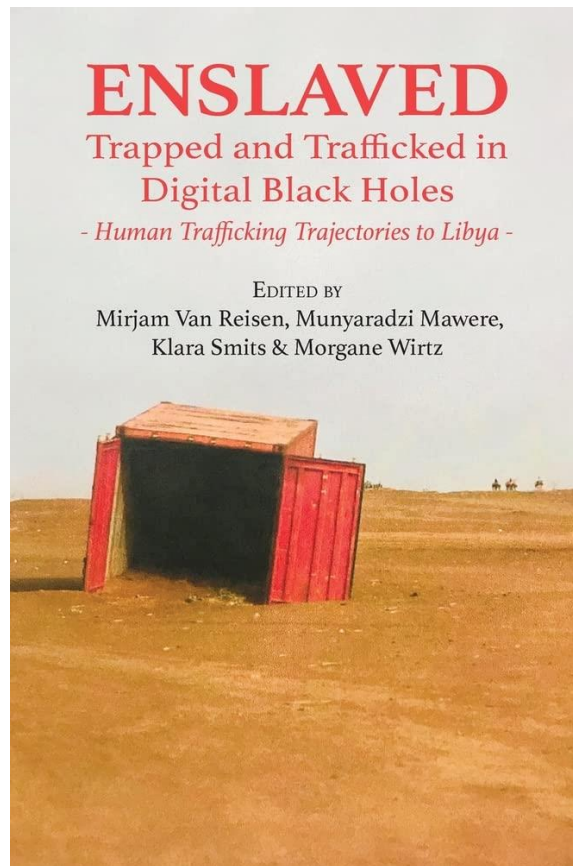
We have found that the highly organized criminal networks operate in many different countries, including in Europe, with agents. What is astounding is that we found that the criminal trafficking networks that traffic Eritrean refugees are led by Eritrean perpetrators. Three of the alleged traffickers at the top, known as John, Walid and Kidane, have been arrested and are being prosecuted.

We also found that the Eritrean regime at the highest level colludes with and facilitates the operations of the criminal human trafficking networks that keep Eritrean asylum seekers in enslavement.

This should stop. We urgently ask that the European Union takes responsibility to:

- a) Protect refugees and ensure legal pathways for asylum seekers;
- b) Support the investigation of the criminal human trafficking networks, including the collusion with the Eritrean regime.

Thank you.



<https://raee.eu/enslaved-trapped-and-trafficked-in-digital-black-holes-human-trafficking-trajectories-to-libya/>

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