

Transnational Repression at the Center of Court Case Against Alleged Eritrean Trafficker ‘Walid’

Substantive hearings begin in [Zwolle, The Netherlands](#), in November in the case against Eritrean national Tewelde Goitom, also known as ‘Walid’. The prosecution alleges that Walid led an international criminal network that detained, tortured, raped and extorted mainly Eritrean refugees in Libya, holding many in detention sites such as Bani Walid until families paid ransoms. The 191 witnesses that testified for the case all had ties to The Netherlands, where many ransom payments were made, but the same happened in other countries. The scale of the abuses, and their reach into diaspora communities, place this trial at the intersection of organized crime and transnational repression. Survivors are afraid to speak out, as the long arm of the Eritrean regime closely controls what Eritreans in the diaspora are allowed to say and do. This control is exerted in part through interpreters.

Interpreters that speak Tigrinya, the language spoken by most Eritrean refugees in the diaspora, are hard to find. This task is made more difficult because of the links that many interpreters have with organisations supporting the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party in Eritrea. Eritrea is a dictatorship, from which refugees flee because of the severe repression and forced indefinite national service. However, the repression does not stop once refugees flee the country. The [long arm of the Eritrean regime](#) reaches to any country where there is an Eritrean diaspora, including The Netherlands.

One of the tactics employed by this long arm is [infiltration](#) of organisations and institutions. As Eritrean refugees are in need of translation, interpreters are in a particularly good position to influence refugees about what they should say, how their words are translated, and to communicate any intelligence back to the Eritrean regime. It is therefore no surprise that already in 2015, an [investigation found interpreters](#) working at the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service that had ties to the Eritrean regime. Although some interpreters were dismissed, the investigation pointed to a more [structural issue](#) with Eritrean interpreters. The same issue was found in [other countries](#) too.

Survivors who want to speak out in cases such as Walid’s therefore have reasons to fear that their presence and what they say may become known to the Eritrean regime. The pro-forma hearings against Walid have been ongoing since 2023. A large public demonstration in Zwolle in July 2024 called attention not only to human trafficking but also to persistent fears about the long arm of the Eritrean regime. [A report](#) presented to the Dutch parliament document methods of Eritrean diaspora coercion including surveillance, threats, demands for payments and intimidation that includes threats against relatives back home. Those documented tactics amount to transnational repression that operates alongside, and sometimes through, criminal trafficking networks. Walid himself has also been accused of attempting to [tamper with witnesses](#). Survivors in the Walid case have reported that one of the translators present at the court urged them to just drop the case.

The transnational repression perpetrated by the Eritrean regime is part of a wider strategy to control the diaspora as the [‘Fourth Front’](#). The first, second and third front are referring to respectively the Western Defense Front, Central Defense Front and Eastern Defense Front, inside Eritrea, responsible for military control in the country; with the Fourth Front being the military defense front outside the country in the diaspora. This ‘4G’ strategy has been linked to Eritrean

militia such as Eri-Blood and Eri-Mekhete which operate as thugs for supporters of the Eritrean regime during [festivals](#) and other pro-Eritrea events. It also includes the strategy of broad surveillance of the Eritrean diaspora to control loyalty.

Survivor protection and witness security are central challenges for a trial that exposes transnational networks and threatens their influence. [Authorities have urged survivors](#) who traveled through Sudan and Libya to come forward and testify, yet many remain afraid of retaliation. Ensuring secure testimony mechanisms, including protection and reliable interpreters, is essential to enable victims to participate safely in the judicial process. At the same time, investigators should pursue not only criminal accountability for trafficking and torture but also inquiries into any links between traffickers and state or state-affiliated actors to clarify how organized crime and political repression may overlap.

The hearings in Zwolle can be followed at the court or via livestream in Dutch, English and Tigrinya at <https://streams.nfgd.nl/onderzoek-pearce-grootschalige-mensensmokkel>

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Hearing programme

Livestream: <https://streams.nfgd.nl/onderzoek-pearce-grootschalige-mensensmokkel>

<i>3 November</i>	The identity of the suspect
<i>4 November</i>	The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Lampedusa on 1 august 2015.
<i>5 November</i>	The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Augusta on 17 December 2017. The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Augusta on 28 December 2017. The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Pozzallo on 12 March 2018.
<i>11 November</i>	The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Messina on 4 February 2018. The cases victims on the boat that arrived in Messina on 24 April 2018.
<i>17 November</i>	The subject ‘criminal organization’ and; The personal circumstances of the suspect; Exercising the right to speak.
<i>18 November</i>	Reserve day
<i>19 November</i>	Indictment
<i>24 November</i>	Plea
<i>26 November</i>	Reply Rejoinder Final word of the suspect

Additional Sources:

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