

Policy Brief

Walid Case Hearings & EU/Dutch Policy on Trafficking, Torture, Extortion, Jurisdiction, and Victim Protection

Court of Zwolle, The Netherlands — November 2025 (Days 1–6)

Subject: Transnational trafficking, torture, extortion, criminal organisation, jurisdiction, victim protection, and implications for Dutch and EU policy.

The court case against Tewelde Goitom, known as “Walid,” concerns one of the most significant transnational trafficking and torture networks affecting Eritrean refugees on the Central Mediterranean Route. Dutch jurisdiction is based on the direct involvement of Dutch residents and citizens, who were forced to send ransom payments, as well as the Netherlands’ role in the Schengen area, encompassing arrivals via Italy. The societal consequences of trafficking-related debts render asylum seekers vulnerable to exploitation within the Netherlands. The prosecution has emphasised that trafficking-related extortion and coordination within the Netherlands constitute a direct link to crimes committed abroad, particularly in Libya and Sudan.

The hearings highlighted the persistent impact of Eritrean state-linked transnational repression on diaspora communities. Survivors reported fears of repercussions against their families in Eritrea and intimidation within Europe. Investigators faced challenges due to potential interference by interpreters with links to the Eritrean government, which may have influenced witness testimonies. Witnesses indicated pressure from Walid to alter or retract testimony, illustrating the risks victims face even while participating in judicial processes. This underscores the need for secure testimony procedures, vetted interpreters, and enhanced witness protection across EU jurisdictions.

Evidence presented across the hearings consistently identified a well-organised, profit-driven criminal network. Walid, together with Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, Kidane’s brother Henok, and a man known as Aziz, coordinated abductions, extortion, and transfers of refugees. The network collaborated with Libyan actors, including the Diab brothers, who controlled security, transport, and warehouses. Payments relied on hawala banking systems, with several Dutch intermediaries charged separately. The organisation operated from detention camps in Libya, controlling both the flow of persons and associated finances. Satellite imagery, forensic photographs, phone intercepts, and financial records demonstrated the structure, intent, and leadership attributed to Walid and his network.

Across Days 1–6, survivor testimony provided consistent and detailed accounts of severe beatings, torture, sexual violence, rape, starvation, and neglect. Witnesses described prisoners forced to carry out violence under threat and identified henchmen, referred to as “kapos,” who executed Walid’s orders. Survivor E. stated, “To you he may be a suspect; to me he is a perpetrator,” and Witness N. added, “I think of women who were taken away and raped. It is always in my mind.” Victims exercised their right to speak despite fear of intimidation, demanding justice and compensation. Families paid significant ransoms, often relying on community networks, highlighting the transnational financial dimension of Walid’s criminal operations.

A key aspect of the case concerns the legal distinction and relationship between cross-border human smuggling and human trafficking for ransom. While human smuggling generally involves the facilitation of illegal entry or movement of migrants across borders, it becomes a case of trafficking when victims are coerced, detained, or extorted for profit. In the Walid case, refugees initially seeking passage to Europe were held against their will, forced to pay ransoms, and subjected to physical and sexual abuse, illustrating how smuggling and trafficking often intersect. The prosecution underlined that smuggling in itself is insufficient to describe the crimes committed, as the systematic detention, torture, and resale of individuals to extract payments constitutes human trafficking for ransom. Dutch jurisdiction relies in part on this interplay: although transport from Libya was completed in Italy, the financial and coercive links to the Netherlands, including ransom payments from Dutch residents, establish sufficient grounds for prosecution.

Eritrea's ongoing grave human rights violations, including indefinite national service, political repression, and widespread abuses, foment a climate where refugees are vulnerable to exploitation. The majority of refugees entering the Netherlands originate from Eritrea, making the country a critical factor in understanding the transnational criminal networks involved. The victims of Walid's criminal network are predominantly Eritreans, and the network's leaders and "kapos" are largely Eritrean nationals, deeply embedded within the Eritrean sociopolitical landscape. Public funds and private money from the Netherlands have entered into the financial model of the criminal organisation that Walid led, linking Dutch money directly to the perpetuation of Eritrean-related trafficking and exploitation.

The prosecution presented evidence establishing the identity of Walid, of Eritrean origin. Multiple witnesses recognised him both in photographs and in court. Unique physical markers, such as a pigment spot under the eye, reinforced identification. Walid was recorded attempting to obtain false Eritrean documents and influencing witnesses from prison. While the defense contested the identity evidence, citing social media proliferation of images and procedural concerns, the prosecution argued that all evidence consistently points to Walid as the leader of the criminal network.

The Pieter Baan Centrum (PBC) psychiatric assessment noted that Walid showed no trauma-related or mood disorders, and limited empathy, though he recounted past alleged torture in Ethiopia and experiences in Eritrea. He had applied for asylum in the Netherlands in 2025, which was rejected under Article 1F of the Refugee Convention; the appeal is pending. The PBC report indicated that Walid may have underperformed on intelligence testing strategically, while demonstrating strategic thinking in other contexts.

On Day 5, the prosecution presented the indictment, charging Walid with leadership of a criminal organisation, human trafficking, torture, extortion, and unlawful detention. Evidence demonstrated coordination with Kidane and other actors to control migration flows and extract ransom. Compensation claims exceed €115,000 for victims, with €2 million sought for confiscation. The prosecutor requested the maximum Dutch sentence of 20 years, emphasising the exceptional impact on victims and broader societal interests. Videos, satellite imagery, and financial records illustrated inhumane detention conditions, abuses during transportation by land and sea, and systematic coercion and extortion across multiple countries. The prosecution highlighted the central role of Walid in a global criminal organisation and his accountability for the extensive harm inflicted on refugees.

The defense plea on Day 6 focused on acquittal, arguing that Dutch jurisdiction is lacking for the charges presented, that there is insufficient evidence, and that the suspect's identity cannot be conclusively

established. The defense emphasised that Walid had already been convicted in Ethiopia and is serving an 18-year sentence. They contested the probative value of photographs, witness statements, and expert reports on Libyan law. The defense argued that foreign actors controlled the Libyan camps and that Walid could only operate with their permission. They further challenged the legal basis for charges of extortion, human smuggling, and participation in a criminal organisation, arguing that Dutch law does not extend to crimes committed abroad without a direct link to the Netherlands. The defense requested that the court not adopt the maximum sentence, citing proportionality and prior Ethiopian conviction, and stressed that what occurred in Libya and at sea, while harrowing, falls outside the jurisdiction of Dutch courts.

Throughout the hearings, issues of victim protection, transnational repression, and international investigative cooperation have been central. Witnesses were identified only by initials to protect their identities, and some survivors could not testify due to mental distress or legal vulnerabilities. The case underscores the importance of international coordination in extradition, secure testimony collection, and effective victim support mechanisms. The extradition of Kidane from the United Arab Emirates remains pending and may impact further proceedings. Related Dutch proceedings against intermediaries facilitating ransom payments are scheduled for April 2026.

The Walid case demonstrates the complex interplay between transnational crime, human trafficking for ransom, smuggling, torture, and European jurisdiction. It highlights the critical need for secure victim testimony, international investigative cooperation, and legal frameworks capable of addressing crimes that cross multiple countries while ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable. Lessons from this case are highly relevant for Dutch and EU policy on refugee protection, combating transnational repression, and disrupting organised criminal networks that exploit vulnerable populations.

Policy Recommendations

1. Clarify Jurisdiction: Establish criteria linking transnational criminal offences to domestic legal responsibility for trafficking/ransom networks.
2. Enhance Victim Protection: Implement cross-border witness security and legal support, including protection from transnational repression.
3. Target Financial Networks: Disrupt hawala/underground banking used to fund trafficking networks.
4. Strengthen International Cooperation on Transnational Crimes and Transnational Repression: Facilitate extradition, joint investigations, and data-sharing across countries of origin, transit, and destination.
5. Strengthen Investigation of States in Transnational Crimes: Create safe points for witnesses to come forward with state sponsored support to transnational crimes.