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# Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea

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# Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements.....	xv
Justification.....	xvii
Acronyms.....	xix
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
The ongoing human trafficking crisis.....	1
Severe trauma.....	6
A crisis of accountability.....	7
Main conclusions.....	11
<b>Part 1: The Ongoing Human Trafficking Crisis.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Human Trafficking in the Sinai:</b>	
<b>Mapping the Routes and Facilitators.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction.....	19
Deliberate impoverishment and control:	
Establishing human trafficking structures.....	21
Eritrea’s illicit cross-border trade in arms and people.....	31
Abduction and trafficking to the Sinai.....	39
Involvement of Eritrean officials.....	56
In the Sinai and beyond: A coordinated	
network of traffickers.....	65
On release: Imprisoned and deported.....	72
Towards Israel.....	76
Following the ransom back to Eritrea.....	82
Conclusion.....	88
<b>Chapter 3: The Exodus from Eritrea and</b>	
<b>Who is Benefiting.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Introduction.....	95
Eritrea’s policy to push out youth:	
The students arrests of 2001.....	98
Mass detentions of 2001.....	109

The consolidation of power: 2003–2007.....	116
The post-2008 economy: Sources of funds for the regime.....	117
Crisscrossing borders: No safe haven in Ethiopia or Sudan.....	130
Surveillance and deportation.....	139
Conclusion.....	147

<b>Chapter 4: Human Trafficking Connecting to Terrorism and Organ Trafficking: Libya and Egypt.....</b>	<b>159</b>
Introduction.....	159
New routes from Sudan to Egypt and Libya.....	161
Deportation from Egypt.....	163
Held by ISIS in Libya.....	167
Beheadings by ISIS.....	177
Women abductees held by ISIS.....	180
Organ trafficking in Egypt.....	183
Conclusion.....	186

<b>Chapter 5: Eritrean Unaccompanied Minors in Human Trafficking.....</b>	<b>193</b>
Introduction.....	193
Reasons for fleeing Eritrea.....	196
The exploitation and extortion of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking.....	201
When minors become torturers.....	212
The trauma of unaccompanied minors.....	215
Conclusion.....	217

<b>Chapter 6: The Fragmentation of Families: Eritrean Women in Exile in Uganda.....</b>	<b>221</b>
Introduction.....	221
Conditions in Eritrea and reasons for flight.....	224
Migration journeys.....	229
Life in Uganda.....	237
Beyond Uganda.....	255
Lifestory: Abrehet’s journey to Uganda.....	258
Conclusion.....	264

<b>Part 2: Severe Trauma</b> .....	269
<b>Chapter 7: The Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking</b> .....	271
Introduction.....	271
Methodology.....	275
The camps where Sinai survivors live.....	278
Theoretical framework.....	281
Overview of torture practices.....	285
Impact of events scale and trauma in Sinai victims.....	290
Physical examination.....	293
Interviews.....	300
Conclusion.....	311
<b>Chapter 8: Collective Trauma from Sinai Trafficking: A Blow to the Fabric of Eritrean Society</b> .....	317
Introduction.....	317
Deliberate traumatising of friends and family networks.....	319
Secondary trauma.....	320
Pain of multiple losses.....	325
Pain of being ignored.....	327
Pain of injustice.....	328
Impacts of collective trauma.....	330
In search of healing.....	333
Healing collective trauma.....	336
Conclusion.....	340
<b>Part 3: A Crisis of Accountability</b> .....	347
<b>Chapter 9: Crimes against Humanity: The Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea</b> .....	349
Introduction.....	349
First report: Systematic and widespread, gross human rights violations.....	350
Second report: Crimes against humanity.....	352
Methodology of the COIE.....	354

Response by Eritreans in the diaspora.....	355
Response by people inside Eritrea: Silence.....	359
Ongoing ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy and national service.....	361
Response by the Government of Eritrea.....	362
Conclusion.....	363

**Chapter 10: The Long Arm of the Eritrean**

<b>Regime in the Netherlands.....</b>	<b>369</b>
Introduction.....	369
Eritrean community in the Netherlands.....	373
Impact of the long arm on integration.....	381
Forms of intimidation.....	387
The 2% tax.....	397
Conclusion.....	400

**Chapter 11: Atlantic Council: The Eritrean**

<b>Regime's US Spin Doctors? .....</b>	<b>405</b>
Introduction.....	405
What we know about the human rights situation in Eritrea....	406
The Atlantic Council’s stance.....	410
The Nevsun case.....	419
Blurring the line between policy research and lobbying.....	423
Conclusion.....	424

**Chapter 12: The Policy Agenda in Europe and Africa.....**

<b>429</b>	<b>429</b>
Introduction.....	429
The European Union.....	430
The African Union and IGAD.....	441
The African Union’s approach to trafficking.....	446
Addressing the causes of migration .....	453
Conclusion.....	454

**Chapter 13: Prosecuting Sinai Trafficking: An**

<b>Overview of Options.....</b>	<b>465</b>
Introduction.....	465
Prosecution: Essential in combating human trafficking.....	467
The international legal framework.....	468

Eritrea at the centre of Sinai trafficking..... 471  
Trafficking and the crime of enslavement..... 472  
Involvement of Eritrean officials.....474  
Trafficking as a lucrative business..... 476  
State responsibility.....479  
Individual criminal responsibility..... 481  
Prosecutorial forums..... 483  
Obligation of international community: R2P..... 488  
Conclusion..... 490

## Introduction

*Mirjam Van Reisen*

Eritrea is a beautiful place. Any new visitor would enjoy the breathtaking views from the high mountain ridges. A tourist would marvel at the beauty of the Sahel and its picturesque landscapes of sand and camels. Eritrea boasts a long sea shore and, together with its islands in the Red Sea, it could be an amazing resting place for tired travellers. Eritrea boasts of two ports in Massawa and Assab – an incredible economic asset in a very well-established geo-strategic location. In Eritrea, one finds gold, among other resources, and the country is well endowed with the raw materials for extractive industries. It provides farmland, pastures and fishing opportunities, and the people of Eritrea have lived from the land for as long as they can remember. This land is their home.

Eritrea is a relatively small country (although four times the size of Belgium), with a population of between 3–6 million people. Its people, who are from diverse ethnic origins, have lived together for centuries. It has a devout population for whom tradition and religion play an important role and family responsibilities are of the highest priority. Its culture provides beautiful music as well as healthy and tasty food. The capital of Asmara is a pearl of architecture, where visitors can enjoy Italian cappuccinos in a traditional hospitable atmosphere. Eritreans are proud of their country. This is the country they built.

### **The ongoing human trafficking crisis**

Every Eritrean in the diaspora longs to go back to their country one day. Why, then, are Eritrean youth leaving their country en

masse? This book seeks to answer this question. It identifies the harrowing trajectories that refugees from Eritrea follow to try and find a place that gives them some security. As this book demonstrates, such security is not easy to find. The long arm of the Eritrean regime in Asmara follows the refugees wherever they go. This book examines the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees to human trafficking for ransom. It describes their migration trajectories and the trauma, torture and dangers that Eritrean refugees are subjected to. Many do not survive.

This book revisits the human trafficking crisis that emerged at the end of 2008, when many young Eritrean refugees were abducted from Eritrea, Sudan or elsewhere and trafficked to the Sinai. In 2012, Antonio Guterres, the then High Commissioner for Refugees, warned that thousands of Eritreans were leaving their country each month, despite a shoot-to-kill policy at the border. Guterres called for more protection in the refugee camp of Shagarab in eastern Sudan and identified that refugees were being kidnapped and taken to the Sinai. Human rights activist and radio presenter, Meron Estefanos, aired numerous interviews on radio, in which she spoke about the victims of human trafficking for ransom who were held in captivity, tortured and killed in the Sinai Desert. Sr Azezet and campaigners in Israel published the findings of thousands of interviews with patients in the clinic of Physicians for Human Rights, where former hostages came to seek help.

*'Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between Life and Death'* and *'The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond'* (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012, 2014) documented the phenomenon and gave a detailed description of the modus operandi used in this new form of human trafficking for ransom, also called 'Sinai trafficking'. Subsequently, in 2015, anti-terrorist operations in the Sinai Desert inadvertently ended this cruel form of trafficking, although some reports have been received of refugees held in the Sinai in 2015 and 2016. An estimated 25,000–30,000 people were trafficked and tortured in the Sinai (between 2009 and 2013) and over USD 600 million in ransoms have been paid (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2014). The

majority of victims of human trafficking for ransom held in the Sinai originated from Eritrea.

Chapter 2 documents the journeys of refugees from Eritrea to the Sinai and other places. All of these routes include components of human trafficking for ransom. It looks at why particularly young people are leaving and tries to understand how the different journeys of smuggling and abduction are connected. This chapter locates the origin of Sinai trafficking within Eritrea and points to how a deliberate policy of impoverishment and human rights abuses has driven the people out of the country. It argues that the creation of a widespread illicit internal and cross-border black market, together with stringent controls on the movement of people, has created an environment in which human trafficking and smuggling were able to flourish and became embedded in the 'system'.

This chapter presents evidence that arms smuggling routes and networks from Eritrea were used for the implementation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and that the Eritrean regime controlled the arms/trafficking operations. There is strong evidence that the trafficking networks are linked directly to the Eritrean military. In the Sinai, hostages were forced to collect ransoms from relatives over mobile phones while being tortured. These ransoms were routinely paid through mobile money transfer systems in Asmara or to agents abroad believed to be linked to the financial network underpinning it. From the analysis of the interviews, the shocking reality emerges of a country that trafficks and extorts its citizens outside its own territory. The authors raise the question to what extent the Government of Eritrea is responsible for human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and for the atrocities that were carried out as part of this practice against the Eritrean victims of such crimes.

Chapter 3 looks at why there is a mass exodus taking place from Eritrea and who is benefiting. It is based on interviews that describe a deliberate policy by the government to rid the country of its youth, as they have the critical capacity to criticise the government. This policy has been carried out through the mass detention (and torture)

of youth. The impoverishment of the population and the creation of a black market in Eritrea have resulted in an illicit culture of finances, in which the revenue generated by smuggling and trafficking is tied to those in power. In this chapter, Mirjam Van Reisen and Meron Estefanos demonstrate that the causes of human trafficking of Eritrean youth have not gone away. Instead, the practices and modus operandi have been extended to Ethiopia and Sudan. The modus operandi are facilitated by information communication technologies (ICTs): ransoms and other financial transactions are negotiated with relatives over the phone who contribute to the release and support of the refugees through mobile money transfers, while trafficking networks make extensive use of ICTs to coordinate logistics as well as global financial transactions.

In both of these countries, pressures caused by the harassment of Eritrean refugees have created an atmosphere of fear. In Sudan, large groups of Eritrean refugees have been deported back to Eritrea or are being detained. The collection of ransom and extortion of refugees is ongoing. Paramilitary groups are believed to be rounding up Eritrean refugees and hundreds of refugees are reportedly being held against their will and threatened with deportation unless they pay the ransom. From the interviews, the researchers understand that payments of ransoms for people held in Sudan are made in Asmara. The vulnerability of the Eritrean refugees – whom at all costs try to ensure that they are not sent back to Eritrea for fear of retaliation – has been leveraged to create a widespread system of fear and exploitation. From the interviews carried out for this research, it emerges that the Government of Eritrea is directly involved in the organisation of the round-ups, extortion, and deportations from Sudan to Eritrea. With nowhere to go, refugees are crisscrossing between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya in search of a place with some relative safety.

Chapter 4, discusses the excesses emerging in Libya and Egypt, fed by the ongoing pressures that young Eritreans are facing in their attempt to reach safer shores. In Libya, groups of hundreds of young refugees have been captured by the terrorist groups of ISIS, who

have expanded their operations to North Africa. Based on interviews, the authors (Mirjam Van Reisen and Meron Estefanos) demonstrate that this situation is reason for serious concern. Among other things, tens (if not hundreds) of refugees have been beheaded, and a testimony was received that Eritrean refugees who had been deported from Israel to Africa have been killed in such incidents. There is systematic and widespread sexual violence against Eritrean women refugees, including rape. If they are Christian, women are forced to convert to Islam. Women are also forced to marry ISIS fighters, with the aim, according to one interviewee, to bear the children of ISIS fighters.

In Egypt, hundreds of Eritrean refugees who are declared illegal are in prisons and face deportation to Eritrea, creating fear and anxiety among the refugee population. Such fear is fertile ground for exploitation and the most vulnerable refugees face the most severe abuse. Eritrean refugees have for a long time spoken about the organ harvesting trade which, in their mind, is linked to human trafficking for ransom. One of the first reports on organ harvesting and human trafficking for ransom was published by Mekonnen and Estefanos in 2011. In 2016, members of an organ trafficking ring were arrested in Egypt. Chapter 4 investigates the suspicion that organ harvesting is connected to human trafficking.

Chapter 5 discusses the plight of unaccompanied children in the context of human trafficking for ransom and how they are particularly vulnerable. Having little access to resources to pay ransoms, they are exploited for their labour and for the services they can render to the trade in human commodities. Authors Mirjam Van Reisen and Taha Al-Qasim argue that, due to the fragmentation of Eritrean families, many young children and minors become divorced from their parents. The mandatory and indefinite national service in Eritrea, in which the government assigns most members of the population to a position in the military or civil service, has resulted in children being raised without one (or both of) their parents. The fear of being drafted, drives them to leave Eritrea at an early age. Being under-aged and without resources, they are extremely

vulnerable to being caught up in the human trafficking trade, as they are left without alternative options.

Chapter 6 considers the particular situation of Eritrean women refugees. Based on interviews in Uganda, their difficult situation is explored. The vulnerability of women refugee is exacerbated by the fragmentation of their families and support networks. Many women who flee Eritrea end up alone or only in company of their children. They become the sole protectors, breadwinners and caretakers of their families. Single mothers are by far the most vulnerable to all of the risks faced by women refugees. The authors of this chapter, Eyob Ghilazghy, Sacha Kuilman and Lena Reim, find sexual violence reported by women refugees from Eritrea during all the stages of their displacement. Women refugees, who have experienced serious trauma in their migration journeys (and while living in exile), generally remain isolated from host communities. In exile, they continue to experience exploitation, extortion and extreme economic hardship.

### **Severe trauma**

In Chapter 7, Mirjam Van Reisen, Selam Kidane and Lena Reim examine the mental and physical trauma that has resulted from the severe and inhumane conditions in which the victims of Sinai trafficking were held. This chapter brings together several pieces of research on Sinai trafficking victims in refugee camps in Ethiopia. A series of interviews were held with these victims. In addition, thirty-five Sinai survivors filled out Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R) tests measuring post-traumatic stress and a medical examination was carried out on 28 survivors. The research inventorises the torture practices carried out in Sinai trafficking. The inventory of torture methods resemble those in Eritrea, as described in the report by the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). The medical examination established the severe impact of the torture practices experience by the victims. The findings reveal serious life-long damage, including as a result of severe and extreme forms of sexual violence. The

researchers found extremely high levels of psychological trauma; the extent of these symptoms are cause for serious concern. The lack of attention to the victims' trauma and the lack of support systems, as well as the unavailability of any form of justice and accountability, has left them in a state of hopelessness and delayed their healing. They are victims of a forgotten crisis.

In Chapter 8, Selam Kidane and Mirjam Van Reisen introduce the concept of 'collective trauma' to describe the collective nature of the trauma which is experienced by the Eritrean community at large. They argue that the sharing of extremely traumatising events, including the situation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, has caused collective trauma in the Eritrean community. Collective trauma emerges when people who have a sense of belonging to one another perceive fearful and painful events together, which affects their collective consciousness and memory. Collective trauma impairs rational decision-making. It is argued that torture in the context of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai was organised to include family and friends who were contacted by mobile phone during the torture, hence, deliberately exposing relatives to the experience of torture as secondary victims. Traditional forms of trauma have re-emerged in diaspora communities (and in Eritrea). This chapter provides a study of ICTs used for communication among refugee communities and the sharing of the atrocities on ICT platforms is identified as contributing to the collective trauma. This chapter explores whether ICTs can be a possible means to help address post-traumatic stress symptoms by methods that make use of the same communication channels through which the traumatic events were shared.

### **A crisis of accountability**

The reports of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (COIE) (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, 2016) constitute an important tool for the international community in developing accountability mechanisms for Eritrea. These reports

describe the situation within Eritrea, from which the refugees are fleeing. In Chapter 9, the findings of the COIE are presented, as well as the way in which these findings were received by Eritreans. While members of the Eritrean leadership denied the content of the report and argued that the methodology of the report was flawed, the authors, Höfner and Tewolde-Berhan, argue that the methodology is in line with other Commissions of Inquiry and consistent with the findings of independent academic researchers. The COIE gathered extensive evidence, using ICTs as a way of gathering a maximum number of testimonies, and carried out verification examinations to ensure the validity of the information collected.

The COIE produced two reports: one that provided extensive findings on the situation in Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015) and a second report in which the Commission concluded that ‘crimes against humanity’ are taking place in Eritrea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016). The 2016 report received widespread endorsement from Eritreans in the diaspora and was welcomed with public demonstrations of support in refugee camps (Shemelba, Mai Ayni and Hitsats) and among refugee communities in Addis Ababa, Tel Aviv, The Hague, New York, and Geneva. The report of the Commission of Inquiry raised hope.

However, the report has not changed the policies of the Government of Eritrea, which, according to the COIE, qualify as crimes against humanity. A shoot-to-kill policy at the Eritrean border is still in place and fresh reports have been received of incidents at the border. The nature of Eritrea’s national service and its character of slavery had not changed. National service continues to be indefinite. Recent reports by the UN have confirmed the expected serious level of malnutrition in the country due to a drought, which is denied by the government. The Arbi Harnet campaign identified cholera outbreaks in the country, which were equally denied by the regime (Asmarino, 2016a, 2016b). Eritrea is a country in denial.

Chapter 10 discusses the control exercised by the Eritrean regime over members of the Eritrean diaspora in new countries of residence. Eritrean refugees constituted the second largest group of refugees in

the Netherlands in 2016, after Syrian refugees, totalling 31,000 refugees (NOS, 2017). The chapter identifies three migration waves of Eritrean refugees. The last wave pertains especially to young refugees. While in other chapters, reference is made to the global presence of the Eritrean regime to control their (former) nationals, this chapter zooms in on the situation in the Netherlands. The authors of the chapter, Klara Smits, DSP Group and Tilburg University present a translation of a report by DSP Group and Tilburg University, on the situation of influence by the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands. Based on a hundred interviews, the group of researchers concluded that the regime organises surveillance of members of the Eritrean community in the Netherlands through the youth organs of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), churches and the Eritrean embassy. The chapter identifies the methods of progressive intimidation, as well as the practice of collecting payments (taxes and other financial contributions) from members of the diaspora. Such financial contributions are often paid in Asmara or to agents from Eritrea at festivals and meetings and in church.

Chapter 11 looks how the Atlantic Council, a think tank on international affairs with its headquarters in Washington, has become a mouth piece in favour of the Eritrean regime, as part of a larger strategy to target opinion leaders, diplomats and politicians. The author, François Christophe, describes the situation in Eritrea, based on the analysis of Yoel Gibrehiwet (Jeangène Vilme, & Gouéry, 2015), as similar to Russian dolls: The tens of thousands of prisoners populating Eritrea's jails make up the narrowest circle, the 'prison within a prison within a prison'; a broader, middle circle includes the hundreds of thousands of military conscripts whom the government uses as forced labourers; and, finally, the outer circle encompasses the entire population, who live in fear of arrest and are forbidden from leaving the country; hence, the depiction of Eritrea as a 'prison state'.

It is argued that the Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, Bronwyn Bruton, has persistently ignored the obvious

realities in Eritrea, denying the scale and seriousness of the human rights violations taking place. Bruton particularly denies the shoot-to-kill policy at the border, ignoring the available evidence, including from military personnel who testified that they have shot at people trying to flee the country. This seems to be part of a broader strategy to play down the human rights violations taking place in Eritrea and to make them seem outside government responsibility. This chapter argues that the position of the Atlantic Council is linked to the donation it received from Mining Company Nevsum, which exploits gold extraction in Eritrea and has been accused of exploiting national service recruits as a means of forced labour (or slavery).

In Chapter 12, Zara Tewelde-Berhan, Martin Plaut and Klara Smits discuss the policy agenda in Europe and Africa in response to the issues discussed in this book. This chapter gives an overview of the failure of engagement between the EU and Eritrea since 2000 until the present time. The refugee crisis has triggered response mechanisms in which the EU is seeking collaboration with the Government of Eritrea and other governments in the region in order to curb migration. In 2014, a ‘new beginning’ of cooperation was announced, which evolved into the Khartoum process, even though the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry has somewhat complicated the matter of active collaboration. The Khartoum process has transferred the problem of resolving the migration problem from the EU on to the countries in the wider Horn of Africa region. However, these policies do not tackle any of the root causes of the problems. The Africa Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development have started to implement policies to counter human trafficking, but with limited success. This chapter is pessimistic about the current policy direction as a realistic basis for the resolution of human trafficking for ransom in the region. The authors argue that the policies of the Europe Union seem to encourage those responsible for human trafficking for ransom to continue such practices with impunity.

In Chapter 13, Daniel Mekonnen and Wegi Sereke analyse the crisis of accountability regarding human trafficking for ransom of

Eritrean refugees. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea has provided a clear interpretation of its findings regarding the situation within Eritrea. However, more work can and should be done to understand the responsibility of the state of Eritrea for human trafficking from within the country to places outside the country. The authors argue that the prosecution of the entire human trafficking chain is paramount to end impunity. Eritrea appears to be at the centre of human trafficking and enslavement, and the existence of a *prima facie* link between Sinai trafficking and the human rights situation in Eritrea can be established. The authors argue that the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea has applied a conservative *ratione loci*, especially in light of the widespread system in which high-level Eritrean officials are involved in human trafficking networks across the region. Having established the culpability and responsibility of the Eritrean State, the authors argue that accountability mechanisms must be established and those responsible brought to justice.

## **Main conclusions**

What emerges from the analysis in this book is the similarities between the systems governing the realities of Eritrean refugees within Eritrea and outside, which are distinguished only by different levels of excess. More research needs to be done to understand how, in what way, and why systems inside the country reflect those outside. Examples of areas on which more work can be done to understand the patterns and connections across geographical regions include the following:

- The similarity of torture practices within Eritrea and in the Sinai ‘torture camps’, where many Eritreans were held
- The connectivity of surveillance of Eritreans in the diaspora and the intimidation practices used
- The connectivity of financial networks across countries and the payment of ransoms and other financial contributions in Asmara

- Ongoing specific practices to drive youth from the country
- Patterns of sexual violence inside and outside Eritrea
- The fragmentation of families across geographies
- The use of ICTs to facilitate crimes such as human trafficking for ransom

This study identifies the link between human trafficking to the Sinai (and beyond) and Eritrea. It defines this tragedy as emerging from the new possibilities provided by ICTs. ICTs are an essential component of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom: through mobile phones, ransoms are collected and mobile money transfers made. The trafficking networks operate at the global level, making maximum use of the flexibility that ICTs provide in managing and overseeing their operations. This constitutes a new business model, one that makes full use of the enhanced capabilities provided by ICTs. This study shows the potential for the use of new technologies to be perverted by criminal elements, particularly when introduced in the context of extreme poverty and vulnerability.

Furthermore, this study raises the issue of collective trauma. The direct communication between victims of human trafficking and relatives enabled by ICTs creates a virtual presence, resulting in the collective experience of trauma. This study concludes that Eritrean communities (within Eritrea and in the diaspora) and Eritrean society have suffered collective trauma facilitated by the use of ICTs, through which narratives of tragedies are shared and are integrated into a collective consciousness of desperation, vulnerability and shame.

In a sad state of affairs, refugees from Eritrea, many at a very young age, are driven out of Eritrea by a policy of deliberate impoverishment by the ruling regime as a way of exercising control. Young Eritrean refugees crisscross between countries in the Horn of Africa and North Africa in search of a safe place. They do so in the realisation that returning to Eritrea is not an option. But, there are few places of safety. Refugees from Eritrea are surveilled in many countries of the region, including Sudan and Ethiopia. The risk of

deportation makes them vulnerable to extortion (to avoid being sent back to Eritrea). They are looted, threatened, intimidated, violated, and held for ransom. Women routinely suffer sexual violence.

At the same time, crimes against humanity are ongoing in Eritrea. Human trafficking is organised from within Eritrea and the lines between human trafficking and smuggling are blurred. Refugees believe that traffickers from within Eritrea are connected to the broader network operating outside Eritrea, which involves perpetrators along all the routes. Many who flee stay within the region, but feel that they are in constant danger. Thousands of Eritrean refugees are deported from Sudan and Egypt to Eritrea, where many disappear in national service camps, prisons or worse.

The current population of Eritrea is unknown, with estimates ranging from between 3 to 6 million people. In 2016, it was estimated that 60,000 people left Eritrea in the hands of smugglers or human traffickers. By 16 October 2016, over 105,000 officially registered refugees from Eritrea had arrived in Europe (cumulative total since 2009) through the Central Mediterranean route alone (Frontex, 2016). The average cost paid by a refugee from Eritrea to reach Europe is estimated at USD 10,000 (based on research conducted for this book). This includes ransom payments. The most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion (calculated by author).

It is not Eritrea as a country that benefits from illicit trade including human trafficking, but individuals within the regime. In interviews, refugees never refer to the government, they refer to the 'HGDEF' (the Tigrinya abbreviation for the People's Front for Democracy and Justice – PFDJ) when pointing to those in power and controlling the country. They also refer to the HGDEF or PFDJ when identifying who is benefiting from the trade in Eritreans. The HGDEF or PFDJ is seen as the organisation running the country, as well as controlling Eritreans outside its borders.

Young people are especially vulnerable to human trafficking. Embarking on such dangerous journeys, often without support networks, they are at constant risk of extortion and exploitation. This

reality is of great concern. The involvement of youth in establishing accountability and promoting healing and resolution for trauma is critical. This requires a set of policies that will help provide support for the trauma suffered. There is an urgent need to deliver justice for the crimes committed and to end the impunity that human traffickers have enjoyed. This will require actions that seek to protect the victims of human trafficking and integrate them into host communities. Programmes are needed that create safe places for the vulnerable refugees from Eritrea, including, and especially, youth.

Eritrea is a wonderful country of gentle people full of grace, strengthened in their resolve and old traditions, and a deeply-rooted sense of culture and religion. Any visitor who takes the time to enjoy the beauty of this country in the company of its hospitable inhabitants will appreciate what it has to offer. However serious the tragedy is of a country that trades in its own people, Eritreans are resilient. One day the people of Eritrea will celebrate a life in freedom in the country they call home.

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