



## **Webinar - Voices from Tigray - Human trafficking of Eritrean refugees**

Thank you for allowing me to speak in this important webinar about the situation of refugees in Tigray. I am a PhD candidate and researcher on human trafficking at Tilburg University, and I focus particularly on the situation of Eritrean refugees that travel along the routes that go through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya.

Most of the people I have spoken to in the context of my research so far have fled before the start of the conflict in Tigray. Many of them have stayed for a long or shorter time in refugee camps in Tigray and Sudan. Even before the start of the conflict, refugees feel forced to keep moving. They did not feel safe, and were unable to build livelihoods. The movement of people has traditionally led to migration routes of which many have existed for hundreds of years. However, recent forced movement combined with technology such as mobile phones has led to some networks that do not focus on transportation of people, but on extortion. In the last 15 years, these networks have increasingly used a combination of tech - mobile phones, social media - to torture people, broadcast their voices and images and extort ransom from their family and the community.

This has hit Eritrean refugees particularly hard, as friends and family - including family abroad - can be forced to pay high prices for to save their loved one, even if it does not guarantee their safety or even their freedom. They can be sold again to another trafficker just as easily, or die trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. We will hear much more about the situation in Libya, a destination for many of the trafficked refugees, later this webinar.

Refugees have long been forced to make use of smuggling networks, which often turns into a situation trafficking, in order to move. The current situation in Tigray, which has been an unprecedented attack on the rights of protection for refugees, has been the latest trigger for forced onwards movement. The close to 100.000 Eritrean refugees residing in Tigray at the start of the war - and these include only those officially registered by UNHCR - are now mixed in with displaced people from Tigray, in search of a safe heaven. For Eritreans, they face the additional threat of kidnapping and forced return to Eritrea.

The refugees have nowhere to go. It should be remembered that by far not all people flee to Europe, many try to go for example towards Kenya or Uganda. However, the routes have been closing. This situation is the most dangerous for the refugees, because they have no choice but to rely on services of people who may end up torturing them. Already, there have been reports of extortion taking place among the refugees trapped in the conflict.

The refugees fleeing from Tigray are in urgent need of protection now and the international community should recognise in this that not only should they look at human rights abuses that have taken place in to context of the conflict, but also human rights abuses that may result from the forced movement. This is why refugee protection should be the priority at this very moment, and policy should focus on this, rather than stopping migration.

(The traffickers in charge do not drive the cars; they make sure to keep their distance.)