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The Involvement of Unaccompanied Minors from Eritrea in Human Trafficking

2 June 2016

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Foreword

Between 2008 and 2014 a new form of human trafficking emerged in the Sinai, called trafficking for ransom. The situation was studied by myself, investigative journalist Meron Estefanos, and Prof Dr Conny Rijken. In follow up research in 2015 and 2016, I travelled regularly to the camps in Northern Ethiopia where many unaccompanied minors arrive from Eritrea as refugees. The youngest unaccompanied child I met there was five years old, accompanied by a sibling only a few years older.¹ I made these journeys with PhD student Selam Kidane.

The ongoing and deepening tragic situation in Eritrea, which motivates these children to take such a hazardous journey, and the desperation that underpins their situation, came as a shock, as did the vulnerability of these children to the trafficking networks. It is a deeply worrying situation. The increased attention on Eritrean unaccompanied minor refugees underlines the need for a deeper understanding of the reasons for their vulnerability and the modalities by which they fall into the hands of trafficking gangs and (temporarily) even become part of them.

This report has particularly benefited from the interviews carried out and shared by Meron Estefanos. It has also benefited from the input of Africa Monitors, which investigated the subject through their network. I am grateful for their contribution. I would also like to thank Susan Sellars-Shrestha for her careful editing of the report.

2 June 2016

Mirjam van Reisen

Introduction

This report looks at how trafficking organisations operate in Eritrea and Northern Africa and the role of Eritrean minors in these organisations and their vulnerability to trafficking.

The situation is summed by a recent report by Africa Monitors (2016) entitled *Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*, which states that:

Children, as young as 8, have been reported to have crossed the border to Ethiopia from the southernmost parts of Eritrea. This has been happening since the early 00's but started turning into a major phenomenon after 2007 when droughts hit the southern region's farmers. The economy was failing, most basic supplies were scarce. In some towns like Mendefera, water, if available at all cost as much as 2 USD for a barrel before the summer of 2007. Before 2009 the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] was arranging the return of young minors to their parents from the camps. Those children usually crossed the border from the last villages near the border with Ethiopia. Those children who expressed willingness to return back to their homes were sent back within few months but many chose to remain.²

What is the background to the large number of unaccompanied children identified among the Eritrean refugees, and why are they so susceptible to human trafficking? How do Eritrean minors end up becoming part of the human trafficking network? And as part of these networks, what tasks do they perform and how are they able to escape from these roles? These are the questions looked at in this report.

During one of my visits to camps in Northern Ethiopia in 2016, staff in one of the camps explained that 700 unaccompanied children had arrived, and we saw a large group of around 50 children arrive that day.³ It was also clear that, despite the relatively safe environment established for the children in the camps, officials had little confidence that they could keep all of the children out of the hands of the traffickers. They said that, from experience, a good number of the children would continue on their hazardous journey to

Sudan and Ethiopia, a trip that cannot be made without the involvement of the trafficking networks.

More worrying was the observation by camp staff that many unaccompanied children were living in the camps without any support. These were children who had arrived with parents or care-taking adults, but who were orphaned due to the death or disappearance of their parents or care-taking adults, or found themselves alone for other reasons. These children were not registered as unaccompanied children, but were left to fend for themselves in the difficult circumstances of the refugee camps.⁴ We learnt that the Protestant Church had taken the initiative to try and help some of the children whose fate was known to the church officials in the refugee camps.

The background to this report is the studies conducted on the human trafficking of refugees from Eritrea to the Sinai between 2008 and 2014. This new form of trafficking, also known as 'Sinai trafficking' or 'trafficking for ransom', involves the collection of ransom as a central element of a new business model that incorporates especially refugees from Eritrea (including minors and unaccompanied minors) and has been extensively described in several studies.⁵

A further basis for this report is provided by an overview of the literature on human trafficking in this region and an Internet search to identify available sources, as well as interviews with refugees and minors who served in the trafficking networks. As part of my investigations, I carried out regular visits to Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya. In addition, interviews with refugees in Sudan and Egypt have helped my understanding of the modus operandi of the Sinai traffickers. Members and leaders of the refugee communities have also conducted interviews and shared their findings with me and alerted me to information on social media that is relevant to understanding the modus operandi of the trafficking for ransom.

The situation of the minors, unaccompanied and separated, as the most vulnerable group in the exodus from Eritrea has received increasing attention. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetaruth, presented a report on Eritrean unaccompanied

minors as refugees in 2016. Special Rapporteur Keetaruth recognises that the large number of people fleeing Eritrea and relatives left behind in national service, military service or one of the many prisons or detention facilities has effectively orphaned many Eritrean children in a practical sense, as they are divorced from parents and adult care-takers and may not know their whereabouts. There has been a rapid and steady increase in unaccompanied minors from Eritrea arriving in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan.⁶ According to figures provided by the Special Rapporteur, Eritrean children constitute the largest group of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy. In 2014, 3,394 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 13,026 unaccompanied children, and, in 2015, 3,092 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 12,360.⁷

This report looks closely at the 'no-fee deals' offered by traffickers, which target especially unaccompanied minors on migration routes, enticing them into trafficking arrangements. This report has been compiled with respect for ethical considerations with regards to the need for anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the names of the minors referred to.

In the next section, the current situation in Eritrea is examined to explain the drive and motivation of Eritrean minors to flee their country. This is followed by an overview of the organisation of trafficking along the routes that minors fall into in the region. The modus operandi of trafficking for ransom will then be presented, including some witness statements to provide further evidence of how minors are incorporated into the trafficking networks. Finally, conclusions are presented in the last section.

Conditions in Eritrea

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa on the shores of the Red Sea. Neighbouring countries are Djibouti, Ethiopia and Sudan. Eritrea gained independence in 1993 after victory over arch rival Ethiopia in 1991, ending a 30-year war. However, the dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea continued with a new war over the border in 1998. An international agreement to settle the border dispute followed, but failure to implement the agreement has protracted the conflict between the two countries.⁸

On the Eritrean side, the Border Control Authority is in charge of border management. The 912 km border between Eritrea and Ethiopia is heavily guarded on both sides. Between the Eritrea and Ethiopian border is a shoot-to-kill zone patrolled by Eritrean Border Control Authority. Despite promises by the Eritrean authorities to end the shoot-to-kill policy, incidents of injury, death and capture of Eritrean refugees attempting to flee the country continue to be reported on the border. Fleeing Eritrea is regarded as an act of treason and desertion. Those who are captured usually end up in one of the many jails and detention centres in Eritrea.

The 605 km border between Eritrea and Sudan is a more open border, but is also controlled on the Eritrean side by the Border Control Authority. This border provides a challenging route, given the many internal check points in Eritrea and the fact that free travel is not allowed within Eritrea and citizens are assigned to the specific locations where they live and are authorised to be.

National Service is one of the major reasons for Eritrean refugees to flee their country.⁹ According to the United Nations, 5,000 refugees escape from the country each month, despite the difficulties involved in fleeing and the dangers associated with it. Eritrean National Service became indefinite after the 1998 war with Ethiopia. It is compulsory for those in their final year of school to enter the military training camp of Sawa. Since 1998, recruits have not been released and most minors do not see their fathers while growing up, as their fathers are in National Service. Repeated and regular imprisonment and detention

are part of the national service regime. Many military conscripts have fled or attempted to flee or have disappeared. Minors who grow up under these circumstances lack family support, fear the National Service and are generally unmotivated to do well educationally, given the lack of prospects in the country, other than to join the military service.¹⁰

Women and girls also enter military service and national service, although women with children are released. Girls are usually assigned domestic tasks and are expected to provide services to please the military hierarchy, including sexual services. The breakup of the family because of indefinite military service has been identified as a major factor in the mass exodus of unaccompanied children from Eritrea, as explained in the report by Africa Monitors (2016):

When the government wouldn't let the fathers of the school age children of the early 2000s take care of their families, it was in effect deciding the fates of the children. Tens of thousands of young fathers had died during the war, leaving the women to raise their children alone. The economic policies of the government made the situation worse for the poorest part of the society. And this was happening before there was time to address even the issues that originated before 1991.¹¹

Military service is one part of national service. Service within the administration, the ministries and local authorities is also part of national service, which is generally seen as the 'high end' of national service. For all national service members, the situation remains difficult because of low pay (Eritrean nakfa 500 a month, approximately USD 25), inability to support themselves and their family, inability to carry out family obligations, lack of acceptance of conscientious objection, lack of freedom over life decisions, inability to live a family life and participate in marriage and the raising of children, protracted ill treatment, imprisonment and detention without access to the legal system and rule of law, and the protracted situation of uncertainty, random imprisonment and detention, and collective punishment.

Eritrea lacks any civil space and 'citizenship' is regarded as a domain over which the party decides, both in the public and private realm. In an interview reported by Special

Rapporteur Keetaruth, she quotes a minor's understanding of his reason for fleeing the country: "He wanted a life of his own, rather than one which would make him 'belong' to the state."¹²

The situation of National Service in Eritrea affects children in a serious way. UN Special Rapporteur Keetaruth expressed concern for the vulnerable situation of Eritrean children, especially children of "national service evaders and deserters, who face detention and enforced disappearance and their children and other family members are not informed of their whereabouts"¹³, effectively leaving children orphaned or semi-orphaned. Keetaruth also pointed to "the allegations of forced underage recruitment, including through the frequent practice of round-ups called 'giffa', despite the legal minimum age for recruitment being set at 18"¹⁴, which are experienced as a threat by Eritrean minors. She further identified that "a large number of people leaving the country, including unaccompanied children, face the risk of being trafficked, smuggled or abducted".^{15 16} Keetaruth concluded that:

...it is important to ensure protection in the treatment of unaccompanied children, as they face greater risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, military recruitment, child labour and detention. It has been brought to my attention that some States have failed to provide adequate protection as some children continue to be exposed to various human rights violations while in refugee camps or along migration routes.¹⁷

The report *Young and astray: An assessment of factors driving the movement of unaccompanied children and adolescents from Eritrea into Ethiopia, Sudan and beyond*, by the Women's Refugee Commission (2013), listed similar reasons for the disproportionately large number of Eritreans among the unaccompanied minors.¹⁸

The Special Rapporteur focused her research on the reasons why unaccompanied and separated minors leave Eritrea. She expressed concern that these children need special protection:

In leaving Eritrea, the unaccompanied children are subjected to an array of protection risks, starting right during the clandestine border crossing. In doing so they become vulnerable to

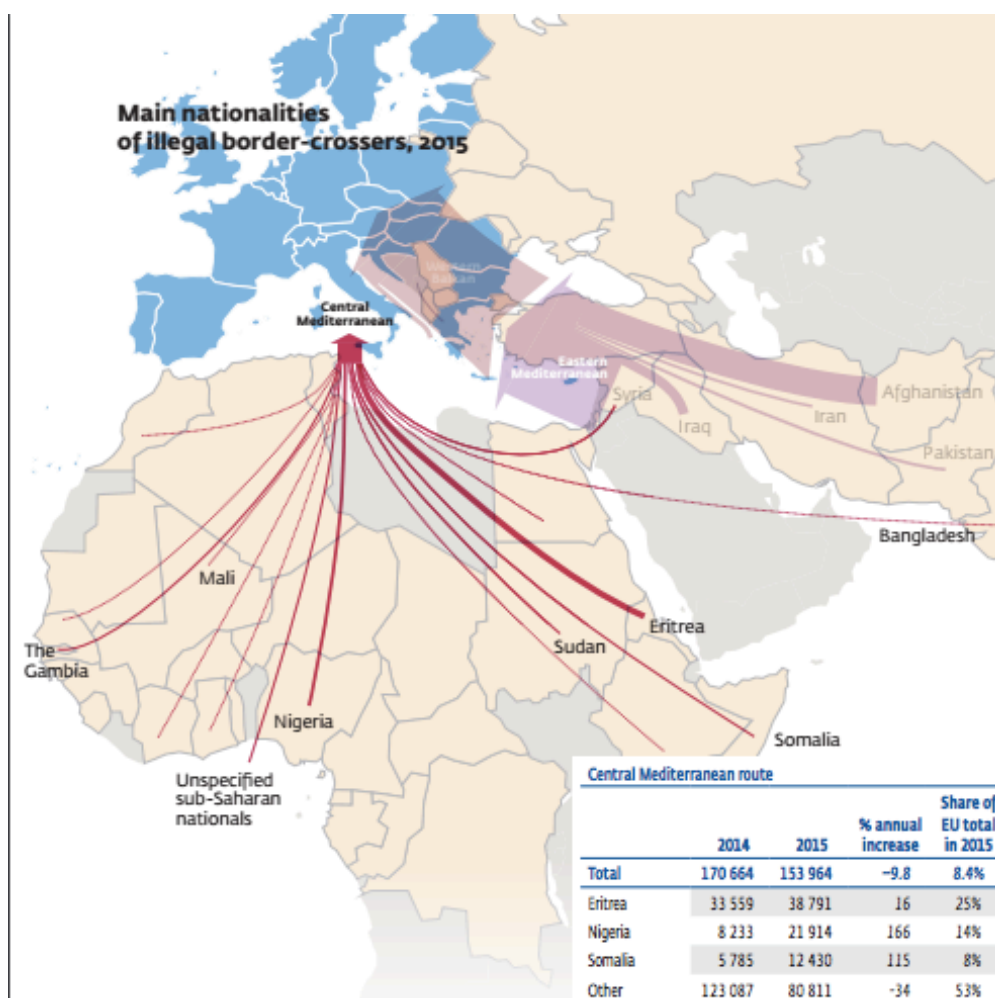
other violations including trafficking, abduction for ransom, sexual violence, torture and other cruel and inhuman treatment, among other numerous dangers. They shared with me some of their experiences in travelling from Eritrea in the hands of smugglers and traffickers in the different territories, though this was not the focus of my investigations.¹⁹

The lack of protection makes unaccompanied and separated minors vulnerable to abuse and extortion, especially if they do not receive any support from outside family or other support networks.

Routes

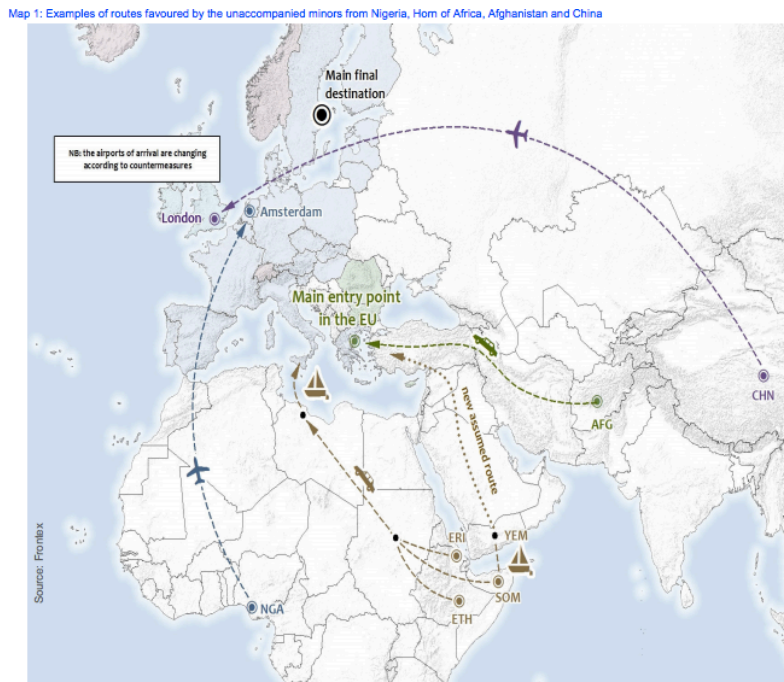
Since 2015, the Central Mediterranean route across the Mediterranean Sea has been a major route for Eritrean refugees. Eritrea is among the top countries of origin of refugees using this route. A rapid increase in Eritrean refugees occurred between 2010 (55 Eritreans) and 2013 (over 10,000 Eritreans) and again more than doubled in 2014 and 2015 (to over 30,000 Eritreans), according to Frontex.²⁰

Graph 1: Map of refugees using the Central Mediterranean route in 2014 and 2015 (Source: Frontex Risk Analysis, 2016)²¹



A recent report by EU Frontex describes the main routes used by unaccompanied minors to Europe. For Eritreans, the main route is from Ethiopia and Sudan, through Libya and the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.

Graph 2: Map of routes taken by unaccompanied minors to Europe (Source: Frontex, 2016)²²



The route through Libya opened up only in 2014/2015, after having been closed during the NATO action in Libya. Earlier, following a deal in 2008 in which then Italian President Berlusconi agreed with then Libyan President Khadafy that refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy would be returned to Libya, Eritrean refugees were looking for alternative routes. The alternative route was the result of the fact that Italy returned refugees to Libya which in turn deported Eritrean refugees back to Eritrea, giving rise to a major fear among Eritrean refugees of refoulement to Eritrea and repercussions (prison, disappearances) imposed by the Eritrean regime.

Therefore, a new route opened in 2008/2009, from Eritrea to Ethiopia and Sudan to the Sinai desert. The route from Eritrea to the Sinai desert is illustrated in Graph 3.

Graph 3: Route from Eritrea to the Sinai 2009–2014



This older route used from 2008–2014 is included because of its relevance in understanding today’s practices in trafficking for ransom. The Sinai trafficking route was the first known route in Africa where trafficking for ransom has occurred. At present, the practice of trafficking for ransom has been extended to Sudan, South Sudan and Libya.²³ While the situation in the Sinai has been reasonably well researched, the current situations in Sudan and Libya are little researched and difficult to access.

The modus operandi along the Sinai route is described in the next section.

Modus Operandi of Trafficking for Ransom

The predominant modus operandi of human trafficking from Eritrea is human trafficking for ransom. This is defined as involving:

...the abduction, extortion, sale, torture, sexual violation and killing of men, women and children. Migrants, of whom the vast majority are of Eritrean descent, are abducted and brought to the Sinai desert, where they are sold and resold, extorted for very high ransoms collected by mobile phone, while being brutally and 'functionally' tortured to support the extortion.²⁴

Since 2014, this modus operandi has geographically expanded and is now more generally referred to as 'human trafficking for ransom'.²⁵ The geographic expansion of this practice includes similar forms of trafficking in the Eastern and Northern African region: Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Chad and other countries. Human trafficking for ransom is enabled by ICT, especially mobile phones, mobile money transfers and mobile information distribution.²⁶

Specific targeting of minors from within Eritrea, for abduction by trafficking networks has been reported in recent years. Abductions have also been reported from the Sawa Military Camp in Eritrea. It was reported that children who had relatives in Sweden and some other children were taken by a high-ranking military official to Sudan where the children were made to call their parents. The parents were told that they had to pay ransom if they wanted the children released or else the children would be taken to the Sinai torture camps. The money was paid to an account in Saudi Arabia and the children were then released in Khartoum. One theory was that the children were specifically targeted for abduction because they had relatives in the West who could pay the ransom.²⁷ A case involving 211 children abducted from Sawa was reported in 2013²⁸. In this case the children were incorporated in the trafficking as they were forced to beg for payments in exchange for their release.

Apart from the military camps in Eritrea, there have also been reports of abductions from within Eritrea. These include children under the age of 15. Especially women and girls collecting firewood in the Golij area have been targeted, as well as farm workers, who are reported to have been kidnapped near the Sudanese border. The abductions led to a situation in which the victims were required to collaborate with the trafficking networks in order to collect ransoms for their release²⁹.

The collection of ransom as the objective of human trafficking developed in the Sinai desert from 2008 onwards. Ransoms were collected in consecutive situations of captivity, while abductees were sold from one trafficking gang to another. In order to increase the pressure and drive up ransoms, the abductees were held in cruel and dehumanising situations and heavily tortured. Whenever they spoke to relatives on the phone to request the ransom, the torture would intensify in order to increase the pressures on relatives.

Africa Monitors reports that children are an easy target to bring into trafficking networks and describe the practice as follows:

Some minors; desperate to make easy money, and manipulated into it, join the trafficking and smuggling networks. Although the children do not have the capacity to become traffickers themselves, they are used as smugglers in border areas and as brokers in towns and other communities. Some children from mostly very poor families are also recruited by smugglers or traffickers at a young age because there is no other way for the trafficking networks to reach high school students. The fear around migration from Eritrea makes information about traffickers very hard to access, which means that traffickers have to prioritize their major targets and have agents representing them in those parts of society. For most traffickers having representatives/brokers in high schools, military training centers, colleges, churches and other places where young people are found is a business strategy. The easiest to recruit are teenagers who come from very poor families or those who have already developed habits like drinking and smoking for which they cannot ask their parents for money. Children and young teenagers do not make an obvious target for security agents trying to catch independent traffickers. They are ideal for smuggling clients in high security border areas. They can transport clients and money without raising any suspicion and can work for years without getting caught.³⁰

In the *Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond*, Van Reisen et al. (2014) identified a number of ways that children from the camps in Ethiopia are lured into trafficking through 'no-fee deals'. The following modus operandi is identified in the following:

In the camps in Ethiopia there is an increasing number of Eritrean refugees who have been deported from Egypt and elsewhere, trapped in a cycle of despair and with no or little access to trauma counselling or other services. This is leading to an increasing level of tension in those camps. In the aftermath of the tragedy in Lampedusa in which fellow refugees and trafficking victims drowned, the tension led to riots in the camps in which three people were killed. There is quite high mobility from Ethiopian camps to Sudanese camps as refugees try to move to places where they feel there are better options for their future. There are also reports of organised trips from the Ethiopian camps to the refugee in Sudan by traffickers. Children (aged 13–14) are: "being enticed [...] without paying anything and their respective families are extorted when they get there. They're basically taken without the consent of their families." Being presented with these observations, an interviewee from Mai Ayni camp in the Tigray region (Ethiopia) commented: "It is a bit hard. We know what's actually going on; we know those things are being perpetuated by individuals who live in this camp or its environs with us. We're incapable of addressing the issue ourselves even though we know everything." The main traffickers working from the Mai Ayni camp in the Tigray region, home to 15,000 Eritrean refugees, are of Eritrean origin. They receive some help from Ethiopians. In 2013, there was a report of people being trafficked from Metema, on the border with Sudan: "...and people are being kidnapped from here [Mai Ayni], in fact, such in fact such things have started appearing in Metema as well. There are go betweens here who function freely and we've informed the concerned authorities but there's nothing coming. [...] They lure people, they promise to take them all the way to Libya for free and they will get payment once you reach there – but they already transfer them to Bedouins before they even cross Metema."³¹

The practice of no fee or low fee deals was also reported in the following account in which a 15-year old Eritrean girl and her three friends were lured by a smuggler to Sudan for a relatively low price. According to the girl, the smuggler knew that their parents were in Europe and the girls did not realise at that time how low the payment was compared to a normal fee. The smuggler told them that they did not need to pay until they had reached

Sudan and they walked for eight days. When they reached Sudan, the smuggler handed them over to kidnapers and they were sold to the Sinai where the 15-year old girl was raped and fell pregnant. She was eventually released in the Sinai for USD 25,000, having paid other fees at various moments.

Africa Monitors also reports no-fee deals:

Some of the deals traffickers bring to minors are the promise to be smuggled for free in return for bringing clients. For children who grew up seeing people leaving by the hundreds from their communities and who have come to believe that migration is the best choice they can make in the future, such deals are deals sent from heaven. Families are constantly worried that their children might try to cross the border without telling them. Most families hold family sessions for their children who go to military training to warn and convince them not to try to go to Sudan. But at their age, and with the general atmosphere of hopelessness the young students see, it is difficult to have a powerful influence on them once they go to military training or when posted to remote army units or other government agencies. In border towns near Sudan or Ethiopia those in their early teens know nothing except a culture of migration in their lives. They have grown up hearing stories about people making money from migration. As the possibility of making money becomes an important part of their plan to improve their lives and the lives of their poor families, their closeness to the migration routes, their knowledge of the localities, and their young age make them ideal agents for traffickers who need locals to help them smuggle people safely from the country. The traffickers study the possibility of making money out of each underage refugee very easily. As children, most of them are no match for the experienced traffickers who know how to make sure beforehand if the child's family can pay the demanded money. When the traffickers know the possibility of anyone paying for the children is very low they usually keep them as messengers.³²

No-fee deals aim to bring the minors out of the context that they know. Once they are no longer in a place they know and are isolated from family or community who can protect them, they are forced to phone relatives to beg for ransom. If the relatives cannot be reached or are unable or unwilling to pay the ransom, the children are completely left to the abuse of the trafficking gangs, who can then force them to support their activities.

In April, during a visit to Ethiopia, a similar ploy was reported on Ethiopian TV. A group of Ethiopian children had been enticed to Sudan with a no-fee deal. In that case, it was reported that some of the children became suspicious because of the bad treatment and before they crossed the border to Sudan, escaped and reported to the police.

The importance of fear in a situation where someone is being trafficked cannot be underestimated, and even more so when this concerns a child. This is illustrated by a legal case initiated in one of the Ethiopian camps, which did not go far:

From the perspective of the recruitment of hostages for trafficking, the security of the refugees in the Sudanese camps is an issue that has been reported in the interviews conducted for this research for several years. In 2012, refugees in the Mai Ayni refugee camp initiated a legal case against the traffickers working inside the camps. However the case against the traffickers ran into trouble securing testimony, as the families who pay ransoms for people trafficked from the camps are scared to speak for fear of reprisals.³³

An in-depth report into unaccompanied minors in both the Ethiopian and Sudanese refugee camps in Kassala by the Women's Refugee Commission identified the challenges that the children face:

A significant number of Eritrean refugees, no matter their age, do not remain in the refugee camps but cross into Sudan or live outside the camps in Ethiopia. Some of those who stay in the camps seem to do so only as a last resort and a consequence of the ongoing economic stresses affecting their families. Various protection concerns were raised by the [unaccompanied children] living in the camps, including but not limited to: a real threat of kidnapping and forced abductions in Sudan; potential refoulement by the Sudanese government; and potential forced conscription by an Eritrean opposition movement in northern Ethiopia.

The security situation for refugees living in eastern Sudan remains a concern to UNHCR and numerous human rights groups. Limited livelihood opportunities and what appears to be a belief that the Eritrean diaspora have come into a great deal of money are all considered causal factors for a complex kidnapping and human trafficking network, primarily affecting

Eritrean refugees and migrants as they enter the east of Sudan. Initially a cross-border smuggling network led by members of border tribes, who were already engaged in goods import/export and alleged trafficking of arms, the smuggling of Eritrean refugees has evolved and grown uncontrollably in recent years. There has been a drastic rise in the number of Eritreans either held by or sold to some border tribe families in and around Kassala State for the purpose of ransom demand. A profitable business, the number of people involved in this abuse has risen, and is now believed to also include Eritreans from the protracted caseload and some new arrivals who work alongside the border tribesmen to tap into the ransom payments.

Victims' testimonies collected by various refugee rights groups and by UNHCR indicate that the first point of kidnap may be within Eritrea, along the border with Sudan, and in the northern heights of Ethiopia close to the Sudan-Eritrea-Ethiopia tri-border point. Some testimonies describe smuggling arrangements turned sour, while others describe having been taken by force from within and around Shagarab camps. Though there has been a decrease in reports of kidnapping from the camp in recent months, perhaps in correlation with a significant drop in new arrivals registering in Shagarab camp, the close connection between border tribes and members of the local tribes alleged to be responsible for several torture camps in the Sinai desert continues to cause much concern to the refugees in the camps and to UNHCR.³⁴

A recent report by the Mixed Migration Hub (MHUB) (2015) provides a few interviews with unaccompanied minors (from Ethiopia and Eritrea), which were undertaken in Cairo. These interviews also highlight the vulnerability of unaccompanied and separated children left without support and in fear for their life, which can lead them into situations in which they are abused. The following conclusions were drawn from these interviews:

Unaccompanied minors interviewed for this report did not make the choice to move alone, but were supported by family and broader social networks until the moment to leave. Both the Ethiopian youths interviewed in Cairo, for instance, stemmed from a rather disadvantaged rural background and, crucially, had family members, usually older brothers, who had migrated – to Sudan, Libya, or Egypt – before them. Family is thus often a central source of information and “know-how”, providing first contacts with the smugglers and, not uncommonly, being willing to invest significant amounts of savings into journeys that are

seen as the only possible options for building secure livelihoods in a safe environment. While the role of family is central in the phase that precedes the actual travel, once en route unaccompanied minors often find themselves feeling confused and unsafe, without points of references or reliable sources of help. Their journey into Egypt is particularly risky and traumatizing, to the point that both reported having doubted several times that they would reach their destination safely. Both of them experienced extreme hunger and thirst as well as violence and attempts at extortion by the smugglers.³⁵

This desperate situation in which unaccompanied minors can find themselves is fertile ground for exploitation in all sorts of ways. One refugee in Addis Ababa reported in an email conversation:

I reached an understanding that many regardless of their age worked as human traffickers or assisted in human trafficking for many reasons. Some of the reasons being economic ground. They have no remittance so they are forced to go for desperate measures.³⁶

According to a source who has been closely monitoring human trafficking in the Sinai, there were five or six Eritrean minors who could be identified as helping the trafficking operation. These minors were involved in translation, cleaning, communication and messages. The source met one of the minors and could identify him by name – a name that, according to him, was mentioned by many of the trafficking victims. This boy operated in the Sinai from 2012 to 2013 and was involved in torture as well as begging for ransom as a translator:

I heard from many victims that this boy worked with the traffickers to torture his people and in the begging work as a translator... I saw this boy myself one time.³⁷

Interviews carried out by Meron Estefanos demonstrate that the involvement of some minors in the trafficking networks was more serious than just translating and running errands. Here follow four examples.

1. B. (16-year old Eritrean, male, 2012)

In an interview with B. it is identified that he not only translated, but was also involved in severe torture practices. He was accused by 150 victims of torture as having been cruel and sadistic. B. was 16 years of age when he was abducted for ransom and brought to a torture camp in the Sinai. He was abandoned by his family. He was given the choice to collaborate with the traffickers or be tortured to death. In order to survive he started to translate, as he spoke good Arabic and Tigrinya. In this video-clip, Meron Estefanos and a Sinai human trafficking and torture survivor are in conversation with B.

See annex 1 for interview, audio available and see also a short interview in:

<https://youtu.be/DvVU65gllXE>.³⁸

2. S. (15-year old Eritrean, male, March 2011)

S., aka Bambino, was kidnapped in 2011 on his way from Libya to Egypt. S.'s father died in the last war with Ethiopia and his uncle took him all the way to Libya and left him with some people in Libya. His uncle told him that the sea trip was dangerous and that he would bring him legally to Europe once he had arrived. Unfortunately, the uncle drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and S. had to take care of himself for almost five years in Libya working at a tea house. When the Arab spring began it was not safe for any African in Libya. By now S. had turned 14 and decided to follow some Eritreans to Egypt where they were kidnapped by the Bedouins. As S. had lived six years in an Arabic speaking country, the Bedouins made him a translator and cleaner; he complied to stay alive. After a year working for the Bedouins he was released and dumped at the Israeli border. Up until last year he lived in Israel.

See annex 1. Audio available.

3. M. (16-year old Eritrean, male)

M. left Ethiopia for Libya at the beginning of 2015. Once in Libya, his family could not pay for his trip from Ethiopia to Libya and Libya to Italy. The smugglers made him work as a translator, cleaner and cook for almost a year. He was also required to make sure everyone

paid the smugglers. At the end of December 2015 he was allowed to board the boat to Italy and, with the help of some friends, he travelled to Germany where he is now waiting to receive asylum.

4. L. (16-year old Eritrean, female)

L. is a former Sinai hostage and went through horrendous experiences in Sinai. After her ransom of USD 40,000 was paid, she was deported to Ethiopia. In 2015 she decided to go to Libya and was kidnapped by Chadians at the border of Libya and Sudan. She told them she had no money to pay the ransom demanded, which was 5,500, and she was asked to clean and give sexual favours in exchange for payment. Two months later her ransom was paid and she was released. It is unclear how long she would have been kept there if her father had not paid the ransom demanded. She is now in Sweden and received her asylum papers three weeks prior to the time of writing.

Conclusions

The research for this report is based on a literature review, witness reports and first hand interviews. The evidence demonstrates that unaccompanied and separated minors may be forced to enter into deals with trafficking gangs. As long as they carry out support tasks for the trafficking gangs, they may be saved from torture or death and stay alive until the ransom is paid.

This new form of human trafficking for ransom generates profit by forcing abductees to collect ransom. The victims are often tortured in order to increase the pressure on victims (and on relatives) to collect the ransom.

With no-fee deals, minors are lured out of Eritrea and Ethiopia and fall into extremely vulnerable situations in unfamiliar and unknown territories, where they are left completely at the discretion of the traffickers. They are forced to collect ransom. If they are incapable of collecting the required ransom, they fall prey to violence or are forced to participate in the trafficking. Such unaccompanied and separated minors are extremely vulnerable. They often have no money and those who are separated from relatives have no means of raising the ransoms demanded by the traffickers from the diaspora.

Especially those minors, who have no ties or who have been abandoned and cannot collect any financial support from relatives, are easy prey for trafficking networks seeking to exploit them. Such minors may be forced to carry out activities in support of the trafficking of human beings. Such activities can entail translation, running errands, communication, sexual services, torture and even killing. These activities are a way for minors to stay alive and avoid being tortured. Sometimes carrying out such services for the trafficking networks may result in movement along the trafficking routes towards a next destination.

This modus operandi of trafficking for ransom has expanded geographically from the Sinai to Sudan, South Sudan, Libya and Chad. Particularly minors originating from Eritrea are at

risk. Cases of minors being forced into supporting the trafficking gangs have been reported from the Sinai, Sudan and Libya.

Annex 1: Interviews

These interviews were carried out by investigative journalist, Meron Estefanos.

Interview 1

Interview 1 B. 16 years

2012/10/19 by Meron Estefanos

Estefanos: Hello, B., Can you please tell us a little about yourself and tell us where you are?

B.: Hello, my name is B.W., I'm from Omhajer, Gash Barka. And I now reside in Israel.

Estefanos: Okay B., You recall, of course, that we met almost two years back while you were in captivity, I interviewed you a lots of times. Now can you tell me who you are, why you came out of Eritrea and everything that has happened?

B.: When I left Eritrea, it wasn't a premeditated decision, the Eritrean security people were looking for me, and I left the Shegeraib camp within one night.

Estefanos: Where did you leave Shegeraib to go to?

B.: Israel, I told the trafficker that I wanted to go to Israel, and he said that he has people leaving the next day, so I left after one day.

Estefanos: Did you have any money to make such a deal with that trafficker; after all, aren't you expected to pay for his services?

B.: I just was doing what other people were doing, and I couldn't go back to Israel, Eritrean security forces were looking for me, I didn't really have a choice, I was forced to go there.

Estefanos: Tell me about the route.

B.: All in all, between 33–35 people left for the Sinai and it took us about 3 weeks to get there and there were 5 girls. When we arrived in the Sinai, we were asked to pay 3,300 dollars. I couldn't call my family, so I called a friend of my father and asked him for the sum, and he told me that he'll come up with a solution and will talk to my father. I saw people leave after they paid. There were two people, they paid and they left to Israel, but I couldn't pay for a full month, so I was beaten. I had wounds and all, and after that my family managed to pay the money, so I was let go. However, we found out that we were sold onto

another trafficker, who was asking us to pay 20,000 dollars each and we found those two who left before us held. I cried and became so hopeless then... because I know my family couldn't pay a single cent more and they didn't have anything. So, I called my father's friend and told him what happened, and he told me that he has never seen such an amount of money in his entire life, a problem exacerbated by the fact that my sister was diagnosed with cancer and she had to go to Khartoum for surgery. So when I was held there, there was this translator called Redwan, but he wasn't required to beat us and all. We even planned on running away, and he didn't even tell on us. But that didn't work out. **And after that I became the translator.** I didn't hit anyone at first, I wasn't required to, just like Redwan. So they took the group away from us and then I was left all by myself. My feet were tied, and I didn't hit anyone then. I remember then, those who were kidnapped used to ask me to translate and say that they've come here kidnapped and didn't set out to come this way from the beginning, and because of that they're unable to come up with the money for quite some time; I told the trafficker, and he said he didn't care...

Estefanos: Yeah?

B.: Some of them paid, but most of them couldn't, so that's when I started hitting them.

Estefanos: I remember talking to you, when you were held with Redwan, with the 31 other people who were held there. I remember you were wailing and crying when you were there with them at first, but later on you were real hopeless. I recall how you changed day to day. I want to know what it is that made you hopeless and become what you became.

B.: I became hopeless. I saw two friends of mine, E. and T. die. My father wouldn't take my calls anymore. I didn't expect to live.

Estefanos: How did you know your family couldn't help you anymore?

B.: My father was one of the first fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and I assume he didn't want to give in, pay for his son's ransom and everything.

Estefanos: I thought you told me before that your family was quite well off?

B.: It is just as I tell you right now. He just didn't want to be involved with me, period. It's true that they are well off though.

Estefanos: Yeah, I remember talking to you after you were moved into another holding place, if you recall.

B.: Yeah, that day my family told me to never call them again, and I tried calling you for a change. Then I was hit because, unbeknownst to me, there was this Egyptian guy who could

understand Tigrinya, and he hit me bad. He first asked me what I was saying to you, and then I told him that I called some people regarding the ransom money. He called me liar, and hit me and addressed me in Tigrinya and hit me real bad. From that moment on, I lost all hope. Even my brother who used to call me, I'd pick up the phone and I'd tell him that "B. is dead" and would hang up on him. And I remember I used to call lots of people bad names, it pains me at the moment that I came right out and said those things.

Estefanos: I remember calling you two three times, sometimes with the family members of those kidnapped like yourself. I didn't even know it was you at first, I found out after you only told me later, you called us lots of bad things. And I remember how this one time we called you with this girl, whose brother was kidnapped in the Sinai and was killed there; she said she was informed about the issue by you, who reportedly said that "your brother is dead and don't call here anymore". The way you spoke to her was so cruel and you had no remorse, you said to her "don't call me again".

B.: He had diabetes. His sister said she didn't have any money to pay for him and he was really hopeless. I actually tried to help him, I got him some sugar to get him going and I was inquiring about whether I was able to get him some medical attention. Anyways, she called me towards the end, and she told me that she couldn't find her brother. He told me to tell her that he's dead. And I did the same, she was crying when she found out, and I said, don't cry, we're all going to die, I remember saying that to her.

Estefanos: Okay, B., hundreds of former victims say they'd kill you if they could find you, why do they want to do so?

B.:

Estefanos: Lots of people have said that. You were telling me you were a translator only – why would they want to kill a mere translator?

B.: I haven't seen anyone who has died, except those two friends of mine whom I've mentioned. It's possible that others have died as well though, there's no denying that! I haven't seen anyone who has died with my own eyes though, and I admit that I've engaged in beatings and abuses against fellow victims. I can only attribute that to fear on my part. I'm sure they would agree that I wasn't doing that because I feared...

Estefanos: What did you fear? Death?

B.: Not death, I don't fear death.

Estefanos: So what brought you to become so cruel? You remember Redwan, he was a translator just like you. He courageously said he's not going to torture anyone, because tomorrow he's going to have to face every one of those he tortured. He said "I'd rather you kill me than they kill me". How come you didn't say that?

B.: I don't know... I regret it.

Estefanos: What bothers you more than anything about the whole thing?

B.: I wish I died or didn't have to set foot in the Sinai, I don't know...I've even committed those crimes against my relatives. My pains have just started, and I don't think I can ever condone myself for the crimes I've committed.

Estefanos: Is it true that you've tortured more than 150 people?

B.: 150?

Estefanos: Uh huh.

B.: Probably.

Estefanos: How about the accusation that you've murdered 4 people after you tortured them?

B.: That's possible, but I didn't see anyone dying?

Estefanos: Dying not while in torture, but while in captivity as a result of the wounds you've inflicted.

B.: ... That's true.

Estefanos: While you were working as a torturer/abuser lots of people said different things about you. I want to ask you, have you ever raped any of the women prisoners who were held with you?

B.: They were asking us to fornicate for entertainment, as they watched. What do you think? There was a girl called A, I was forced to do it with her, but I haven't raped anyone willingly.

Estefanos: I've heard that you were one of the foremost enemies she had and you used to cause her so much pain. I've heard from different others that she was a mother figure, she was helping everyone. What can you say about her?

B.: ... She was ... she was only held with me, she couldn't pay...

Estefanos: She was the one who was held longest there, right?

B.: There were four women held; three managed to pay and leave. She couldn't pay and she was left there.

Estefanos: Listen B., we're doing this interview as a confessional for you, and so that we could fix whatever happened and that your victims would forgive you, right?

B.: Yes.

Estefanos: Then, if it is so, I wish you would tell me what you think the worst thing you did while you were there was. Just to show those people whom you've wronged that you really regret your actions.

B.: I've done lots of things, I've done all those things I'm being accused of.

Estefanos: Can you provide details.

B.: There was this one guy, Wedi Keshi, his father called and I insulted his father, an old man, I think his name was Michael or something. I did the same to his brother, who used to call him from Norway. There was someone else... I don't remember their names...

Estefanos: Others tell me that you used to force them to drink your urine?

B.: I... I didn't do that.

Estefanos: They say you used to take away their drinking water, even though the Bedouins allowed them to drink water.

B.: That's not true. How would the Bedouin allow the people to drink water? They used to give us bread, twice a day. I was being tortured on behalf of the prisoners. What are you talking about? A little kid used to come and beat me, a real young kid. What would I gain from taking water away from the prisoners?

Estefanos: Okay, towards the end, after committing all those atrocities, how were you able to leave the holding place?

B.: I never would have made it out of the house had it not been for some girl that arrived, her name was Suzi or something I thing.

Estefanos: You're talking about S.?

B.: Yes, her. They took us to the border of Israel. I didn't even think I would make it.

Estefanos: That doesn't answer the question. Why did they let you go?

B.: I had a good relationship with the leader of the traffickers, and he instructed them to let me go and take me to Israel, but they just dumped me on the border of Israel. Why they let me go, however, I can't answer that because I don't know.

Estefanos: What happened then?

B.: I was only compelled to torture people because of Eritreans; they're the ones who showed me what to do and the limits of mercy. Not the ones who were held with me, but

there were others in another location. I saw that they were torturing others and used to work with the Bedouins. They were trusted and they were the real enforcers, they dressed as they pleased and in nice clothing, and I thought I could do the same to buy my freedom.

Estefanos: Okay...

B.: I think all the actions of those Bedouin were directed by those Eritreans, they're the ones who taught them what to do and how to act. The Bedouin aren't capable of thinking or organising something to this level. They used to tell me that they don't wish to put me in a steet, I just have to follow their instructions.

Estefanos: But you could have said no?

B.:

Estefanos: Right?

B.: I couldn't

Estefanos: Just like the others who were asked to take part, like you were, but thought they'd say no!

B.: I think so. But that's a hard thing to do, and especially given my knowledge of both Arabic and Tigrinya. I was the only one there with that ability. It would have intensified the punishments if I refused because it would boil down to the fact that either I'd help them or they wouldn't be able to extort the money.

Estefanos: I just want you to either deny or confirm the fact that you could have said no and wouldn't take part in the atrocities against your fellow brothers and sisters?

B.: That's true, I could have said no!

Estefanos: Okay, what happened after you left when you were going to Israel?

B.: They first dropped me near the border, and they left and brought the girl and said nothing is to fear anymore. We were caught as we crossed the first fence by the soldiers, they came and caught us. I was injured while crossing the fence.

Estefanos: Okay. I heard you were wounded. I saw that, where did you go.

B.: I was injured on my foot. I told the Israeli doctors that I am worried quite a lot. I didn't mention my foot injuries.

Estefanos: Did you meet anyone whom you tortured in the Israeli internment camp?

B.: Yes.

Estefanos: What did they say to you? What happened, tell me?

B.: They wanted to have me arrested. They told the soldiers that I was a torturer, which was true. One of the people approached me, bid me welcome, and that he's going to exact his revenge pretty soon. I spent about two months in the hospital, and about a month in the camp. [starts sobbing]

Estefanos: Okay, as I understand it, in the place that you're at, you're there by your own will. Why is it that you seem to have chosen to stay in the internment place, instead of venturing out to the cities?

B.: What can I do? I am truly scared. I would have left, but I can't.

Estefanos: You fear that they might find you and kill you?

B.: No, that's not what I fear. I'm not scared of dying or being beaten. I just don't have the courage to face the people I've tortured. I don't know how I can face any Eritrean. My actions have guaranteed that I'm erased from being Eritrean. That's what happened to me.

Estefanos: When I came to Israel, I first called the place you're living at. I was told that you don't want to speak to anyone, don't want to even talk to relatives. And then they called me two hours later and said, I'm allowed to talk to you.

B.: I don't keep in touch with anyone. My family didn't help me through my darkest days, they turned their back on me, why should I call them now?

Estefanos: You're very young, as I saw you, and you seem to be pretty disturbed. Tell me, what is it that troubles you?

B.: What troubles me is quite a lot. My torment and pain is just beginning and it has no end. I suffer because of my actions.

Estefanos: When I was there, I made you meet with someone you used to torture. After he talked to you, he said he forgives you and even went on to beg you not to do something bad to yourself. How did you feel when you met with him?

B.: I couldn't believe that. I mean, let alone someone I tortured, even people who I tell what I have done do not pardon my actions.

Estefanos: How did you feel when he was begging you to not kill yourself or do any harm to yourself, a victim begging you?

B.: I was very happy, I tell my friends here what happened. I admire him for his actions, he gave me so much hope. Even people here were telling me that I need to find someone who can help me. I can't forget him.

Estefanos: I'll now give you an opportunity to talk to those whom you've wronged, and those following the broadcast to tell them whatever it is that you want to tell them now.

B.: I have wronged all of you, I am sorry. I've done so many bad things to you... [breaks up]
...I was only doing those things, I don't know... My pain is starting now, my torments are endless. I spend my days secluded in a room, I can't eat right and I can't think right. I should never have done those things. Maybe some of you are thinking right now that I'm saying those words after doing all that I've done, but at this moment, I can't forget what happened, but all I can do at this moment is beg your forgiveness. And A. ... [he breaks up]
...

Estefanos: Continue.

B.: I've wronged that girl, I'm sorry A. I hope you won't think badly of me anymore. I just hope all those who've asked about me and who've found it in themselves to forgive my unforgivable actions do well in life. I have no life whatsoever, I am not even alive. My worries have started to rule my life.

Estefanos: I remember asking you why you can't ask for forgiveness in previous times and you said you can't apologise to everyone, not to all Eritrean population. What did you mean?

B.: I didn't think it would be like this. I thought if I wrong any Eritrean, we're all related, and I would be wronging my brothers, my sisters, and even my family. ... [breaks up]

Estefanos: What would you like to say, finally?

B.: I ask for forgiveness from everyone. I have done many bad things, and I would like to ask for forgiveness, heartfelt. I can't forget the things I've done.

Estefanos: I hope one of those days you'll get to meet everyone you've wronged, like you did last time. I remember you first sat down and talked to one of your former victims, he detailed out everything you've done and you were able to talk about it and you eventually ended up being friends and he forgave you. It was one of the most amazing moments in my life witnessing that. I recall that he told you not to kill yourself, but rather you should strive to better yourself so that one of those days you can rise and help the families of the ones you killed. He advised you that you should work one of those days to create a cooperative that would seek to help the victims of the atrocities committed in Sinai. I hope you follow his advice.

B.: I cry every time when I hear that those who come out of the Sinai, have formed a group and meet each other and help each other, because I can't join them thanks to my actions. But what can I do? You may give them my number so that they can call me and talk to me, I'm willing to do that.

Estefanos: I hope one day we will sit together, all of us, and talk this through.

B.: Me too. Please give them my number so that they may call me and talk to me if they wish.

Estefanos: I will do that, thank you so much for giving me this chance to interview you.

Interview 2

Interview 1 B. Simon 15 years old

March 2011 interviews by Meron Estefanos

Biniam:- Hello

Meron:- Hello

B (Biniam):- This is Biniam, Meron.

M (Meron):- Hello Biniam, this is Meron.

B. Yes. How are you, is everything fine?

M. We are all fine. What about you? How are you all?

B. We are fine, thanks be to God. It's fine.

M. OK, so what's new?

B. There is nothing new here.

M. OK. So I told the family about Qeshi (the Priest) Oqbai.

B. Yes. Did you find the right address?

M. Yes, it wasn't his sister's, it was a neighbor's number. I was afraid it might be his sister.

B. Yes, it was a neighbor's sister.

M. Yes, but I was afraid of being the bearer of the bad news to his sister. It's horrible being the bearer of the bad news.

B. Yes, very bad, very bad.

M. Poor woman, she told me she has travelled to collect money, she still needs twenty thousand more.

B. Pity.

M. Pity. I was so sad for her.

B. Such pity, so sad.

M. She said, "We collected money but it wasn't enough, so she has gone to another village to beg for more money, she will come tomorrow".

B. Pity. What can we say! May God take care of it Himself!

M. So they have brought you new people, you said they brought a new kid earlier?

B. Do you remember when I told you they brought us five people who had been in this country?

M. Yes.

B. (Inaudible) So he is one of them. He is really young, very young.

M. How old do you mean when you say young?

B. I don't know for sure, but I think 15 years is the oldest he can be. I think he is 13.

M. Can you get him on the phone? I want to talk to him.

B. Here you go. Come, come. Come, talk to her.

B (Simon/Bambino):- Hello, who is this?

Meron:- What's your name? My name is Meron. I'm calling from Sweden.

(Bambino/Simon):- My name is Bambino.

M. Who?

B. Bambino.

M. Bambino, what's your real name?

B. My real name is S.

M. Simon who?

B. S T.

M. Which part of Eritrea did you come from?

B. AliGhidir.

M. Alighidir?

B. Alighidir, yes.

M. When did you get out of Eritrea?

B. 2008.

M. What 28?

B. 2008.

M. 2008? What?

B. Yes.

M. How old are you?

B. I am 15 years old.

M. What? 2008, three years ago, who did you get out with?

B. I left with my uncle. (Paternal uncle)

M. And where is your uncle now?

B. He died at the sea near Malta.

M. He died there? That's really sad. What about you, where were you then?

B. I was in Libya.

M. In Libya?

B. Yes.

M. So what happened next?

B. I came with many other people. We had many people with us.

M. Yes,

B. They paid and went but we didn't have money.

M. Yes,

B. They asked for 1800 to be paid, ... (Inaudible)

M. Yes. Can you tell me how you left Alighidir with your uncle in 2008? Where did you go next? Tell me what happened.

B. We went to Sudan.

M. You went to Sudan.

B. Yes.

M. What about your mother and father, where were they?

B. My mother and father are in Eritrea. My father was in the army doing national service, my mother is at home. My father was killed in action.

M. When was your father killed?

B. During the third offensive. (*This was the last round of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea that started early May 2000 after which the hostilities ceased.)

M. During the third offensive? OK. So your uncle took you to Sudan with him?

B. Yes.

M. How old were you then?

B. I was 12 years old.

M. You were 12? OK.

B. Yes.

M. So your uncle was one of those people who were returned from Malta?

B. No, he died there in the sea. Do you remember there were many who died there?

M. Yes. Was he with the 85 people?

B. Yes.

M. And were you with him on the boat?

B. I wasn't there, I was behind. They had told me that I would follow.

M. Yes. So, who did he leave you with?

B. There were many people from our home village. He left me there. So when I heard he died, I came here.

M. Who told you? So they told you he died?

B. Yes.

M. OK, so who was looking after you?

B. I was living with any Eritreans. I had some work. I was working with a Sudanese man who sold things. After that I came here.

M. OK. So can you tell me how you came from Libya to the place you are now?

B. They said we would pay 1800 USD to get to Italy, but when we paid that amount, they asked us to pay more.

M. Yes. So that's when they brought you to Sinai?

B. Sinai.

M. My poor brother! Have you contacted your mother?

B. Yes, we have talked through a neighbor's phone. But now the neighbor says he is in Asmara.

M. The number is not working?

B. Yes. I had talked to him. I asked him to tell my mother that I called. She can't pay anything.

M. So how long have you been there in Sinai?

B. I have been in Sinai for two months now.

M. Tell me, do they beat you.

B. They used to beat us, but now it's better, they have stopped beating me. I clean after the sick...

M. What did you say?

B. There are many people who are sick here. I clean after them.

M. What happened to those who were with you?

B. They paid and went away. There were five, the four remained at another house, and I was brought here.

M. OK. So you came together with the priest?

B. No, with the other people who are here...

M. The 28 people?

B. Yes, with the 28 people.

M. When did you meet with the 28 people?

(Inaudible/Breaks up)

M. can you hear me Simon?

B. Yes.

M. When did you meet with the 28?

(Breaks up)

Meron:- Hello, can you hear me?

Simon:-Yes

M. When did you meet with the 28 people?

B. When they came from Sudan, we are at the other place. They used to call you. There were many of them. The place was underground with three or four rooms. The five of us were on one side and they were on the other side. We couldn't see each other then. We only heard their voices. After that we met.

M. Yes.

B. After that they brought me here and kept the four there. They brought to me to keep after the sick people here.

M. So you're not in chains.

B. I am not in chains.

M. So tell me, what do you exactly do?

B. I understand a little Arabic, so I translate for them.

M. OK. So what do they say to you now?

B. They only know paying, they tell us to pay and nothing else.

M. What do they say to you? For all the help you do, won't they ask you to pay less?

B. These people don't know making anything less.

M. Ehm, poor child! Be strong, it's going to be OK. Be strong!

B. Yes.

M. Be strong my brother!

B. I will.

M. What can be done if this has happened except be go through it!

B. Yes.

M. In Alighidir, which area did your family live?

B. Inside Alighidir.

M. OK. What's your mother's name?

B. Amleset.

M. Amleset who?

B. Amleset Tkue.

M. Amleset Tkue, OK. And what was your father's name?

B. Tekle.

M. Tekle who?

B. Tekle TesfaAlem.

M. Tekle TesfaAlem?

B. Yes.

M. During the third offensive, which place was he killed at?

B. I don't know that. He died when I was a baby. I was about 8 months old or so when he died.

M. Be strong, it's going to be well. Be strong! What else to do! Just be strong! I will keep calling too, alright?

B. OK.

M. Be strong, my brother. Give me one of them now.

B. OK.

Biniam:- Hello.

Meron:- Hello.

Biniam:- Hello Meron.

Meron:- What a mess!

B. It's amazing, we were horrified ourselves. At the house, they said they were with us, that they heard when we when were tortured. When they brought him, we first thought he was born in this country. He is so young.

M. Poor boy, he has seen too much suffering.

B. This is unusual. We couldn't believe how early he left the country.

M. This is very sad.

B. Yes.

M. What can we do!

B. That is true.

M. Be strong, anyway, what else is there to say?! I will keep calling you. I will have classes in the morning from tomorrow, but I will be free in the afternoons, so I will call in the evening.

B. OK.

M. Be strong!

Annex 2: Eritrean Unaccompanied Minors and Human Trafficking

Reproduced with permission from: African Monitors (2016) *Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*, [29 May 2016](#),

An extremely worrying dimension to the Eritrean refugees' situation is that there is a steady influx of unaccompanied minors. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, released a report in March of this year expressing horror on the situation of an increasing number of unaccompanied minors joining tens of thousands of their compatriots in migrating out of their country. The rapporteur identifies forced military conscription and gross human rights violation as the main drivers behind the minors leaving their country and family behind. As [reported](#) by the Special Rapporteur, Eritrean children risk being forcibly drafted into the national service in their last year of school or in round-ups. Some of them also taste the brutality of the regime's prison systems after being taken away in routine roundups or in exchange for older siblings who had deserted the army.

The recent militarization of the Eritrean society is the bi-product of the border war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000. The border war with Ethiopia had started before the deep traumas of the war of independence had healed. Nothing had been done to address the issue of social trauma and the various other problems that follow a brutal 30 year war in which civilians were a constant target and when every family in the whole country had been seriously touched by the [effects of the war](#) in more than one way. This situation has left nothing for many people except to think of migrating. For teenage minors, especially those above 14 or 15, [leaving the country](#) is a decision they know they will take in the future. For children who feel they have to carry family responsibilities, leaving while in their teens is a way of saving time. Instead of waiting until they turn 18 or 19 to leave, by leaving earlier they can save four or five years for reaching their destination.

When the government wouldn't let the fathers' of the school age children of the early 2000s take care of their families, it was in effect deciding the fates of the children. Tens

of thousands of young fathers had died during the war, leaving the women to raise their children alone. The economic policies of the government made the situation worse for the poorest part of the society. And this was happening before there was time to address even the issues that originated before 1991.

In the western and southernmost border regions it was easy to cross over the borders to Ethiopia and Sudan. At times children of better off families would follow the trend and cross the border. Going out of the country was a way of making sure they survive. The few underage refugees who come from better off families leaving the country through safer routes are safe once they reach the country of transit, and usually wait to migrate legally for education or family reunions. But the bulk of underage refugees who decide to cross the Sahara and the Mediterranean usually come from young, poor, and usually, single parent families. When they have both their parents, the fact that their fathers are in the army or living at home, but working in national service means that in effect their parents are not fully able to take care of their children.

Children, as young as 8, have been reported to have crossed the border to Ethiopia from the southernmost parts of Eritrea. This has been happening since the early 00's but started turning into a major phenomenon after 2007 when droughts hit the southern region's farmers. The economy was failing, most basic supplies were scarce. In some towns like Mendefera, water, if available at all cost as much as 2 USD for a barrel before the summer of 2007. Before 2009 the UNHCR was arranging the return of young minors to their parents from the camps. Those children usually crossed the border from the last villages near the border with Ethiopia. Those children who expressed willingness to return back to their homes were sent back within few months but many chose to remain.

Some minors; desperate to make easy money, and manipulated into it, join the trafficking and smuggling networks. Although the children do not have the capacity to become traffickers themselves, they are used as smugglers in border areas and as brokers in towns and other communities. Some children from mostly very poor families are also recruited by smugglers or traffickers at a young age because there is no other way for the trafficking networks to reach high school students. The fear around

migration from Eritrea makes information about traffickers very hard to access, which means that traffickers have to prioritize their major targets and have agents representing them in those parts of society. For most traffickers having representatives/brokers in high schools, military training centers, colleges, churches and other places where young people are found is a business strategy. The easiest to recruit are teenagers who come from very poor families or those who have already developed habits like drinking and smoking for which they cannot ask their parents for money.

Children and young teenagers do not make an obvious target for security agents trying to catch independent traffickers. They are ideal for smuggling clients in high security border areas. They can transport clients and money without raising any suspicion and can work for years without getting caught.

Within the Rashaida, children assume adult roles at a young age. They have to learn the use of weapons, evasive desert driving and the landscape at a young age. Once the boys reach the age of ten, they usually spend most of their time with their fathers. Most Rashaida gangs operate in extended family structures for contraband trade and human trafficking and their children do most of the smuggling and transport. This culture among the Rashaida might have influenced other traffickers in the western lowlands to enlist children for small trafficking jobs that range from smuggling and transport to helping with torture and guard duties.

Some of the deals traffickers bring to minors are the promise to be smuggled for free in return for bringing clients. For children who grew up seeing people leaving by the hundreds from their communities and who have come to believe that migration is the best choice they can make in the future, such deals are deals sent from heaven.

Families are constantly worried that their children might try to cross the border without telling them. Most families hold family sessions for their children who go to military training to warn and convince them not to try to go to Sudan. But at their age, and with the general atmosphere of hopelessness the young students see, it is difficult to have a powerful influence on them once they go to military training or when posted to remote army units or other government agencies.

In border towns near Sudan or Ethiopia those in their early teens know nothing except a culture of migration in their lives. They have grown up hearing stories about people making money from migration. As the possibility of making money becomes an important part of their plan to improve their lives and the lives of their poor families, their closeness to the migration routes, their knowledge of the localities, and their young age make them ideal agents for traffickers who need locals to help them smuggle people safely from the country. The traffickers study the possibility of making money out of each underage refugee very easily. As children, most of them are no match for the experienced traffickers who know how to make sure beforehand if the child's family can pay the demanded money. When the traffickers know the possibility of anyone paying for the children is very low they usually keep them as messengers. [In camps in Ethiopia](#) and in camps and cities in Sudan, the minors are useful for small daily tasks and sometimes small smuggling jobs that don't necessarily require adults. In camps in Ethiopia young refugees from the rural areas in the southernmost regions of Eritrea are used by the traffickers to do small tasks like buying qat, cigarettes or alcohol, which the minors themselves become easily addicted to. For their services as messengers they usually get to eat with the traffickers, and provided with qat, alcohol and cigarettes. In refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, underage women are sometimes forced by traffickers to exchange sexual favors for basic needs. This means that the underage girls are highly traumatized before leaving the camps and many of the boys had become used to certain addictions. They have usually seen or helped when people are punished or tortured by traffickers and have participated in some acts that can be considered rape.



Once the young refugees decide to migrate, for example in exchange for services to the traffickers, they are at their most vulnerable in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Traffickers do not demand money in advance from minors, but they call the children's families from the Mediterranean coast or from a holding house somewhere in Sudan, Egypt or Libya, the families have no choice but to pay for the crossing or for the ransom demanded. Most of the earliest kidnap victims of the networks that trade in people were women and male teenagers. The unaccompanied minors en route to a safety or where they can build a better are being easy prey for gangs and extremist organisations, where girls are integrated into domestic and sexual services and boys are initiated as fighters.

The fragmentation of Eritrean society is very worrying as the country is losing part of its youth to gangs that support themselves by criminal trade. The deliberate policy to divide families has sacrificed the new generation that should be the future of tomorrow's Eritrean society. These youth should be protected and nurtured.

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<https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/webwijs/show/m.vanreisen.htm>

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/staffmembers/mirjam-van-reisen>

<http://www.eepa.be/wcm/>

Meron Estefanos

Meron Estefanos is an investigative journalist of Eritrean descent, living in Sweden.

Estefanos is featured in the film 'Sound of Torture'.

https://twitter.com/meronina?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle|twcamp%5Eserp|twgr%5Eauthor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwXSsCWeSyk>

Africa Monitors

Africa Monitors aims to promote awareness of basic human rights as contained in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international laws and instruments among Eritrean citizens. Towards this, it carries out research, monitoring and documentation of human rights policies, laws and practices in Eritrea and in countries where Eritrean refugees live.

<https://africamonitorsco.wordpress.com/>

Background Reading

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Attachments_News/unaccompanied_minors_public_5_dec.pdf

<https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2016/05/31/eritrea-eu-collaboration-with-sudan-eritrea-strengthening-human-trafficking/>

<https://news.vice.com/article/libyas-migrant-cattle-trade-one-refugees-story><http://www.wsj.com/articles/eritreans-flee-conscription-and-poverty-adding-to-the-migrant-crisis-in-europe-1445391364>

<https://news.vice.com/video/migrant-prisons-of-libya-europe-or-die-full-length>

<https://news.vice.com/article/desperate-eritrean-child-escapees-are-committing-suicide-in-ethiopia>

Endnotes

¹ A similar age range was reported in this news article (March 2014):

<http://allafrica.com/stories/201410061137.html>

² <https://africamonitorsco.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/eritrean-unaccompanied-minors-and-human-trafficking/>

³ The visit was filmed by Dutch TV programme Brandpunt (April 2016), available at:

http://www.npo.nl/brandpunt/19-04-2016/KN_1678978/WO_KRO_3753626

According to VICE 200, unaccompanied minors reach the Northern Ethiopian camps each day: “Eritrean refugees are currently arriving into the camps in northern Ethiopia at an average of 200 each day, according to Onyango. “Almost half of them are minors”, he said. “The majority are under 35 — minors and young men and women, and even the adults coming in are coming with two or three children.” <https://news.vice.com/article/desperate-eritrean-child-escapees-are-committing-suicide-in-ethiopia>

⁴ See also this photo impression of one of the camps by Swissinfo:

http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/eritrean-exodus_growing-up-in-a-camp-without-parents/40596260

See also an account of the difficult situation on unaccompanied minors in the Northern Ethiopian camps by RefugeePoint: <http://www.refugeepoint.org/lifeline-child-protection-focus/>

⁵ Van Reisen, M. and Rijken, C. (2015) ‘[Sinai trafficking: Origin and definition of a new form of human trafficking.](#)’ *Social Inclusion*, 3 (1), pp. 113–124; Buck, K.D.; Van Reisen, M. (eds) (2015) *Eritrea. Von der Befreiung zur Unterdrückung*. Hamburg: EMW; Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; Rijken, C. (2014) *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers; Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; & Rijken, C. (2012) *Human trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between life and death*. Nijmegen: Wolf Publishers

⁶ <https://news.vice.com/article/more-children-are-making-the-dangerous-journey-to-europe-alone>

⁷ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E-sthash.fmnqqWxG.dpuf>

⁸ Permanent Court of Arbitration (2002) *Conclusions of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission*, published by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague

⁹ The Eritrean government promised the European Union that it would reduce National Service to 18 months, but in a later statement by the Government TV channel it retracted from these promises. In a recent statement, UN Special Rapporteur Sheila Keetaruth stated that there were no signs of evidence of National Service being limited to 18 months: The UN Special Rapporteur, Sheila Keetaruth, remarked in her oral update on her report on unaccompanied children: “To date, I have not received any conclusive sign that the national service was reduced to 18 months, following initial indications that this could be the case. Those involved in the 28th round of national service have not been released and although there are reports of planned salary increases for those in national service, I have not been able to ascertain whether this indeed happened. I sadly conclude that conscripts cannot look forward to a life out of indefinite national service and forced labour in the near future. I would welcome updated information from the Government of Eritrea on measures taken to ensure the 18-months term is respected and that children are not conscripted.”

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E>

¹⁰ With regards to education and life opportunities, UN Special Rapporteur Keetaruth remarks:

“Most of the unaccompanied children emphasised that they left Eritrea to seek a better life for themselves as well as their families. This might be misconstrued to mean that these young Eritreans

are economic migrants. However, further discussions with them pointed to broader goals and expectations which compel the children to leave. They expressed a general sense of despair with the current situation, which according to them, would not allow for further personal development. Fear of a future constrained by indefinite military conscription and arbitrary detention for exercising fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression or religion, were chief among the concerns they voiced. One of the children said: 'In Eritrea there is no hope for a future, there is nothing to dream of or think of, so you have to leave the country to reach your goals. Even if you plan for the future there is no future except being a soldier.' Another one stated that he left Eritrea because he wanted a life of his own, rather than one which would make him 'belong to the state'.

Several unaccompanied children explained that accessing better educational opportunities was one of the strong motivating forces pushing them ahead during their journey. They expressed their desire to further their education and pursue various careers, including in the field of dentistry, as a chef, a jewellery designer, a doctor, and an officer, with the aim of reaching the rank of captain in the merchant navy.

However, they also said they did not trust that their dreams to pursue their chosen careers could have been possible in Eritrea because of the current situation in the education system, in which they experienced shortages of teachers and other resources needed for effective learning. They also highlighted the state of demotivation among teachers, a contributing factor fuelling absenteeism and poor performance among students, especially among those coming from rural settings and border towns. They also noted that even if they were to complete school in Eritrea, their future would still be controlled and they would not be able to engage in a career of their choice; they would still be conscripted into the military. One of the unaccompanied children explained how her siblings had finished school, but still ended up as conscripts in the national service as soldiers and teachers, even if they had other dreams – an experience which motivated her to leave to avoid the same fate.”

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E>

¹¹ <https://africamonitorsco.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/eritrean-unaccompanied-minors-and-human-trafficking/>

¹² <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E>

¹³ “The exposure of Eritrean children to violence and arbitrary arrest both as witnesses and victims was among the top compelling reasons Eritrean unaccompanied children cited for leaving the country. Several among the unaccompanied children highlighted experiences in which they witnessed violence against a family member or friend, thereby creating fear that the same fate could befall them. Some of the unaccompanied children experienced violence first-hand, including arbitrary detention after the ‘giffas’ or for inquiring about relatives who were detained, or because they were suspected of wanting to flee the country. Fear that this could happen again was expressed as a reason for leaving. One female interviewee was suspected of planning to leave the country, as a number of her friends had already left. She was not planning to do so, as her mother was mentally disabled. She was put in detention for three days, an experience which traumatised her to a degree that she eventually left the country, only to be injured at the border when shot at during flight.”

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E>

¹⁴ “Some of the unaccompanied children said that if they were caught without identity documents such as their student cards, they would risk being rounded up and conscripted during ‘giffas’ or raids. One of the unaccompanied children said he was caught in a ‘giffa’ after he had gone to the market to buy food for his family. He was detained together with other boys who were even younger than him and his parents were not allowed to see him while he was in detention. He was sent from prison to military training until he fled the country. Another unaccompanied child noted how his brother was forced into military conscription and he feared the same would happen to him due to his poor performance in school and the mere fact that he looked older than his age. Witnessing this spurred him to leave the country in fear that such fate could also befall him as he

was not well gifted academically.”

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E - sthash.fmnqqWxG.dpuf>

This issue was also discussed in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

“After Grade 11 children were sent to ‘SAWA’ which was a military training camp according to many reliable reports. There were several thousand children under the age of 18 in SAWA. The Government stated that SAWA had been a military training camp but was today an ordinary school – could the delegation provide information on that transition? Children often fled Eritrea and claimed asylum in other countries because of the fear of conscription and the fear of being sent to SAWA which they believed was a military training camp”. See more at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15984&LangID=E - sthash.NUZRstCw.dpuf>

¹⁵ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E>

¹⁶ See more at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E - sthash.fmnqqWxG.dpuf>

¹⁷ See more at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E - sthash.fmnqqWxG.dpuf>

¹⁸ Women’s Refugee Commission (2013) *Young and astray: An assessment of factors driving the movement of unaccompanied children and adolescents from Eritrea into Ethiopia, Sudan and beyond*, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/youth/resources/940-young-and-astray-an-assessment-of-factors-driving-the-movement-of-unaccompanied-children-and-adolescents-from-eritrea-into-ethiopia-sudan-and-beyond>

¹⁹ See more at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E #sthash.frUu1T8u.dpuf>

²⁰ Frontex Risk Analysis, 2015 (p. 16)

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2015.pdf

²¹ Frontex Risk Analysis, 2015 (p. 19)

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annula_Risk_Analysis_2016.pdf

²² Frontex, 2015, Unaccompanied Minors in the Migration Process. See:

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Attachments_News/unaccompanied_minors_public_5_dec.pdf

²³ See this chilling report by VICE: <https://news.vice.com/article/libyas-migrant-cattle-trade-one-refugees-story>

²⁴ Van Reisen, M.; Rijken, C. (2015) ‘[sinai trafficking: origin and definition of a new form of human trafficking](https://www.cogitatiopress.com/ojs/index.php/socialinclusion/article/view/180).’ *Social Inclusion*, 3 (1), pp. 113–124,

<http://www.cogitatiopress.com/ojs/index.php/socialinclusion/article/view/180>

²⁵ For a good illustration of this practice, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSkJpx9_JJI

²⁶ See: Van Reisen et al. (2016) ‘Tracing the emergence of ICT-enabled human trafficking for ransom.’ In Rijken et al. (eds) *Human Trafficking Handbook* (forthcoming)

²⁷ Van Reisen et. Al (2014).

²⁸ Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; Rijken, C. (2014) *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, pp. 46–47

²⁹ Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; Rijken, C. (2014) *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, p. 46

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- ³⁰ Africa Monitors (2016) *Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*, 29 May 2016, <https://africamonitorsco.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/eritrean-unaccompanied-minors-and-human-trafficking/>
- ³¹ Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; Rijken, C. (2014) *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, pp. 41–42
- ³² Africa Monitors (2016) *Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*, 29 May 2016, <https://africamonitorsco.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/eritrean-unaccompanied-minors-and-human-trafficking/>
- ³³ Van Reisen, M.; Estefanos, M.; Rijken, C. (2014) *The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, p. 42
- ³⁴ Women’s Refugee Commission (2013) *Young and astray: An assessment of factors driving the movement of unaccompanied children and adolescents from Eritrea into Ethiopia, Sudan and beyond*, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/youth/resources/940-young-and-astray-an-assessment-of-factors-driving-the-movement-of-unaccompanied-children-and-adolescents-from-eritrea-into-ethiopia-sudan-and-beyond> (p. 17)
- ³⁵ MHUB, 2015, *Conditions and Risks of Mixed Migration in North East Africa*. Report.
- ³⁶ E-mail conversation, 27 May 2016, TB
- ³⁷ Skype conversation, 25 May 2016, HA
- ³⁸ <https://youtu.be/DvVU65glIXE>