

Eritreans Flee their Country in Droves, But outside Protection is Still Lacking

**Joint Media Team
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Political repression, social injustice, fear, arbitrary arrests, despair, forced relocations, indefinite military service, and economic hardship are forcing Eritreans to seek refuge in the neighboring countries of the Sudan and Ethiopia in great numbers. Eritreans of all walks of life: youth, soldiers, civil servants, students, entire family members, women, and children between the age of 5 and 16 are part of this tragic exodus. The refugees trek through dangerous places along the Ethiopian and Sudanese border crossing points to avoid the death squads of the ruling regime of Isayas Afewerki. In this dreadful situation, many unlucky ones were shot and could not make it to Sudan or Ethiopia. With tight border security and the absence of international representatives in Eritrea, the death of hundreds of fleeing Eritreans in the border areas continues to remain unreported.

Eritrean refugees continue to suffer numerous inhumane treatments and untold abuses by the host countries, namely Libya, Malta, Italy, and Egypt. Egypt and Libya have deported hundreds of Eritrean refugees in the last two years despite pleas from a number of international human rights advocates, individuals, and Eritrean civil society organizations.

In August 2009, sources of the Eritrean People's Party reported that Libyan authorities were holding over 200 Eritrean refugees in Danfuda prison in the northern town of Benghazi. Few refugees who managed to escape from the Danfuda prison reported overcrowded detention facility, mistreatments and physical abuses by prison guards, poor sanitation, and lack of health care services, inadequate supply of food and water, and unbearable temperature inside the prison.

In Egypt, there are hundreds of Eritrean refugees languishing in various detention centers with no access to any legal protection of the UNHCR and others. Last month, the Melbourne-based Radio Voice of Eritrea reported eight unknown corpses of Eritrean refugees lying in Egyptian hospital mortuaries. The disregard of international refugee conventions and laws by Egyptian authorities with respect to Eritrean refugees is not something new. In June 2008, Egyptian authorities deported over 1,200 Eritrean refugees back to Eritrea. In addition, Egypt had returned unknown number of Eritrean refugees prior to the June 2008 deportation.

One of the reported tragedies is the death of 73 Eritrean refugees in August this year after their boat capsized near Italy's Lampedusa Island in the Mediterranean Sea. This batch of refugees, including pregnant women and children, took off from Libya and sailed 20 days before their boat ran out of fuel and capsized. Survivors reported several Maltese coast guard boats and

others went by them and never offered to help. It is believed that the Eritrean refugees would have survived if the Maltese coast guards had taken measures to rescue them.

Eritrean refugees are among the most wronged groups of people in the world. Yet, the indifference of the international community towards Eritrean refugees is saddening. From denying the right to political asylum to mistreatment and abuse in various detention centers by some host countries, including forced deportation: Eritrean refugees had it all. What does it take to convince the international community to accord Eritrean refugees their right to political asylum and protection in line with the laws enshrined in the international refugee conventions?