

## 'Aren't We Human Beings?': One Year After the Lampedusa Refugee Tragedy

When over 300 refugees drowned off the coast of Italy last October, the incident prompted widespread outcry and promises to save more lives. But 12 months later, the fates of the survivors show just how broken Europe's refugee system really is.

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A few weeks ago, Tadese Fisah returned to Lampedusa to thank the fisherman who had saved his life. He was shaking when he stepped onto the island, Fisah says. When he saw the shipwrecks and the sea, the images all came back to him, images of women crying for help and of tangled bodies.

Fisah, who is from Eritrea, knew nothing about the man who pulled him out of the water one year ago except his name: Costantino Baratta. He asked some passersby, who sent him to the harbor. There, he was told that Baratta was at sea, so Fisah waited. After a few hours, the fisherman, a powerful man in his mid-50s, returned to port and tied up his boat. Fisah walked up to the man timidly, not knowing what to say. But Baratta understood him nevertheless. With tears in their eyes, the two men embraced.

On the morning of Oct. 3, 2013, Baratta saved 12 people while the coast guard did nothing. Although he and other fishermen recovered 155 people altogether, [366 others drowned](#), only 800 meters (2,625 feet) from Europe. Most were from Eritrea.

Fisah was sleeping that night as the lights of Lampedusa approached on the horizon. He was still asleep when, in an effort to signal that the boat was in distress, the captain set fire

to a sheet soaked in gasoline. The burning sheet fell to the deck, and the passengers began to panic. That was when Fisah woke up.

The boat began listing to starboard. He called for his brother, but couldn't see him. "Hurry up! Jump!" someone shouted, and Fisah jumped. He couldn't swim, but he flapped his arms enough to stay afloat. People grabbed onto him, pushing him down, but he somehow managed to reach the surface again.

Next to Fisah, Eritrean Tsegazi Hadish also jumped into the water, holding his wife Selina in his arms. As the waves splashed in their faces, Hadish momentarily lost consciousness. When he came to, he was drifting alone. He dove underwater, but all he could see were dead bodies. His fellow Eritrean Berhane Yoboyo was lying below the deck when the boat capsized. People fell on top of him and grabbed onto him. The boat was already sinking by the time he managed to extricate himself.

Within a few minutes, the boat had sunk into the sea, and soon afterwards most of the passengers had disappeared. Almost all the women and children on board were dead, but the three men survived; the fishermen pulled them out of the water several hours later.

### **Revealing Trajectories**

It was the biggest accident of its kind -- at least until early September of this year, when 500 refugees died in a shipwreck near Malta. But what happened on Oct. 3 a year ago wasn't just an accident, it was the result of Europe's contradictory approach to immigration.

After the accident, politicians traveled to the island and said that they would never forget the sight of the many coffins,

promising assistance to the 155 survivors as well as expedited naturalization and psychological counseling. They also promised more humane immigration laws and better protection for those who would hazard the journey in the future. It sounded as if something were truly about to change.

The Italian government announced the Mare Nostrum operation, designed to help [refugees](#) who are already in international waters. But it was a doubled-edged promise: Although it made the passage safer, it also encouraged more refugees to make the trip -- on even more dilapidated ships. **More than 100,000 people have landed on Italian shores this year, most of them rescued when their vessels were in distress. Over 2,500 have died.**

But now even the rescue mission is to be terminated because it costs € million (\$11.4 million) a year and the Italian government no longer wants to pay. This will lead to riskier crossings, and even more deaths. And no one knows what to do with all the survivors, who arrive every day. The EU is helpless as it adheres to the Dublin Regulation -- which states that a refugee must apply for asylum in the EU country in which he or she first arrives. The policy, however, has long since been invalidated by reality.

The trajectory of the Oct. 3 shipwreck survivors shows how absurd and inhumane this immigration policy is. They all fled for similar reasons, most from Eritrea and a few from Somalia, and had no belongings when they arrived in Lampedusa. Today, the 155 survivors are now scattered across Europe. Some were granted asylum, others have been provisionally allowed to stay and a few were deported. Only one of them, it would seem, Tadese Fisah, has remained in Italy, their country of arrival.

## A Lost Brother

A year after being rescued, Fisah is living in the Salaam Palace, or Palace of Peace. It's what refugees call the abandoned university building on the outskirts of Rome where they have been squatting for the last eight years. It isn't a palace but a pile of concrete with broken windows, mattresses, plywood and other debris are piled in front of the entrance. The building is home to about 1,600 people, the ones who don't have the money to continue traveling north, which is where almost all refugees want to go.

Hardly anyone wants to stay in Italy, even though the country approved 64 percent of asylum applications last year, more than twice the European Union average. **Italy's refugee camps are overcrowded, forcing thousands of immigrants to live in the streets.** Very few of these immigrants are working legally or receiving medical care, which is why they want to leave Italy for countries like Germany. That's a goal Italy is helping them achieve: More than a quarter of the refugees are not registered by the Italians, enabling them to apply for asylum wherever they choose -- or wherever they are arrested.

But Fisah wasn't part of that group, which is why he is now telling his story in front of the "palace," clutching a container of milk surrounded by flies. His three-year journey began in Eritrea, where he worked as a photographer. His brother Mengsteab, who was three years younger, wanted to become a teacher. But the regime accused them of supporting the opposition, so the brothers fled to Ethiopia and, from there, crossed Sudan and entered Libya. At the beginning of their journey, the brothers made a promise to each other: "No matter what happens, we stay together."

But Fisah lost his brother when the boat sank. After his rescue, he was taken to a hospital in Sicily where, after 10 days, police officers picked him up and took him to the police station. They took his fingerprints and told him to get out. "They treated me like a criminal," says Fisah. After living on the street in Palermo for a week, he went to Rome in early November, where he ended up in the Salaam Palace.

He tried to find his brother, but Mengsteab's mobile phone didn't ring when he tried to call it. "I was frantic. I didn't know what had happened to him, whether he had even survived the disaster." After a while he came to believe that his brother was dead.

Because the "palace" isn't the kind of place where people stay long, Fisah stowed away on a train to Stockholm in December. He applied for asylum in Sweden but was rejected. Fisah had been unlucky: Italy had fed his fingerprints into the Eurodac database. **Some who flee to the north burn their fingertips, or they wait for two years until the prints are deleted from the database.** The Swedes treated him as a Dublin case and sent him back to Italy.

Since March, he has again been living in the Salaam Palace outside Rome. Once a day, he takes the bus into the city to pick up food packages from the Caritas charity.

### **In German Limbo**

Although his journey was shorter, Tsegazi Hadish has made it further than Fisah. He is now living in a home for asylum applicants in Seevetal, a town in the northern German state of Lower Saxony. **He has applied for asylum and would like to work, but he is not allowed to. "I'm condemned to doing nothing,"** says Hadish. Although he is now in a safe place, the

days and hours drag along. He passes the time watching television; sometimes he rides a bicycle into town.

Hadish has hollow cheeks and tired-looking eyes. He crouches on his bed in a container home, his face buried in his hands. He says that he wishes he had never made the trip. "Why did I get on that boat?" he asks. "Why did Selina have to die?"

Hadish and Selina grew up together in a village in southern Eritrea and they were married when he was 23 and Selina was 18. Then Hadish was drafted into life-long military service, which is more like forced labor than army duty. After three years, he and Selina left their country, and when they arrived in the Libyan city of Tripoli months later, they were both exhausted and relieved. "I thought at the time that we had survived the worst," says Hadish. But then came the real hell.

After his rescue, Hadish was taken to the overcrowded reception center in Lampedusa. When the police asked him to identify Selina, he clicked through the photos of the dead until he saw the swollen body of his wife. He collapsed at the sight. Since then, he sees the same images again and again, every night, of children thrashing around in panic and bodies floating in the water.

Italy promised a state funeral and that those who had drowned would be symbolically declared Italian citizens. But then the coffins were taken to Sicily, the state funeral never materialized, and most of the bodies were buried quietly and in secret, with only numbers marking the graves. Hadish was not even permitted to attend the funeral service, and he still doesn't know where his wife was buried.

After six weeks in Lampedusa, he and the other survivors were flown to Rome, where the mayor met them at the airport. He too promised that he would personally attend to their needs.

But after one night in a hotel room provided, Hadish was informed that he was on his own. Like almost all the refugees seeking to travel northward, he went to Milan, where he got into a trafficker's car. He arrived in the Swiss capital Bern a few days before Christmas. But even though an attorney had submitted an evaluation stating that Hadish was suicidal, Swiss authorities deported him to Italy six months later.

He was back in Milan, sleeping in parks and eating garbage. "I couldn't have survived in Italy," he says. He decided to try again and paid a trafficker to take him to Sweden. But the police arrested Hadish just outside the Bavarian town of Rosenheim and took him to a detention center in Munich. He was later transferred to Friedland in Lower Saxony, and he has been in Seevetal, outside Hamburg, since late July. The immigration authorities are currently reviewing his asylum application, but it will most likely send him back to Italy, as the Swiss authorities did before.

What happens then? Rain is drumming down on the roof of the housing container in Seevetal. Hadish walks over to the window. "Why do you Europeans do this to us?" he asks, shaking his head. "Aren't we human beings?"

**Berhane Yoboyo** has made it farther than any of the others. It took him three years to get to the northern end of Europe from his hometown of Tesseney, in Eritrea. **The journey cost him \$47,700 (€37,700) - which he needed to pay fees to traffickers and ransom to kidnappers in Sudan, Sinai and Libya, and for cars, trains and ships. His parents sold their house to pay for it. He was tortured, he starved and he saw people die -- all to reach Sweden.**

Now he lives in Galliväre, north of the Arctic Circle, in a red wooden house on a lake. There is snow on the ground from

October to April and it remains completely dark for 14 days in December. When Yoboyo arrived in late November, he was afraid to leave the house for four weeks.

Yoboyo is a slim 23-year-old with a thin moustache. Although his back is covered with scars, he looks like a child and he wasn't fingerprinted by the Italians because they thought he was a minor. He was taken to Sicily, and in his third night there, while the guards were sleeping, he and other refugees escaped through a window.

Yoboyo went to Rome, where he has relatives. They told him that his parents had died without knowing that he had survived a torture camp in Sinai, a fact that is especially painful for him today. He traveled to Milan and bought a fake refugee identification card for €900. He wanted to fly to Denmark and take a train to Sweden from there, but he was arrested before he could board the aircraft. The police took him in, fingerprinted him and then released him.

Instead of flying, he decided to take a train from Milan to Frankfurt, and then to Malmö in southern Sweden. The traffickers had told him that Sweden was the best country for Eritreans. They taught him one sentence, the only sentence he can say in English: "I want to go Stockholm." He arrived there on Nov. 21, 2013.

He was lucky: Although the police had taken his fingerprints at the Milan airport, they hadn't passed them on to other European authorities, and because Yoboyo wasn't registered anywhere yet, he was able to apply for asylum in Sweden. All Eritreans permitted to apply for asylum in Sweden under the Dublin Regulation are accepted -- as was Yoboyo. He now has almost the same rights as a Swedish citizen, except that he is not allowed to vote in national elections. He can also become



a citizen in five years. He receives welfare payments and is now waiting for a free apartment so that he can finally escape from this village at the end of the world. He wants to complete a training program as an auto mechanic. Cars are the only things that Sweden and his native Eritrea have in common.

But the Swedish authorities are also overwhelmed. More than 50,000 people had applied for asylum in Sweden by the end of August, including 8,623 Eritreans, the second-largest refugee group after Syrians. Many Swedes seem concerned that the country is accepting too many refugees; a new parliament was just voted into office, and right-wing populists are now the third-strongest party. But Yoboyo doesn't know anything about that. After eight months, he has very little to say about his new home: "It's a good country. The people are very reserved, but they are not unfriendly."

### **Trying to Start Over**

He lives with six other refugees from Eritrea in the wooden house on the Arctic Circle. A government official visits them twice a week, but otherwise they are left on their own. They go to the local church and say "hej" to the villagers. Yoboyo has started learning a few sentences in Swedish, like "What is your name?" and "How are you?" But he isn't confident enough to ask anyone these questions.

He never lets go of his smartphone, which is his connection to the world. "Almost everyone I know from my country has fled," he says. His closest friends are the Lampedusa survivors. They talk a lot about the accident.

He is telling his story in the Stockholm apartment of Swedish-Eritrean activist **\*Meron Estefanos**. They met on Lampedusa, but have known each other longer than that. Estefanos pulls up a YouTube video. "We tortured him with electroshocks. He

can't move his tongue anymore," says a man speaking into a telephone in the video. He is talking about Yoboyo. Then Yoboyo himself calls from the torture camp on the Sinai Peninsula. "Please help me. If you pay they'll let me go," he begs. Estefanos hosts a call-in radio program for kidnapped refugees, in an effort to help people locate their relatives and comfort them.

Yoboyo looks away and groans. He is seeing the video for the first time. He talks about fleeing to Sudan, and about the soldiers there who sold him to human traffickers from Sinai. He was chained there for 11 months: every month they demanded \$5,000 from him, which he was forced to beg for in calls to relatives. He talks about how they dripped molten plastic on his back whenever he couldn't convince the relatives to send the money. And about how his kidnappers stuffed him into a garbage bag and threw him onto the side of the road when he could no longer raise any money.

He remains calm as he relates these experiences, but he begins to tremble when asked about the Lampedusa accident. He says that he has to smoke a cigarette. The sea, he says, was even worse than Sinai.

"When you're a refugee, you expect things to be bad," says Yoboyo. But he doesn't understand why the coast guard in wealthy Italy didn't rescue them. Still, he says, he doesn't regret making the trip. "At least I have a choice here. I have no choices in Eritrea."

The biggest burden of being rescued is the debt he now has to pay off. He is also worried about his two younger brothers, who will soon be drafted into the army. "I'm concerned that they too might decide to make the journey. I told them that they can't run away." But he knows that they'll come.

## Unexpected Reunion

There is at least one small piece of good news. Tadese Fisah has found his brother -- in Germany.

Mengsteab Fisah, it turns out, is living in a home for asylum applicants in Wolfhagen, a town in the western state of Hesse. After the shipwreck, he too searched for his brother. He was sent to the reception center and flown to Rome after one-and-a-half months. He wandered the streets in Rome, only a few kilometers away from his brother, then hired a smuggler to take him to Germany.

Because Mengsteab Fisah was initially sent to the reception center in Lampedusa, he was not registered in Italy. Hardly any of the survivors were fingerprinted there, which is why almost all of them have left the country. Mengsteab Fisah's chances of being allowed to stay in Germany, it turns out, are good.

Tadese Fisah, on the other hand, was sent to the hospital right after his rescue and registered there -- which is why he has almost no chance of gaining asylum outside Italy. **While his brother takes German lessons three times a week, Tadese is fighting for his survival in the streets of Rome.**

When Mengsteab Fisah arrived, he made one last attempt to find his brother. He posted a message on Facebook, writing: "Tadese, where are you? Please get in touch with me!" It had never occurred to either of the brothers to try it earlier. They had never heard of Facebook in Eritrea. Tadese Fisah broke out in tears when he read the message. They have spoken with each other by phone every day since then.

Tadese Fisah is now saving his money for another trip north. He wants to go to Germany this time.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*

- \*Meron Estefanos is one of the many liars, middle-women-men/conspirators with the criminal Human Traffickers/Gangs, make a lot of profit in the name and much suffering of our Eritrean Brothers/Sisters. History will judge her and her likes i.e. the treason Camps, the fraudulents, the liars and the brutal Human Traffickers [Eritreans and their bosses]. Berhane Habteariam



Photos ▶

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