

## Thoughts and rants of an Eritrean-American.

### The Traffic Racket: The Eritrean “Activists” (Part 1)

*[“It must be read by everyone-It is about an objective of truth over a massive campaign of lies, defamations and conspiracies for about 15 years against Eritrea and its’ People. It is a Bombshell to the Traitors and their Bosses (financiers), would be “Eritrean Activists”, but Beggars-Slaves of the higher bidder-Human Smugglers/Traffickers and their Collaborators.”] **Berhane Habtemariam***

May 19, 2015

*This piece is the first in a series of articles on the “The Traffic Racket.” The series will look into the shocking evidence of a smuggling and trafficking network facilitated by human rights activists working with refugee agencies, state governments and officials, NGOs and international bodies to smuggle Eritreans, particularly children, from Eritrea. Exploited Eritrean migrants often show up on European shores with few observers understanding that the growing tide of trans-Mediterranean migrants is the result of a larger trafficking racket. Part one looks into the role of Eritrean “activists.”*

### Tragedy on the Mediterranean

Sunday, April 19 witnessed the [deadliest migrant shipwreck in the Mediterranean](#) since World War II. More than 850 migrants from multiple countries were pronounced dead the next day after their boat capsized during a voyage from Libya to Italy.

In less than forty-eight hours following the tragedy, before the proverbial dust had settled, the majority of migrants were said to be Eritrean. According to Carlotta Sami, a spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) in Catania, Sicily, “there were Syrians, about 150 Eritreans, Somalians.”

Observers found it somewhat odd that, of the [20 different nationalities](#) aboard the ill-fated vessel, only the number of Eritreans were tallied and definitive. This did not appear to be a one-time exception or anomaly, either.

Only a couple hours after Cami’s statement, an updated UNHCR statement by Adrian Edwards, declared that “among those on board were some 350 Eritreans, as well as people from Syria, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia.”

Again, no definitive casualty figures for any groups other than Eritreans. Thus, how was the official number established? How were the bodies identified and confirmed to be Eritrean? Why were numbers not established for other groups?

With a number in hand, Eritrea immediately came to the fore of the horrific international tragedy. Journalists wasted no time in turning to the nation’s domestic politics and human rights situation. From the ensuing barrage of sensational headlines, it was clear that the plight of Eritrean migrants would be singled out and politicized.

Just a few of these headlines, for instance, highlight this reality: *Eritrea: Africa’s land of exodus* (Stefanie Duckstein, Deutsche Welle); *Crushing repression of Eritrea’s citizens is driving them into migrant boats* (Dan Connell, The Guardian); and *Escaping Eritrea: ‘If I die at sea, it’s not a problem – at least I won’t be tortured’* (Mark Anderson, The Guardian).

Unlike the reporting on other ‘first nations’ that regularly produce Europe-bound asylum seekers and migrants, reporting on Eritrea mainly centered around alleged domestic repression

rather than conflict and poverty, which have historically been the leading causes of flight by asylum seekers and migrants worldwide, respectively.

“If you look at the numbers last year,” explained Volker Turk, the director of international protection at UNCHR, “over 50 percent of the people who crossed the Mediterranean were people in need of international protection. Mostly Syrians, Eritreans, some Somalis.”

Tim Lister from CNN, however, noted the exceptionalism of the Eritrean migrants. According to Lister, “Eritreans want to escape repression or military service; Somalis flee Al-Shabaab and clan warfare; Syrians have given up hope of returning home.”

Again, Matina Stevis of the Wall Street Journal echoed, “The continued Syrian war is pushing ever more refugees out to Europe, where they seek asylum and safety. Sub-Saharan Africans are fleeing their homelands because of either conflict or deep poverty. Eritreans, the second-top nationality of migrants reaching Europe last year, are leaving in hordes because their country enforces mandatory conscription in the army, does not pay them and does not allow them to return to work.”

While Business Insider’s Editor Armin Rosen explained that “Eritrea has a population of around 6.3 million and accounted for 20% of the total [asylum seekers in Europe]”, Dan Connell, writing for the Guardian, explained that “Eritreans are second only to Syrians in the number of boat arrivals, though the country is a fraction of Syria’s size and there’s no live civil war there.”

Most reporting on Eritrea was more or less the same and the emerging post-tragedy narrative on Eritrean migrants suggested

that they, unlike all other migrants groups (with the exception of Gambians), were fleeing their homeland due to government repression rather conflict and poverty.

Absent from this narrative, unfortunately, were any voices of dissent or more nuanced analyses for a more contextualized understanding of Eritrean migration.

### **Credible Sources?**

Naturally, the question thus emerges: Upon what evidence do the aforementioned journalists base their claims about the domestic situation in Eritrea?

One cannot help but notice the glaring fact that none of the authors have either visited Eritrea to field their reports or based their writing on entities that report from Eritrea such that claims behind the domestic situation can be substantiated firsthand. In fact, many of the entities cited—and some of the author themselves—have already demonstrated compromised credibility and bias vis-a-vis Eritrea.

Take for instance, Connell from The Guardian. In a May 2013 speech in Washington, D.C., later [posted on YouTube](#), he instructed a group of Eritreans to campaign around migration and human trafficking to help bring about the ulterior motive of regime change and topple Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki:

“What’s going to generate the most response from a wider public that is not familiar with Eritrea? And what would weaken Isaias’ ability to govern? I don’t think you can organize a campaign for regime change but you can organize campaigns that can make regime change more possible...I would certainly suggest an end to unlimited conscription into national service partly because it’s so easy to tie that together with so many other issues: the

refugee issue, the trafficking issue, and so on. And partly because the pressure on Isaias would weaken his ability to govern.

...A campaign should be simple direct and uncomplicated. Other obvious issues that can be in some way linked, focusing our attention on the trafficking issue and always linking it to the source of the refugee flows. This trafficking issue is a consequence of the situation inside Eritrea. No other issue is likely to generate attention and support from the American public. Calls for increased financial and technical support for refugees in the support and for far better security in the camps are also simple issues to link them to this. Pressure on the US, Canadian, European and Israeli asylum seekers is another one that comes directly out of this.”

Despite his obvious bias and plans to opportunistically exploit the plight of Eritrean migrants for political ends, Connell’s latest piece was published in *The Guardian*, making recommendations to the European Union to restrict development—not military—aid to Eritrea worth hundreds of millions of euros.

He warned that “if EU and individual states jump too rashly and simply throw money at Eritrea, they risk entrenching the very practices that lie behind much of the exodus, while doing precious little to stem it.”

Such a claim seems hard to substantiate and understand when Eritrea is the only nation in sub-Saharan Africa thus far that is on track to meet all of health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) despite having the lowest health expenditures in the world, according to the World Health Organization.

Christine Umutoni of the United Nations Development Program and head of all humanitarian operations in Eritrea, [told the BBC last month](#) that there was a lack of corruption in Eritrea and that “we’ve seen value for money and accountability. You know, you invest a little and you get a lot.” If Umutoni is indeed correct, restricting developmental aid to Eritrea seems to make little sense.

However, Michela Wrong, like Connell and the majority chorus of American and European journalists, disagrees, writing in another post-tragedy article that any support for developmental programs in Eritrea will not make the situation in Eritrea better. According to Wrong, “Man cannot live by MDGs alone.”

Although Wrong’s claim about the limited scope of MDGs is certainly true, it doesn’t change the facts on the ground that suggest Eritrea has used developmental fund effectively. It should also be noted that when Eritrean President Isaias was [asked about Eritrea’s success with the MDGs](#), he stated, “It’s true we might have met global standards when it comes to malaria and other diseases, but that should not put us at ease. It would be wrong to compare your excellence with others’ mediocrity. You need to have your own standards.”

### **Citing ‘Eritrean Activists’**

Duckstein’s aforementioned piece in Deutsche Welle, also cited a dubious source, this time an Eritrean. Duckstein interviewed and quoted Father Mussie Zerai, an Eritrean Catholic priest from the Vatican’s Ethiopian College living in Rome, who has been implicated in facilitating and abetting trans-Mediterranean human smuggling following 2012 investigations by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

According to PACE's report, *Lives Lost in the Mediterranean: Who is Responsible?*, Mussie allegedly served as a smuggling intermediary between the 'captains' of Italy-bound vessels and the Italian Coast Guard. Without his call, the migrants rescue was unlikely:

The "captain" had the phone, but nobody knew where he had got it from or who had added Father Zerai's number to it. In a short conversation Father Zerai was informed that they were having problems...The Priest informed them that he would contact the Italian authorities to request assistance. Father Zerai subsequently contacted the Italian Coast Guard...

...However, in the meantime, the "captain" had thrown the compass and the satellite phone overboard when he thought the helicopter was going to rescue them. He explained that he did not want to be arrested for possession of the telephone and the compass. He feared that these items would be used as evidence of his involvement in a smuggling network....

If the captain is afraid of being implicated in smuggling, then how about Mussie Zerai, the man on the other side of the phone? What makes the coast guard willing to pick up the call from Mussie but not the captains themselves? Why does Mussie have this special monopoly?

The actions of the smugglers are in line with the *modus operandi*, whereby the smugglers deliberately sink the boats, triggering a rescue mission from the National Guard, and satellite phones are thrown overboard to hide one's involvement.

The UNODC report *Smuggling of Migrants by Sea* states, "Where vessels are unseaworthy and not intended for reuse,



there is no risk to the smuggler in assigning an unskilled person, possibly even a migrant, to captain and navigate the boats. Fishing vessels used to transport migrants generally end up at the bottom of the sea and were never intended for use in more than one journey.” The report continues:

Upon interception by authorities, mobile phones, GPS and any other equipment allowed on board to navigate the sea journey will be thrown overboard. Before doing so, smugglers or others on board or on land may call the coast guard with a satellite mobile phone, telling authorities to rescue persons on board boats. A frequently reported modus operandi put in place upon interception is for smugglers or migrants to force a rescue by sinking or scuttling boats. Rubber dinghies for instance may be punctured so authorities are forced to assume responsibility for persons in the water. Wooden vessels may be set alight to ensure that authorities assist persons on board, sometimes motivated by the perception that intercepted vessels will be turned back otherwise.

The fact that wooden vessels are set alight is critical to understand. The October 2013 migrant shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy, which led to the [widely publicized and politicized death](#) of 366 migrants—almost entirely Eritrean—was said to have been [triggered by the Tunisian captain](#) Khaled Bensalam, who lit a fuel-doused rag on fire and set the vessel ablaze.

The lighting of the rag was likely deliberate as it is in line with the smuggling modus operandi. Bensalam was the subject of much public outcry, leading to his swift apprehension by the authorities.



Like Bensalam, multiple smugglers and traffickers were taken into custody following the latest mass casualty shipwreck. Instead of an ‘accidental’ fire this time around, the captain, Mohammed Ali Malek, another Tunisian, was said to be “drunk and smoking hashish.” He allegedly [rammed into another ship 3 times](#), suggesting that his actions were deliberate as well.

Traffickers higher up in the food chain, like Ethiopian national Ermias Ghermay, pocketed £72 million in profits in the last two years and is believed to be the mastermind behind both the October 2013 and current shipwreck, had his phone wiretapped and was under pursuit by the Italian authorities.

Thus, note the differing approaches in dealing with the alleged smugglers: while the captain was taken into custody and the higher-level traffickers have become fugitives, Mussie Zerai was seen as a human rights activist, an esteemed man of the cloth, and, ironically, was [nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize](#) alongside Pope Francis—ostensibly, for ‘[helping](#)’ migrants.

Mattathias Schwartz of the New Yorker even goes as far as [comparing him to Haile Selassie](#): “Behind him, in a glass case, was an Ethiopian Bible, its cover adorned with a gold cross. In front of it was a laminated printout: ‘The gift of H.I.M.; Haile Selassie I; The last emperor of Ethiopia.’ ... Though Zerai lacks Selassie’s imperial pretensions, he, too, is on the receiving end of a great deal of hope projected by a great number of desperate people.”

Beyond the eulogizing, do Mussie’s actions not warrant an investigation, at the least?

Like Duckstein’s piece, which quotes Mussie, Anderson’s is also notable for citing two other Eritrean potential smugglers and dubious characters: Meron Estefanos and Elsa Chyrum. Robyn Dixon’s recent post-tragedy article for the LA Times

goes into a little more detail about the former's alleged role in smuggling operations.

Dixon tells us that “When desperate Eritrean migrants go to sea, they keep [Meron's] phone number with them, in case things go wrong. When their relatives go missing at sea, she's the one family members call.”

Like Mussie, Meron seems to serve as a liaison between the smugglers and rescuers. She often bears in hand a list of the smuggled Eritrean travelers, frequently tweeting from the scene of the tragedy, arriving before humanitarians and UNHCR officers, and giving quotes to the media.

[Tweeting to a BBC Field Producer](#) from ground following the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy, she wrote, “I have been passing names to UNHCR Italy and lampadusa center so that they can check for us. Will take days to get name list.” Two days later, she [tweeted the list](#).



Regarding Elsa Chyrum, the director of her Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRC-E), Anderson explained that she “hopes the deaths of at least 800 people...will compel European leaders to rethink their approach to Eritrea when they hold an emergency summit in Brussels on Thursday.”

“She is fiercely critical of the EU’s recent decision to try to halt the exodus of Eritreans by sending development aid to the country, arguing that the money will stay in the hands of the political elite,” Anderson wrote. Again, it beggars belief how ending developmental aid can help the people of Eritrea.

In 2011, a [HRC-E press release](#) called for expanding sanctions on Eritrea as “forced conscription and endless military service have caused a mass exodus of the youth from the nation.” This position is very much in line with Dan Connell’s ‘national service equals human trafficking’ narrative. In fact, both Connell and Elsa have gone on [speaking tours](#) together under the title “Eritrean Refugees Risk Death to Escape Tyranny.”

According to the ‘Eritrean opposition’ website Asmarino.com, Elsa Chyrum apparently [played a strong role](#) in getting Sheila Keetharuth, a former colleague from Amnesty International (AI), appointed as the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Eritrea.

AI employees like Keetharuth are hardly trusted by Eritreans since AI has been seen as hostile to the state of Eritrea, which was perhaps made most obvious in a leaked confidential memo from AI headquarters in 2011 that instructed its employees in the field to “bring about change [in Eritrea] as has happened in other African and Arab countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.”

Notably, the memo goes on to state that AI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have “received a reasonable grant from the US State Department” and should “work with the oppressed Eritrean people” as a “combined force of human rights defenders.”

Thus, these are the facts behind the oft-cited Mussie, Meron, and Elsa. The three regime-change hopefuls cum human rights

activists represent a motley crew, frequently interviewed and quoted by the American and European media ad nuaseum, in search of the official Eritrean perspective.

When a tragedy strikes, they're first on the scene. With prepared sound bites and a 'death list' in hand, they express their sorrow, shed tears, and immediately proceed to call for action against the Eritrean government.

As Meron recently tweeted, in reference to the alleged '350 Eritreans' that died at sea, "no one is [talking] about the pain but their identity. When ever an Eritrean dies I blame the Eritrean government for it." Such a position is hardly impartial, let alone, rational. Taking the moral high ground should not absolve one of presenting the hard facts as it only constitutes a veiled ad hominem fallacy.



When Eritreans other than the activist trio themselves give statements to the press and work with private and state entities to facilitate humanitarian operations at the scene of shipwrecks, they complain of interference by other Eritreans, suggestive of attempts to box-out other Eritreans from their current reigning monopoly on the humanitarian affairs of fellow compatriot-migrants.

For instance, Mussie told the AFP that other Eritreans on the ground in Lampedusa following the October 2013 shipwreck were "actually there to collect names, sensitive information.

[They] are also there to spread disinformation, to defend the regime, to claim these people have fled their country for economic reasons.” Similar attempts to brand other Eritrean voices as ‘government agents’ have served to render them virtually non-existent in the press.

Despite the Nobel peace prize nominations and willful neglect by journalists, the actions of these “activists” over the last several years have brought to light the makings of what appears to be a multibillion dollar smuggling racket that likely involves not only long-entrenched criminals but also human rights ‘activists,’ non-governmental organizations, UNHCR, state agencies and state officials across multiple nations.

Their opportunistic use of smuggling for personal gain in the form of political gain and exploitation of migrants, potentially makes them traffickers in a broader human trafficking network—or, the traffic racket.

*Part two of our series on the “The Traffic Racket” will look closer into this Eritrean trafficking racket to address the following questions: Who are the major players behind the racket and who is supporting these activists and journalists? What are the current policy changes in the EU regarding trans-Mediterranean migration? What can be expected moving forward regarding Eritrean migration?*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **The Traffic Racket: The Activist Syndicate and the EU (Part 2)**

[May 19, 2015](#)

*In part one of our series on the “The Traffic Racket,” we spoke about the dubious roles of Eritrean “activists” Mussie Zerai, Meron Estefanos, and Elsa Chyrum. We spoke about the role of misinformed journalists and sometimes outright biased activist-journalists like Dan Connell, who have been promoting the work of the activists to bring about regime change in Eritrea. Do these ties go deeper? Part two looks into the shadowy links between these activists, journalists, and state officials vis-à-vis Eritrean migration, in a loose syndicate, and looks at the consequences for Europe, Eritrea, and the migrants.*

### **Proto-syndicate**

Emerging evidence suggests that regime change activists Mussie Zerai, Meron Estefanos, and Elsa Chyrum have all been involved in facilitating the smuggling and trafficking of Eritrean youth.

Before any formal cooperation on trafficking and smuggling took place, the three activists and Dan Connell—an activist himself—were all closely linked to one another, meeting under the framework of human rights cooperation prior to their alleged smuggling cooperation. A proto-syndicate to the traffic racket, perhaps.

All four were present at a conference in Brussels hosted by the European External Policy of Advisors (EEPA) in November 2009 entitled “Joining EU and US policy towards Eritrea and the Horn of Africa: for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights.”

Also in attendance were former US Ambassadors and State Department notables alongside a smorgasbord of today's most quoted, press-approved Eritrean human rights activist. As the conference title suggests, the aim of the gathering was to get the EU to go along with US policy towards Eritrea under the mantra of promoting human rights.

It's critical to note that prior to this conference, Eritrea and the EU, despite their differing views on modes of governance, shared cozy relations. EU Commissioner Louis Michel felt that Eritrea was a "key player" in the Horn of Africa and proposed that Eritrea receive €122 million during the 10th round of the European Development Fund, which would make Eritrea the highest per-capita recipient of EU development funding.

The US felt this was too much to bear. According to a diplomatic cable sent from Brussels on April 22, 2009 by Wayne Bush, acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Phillip Carter was actively lobbying against Eritrea-EU engagement: "he questioned the wisdom of giving EUR 122 million to a regionally-destabilizing pariah regime in Eritrea."

In the end, the deal was never signed and Eritrea was sanctioned by the UN the very next month, which would have been unlikely without an EU change of heart and the EU's tacit support.

Though the diplomatic inertia between the EU and Eritrea has kept relations between the two relatively unchanged, save for recent positive developments, the US-supported and financed activists and UNHCR, which itself receives 30% of its funds from the US, have worked incessantly since then to create a rift between the two—or, more precisely, the image of a rift.

It appears that separating Eritrea from its international partners was part and parcel with the US and US-backed Ethiopian



regime's plan to "isolate Eritrea and wait for it to implode economically," as revealed by a leaked US embassy cable by Chargé d'Affaires Vicki Huddleston on November 1, 2005.

## **US State Department Involvement**

Further evidence suggests that the isolation strategy employed by the likes of Mussie, Meron, Elsa, and Connell had official support from the US State Department.

In a May 5, 2009 leaked US embassy cable sent from Asmara, entitled "Promoting Educational Opportunity for Anti-Regime Eritrean Youth", the then US Ambassador to Eritrea, Ronald K. McMullen outlines US plans for politicized smuggling of Eritrean youth, explaining that "Post plans to restart visa services (completely suspended in 2007) for student visa applicants; we intend to give opportunities to study in the United States to those who oppose the regime."

So great was US state sponsorship for smuggling Eritreans out of Eritrea, that Obama himself—who never before uttered the word "Eritrea" publicly—said in a 2012 speech at the Clinton Global Initiative, which inaugurated human trafficking as "modern slavery," "I recently renewed sanctions on some of the worst abusers, including North Korea and Eritrea. We're partnering with groups that help women and children escape from the grip of their abusers." Who are these partners, exactly?

The statement was seen as symbolic and a re-declaration of the position taken during 1884 Berlin Conference, which provided a moral justification for Europe's infamous Scramble for Africa on the basis of "human rights" enforcement that sought to relieve Africa of the Arab slave trade.

Obama's admission of "partnering" with smugglers was concerning given the [US State Department's own definition of](#)

smuggling: “the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation or illegal entry of a person or persons across an international border, in violation of one or more countries’ laws.”

Often the smuggled émigrés are exploited and killed en route to Europe’s southern shores, making the US and the human rights activists potentially party to not only the smuggling but also the trafficking of Eritreans.

## **Europe Suffering the Consequences**

Thus, it’s only within this backdrop of trans-Mediterranean smuggling and trafficking, exploited by the US state and US-supported entities, such as the aforementioned activists and UNHCR, that one can make sense of the latest mass-casualty shipwrecks, the reporting of these incidents, and the EU’s policy responses.

On Monday, April 20, the EU Joint Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs Council met in Luxemburg to hold an emergency meeting, which led to the release of a 10-point plan aimed at addressing the dangers of growing trans-Mediterranean migration. A follow-up summit of the European Commission was held in Brussels on Thursday, April 23 to further address the issue and expand upon the 10 point plan.

In essence, EU leaders agreed to double emergency aid to frontline member states Italy, Greece and Malta to the tune of €50 million per year. They also pledged ships, aircraft and equipment to assist with humanitarian efforts for migrants, such as support for reception centers and medical personnel to deal with the influx.

EU leaders also decided to address growing smuggling activities, pledging to triple funding to €9 million a month for Frontex, the EU's border operation patrolling the Mediterranean. Frontex ships will travel closer to the Libya, the starting point for 90% of all smuggled trans-Mediterranean migrants, to prevent illegal migration before it starts.

The funds for Frontex are earmarked for its Triton mission, which will not conduct active search-and-rescue operations but will instead focus on military operations against smugglers.

### **Protest by UNHCR and Human Rights NGOs**

The new EU position led to criticism by the media and protest by UNHCR and human rights groups. At the helm was UNHCR's Commissioner Antonio Guterres, who [explained](#) that the most recent shipwreck "confirms how urgent it is to restore a robust rescue-at-sea operation and establish credible legal avenues to reach Europe."

"It doesn't mean it has to be Mare Nostrum," Guterres [said](#), referring to the Italian search-and-rescue operation that was suspended last year due to cost. "It can be European Union-sponsored operation but different from Triton."

According to USA News & World Report, Guterres' logic that [justifies a boost](#) in search-and-rescue operations, is predicated on the observation that "42,000 migrants arrived in Italy via sea in 2013, but that number increased to 170,000 in 2014."

On the surface, these numbers seem to provide support for search-and-rescue but Guterres, UNHCR, and human rights NGOs fail to mention that Operation Mare Nostrum was actually in operation during the majority of that period in which

the migrant spike occurred, running from October 18, 2013 – October 31, 2014.

In contrast to Guterres, last year's EU home affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom indicated that the success of the Italian operation has created a pull factor and made the sea crossing attempts more dangerous.

In the wake of the October 2013 mass-casualty shipwreck near Lampedusa, Italy, the Swedish commissioner warned, "The tragic backslide of this [search-and-rescue operation] is that it has also increased trafficking intensity on the other side of the Mediterranean, which means that people have been put in even more unsafe vessels and even smaller boats because of the likelihood of them being saved."

Two years after her warning, it appears that traffickers and smugglers have become emboldened by search-and-rescue-centric EU. According to a recent study by Frontex, traffickers have started [openly marketing their smuggling services](#) on popular social media sites like Facebook.

Despite the statistics and realities behind migration, human rights groups remain seemingly averse to the facts on the ground.

According to Amnesty International's Deputy Program Director for Europe and Central Asia, "Europe has scaled back search-and-rescue capacity based on the flawed argument that such operations were acting as a 'pull factor', attracting more migrants. But the reality in the Mediterranean is exposing that fallacy, since the numbers of desperate people seeking to make it to Europe are only going up."

**The Other Solution No One's Talking About**

Absent from virtually all arguments by UNHCR and human rights group as well as the EU's debate on migration are the root causes of the phenomenon, both push and pull factors. Responses to migrant shipwrecks by both UNHCR and the EU seem to ignore these two key factors and focus entirely on symptoms—namely, the facilitation of migration en route to Europe.

Such facilitation comes in the form of search-and-rescue and boosting asylum quotas. Although this sort of facilitation is undoubtedly much needed, allowing for more humane treatment of migrants and legal routes of entry for those in distress, there's essentially nothing being done to address the root causes and to curb migration.

In fact, the causes of migration are even worsened.

The oft quoted Eritrean activists, who often work with UNHCR and human rights NGOs, seem to go a step of further by playing an active role in worsening the causes of migration, calling for an end to the EU's development aid to Eritrea and engaging in illegal smuggling activities.

By working with these political activists, UNHCR is stepping beyond its mandate, limited to purely humanitarian operations, enshrined in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

In UNHCR's frame of thought: forget about addressing the instability in Libya resulting from the European war of aggression; forget about addressing Ethiopia's ongoing illegal occupation of Eritrea; forget about busting the trans-Mediterranean smuggling racket; forget about the real causes of desperate journeys; just focus on symptoms—rescuing migrants.

Given UNHCR's logic of facilitating ever-expanding search-and-rescue without addressing root causes, why not cut the smugglers out of the loop and simply provide the recently pledged European rescue vessels at Libyan ports to directly transport willing migrants from Libya to Italy, provided they pay the right price? Why stop there?

Or, better yet, why not rescue persecuted Eritreans from directly inside of Eritrea? After all, according to UNHCR's 2009 and 2011 *Eligibility Guidelines on Eritrean Asylum Seekers*, the entire state of Eritrea is deemed the "persecutor," making flight a virtual necessity for all citizens and making Eritrea the only nation in the world with such an exceptional designation.

Justification for this exceptional position by the UN's refugee agency is provided by the "continuous high numbers of asylum applications by Eritreans." However, even these numbers are hotly contested given the rampant asylum fraud, in which non-Eritreans are claiming Eritrean identity. Much like the [prematurely estimated](#) 150 versus 350 dead in the recent mass-casualty shipwreck, the numbers of Eritreans are often questionable, at best, and largely inflated, at worst.

In a recent Voice of America [interview](#), Bronwyn Bruton of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Atlantic Council, explained that people all over the world are claiming Eritrean identity to gain entry into Europe, which ascribes to UNHCR's exceptional asylum recommendations for Eritreans:

When I hear a number like 400 people on a boat, I have to suspect that at least some of those people were actually refugees from another country, taking advantage of Europe's automatic asylum policy. If you're from Eritrea or you can convince a refugee officer that you're from Eritrea, you get an automatic green card in Europe—no questions asked. And that means that

Sudanese, Ethiopians, Somalis...everyone has an incentive to walk through this open door from some of the poorest countries in the world to some of the richest countries in the world.

UNHCR's policies towards Eritreans have made it far too easy and tempting for Eritrean youth not to take the transnational journey in spite of the dangers. Questions of moral hazard come into the picture. The agency's claims of an increasing number of Eritreans "fleeing" Eritrea have become somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy, making migration socially fashionable among teenagers unaware of the horrors that lie on trek ahead of them.

The EU is also largely to blame for the current migrant spike and is misguided in its focus on petty migrants-turned-traffickers.

The chaos currently seen in Libya is largely the doing of Europe's "humanitarian" R2P war that has destroyed the Libyan state and given new life to criminals like [Ermias Ghermay](#). Declaring war on his foot soldiers and burning every rubber dingy lining the Libyan coast will likely do little to stop trafficking into Europe and deaths in the Mediterranean.

No one is talking about the ongoing illegal Ethiopian occupation of Eritrea, forcing thousands of young Eritreans mobilized against a foe 15-plus times its size. No one is talking about the unjustifiable and now [internationally discredited](#) sanctions, choking foreign direct investment and serving to isolate the nation from its would-be international partners.

Life in the militarized nation is hard and punishing as it's locked in a protracted existential crisis exacerbated by a hostile US-Ethiopian isolation strategy that resulted in unjust UN sanctions in 2009. Writing for *Al-Monitor*, Israel's former deputy minister of defense Ephraim Sneh indicated, "Over the last



decade, the United States has espoused a policy designed to isolate and weaken the country.”

The EU, as a guarantor of the 2000 Algiers Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, can curb migration by pushing Ethiopia to abide by the terms of the peace agreement and demanding its unconditional withdrawal from Eritrea. Additionally, it must push to end the UN sanctions and break-up the trans-Mediterranean smuggling networks by arresting criminals at the highest levels of the racket.

It is only when such holistic efforts are carried out in earnest that search-and-rescue makes sense; that one can expect search-and-rescue to lead to more favorable outcomes for the EU, Eritrea and, most importantly, the migrants.

Instead of designing policy responses based on reporting from a media that uncritically trumpets the words of regime-change-oriented activists, human rights NGOs, and UNHCR with an axe to grind against Eritrea, the EU and world public must push for more rational, evidence-based responses to stem the growing tide of migrants washing up on the shores of Europe.

*Part three of our series on the “The Traffic Racket” will look closer into the role of Ethiopia and its refugee agency in promoting the escape of Eritrean children from Eritrea.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **The Traffic Racket: The Pied Pipers in Tigray (Part 3)**

[May 19, 2015](#)

*Part two of our series on the “The Traffic Racket” investigated the shadowy syndicate behind Eritrean migration. This third*

*piece will look into the role of Ethiopia and its refugee agency in promoting the escape of Eritrean children from Eritrea.*

## **Luring Eritrean Children to Death**

German legend has it that a pipe-playing rat-catcher was hired by the city of Hamelin to draw rats out of town with his music. When the city reneged on its payments, the rat-catcher took his revenge by playing his pipe to lure children out the city, leading to their mass drowning in Weser river.

Today this tale is recounted around the world as the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, symbolizing the death of children at the hands of criminals.

David Kirkpatrick, writing in his May 5 article for the New York Times, brings to light the emergence of modern day pied pipers in Ethiopia's Tigray Regional State luring Eritrean children to death in the Mediterranean Sea.

His piece, "Young African Migrants Caught in Trafficking Machine," though checkered with some errors, is significant for raising two important issues: (1) the groundswell of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea in Ethiopian refugee camps and (2) the claim that the Eritrean smuggling/trafficking racket originates in Ethiopia.

We are told that unaccompanied minors in Ethiopia are unable to return to Eritrea. Kirkpatrick explains, "Most children who make the trek without telling their parents regret it as soon as they arrive, aid workers say. But Eritrea considers them defectors and criminals, barring any return." Quoting Meron Estefanos, who he explains is "an Eritrean rights activist in Stockholm who works with migrants," he notes that "They get stuck there in the camps....It is very common."

Kirkpatrick and Meron put the blame on the Eritrean state for the children's inability to return to Eritrea. This claim is unsubstantiated.

Both ignore the evidence that suggests that Eritreans are trapped in Ethiopia as a result of the Ethiopian state's refugee agency, the Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs (ARRA), which has unprecedented control of refugee operations.

Unlike any other state in the world Ethiopia runs refugee operations in its own country—not the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This key fact must be firmly understood when we're talking about the rise of Eritrean unaccompanied minors to Ethiopia and beyond.

## **No Escape**

According to a May 2013 report on Eritrean unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) by the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) entitled *Young and Astray*, "Voluntary return is not possible for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Having claimed asylum in Ethiopia, and thus having sought protection from the government of Ethiopia, ARRA would insist that return to Eritrea could not be in the best interest of any refugee...Geographically, the newer refugee camps are located far from the Eritrean border and simply walking back across is almost impossible."

The report also goes on to highlight the nightmare for Eritrean children in the Mai-Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia:

"UASC in Mai-Aini said that they have repeatedly asked UNHCR, IRC and ARRA to support their return to no avail. They expressed concern for children who had gone missing from the camps, some of whom new arrivals reported had arrived home safely, though the number of

children missing, perhaps lost or deceased on the long journey through the desert-like plains, is unknown. All of the children under 13 involved in the focus group discussions in Mai-Aini expressed a desire to return home, in stark contrast to Sudan, where all but one member of the mixed under 13-years-old discussion group were waiting for family sponsorship to Switzerland, Germany and Canada.

In so many words, Eritrean children are trapped by the Ethiopian state apparatus with the complicity of UNHCR; a fact overlooked by Kirkpatrick.

Making the situation worse, UNHCR itself opposes voluntary repatriation of Eritrean migrants, arguing that conditions in Eritrea are so bad that their support for repatriation is impossible. UNHCR knows better than the Eritrean migrants themselves, apparently.

Such a position is unprecedented. Every refugee has the right to voluntarily return to their homeland if they so wish and UNHCR, in regards to repatriation, has a limited mandate to protect asylum rights by advocating against “forced” repatriation rather those of a voluntary nature. For some reason, its mandate limitations do not apply to Eritreans.

According to a 2011 study, *Getting Beyond Politics and Bad Blood: The Protection of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia*, by Sara Webster at American University in Cairo, “UNHCR refuses to support this repatriation [of Eritreans] due to the mass violation of human rights in Eritrea, as well as the danger to returnees. Due to the dangerous nature of the border crossing, these individuals rejected the possibility of attempting such repatriation on their own.”

Like the WRC, Webster also points out ARRA's unusual level of control over refugee operations within Ethiopia:

“In contrast to the asylum systems of neighboring countries, the role that Ethiopia assumes is quite unique. Despite being one of Africa's poorest countries with the third largest population, Ethiopia's governmental refugee agency, the Association for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), performs most of the functions that UNHCR does in the rest of Africa...The Ethiopian government does not conduct individual refugee status determination per se. In the case of Eritrean refugees, ARRA conducts “screening” of individuals soon after crossing the border, at Inda Abaguna.”

Webster doesn't stop there. She notes that even UNHCR itself, referring to its international staff, is almost entirely manned by Ethiopians (this means their international staff).

...Of those who complained of serious discrimination and those who expressed positive experiences with Ethiopians, there was a unanimous declaration of mistrust of Ethiopian officers at the various agencies responsible for refugees. ARRA, as an Ethiopian state agency, is staffed entirely by Ethiopian nationals. In addition to this, the vast majority of UNHCR staff members are Ethiopians.

Notably, this doesn't even include all of the Ethiopians staffing UNHCR headquarters and crafting destructive policies towards Eritreans to ostensibly ensure Ethiopian “national security.”

It's no secret that the EPRDF government of Ethiopia, the poster-child for the humanitarian-industrial complex financed by mostly by Western donors, has many of its nationals commanding humanitarian aid organs and developmental bodies.

## Smuggling as Ethiopia's Official Foreign Policy

It seems Eritrean children have become the hapless victims of Ethiopian foreign policy towards Eritrea.

Let us consider a 2015 report by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development entitled "Support for Refugees in Ethiopia: 2012-2015." The report states, "there are concerns that ARRA at times dictates refugee policy and operations to UNHCR from a standpoint of national security as opposed to International Refugee Law, resulting in compromised levels of assistance and protection for some groups. Reporting and accountability for the majority of UNHCR funds that are channeled through ARRA for administration and operations has also been the subject of donor concern."

US Chargé d'Affaires Deborah Malac, in a 2008 Wikileaks went as far suggesting that ARRA was using its humanitarian operations to train an Eritrean opposition. Malac explained:

"The presence of Eritrean opposition activity in the camps was not surprising. The defensive tone in EmbOffs discussions with UNHCR, ARRA, and international NGO officials suggests that they had a vested interest in denying any knowledge of it, otherwise they might be required to address opposition harassment of refugees. The visit was yet another reminder that a priority of ARRA's refugee program was to address Ethiopia's national security concerns with Eritrea. Post cannot confirm complicity between ARRA and the opposition groups, but we do note that ARRA, as an organization, falls under the purview of the Ethiopian National Intelligence Security Service.

One can hardly trust the Ethiopian state and ARRA with the wellbeing of Eritrean children. Given the long, tumultuous, and

war-riddled history between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the ongoing, unresolved war between the two nations, and the ongoing Ethiopian occupation of sovereign Eritrea land, one can hardly trust the Ethiopian state to preserve the interests of the Eritrean peoples.

According to Kirkpatrick, Ethiopia seems to be primary launch pad for Eritrean smuggling.

### **The “Mastermind”**

He indicates that Ermias Ghermay, an Ethiopian national, is behind the smuggling of Eritreans out of Ethiopia and across the Mediterranean. He writes, “From the refugee camps in Ethiopia near the Eritrean border, Mr. Ghermay’s crew packed the children in the back of a truck with a dozen other migrants to drive west to Sudan and then north to Libya, children and adult passengers said.”

The critical take away message from this revelation is that Ermias’ network stretches not only to Italy from Libya but also from the very source of the migrants: the Eritrean refugee camps located in the heart of Ethiopia’s Tigray Regional State. From this NYT article, it’s not quite clear whether or not his networks extend directly into Eritrea however other evidentiary sources now suggest this to be the case.

Although Kirkpatrick also mentions the involvement of Eritrean national Mered Medhanie, who goes by the nickname “The General,” he makes it clear that Eritreans like Mered fall under “Mr. Ghermay’s crew.”

According to Charlotte Alfred writing for the Huffington Post, “Sicilian prosecutors said they had busted an international smuggling ring and were issuing arrest warrants for 24 people, including 14 in Italy. They said the group’s mastermind is an



Ethiopian man, Ermias Ghermay, believed to be currently in Libya. Ghermay has been wanted since the last major migrant tragedy in 2013, when some 366 people died in a shipwreck off Lampedusa.”

Thus, the alleged leader of Eritrean smuggling is Ethiopian. Working under him are Eritreans.

Simply being an Ethiopian national, however, does not necessarily equate to Ethiopian state involvement. One must look elsewhere for evidence to support this assertion.

Evidence from leaked diplomatic cables do shed some additional light on Ethiopian state involvement in smuggling Eritreans. According to a 2010 Wikileaks from the US embassy in Addis Ababa, it seems the Ethiopian military is a central piece in the international racket:

“Last year, 86 Eritrean nationals applied for immigrant visas in Addis Ababa...One F-1 immigrant visa applicant told Conoff he began his journey on August 8, 2009 and paid a smuggler 40,000 Nakfa (around USD 2,600) to cross the Ethiopian-Eritrean border near Rama, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. After a 10 hour night walk the applicant said he was met by members of the Ethiopian military, who took him to the Endabaguna transit camp. He stayed in the transit camp for three days before moving on to the My Ayni refugee camp, and eventually Addis Ababa....An Eritrean 2009 diversity visa lottery winner had a similar story. He told Conoff he met his smugglers at the Asmara bus station on August 15, 2009 and paid 50,000 Nakfa (around USD 3,300) for the 12-hour trek across the border. Nearly two weeks later, on August 29, 2009, the DV applicant crossed the border near Rama with his smuggler and another person fleeing Eritrea. Like the

F1 applicant three weeks before, the DV winner stated he received assistance from the Ethiopian military.

The fact that the Ethiopian military is implicated in smuggling Eritreans, suggests possible state sponsorship of human trafficking, which, at the minimum, calls for an international investigation.

On the other side of the border, there seems to be the opposite response by the national government at large.

US Chargé d'Affaires in Eritrea, Matthew D. Smith, confessed in another leaked diplomatic cable from Asmara entitled "How To Escape From Eritrea" that "the GSE [Government of the State of Eritrea] is very keen to break these human smuggling rings and dispatches agents to pose as potential customers. Other agents pose as facilitators, making all of the supposed smuggling arrangements prior to having the unsuspecting person arrested." He goes on to explain that "passage from Mendefera (30 miles south of Asmara) to Ethiopia costs \$1,000 to \$1,300/person."

Smith's cable certainly does not suggest the absence of trafficking in Eritrea but rather highlights the nature of the official Eritrean state response to the criminal enterprise. In light of the Ethiopian state's alleged involvement in smuggling, it is not unreasonable to link the recent spike in Eritrean smuggling as a partial result of Ethiopian state organized, facilitated and financed trans-border smuggling that has made Eritrean smuggling a highly lucrative business.

### **Ethiopia's Child Smuggling Industry**

One cannot underestimate the scale of this illicit enterprise. It seems the Eritrean refugee industry has become a cash cow for Ethiopia. Though Ethiopia was not known for its refugee

operations in the early 2000's, the nation opened up its first of four camps targeted for Eritreans in 2004 (Shimelba) and went on to become the largest refugee hosting nation in Africa by 2014, beating both Sudan and Kenya. As a result, UNHCR has now earmarked Ethiopia with the highest budget for Africa in 2015.

That Eritrean refugees were at the heart of Ethiopia's growing refugee empire was well known to diplomatic officials in Addis Ababa for quite some time. John M. Yates, US Ambassador to Ethiopia, wrote the following in a 2010 diplomatic cable:

“While it is commendable that the GOE [Government of Ethiopia] continues to be willing to host refugees, the GOE, particularly ARRA, has strong political and financial reasons for doing this. The GOE has long advocated for preferential treatment of Eritrean refugees as a part of its greater foreign policy towards Eritrea. In addition, ARRA is 100% funded by UNHCR and thus views the creation of new refugee camps as job security. UNHCR operates in Ethiopia at the invitation of GOE and ARRA and is very well aware that it is at the mercy of ARRA and cannot easily push back on such issues as the development of Adi-Harush if it wants any ability to effectively program activities in the other camps.”

Although the extent of trafficking within Ethiopia—of not only Eritreans but also Somalis and Ethiopians themselves—remains largely unexplored, there is strong evidence that the nation has become a premier hub for human traffickers and smugglers like Ermias Ghermay.

No other nation in the Horn of Africa region, including Sudan, which is thought to also be a hub for traffickers, has seen more trafficking-related rescues and arrests by the INTERPOL-supported Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation

Organization (EAPCCO). In August 2013, EAPCCO's "Operation Usalama" [led to the rescue](#) of more than 300 victims of human trafficking and the arrest of 38 suspects in Ethiopia.

Thus, it's no surprise that the Ethiopian government restricts humanitarian agencies from visiting their refugee camps. According to the [former US Ambassador to Ethiopia](#), Donald Yamamoto, the "ICRC is also currently prohibited...from accessing a number of sites in the north of the country including Shimmelba refugee camp."

### **What do they have to hide?**

Another leaked US diplomatic cable from Addis Ababa sent in February 2010 and marked "confidential," describes ARRA's arrest and summary execution of Eritrean refugees in the camps and denial of UNHCR's request to access the arrested. The cable concludes that the actions by ARRA "suggests an increase in targeting refugees in violation of the GoE obligations as party to the 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugees."

Following the fatal shooting of Eritrean refugee Yohana Gebreyohannis Kahsa near the My Ayni camp, the cable also highlights the continuing preoccupation with Eritrea by ARRA, which, according to a My Ayni staff member from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), "is very concerned and embarrassed about this incident as it has long advocated for preferential treatment of Eritrean refugees and does not want any negative publicity."

In October 2013, Voice of America's Amharic Service (VOA-Amharic) reported on a crackdown by ARRA security personnel against Eritreans refugees protesting in the Adi Harush and Adi Ayni camps located in the Tigray region,

killing 3 and detaining another 150 Eritrean protestors. According to [video footage posted online](#), protestors expressed that they were far worse off in Ethiopia than they were in Eritrea and demanded that ARRA provide better conditions for the marginalized Eritrean refugees.

Many of these marginalized refugees are adolescents that have been lured into the exploitative and politicized refugee industry by the piping of ARRA from their several camps in Ethiopia's Tigray Regional State. Making matters worse, the international media and UNHCR have been joining in on the piping, failing to mention the role of ARRA and the Ethiopian government in smuggling Eritreans.

**Meanwhile, Eritrean children are drowning in the Mediterranean. When will the world wake up and stop this madness?**