



ALL AFRICA CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES
CONFERENCE DES EGLISES DE TOUTE L'AFRIQUE

REPORT ON THE PLIGHT OF ERITREAN MIGRANTS

All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC):

Ecumenical Liaison Office to the African Union.

AACC Liaison Office to the African Union

P.O .Box 2337, Addis Ababa

Tel: +251-911517567

Email: m.iteffa@aacc-ceta.org

www.aacc-ceta.org

AACC is a fellowship of 173 member Churches and Christian Councils in 40 African countries

La CETA est une communauté de 173 églises et conseils chrétiens dans 40 pays d'Afrique

PRESIDENT: The Most Rev. Archbishop Valentine Mokiwa. GENERAL SECRETARY: Rev. Dr. André Karamaga

Introduction

The violation of human rights in Eritrea continues to force citizens out of the country. A recent report¹ by the U.S. State Department confirms that there are ongoing violations in the country – characterized by killings, severe torture, restricted civil liberties, illegal detention of political opposition, and forced military service among many others. In the course of flight, untold suffering happens and safety is not a given- the flight to Israel through Sinai is, for instance, one of the most perilous journeys. Human trafficking, smuggling and torture are often an expected part of the bargain. For the victims, colossal amounts of ransom is the price, mainly extracted out of family members living in countries of origin or the Diaspora. Upon arrival in Israel, asylum processing becomes haphazard, and tokenistic. Most of the would-be asylum seekers are denied protection, owing in part to “Anti-Infiltration law”.

In August 2013, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC²) with its partners³ and Pastoral Team⁴ organized a pastoral fact-finding mission to Israel. The team held discussions with some of the victims of the Human Trafficking in the Sinai region and key actors working on population movement, particularly those people who are moving from the Horn of Africa to Israel. In the course of the mission, many lessons were learned, including the until-now, concealed human trafficking.

Background

Human trafficking, for the governments in the Horn of Africa, is increasingly becoming a policy concern. Not only are the numbers of people involved increasing, but the practice is becoming ever more complex. The reasons of this movement are multiple and include push factors in countries of origin and pull factors in destination countries. Once captured, the victims experience a range of human atrocities including, but not limited to, rape and torture. Overall, the phenomenon is grave and constitutes a budding and increasingly overwhelming industry.

¹ Eritrea 2012 human rights report-United States Department of State-Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204328.pdf>

² AACC is a fellowship of Christian churches in Africa which confess Christ as God and Saviour. The AACC continues to stand with the churches in addressing relevant issues that confront the continent, and to provide a platform of collective voices and collective action.

³ Tilburg University and Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA), together with the Progressive Nationalist Baptist Convention in USA and Release Eritrea Civil Society Organization in United Kingdom

⁴ Rev. Iteffa Gobena, Canon Kaiso Grace, Dr. Legesse Nigussu, Rev. John Mendez, Fr Athanaius, Prof Dr Habtu Ghebre-Ab, Tabitha Kentaro Sabiiti

During the 9th General Assembly of the AACC, concerns about criminal cartels, especially human trafficking and smuggling, came to attention.⁵ At the recently concluded 10th AACC General Assembly held in June 2013, in Kampala, Uganda, human trafficking was further recognised as one of the practices that continue to dehumanize people and thus it was resolved that the AACC must take steps to seize itself of the issue. The pastoral visit was therefore the first step in seeking to understand this phenomenon, especially as it affects asylum seekers from Eritrea and Darfur in Sudan. Against this background, a number of objectives were agreed.

More specifically, the pastoral team decided to;

- Gain an understanding of the travesties of being stewarded
- To assess the host country and the living conditions of the asylum seekers
- Document findings in a manner that will step up awareness and advocacy within AACC member churches and other relevant organs such as the African Union, Regional Economic Communities and the United Nations
- And on the above basis, for the church to express its concern about the situation as well as explore opportunities for assistance and protection.

The Tales of Sinai survivors

The Pastoral Team was shocked by the horrific inhuman experiences it observed. As victims try to flee from their homes in Eritrea, Ethiopia and or Sudan, to presumably safer places like Europe and Israel, they pass through the Sinai. On their way, they are captured, kidnapped and trafficked by (mostly) Bedouin cartels. In the course of that captivity, horrific inhuman acts such as daily rape of women, physical torture and sometimes killings happen. Moreover, some of these victims are young children, some as young as 12. While some of these survivors have paid ransom and have been freed, especially around Sinai, others, sadly, remain in these horrific conditions. In most cases, after their families have paid ransom, they get re-sold to other sets of traffickers, creating an almost interminable circle. Indeed, even if a victim dies, her/his family is not notified so that the traffickers continue collecting more ransom. The findings indicate that to the perpetrators, "Africans are not regarded as human beings." One of the illustrations of this is that the dead victims are buried in rubbish pits where dogs later exhume and devour the bodies. One of the testimonies reveals that a 14 year old boy was

⁵ The 9th AACC General Assembly was held in Maputo, Mozambique in December 2008

forced to bury several people who had been killed after failing to pay the ransom. Later, after having suffered the trauma of this horrific act, he was arrested on arrival in Israel by the government, for entering the country. Many cases like this happen daily in the Sinai. A former torture victim⁶ told the Pastoral team of how his two daughters were raped in front of him. Similarly, another survivor⁷ was held for weeks on end, limbs amputated, just because his family for failing to pay the ransom. The torture methods varied from the use of hot burning bottles, starvation and to psychological breakdown. As a result of these severe untraditional exposures the victims undergo post torture trauma, in some cases resulting in death.

Plight of asylum seekers in Tel Aviv

The above notwithstanding, the situation which the asylum seekers (mainly Eritrean) are experiencing in Israel is extremely humiliating and inhuman. On August 29, 2013, the Hotline for Migrant Workers published an article on the current situation of asylum seekers in Israel. According to the article: *"At present 54,201 African asylum seekers reside in Israel, among them 36,067 Eritreans who have arrived in the country in the past decade. Israel's prime minister, cabinet members, parliamentarians, and public figures often make claims in the media that these individuals are not refugees, but rather "work infiltrators" who come to Israel solely in order to improve their quality of life."*⁸

As noted, to the Israeli Government, the victims/survivors are seen as economic migrants and not as people deserving of protection. As a consequence, and particularly under the Anti-Infiltration Law, they are considered undesirable. This conflates asylum processing and security, and undermines refugee protection and assistance.

In accordance with the "Anti-infiltration Law", asylum seekers can be jailed without trial for at least three years.⁹ One of the testimonies during the pastoral visit indicates that In Israel, a

⁶ Victim was kidnapped from the UNHCR Refugee Camp on the border of the Sudan and Eritrea and sold over to Sudanese soldiers and then to the Bedouins when he finally reached Israel

⁷ Victim was severely tortured and hung by his arms for weeks which resulted into deforming of his fingers giving him the inability to permanently use his fingers

⁸ 'Eritrean refugees in Israel and around the world'- Sigal Rozen, Hotline for migrant workers

⁹ *ibid*

victim must have undergone very severe atrocities at the hands of the traffickers in order to be regarded as a trafficked victim. As an example of this, a woman who was raped for a week was told it was not a severe atrocity and therefore it was not enough of an ordeal for her to be granted any consideration. This is more indication of how the law needs to change, but more importantly how the attitudes need to conform to the reality.

The Pastoral team further found out that Eritreans end up being stateless. In deliberations held by the Knesset Committee on Foreign Workers on October 31, 2011, the then Deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon said, "The international community regards the government in Eritrea as one that does not respect human rights, and whoever returns there is in danger, possibly danger of death."¹⁰ This recognition is yet to be acknowledged across governments and the major responding authorities. Although initiatives have been made to bring the issue of the plight of the Eritrean victims in Israel to the attention of UNHCR, European Union (EU) and US State Department, no action has been taken to date.

"We commit ourselves to stepping up the efforts of our respective institutions, deepen our knowledge and understanding of the crisis and its causes and to collaborate with others to stop this crisis of human trafficking, torture and killing, to improve the safe movements of people across borders, to protect refugees and to support the Sinai survivors in full respect of human dignity."¹¹

Recommendations

Following this learning, a number of recommendations targeting specific key actors were made:

- On the international community to acknowledge this ongoing tragedy and to recognise article 1 of the United Nations Refugee Convention so that Sinai survivors receive protection on that basis.
- On the Egyptian Authorities to act quickly in order to free the refugees held hostage in the Sinai, to prosecute the smugglers and those that assist them, to bring an immediate end to the torture camps and the network of human trafficking, and to provide care for the torture survivors.

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ Joint Statement by the Delegation on the Sinai Crisis of Human Trafficking and Torture issued in 10 October 2013

- On all countries to stop deportation of Sinai survivors and to stop deportations of any refugees to Eritrea, given the uncertainty and fear of persecution the deportees may face in their home country and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- On the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to urgently address the needs of survivors of the Sinai crisis, using all available means and most particularly to ensure the protection of refugees in the UN refugee camps which are under its responsibility.
- On the African Union to use all its mechanisms to prevent human trafficking, abduction from refugee camps and to ensure safe movement of African people within and across borders according to their aspirations.
- On the African Union to demand on the Egyptian Government to take up its responsibility in bringing the Sinai human traffickers to be indicted in a court of law.
- On the relevant regional groups, including IGAD and the Arab League, to address the Sinai crisis.
- On faith-based organisations in Israel to continue and expand efforts to affirm the dignity of the strangers in the land of Israel and to provide pastoral care and to contribute to reconciliation among the affected communities.
- On Israel to treat Sinai survivors in accordance with international law and provide protection and treatment in full respect of the international refugee Convention.
- On the EU to use its influence to find appropriate mechanisms to support the Sinai survivors and to provide asylum to them and to improve reception of refugees in general in accordance with international law.
- On Egypt, Israel, Libya, Sudan and Yemen to use their respective influence to find appropriate mechanisms to support the Sinai survivors and to provide asylum to them and to improve reception of refugees in general in accordance with international law.
- On the member Churches of the AACC to raise awareness among their respective societies and faith communities on the tragedies of human trafficking and to build awareness among the young people especially about the realities and dangers of trafficking.

Rev Iteffa Gobena
AACC Ecumenical Envoy to AACC
m.iteffa@aacc-ceta.org
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia

Acknowledgement:

Pastoral Team:

AACC

- Rev Iteffa Gobena
- Canon Grace Kaiso
- Ms. Tabitha K. Sabiiti

World Council of Churches (WCC)

- Dr. Legesse Nigussu

North America Archdiocese of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

- Fr. Athanasius Ghebre-Ab

Emmanuel Baptist Church-USA

- Rev. John Mendez

Tilburg University Members

- Prof. Dr. Erik Borgman
- Prof. Dr. Mirjam van Reisen
- Pien van de Ven
- Daniëlle Spierings

Expert team:

- Meron Estefanos
- Selam Kidane

Meeting Partners:

- Hotline for Migrant Workers - Sigal Rozen
Public Policy Coordinator at Hotline for Migrant Workers
- Sister Aziza (Azezet Kidane)
Volunteer at PHR and at ARDC.
- Amnesty International - Sara Robinson
Refugee Rights Coordinator, Amnesty International Israel
- Rev. David M. Neuhaus SJ
- UNHCR – Walpurga Engelbrecht
Representative UNHCR Israel
- UNHCR – Sharon Harel
Assistant Protection Officer
- Nurit Wurgaft
Journalist at Haaretz
- Women’s Centre - Zebib Sultan
Founder of the women’s centre.
- ARDC – Diddy Mymin
Project Manager (Psycho-Social Team)
- PHR – Shahar Shoham
Director Migrants and Status-less Persons Department
- Yusef Daher
Jerusalem Interchurch Centre – World Council of Churches
- Shelly Inbar
Works at the shelter, e.g. photography project and cooking.
- Meseret Fishaye
Interviewing torture survivors in the prisons
- ASSAF – Maya Paley
Researcher e.g. surviving in limbo reports and works at ASSAF

General Secretariat • Tel: +254 - 20 - 4441483, 4441338/9 • Fax: +254 - 20 - 4443241, 4445835 • secretariat@aacc-ceta.org:
Waiyaki Way • P.O. Box 14205-00800 Westlands • Nairobi • Kenya
Regional Office: Togo, B.P. 2268, Lomé, Telephone (+228) 22-21-5924 / 22-22-1371, Fax: 22-21-5266 •
bureau.regional@ceta-aacc.org