

History in the Making #2**Africa and the Migrant Crisis: The Case of Eritrean Refugees**

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In the last few months, the dangers that migrants face when trying to reach Europe by boat have once again become front-page news. At the end of May 2016, a succession of vessels carrying migrants capsized off the coast of Italy, claiming the lives of 700 of them. Altogether, since 2014, the Mediterranean crossings have resulted in 8,000 deaths.

The number of asylum-seekers making it to Europe is staggering, at least from a European point of view. So far this year, 203,981 migrants have come to the continent by sea, while a total of 1,015,078 arrived in 2015. They are attempting to reach Europe via two main routes: the “Greek route,” which has seen the largest number of people cross, and the “Italy route,” which has received lower numbers of migrants, but which is considered the more treacherous of the two routes. Although most of the refugees originate in the Middle East, particularly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, many derive from sub-Saharan African countries such as Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, Gambia, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast, among others.¹

As might be expected, the migrant crisis has sparked intense debates in Europe and elsewhere about the reasons why people are fleeing the Middle East and Africa. It is true that one finds many compassionate voices and sober assessments about the reasons why the crisis emerged in the first place. However, one also encounters several myths and

misconceptions about migrants, and about what is compelling them to risk their lives in order to leave their countries of origin. The crisis has unleashed fear and anxiety in Europe. Some see it as a “migrant invasion” that Europeans, currently in the midst of economic turmoil and austerity, cannot afford to ignore. Others argue that migrants will not assimilate into European society, stressing cultural, religious, and “civilizational” differences between them. Finally, some people like to point out that many asylum-seekers are not “true refugees,” but “economic opportunists” instead.

Clearly, there is a need to gain a better understanding of what is causing such large-scale population displacement, particularly in Africa. I would argue that migrants from Africa elicit less sympathy on the part of the international community than refugees from the Middle East, especially those from Syria (largely due to the war that has been raging in that country for five years). The conflict has been relatively well covered by international media organizations. By contrast—and in keeping with long-standing practices—the same media outlets tend to gloss over the African case, and fail to provide details about the factors that are forcing many Africans to risk their lives to reach Europe.

Running parallel to and thus amplifying the poor media coverage on Africa is the problem of long-standing misperceptions

of the continent and its people. Whereas it is perhaps easy to feel pity for Syrians whose country has been embroiled in a disastrous conflict that has destroyed so many people's lives, Africa is regarded as a perpetual "basket case," a troubled part of the world that is filled with failed and corrupt states that seem incapable or unwilling to do anything about the problems plaguing their countries. It is therefore common to come across the view that refugees from Africa are not "real refugees," but that they are in fact economic migrants, people who are desperate to leave the continent to seek a better life in more affluent countries.

What these perceptions and assumptions obscure is the fact that Africans also live in a globalized world, although they happen to live in one of the world's poorest continents (poor in terms of actually existing economic conditions, but not in terms of resources or human potential). Many have relatives who have emigrated to Europe and other parts of the world, family members who they visit or stay in touch with. African diasporic communities also play a significant role in generating revenues for their countries of origin in the form of remittances that they send back home to support family members. The existence of a relative in Europe, however, does not automatically mean that his or her family member(s) want to leave Africa and emigrate as well. In order to understand the reasons why Africans are joining the ranks of asylum-seekers in Europe, it is important to comprehend the factors that are compelling them to do so at this point in time.

This article is the first in a series that analyze the African dimension of the migrant crisis. The goal is to look at particular African countries that are generating refugees, and to discuss not only the causes for population displacement, but also some of the solutions that are being put in place in order to solve it. In addition, by focusing on what in some cases are deep historical roots for the current refugee crisis involving several African nations, the aim is to counter misconceptions that people have about the continent in general and migrants in particular.

It would perhaps come as a surprise to some to find out that, according to recent statistics on migrants trying to reach Europe, many are from Eritrea.² In 2015, Eritreans formed the fourth main group of asylum-seekers in Europe after Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis. According to the UNHCR, since 2014, 37,000 Eritreans have requested asylum in Europe and approximately 4,000 leave Eritrea every month.³ They figure prominently in groups of migrants arriving in Europe via the "Italy route," which in itself is rather interesting since Eritrea was once an Italian colony. The route that Eritrean migrants travel first takes them to Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan, where they make arrangements with smugglers who take them to Libya. Once in Libya, the next step is to board a boat to Italy. Even before they reach Libya, these refugees face immense hardships and struggles. Many are physically abused and given little food or water. There are reports of rampant sexual abuse of women en route to North Africa as well. Once they arrive, migrants are locked away and hidden until the smugglers can

finally put them on board a boat bound for Italy.⁴

Most Eritrean refugees, at least those requesting asylum in Europe, are young people between the ages of 18 and 24 and some are unaccompanied minors. When interviewed, some of these young people state that they were forced to leave Eritrea out of fear of persecution. The Eritrean regime, led by former rebel leader Isaias Afewerki, has been accused of perpetrating gross human rights violations. According to some reports, he is responsible for creating a surveillance state in Eritrea, and for using the on-going border disputes with Ethiopia, as well as the fear of another war with that country, as a justification for the existence of a harsh system of military conscription. Military service is mandatory for both boys and girls in their final year of high school. In theory, it is supposed to last 18 months but, in reality, Eritrean refugees who fled the country reported that either they or their family members and friends were trapped for years in indefinite and poorly paid military servitude. The Afewerki regime is also sponsoring terrorism in the region. Eritrea, which is currently under sanctions by the United States, has been a supporter of al-Shabaab and its insurgency in Somalia. Other forms of human rights abuses against its own population include indiscriminate arrest, indefinite detention, widespread use of torture and even religious persecution.⁵

If the above reasons were not bad enough, Eritreans fall prey to forced labour recruitment, including being forced to work in construction projects and on farms that are owned by the

government. A company that has been implicated in coercive labour practices in Eritrea is Segen Construction, a government-owned business that received a contract to build infrastructure for the Bisha copper mine, which is jointly owned by the Eritrean government and by Nevsun Resources, a Canadian mining company.⁶ The Bisha mine situation is yet another example of how foreign companies and corporations are willing to turn a blind eye and, in some cases, be complicit with human rights abuses in Africa. As long as the profits are there to be made from their extraction ventures, it does not matter to them what African states do to their citizens. People in the developed world complain about the “large numbers” of migrants applying for refugee status in their countries, without realizing that their own companies are implicated in the messy world of politics and economic exploitation in Africa. African governments of course are not without blame, and are more than willing to partake in the profits generated by the exploitation of their countries’ resources by foreign interests.

What might also come as a surprise is that many of the Eritreans refugees are in fact living in neighbouring countries, including Ethiopia and the Sudan, which currently host 155,000 and 125,000 refugees from that country respectively. Ethiopia has the largest numbers of refugees in Africa—a total of 734,000 people, primarily from countries such as the Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. Evidently, not all of these migrants wish to leave Africa for Europe. Their hope is, perhaps, to be able to go back to their countries of origin. Still, the international community wants to discourage them

from taking the Europe route. Recently, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, paid a visit to one of the four camps housing Eritrean refugees in the Ethiopian highlands. During the visit, Grandi called for the need to improve conditions for Eritrean refugees in the camps and in the region. High on the list of requests from the refugees themselves is the desire to have access to schooling or vocational training, and to see the possibility of being re-settled in a place where they will be able to make a life for themselves as something other than refugees.⁷

¹ To access data on asylum-seekers in Europe, including maps showing routes and countries of origin, see the United Nations High Commission for Refugees site (henceforth UNHCR), <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

² For a short but informative country profile of Eritrea, see the BBC's "Eritrea Profile," May 5, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13349075>

³ For data on refugees from Eritrea, see UNHCR, "Sharp Increase in Number of Eritrean Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Europe, Ethiopia and Sudan," November 14, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2014/11/5465fea1381/sharp-increase-number-eritrean-refugees-asylum-seekers-europe-ethiopia.html?query=eritrean>

⁴ Details about the hardships and dangers that migrants face en route to Libya are described in an article published by the UNHCR entitled "Eritrean Survivor of Lampedusa Tragedy Returns to Honour the Dead, Meet Pope Francis," October 2, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/10/542d0ece5/eritrean-survivor-lampedusa-tragedy-returns-honour-dead-meet-pope-francis.html>

⁵ Information about human rights abuses in Eritrea can be found in "World Report 2015: Eritrea," published by Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>

⁶ On the Nevsun connection to alleged human rights abuses, see <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/episodes/2015-2016/nevsun-in-eritrea-dealing-with-a-dictator> and <http://hrc-eritrea.org/labour-struggles-truly-have-no-borders-vancouvers-connections-to-slave-labour-in-eritrea/>. It is worth noting that the Bisha mine was the target of an attack carried out by Ethiopian military aircraft in 2015. See the article entitled "Canadian Mine Targeted in Eritrea: African Media Reports," March 22, 2015. Retrieved from www.mining.com/ethiopian-jets-attack-canadian-gold-mine-eritrea/

⁷ For information on Grandi's visit to camps hosting Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, see "Do Not Risk Your Lives, Grandi Tells Eritrean Refugees," February 2, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/2/56b3251917/risk-lives-grandi-tells-eritrean-refugees.html>