

THE MILLION-DOLLAR BOAT RIDE ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

AMELIA SMITH

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MIDDLE EAST MONITOR

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Title: *The million-dollar boat ride across the Mediterranean*
Cover: Illustration by *The Ink Wave*

Published: November 2017

ISBN: 978-1-907433-34-4

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MEMO Publishers
1 Green Mews
Bevenden Street
London N1 6AS

t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231

e: info@memopublishers.com

w: www.memopublishers.com

The million-dollar boat ride across the Mediterranean

Amelia Smith



Amelia Smith is a writer and journalist based in London who has reported from across the Middle East and North Africa. Formerly based in Alexandria and then Cairo, Amelia has a particular interest in Egyptian politics.

In 2016 Amelia was a finalist at the Write Stuff creative writing competition at the London Book Fair. Her first book, *The Arab Spring Five Years On*, was published in 2016 and brings together a collection of authors who analyse the protests and their aftermath half a decade after they flared in the region.

The million-dollar boat ride across the Mediterranean

At 3am, two weeks after he spoke out in a meeting against members of the ruling Popular Front for Democracy Party, security forces entered Mohamed's house, beat him up in front of his mother and his wife and accused him of trafficking people out of Eritrea.

Mohamed was taken to a prison in Hashfayrat, located in a closed military zone roughly 30 kilometres from the city of Keren, where he stayed for around a year. He had problems with his eyes, was denied medical treatment, and wasn't given adequate food to eat.

Eventually he bribed a military officer to liaise between himself and a smuggler to help him escape. The officer bought clothes and dates and distributed it between Mohamed and the other prisoners. On one of his shifts he pretended to be distracted and moved far enough away so they could escape.

It was February 2014 and Mohamed and his fellow detainees spent seven days walking before they crossed the border and reached Kassala, a city in the eastern part of Sudan along the border with Eritrea. He remembers farmers tending to their cattle who took them in, gave them yoghurt and a place to rest.

Like thousands of other Eritreans who make this journey Mohamed avoided the UNHCR camps along the border – he had heard members of Eritrea's infamous intelligence service regularly infiltrated the camps, picked people up and escorted them home where they would be tortured or killed.

The North Korea of Africa

Thousands of Eritreans each year make a similar journey to Mohamed's to escape human rights violations at home. Isaias Afwerki's brutal one-party state has seen the east African country labelled "one of the world's most oppressive governments,"¹ and the "North Korea of Africa".

Eritreans are one of the most common nationalities aboard the ships attempting to reach Europe because the regime exerts control over the media and the judiciary and uses torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and other crimes against humanity as a method of instilling fear and implementing control among the people.

One of the regime's most brutal collective punishments is indefinite conscription that males and females enter at the age of 18, rarely emerge from until at least a decade later and get paid next to nothing for. In the mid-nineties the Eritrean government made military service compulsory for 18 months though service far exceeds this timescale. This enforced conscription has broken up the family unit, says Adam Al-Haj Moussa, founder and Secretary General of the opposition party the Eritrean National Front for Change (ENF), and forced convention on its head. So whilst young adults get old training as soldiers, their elderly parents are forced to become the breadwinners.

It's not just a decent wage they miss out on. Conscripts are tortured, abused and the women subject to sexual violence. They receive no higher education and struggle to marry because they don't have any money.

In 2016 a United Nations Commission of Inquiry found that the conditions of national service in Eritrea equate to the crime of enslavement.

Eritrea is nestled in the Horn of Africa, flanked by Ethiopia to the south and Djibouti to the south east but it is what lies on the country's western border that is of most interest to refugees. Sudan, the gateway to Libya, which, if they are successful will eventually lead refugees to their final destination: Europe.



Boy on a bike on a road just south of Asmara, Eritrea. Taken on April 20 2017. [Aidan O'Donnell]



Boy in the small town of Hagaz in central Eritrea. Taken on April 19 2017. [Aidan O'Donnell]

In the anthology *Refugee Tales II* the writer Neel Mukherjee tells the moving story of Salim, an Eritrean from the capital Asmara who made this journey after being conscripted into the army in 1996 and sent to fight the Eritrean-Ethiopian war².

When he questions how long he will be in the army Salim's commander throws him in an underground prison along with 400 other detainees. Eventually they dig a tunnel, escape, are shot at and walk for a month before arriving in Sudan.

To try and stop people like Salim leaving Eritrean authorities imported 350 wolves from Sri Lanka, installed cameras on their collars, and spread them across the border between Eritrea and Sudan to attack people trying to escape.

Yet despite brutal attempts to stop them thousands of Eritreans continue to make the perilous journey across the border each month.

By the end of August 2017, 112,450 Eritreans were registered as refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan. Like Mohamed many Eritreans arriving in Sudan avoid the camps – if they can escape being escorted there by Sudanese soldiers – so the number is likely to be far higher.

According to UNHCR's latest figures some 7,165 Eritreans have entered Sudan so far this year but only 2,377 have registered as refugees and asylum seekers.

The Eritreans that bypass the camps for the cities have better access to services and jobs. Whilst it's easier for Eritrea's Muslim population who already speak Arabic – one of Sudan's official languages – many still face hostility among the local population in a familiar story for refugees all across the world.

Eritrean refugees are blamed for Sudan's sluggish economy, a lawyer working in Khartoum told me; that there is not enough bread to go round or accused of bringing indecent behaviour across the border. This hostility, coupled with the fact that there are a lot of restrictions on Eritrean refugees, means they face harassment on a day-to-day basis.

Sudan's main camp in east Sudan, Shagarab, has earned the nickname little Eritrea. There are a number of reports detailing conditions inside – like camps all over the world it is overcrowded because UNHCR simply doesn't have the funds to offer proper services and the refugees share already scarce resources with other people living in the area.

To try and stop people like Salim leaving Eritrean authorities imported 350 wolves from Sri Lanka

As the refugee crisis continues, and refugees in Sudan continue to compete with other crises across the world, this is likely only to get worse.

Refugees inside the camps don't have access to proper education, health care, or a decent allowance to live on. The scale of the issue in east Sudan has become so overwhelming it has been labelled "protracted"; in other words it is complex, overwhelming and unlikely to be solved in the near future.

According to opposition leader Moussa it is the conditions inside the camps that have pushed refugees into the arms of traffickers: "As a result of this failure militias managed to infiltrate the camps and organise an illegal way of helping them escape."

Onwards from Sudan

In the past a popular route used by traffickers to take Eritreans out of the camps and beyond Sudan's borders was through Egypt where they would cross the rugged deserts of the Sinai Peninsula into Israel, a destination particularly in demand with the country's Christian population.

According to a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch up until 2010 Eritreans passed voluntarily through Sinai but about half way through the year information emerged that people were being kidnapped from the camps in east Sudan by the notorious, armed, Rashaida tribe among others, who sold them on to Egyptian traffickers³.

To aid them police and military intercepted escapees, returned them to their traffickers and waved them through checkpoints.

Refugees have detailed how Egyptian police shot at, and in some cases killed them, as they reached the steel fence along Israel's border with Egypt.

Those held captive were kept underground, forced to give up the telephone number of a relative who was then pressured to pay a ransom – whilst listening to them scream – in exchange for their release. Sometimes people were sold on to other groups, then on again, the ransom increasing every time.

Eritreans have been raped, mutilated, given electric shocks and burnt in the attempt to extort money from their families.

Towards the end of 2011 Moussa discovered that there were roughly 200 Eritrean refugees being held by human traffickers in Sinai and 600 had been locked up in Egyptian prisons since the start of the Egyptian Revolution. Kidnappers often demand extortionate sums, as much as \$30,000.

“This trafficking turned into an organ trade because people couldn't pay that money,” says Moussa. “They started to kill these guys and take their organs, kidneys, eyes and teeth.”

Eventually, after pressure from human rights organisations, Egyptian authorities conducted a raid in Arish, the largest city in Sinai where, Moussa recalls, they found the bodies of Eritreans who were missing their kidneys, hearts, eyes and teeth.

This, combined with Egypt's intense crackdown on armed groups and activists in the Sinai Peninsula since 2013, has made it increasingly difficult for smugglers to traffic Eritreans there.

“It was a big scandal,” says Moussa; “the UN couldn't take care of the refugees, it turned into trafficking, which turned into organ trafficking; it was a disaster for the Eritrean people.”

There are people still willing to undertake the journey through Egypt – Samir¹ was one of them.

Samir's nightmare started in Eritrea when he reached twelfth grade and was transferred to the notorious Sawa Military Camp. Since 2003 the Eritrean government has stipulated that all pupils must complete their last year of secondary school in Sawa under military authority – which effectively is the start of their military service – whilst studying for the equivalent of their A Levels at the same time.

Samir remembers digging, cutting down trees and walking long distances to collect firewood. Despite the labour intensive work there was not enough food.

“I found the working and the training very difficult,” says Samir, “because I had a health problem. I told them after I arrived at the camp and I gave them papers to prove it but they told me they did not care about me and they forced me to do the military training and to work hard. I spoke with many officials about my problems; in response I was beaten”.

This abuse continued every day for three months and Samir was finding it hard to concentrate on his studies. When he heard from two other students they were planning to leave he convinced them to take him with them.

The same day, as they went outside to collect firewood, the three of them fled towards Sudan.

As the sun rose the next morning they approached the border – but as they looked around them they were surrounded by Eritrean soldiers and intelligence; they dodged the bullets as they tried to run away.

“We ran in different directions,” recalls Samir. “One of my friends and me were caught. They beat us severely with sticks. Two soldiers were running behind our friend. After that we didn't see him and we do not know what happened to him.”

¹ Samir's name has been changed to protect his identity

Samir was taken to prison where he was detained for just over a year, without standing trial, and was beaten and tortured. Then he was taken in a lorry to another camp to undergo more military training.

It was May 2008, says Samir, and he made the decision for the second time that he would attempt to get to Sudan.

Through his training with the military Samir learnt which direction to move in if he wanted to get to Sudan. He waited until it was dark, dressed like a shepherd and set out. After walking for a full night in the mountains he found real shepherds.

“I went and drank with them and told them I was from the next village,” Samir says, “and that I’d lost my camels. In this way I crossed the border into Sudan, into Kassala”.

Samir spent two months in Khartoum until one night someone came to him, instructed him to get ready to travel and bundled him into a minibus which took him close to the border with Egypt. From here he took another car.

Some prefer this route, he tells me, because the desert between Egypt and Sudan is shorter than the desert between Libya and Sudan.

Samir made it to Alexandria, a city on Egypt’s northern coast. Forty of them got into a small fishing boat and travelled across the sea for eight hours until they arrived at a bigger ship, which was stationary. Other passengers told him they had already been waiting for two days.

Samir stayed on board the ship for another day until a small boat arrived and another group of people climbed aboard. Some were pregnant women, he recalls; as the captain informed them they were moving towards Italy some started praying, others were weeping.

The people on board were rescued by the Italian navy after seven days on the sea; from here Samir travelled through Paris and La Chapelle before arriving

in the Jungle, the now-closed refugee encampment in Calais, a major port for ferries between France and England.

One day Samir and his friends got lucky – a parked lorry had been left with the doors open and they climbed inside. Eventually the lorry drove to the port where it was checked by customs officials who found his friend and took him out. They didn’t see Samir.

Now living in England Samir is studying, waiting for accommodation, and for his wife to join him: “It makes me very sad,” he says, “thinking about all the people and what the government are doing to them in Eritrea, and the problems they have”.

“It makes me feel very sad and it makes me feel stressed. Here I feel very happy and lucky that I am living in this country. For so many people they didn’t arrive, they drowned in the Mediterranean; some of them died in the Sahara desert of hunger.”

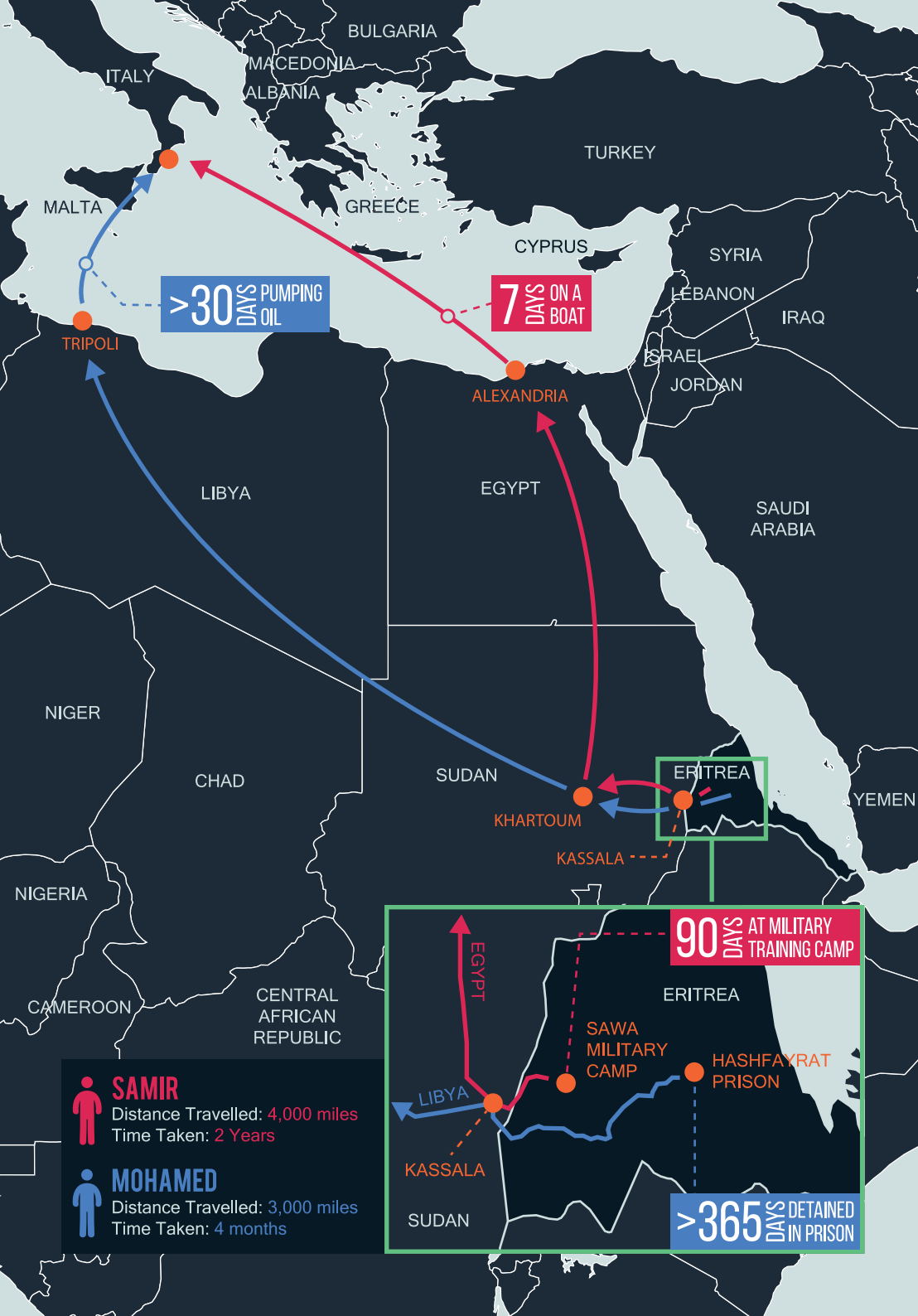
Slavery in Libya

With the path to Egypt becoming less popular, the road to Libya is flourishing.

To get to Libya refugees must first spend days making an increasingly treacherous journey across the Sahara. Last year the EU poured money into clamping down on this route, arresting smugglers, confiscating their vehicles and installing extra security controls and checkpoints.

In response smugglers simply go out of their way to avoid the extra restrictions, taking little known tracks away from the main roads, water sources and basic services. They get lost and abandon their passengers, who die of thirst in larger numbers even than those in the Mediterranean.

Mohamed – who escaped the country after being beaten in the middle of the night – was one of the thousands that chose to make this journey and stayed in Sudan for just two months before moving onwards. There were 15 of them, all from the Keren area in Eritrea, that met in Sudan and went together.



"Going to Libya was the hardest thing ever, even harder than prison," he says. "The reason I went was that I felt I was either going to die or go to Libya. I had nothing to lose so I went to Libya."

Mohamed says reaching the Libyan border was like entering into slavery; he and his travelling companions had no right to ask for anything from their traffickers. If you asked for water you could be abandoned in the desert.

"The Libyans told us whatever food we brought from Sudan could not be taken in the vehicles so we were forced to leave it in the desert. If we had died from thirst they would literally have buried us in the desert," he recalls.

If you asked for water you could be abandoned in the desert.

Members of the group who could speak Arabic translated instructions like this for those that could not understand. They warned the others what the consequences for disobeying were: "They will make you drink gasoline to stop you talking."

Mohamed heard stories of others who left Sudan after them, who paid \$10,000 because people would kidnap them and hold the vehicles and the people aboard hostage. Other people reported being intercepted by the Libyan police, bought back by their traffickers for \$600, and then their families footed with a \$1,600 bill for the effort.

According to opposition leader Moussa the main gangs operating this route are protected by Libyan security guards and corrupt Sudanese officials and are connected to intelligence services within the Eritrean regime. Just like the traffickers and the brokers, they are out to make money from the refugees' misery.

Mohamed says that some people making the journey would pay at the Eritrean embassy in Libya so that officials back home wouldn't hassle family left behind, arrest them, or confiscate their property.



In Libyan migrant camps, food is cooked by a former prisoner and served at least twice a day. Detainees are also given the occasional juice box. Taken in 2014. [Karim Haddad, Al-Jazeera]

Moussa reckons that in total a refugee seeking to travel with any of these groups can expect to pay around \$4-5,000 and if it is known they have family in the West the price moves upwards.

According to a recent report from Unicef and the International Organisation for Migration, black people are more at risk of being exploited, beaten and abused along the way⁴. Traffickers charge them higher prices because, due to discrimination, it is more difficult to move them through the country.

Even paying such a high price does not protect them from the horrors of such a journey. Like Salim – the refugee from Asmara who escaped military service – many are sold into slavery by the traffickers or by Libyan authorities and forced to work without pay. Mohamed also confirmed that Libyans put Eritreans to work and then withhold money from them.

When Mohamed and his fellow travellers reached the Libyan capital Tripoli their phones and any other electronic devices were confiscated. Mohamed describes spending around one month completely out of communication with the world.

Mohamed was taken to the abandoned site where Gadhafi's navy was once stationed and kept in what would have been the officers' lodgings along with 100 other people. The Arabic speakers among them, including Mohamed, were taken on boats to oil rigs in the middle of the sea where they pumped oil every day for a month.

Some of the people he was with worked for up to four years, others he is unsure of their fate: "Out of these people you don't know who made it or who was taken to work permanently, you're under their control," says Mohamed.

One day traffickers came to tell him a ship had arrived from Tunis. "If the ship sinks," the smugglers told Mohamed and the other passengers, "we'll lose \$500 but you'll lose a lot more. You'll lose your life".

Fortunately for Mohamed and the other passengers they reached international water after one night, the Italian navy rescued them and took them to the sea port. Mohamed had been travelling for four months in total and had paid \$3,500.

Mohamed and his fellow passengers may consider themselves reasonably lucky not to have been rounded up by armed men and sent back to Libya where they would be crowded into one of the detention centres the North African country has now become famous for.

Inside hundreds of people are crammed together without adequate food, access to sanitation facilities and little funding from the Libyan government. Many women have reported sexual abuse and invasive body searches.

Charging \$3,000 per person, smugglers can make over \$1 million in one trip

Others picked up from the shore have reported being sold from here into slavery and being forced to work in exploitative industries such as the sex trade.

Eritrean smugglers who have phoned in to activist and journalist Meron Estefanos' radio show reckon there are around 10,000 Eritreans waiting in smugglers' connection houses to leave Libya⁵. Whilst they continue to suffer the traffickers are rolling in money.

They pay \$100,000 for a boat, says Moussa, and send 400 people across the water on it: "They take \$3,000 from each one of those 400, that's like a million dollars they make in one trip."

When he first paid his money Mohamed said he gave it to a Sudanese guy who sent it to Dubai. From Dubai the money was distributed first to traffickers in Sudan, who took \$1,000, then to the traffickers who took them from the Libyan border. They took \$600. Then the Libyans who took them across the water received \$1,800 of it.

"It's like a network," he explains.

ERITREAN REFUGEES

ERITREA RANKED
7 OUT OF 7
(THE LOWEST RANKING)
IN THE FREEDOM IN THE
WORLD INDEX



OVER **5,000**
ERITREANS
LEAVE THE COUNTRY
EACH MONTH

1 IN EVERY 11 ERITREANS ARE REFUGEES



THAT'S EQUIVALENT TO **> 500,000** REFUGEES

THERE ARE AROUND
10,000
ERITREANS
WAITING IN SMUGGLERS'
CONNECTION
HOUSES
TO LEAVE LIBYA

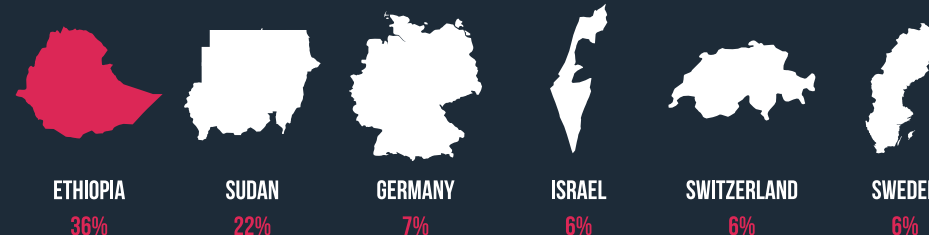
EACH REFUGEE
CAN EXPECT TO
PAY AROUND
\$4-5,000

FOR THE
JOURNEY

SMUGGLERS MAKE
\$1,000,000
FROM EACH

FULL
OF REFUGEES
THEY SEND TO EUROPE

WHERE ARE ERITREAN REFUGEES?



Sub-Saharan migrants caught on their way to Europe and held in Abu Sharda – a detention centre for illegal immigrants in Libya near Tripoli – complain of mistreatment, discrimination and filthy living conditions. Taken in 2014. [Karim Haddad, Al-Jazeera]



Curbing the industry

Fatimah² recalls three cases that have moved her deeply. The first was a young woman who was raped, fell pregnant, and gave birth to her perpetrator's baby.

The second is a young man who was tortured so badly his skin shrunk and became disfigured from his left armpit downwards; "it was completely deformed," she says; "as if it was burnt".

Both were asylum seekers from Eritrea Fatimah was representing on behalf of an NGO based in Sudan that offers legal assistance to refugees.

In both instances Fatimah's clients trusted traffickers to transport them safely out of their home country Eritrea, escort them through Sudan, and onwards towards Libya where they would become one of thousands of refugees hoping to climb aboard a rickety fishing boat and make the treacherous journey across the sea towards Europe.

Both only got as far as Sudan before the abuse started. Neither of them had enough cash to pay their debts to the smugglers and were waiting in Sudan for their families to save up so they could leave the country.

Before they could do this Sudanese authorities found out, arrested them and referred them to the Commission for Refugee Affairs, a section within the Interior Ministry that determines who is an asylum seeker and who is an illegal immigrant and offers refuge to the first and deportation to the latter.

Emigration from Eritrea is illegal and those that leave or are caught trying to leave are considered deserters and face severe punishment in the form of torture and forced labour, just as Samir did, or even death by firing squad.

The Sudanese government has been criticised for forcibly deporting Eritrean refugees back home, which is ultimately against international law if they have not been allowed to apply for asylum and their cases have not been considered.

² Fatimah's name has been changed to protect her identity

In 2017 UNHCR voiced concern over the return of 66 Eritrean nationals to Eritrea, who they were unable to get access to.

UNHCR have said that to their knowledge no recognised Eritrean refugee has been forcibly returned to Eritrea but that "UNHCR had no access to the individuals who were returned and was therefore unable to verify if any had asylum claims," says Mohamed Elfatih Alnaiem, the UNHCR spokesperson in Sudan.

But in 2016 Human Rights Watch condemned the deportation of some 442 Eritreans, including six registered refugees, back to Eritrea in May that year⁶.

"It is illegal for Sudan to do this because these people will suffer there, maybe they will kill them," says Omer Zerai, manager at the Horn of Africa for Development and Information (HADI), on the issue of forced deportations. "They wanted to stop people; they wanted these people to be an example."

At the same time the Sudanese government has made attempts to crack down on this multi-million dollar trade and as part of this the government has formed a special unit to fight trafficking, set up special courts and drawn up new legislation. In 2010 they passed the Kassala Law against Human Trafficking and Smuggling and the 2014 Anti-Trafficking Act.

Khalid Al-Mubarak, the media counsellor at the Sudanese embassy in the UK, admits there is a problem with his country's eastern border, largely due to Sudan's lack of resources: "The facilities available to Sudan to guard the crossing point are not adequate for financial reasons. It's a long stretch and it's very treacherous. So there is a problem in the border area."

Sudan, he says, is working to solve it as best they can: "The problem of the border is not only a problem of trafficking. Across the border we get terrorists also. Boko Haram infiltrated the Sudan through its western border and they crossed and were handed back to Nigeria. Weapons are smuggled across the border. And more importantly our own rebels have lost all ground in the Sudan now; they have crossed to Libya where they are now fighting as mercenaries and contributing to the destabilisation of Libya."

Zerai agrees that securing the border is a mammoth task for the Sudanese government: “I think this is over the capacity of the Sudanese government. I know Sudan very well; I know the area, because I lived the life there. There are a lot of people coming from Eritrea. The Sudanese government did a lot to solve this issue. The Sudanese government is trying but it’s not easy.”

Sudan itself is an underdeveloped country. It receives aid from the UK and the US and, despite the recent news that they will be lifted, has suffered sanctions for the last two decades. “We are recipients of help, we are not in a position to help others, but we can’t close the doors because it’s virtually impossible. So this is the position,” says Al-Mubarak.

“As far as migrants are concerned, we are a poor country,” he continues. “They are a burden on our accommodation, they are a burden on our legal system, they are a burden on our health system. But we know they are migrants, we know they have got rights. Our facilities are limited because we are a poor country.”

According to Alnaiem there is a high recognition rate of Eritrean nationals seeking asylum in Sudan – some 95 per cent are recognised as refugees.

As for the EU, they have implemented strategies to keep refugees in the region, rather than help relieve the burden and accept them at home.

Following the success of a 2016 EU-Turkey deal that offered Turkey 6 billion euros in return for containing asylum seekers the EU sought to expand this strategy in other major transit countries, one of which was Sudan.

The Khartoum Process, followed by the Valletta Summit in Malta, sought to establish a regional dialogue on how to tackle human trafficking between the Horn of Africa and the EU. Two billion euros was put forward for Africa in the form of four-wheel drives and training for police officers with the hope that it would stop people crossing Sudan’s border.

Al-Mubarak was not the only African leader to complain: “This is very little of course. The share for Sudan is 100 million [euros].”

As part of this containment strategy the EU allocated a 200 million-euro, five-year package in development aid to Eritrea to try and improve their conditions at home and stop refugees arriving in Europe. It’s hardly worth saying how unlikely it is that this money will filter down to people like Fatimah’s clients or the families of Samir and Mohamed. It is simply a reward for the Eritrean dictator’s actions.

The best solution for Sudan, says Al-Mubarak, is not initiatives like Valletta or the Khartoum Process – it’s to help development in countries neighbouring the Sudan: “There is an international financial system which is weighed against developing countries and against their industrialisation and stability. It’s in the interests of certain [countries] to keep it like that. This is driving the desperate young people to reach the Sudan,” he says.

“There was and still is a fierce operation including some Islamophobic organisations in the US who are against this. They’re against the EU helping the Sudan, against Italy, Germany, helping the Sudan which is very illogical because they want to play politics with the fate of young men and women.”

On their behalf UNHCR has appealed for more funding from the international community and more resettlement places. In 2016, about 989 vulnerable refugees were resettled in a third country, though UNHCR submitted over 1,200 for consideration. In 2017 598 were resettled.

On Sudan’s southern border a new emergency is not only unfolding but it is also receiving more publicity than the protracted conflict in the east.

South Sudan separated from Sudan in 2011 to become the world’s youngest country, yet since December 2013 447,300 South Sudanese refugees have arrived in Sudan, says Alnaiem. There are over 1.2 million South Sudanese refugees in Sudan, and up to 2 million refugees in total – that’s five per cent of the total population.

In the UK – which has a GDP roughly 27 times the size of Sudan – there are around 118,995 refugees, that’s just 0.18 per cent of the population⁷. In 2015 they granted asylum to just 45 per cent of cases presented to them.

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