

The Ongoing Eritrean Refugee Crisis and the Work of EMDHR

By Helen Kidan

Executive committee member of the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR) and member of Eritrea Focus and the Network of Eritrean Women.

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The Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR) was founded in 2003 by Eritreans residing in South Africa in response to the absence of civil and democratic rights of citizens and the lack of rule of law in Eritrea. From its very inception EMDHR has actively worked to assist Eritrean refugees, especially in Africa. In 2004, when there was an influx of 600 Eritrean refugees into South Africa, EMDHR worked to advocate, assist and find shelter for them. Initially the EMDHR office was used to house some of those refugees.

Since then our advocacy and lobbying on the human rights violations within Eritrea has gone hand in hand with the assistance we provide to Eritrean refugees in distress. One of the main issues which Eritrean refugees face is protection: having left their home country many do not find the protection and security they need and continue to fall prey to criminals and unscrupulous smugglers.

The Shagarab refugee camp in Eastern Sudan has had particularly bad security issues and there has been a high incidence of kidnappings from the camp. In some cases, the Sudanese security forces themselves have been involved in kidnapping Eritrean refugees. The inefficiency and indifference of UNHCR has caused a great deal of frustration over the years, and there have even been allegations of mistreatment and abuse by its staff in Sudan.

In February and March 2018, the UN refugee agency began two separate investigations into the running of its office in Sudan and as a result its resettlement programme was suspended. The same complaints have also been raised by Eritrean asylum seekers about the UNHCR office in Cairo. On 21 July 2019 they handed the office a letter detailing all their concerns while 500 Eritreans protested outside.

Their grievances included the following:

1. Registration

A) Delays and repetitive postponement of appointments for newly arrived asylum seekers for them to get registered. No proper applications of the basic principles and approaches of the UNHCR office with regards to this issue.

B) UNHCR office doesn't provide ID card (Yellow or Blue) to most underage and unaccompanied children; thus, they don't receive any educational grants and financial assistance. The consequence is that some end up with unwanted pregnancies, addiction to drugs and homelessness.

C) The UNHCR office doesn't regularly update its database with regards to the Eritreans who are registered, and we see many asylum seekers whose files remain active whilst these, individuals no longer reside in Egypt.

2. RSD (Refugee Status Determination): Eritrean asylum seekers awaiting refugee status decision from UNHCR have been stuck in limbo for many years, and for many the situation remains intolerable and the following consequences of this are:

- People take life-threatening journeys through the Sahara Desert back to Sudan or Libya where several have perished;
- Single women and underage children have become easy targets for smugglers.

These are merely some of the grievances towards UNHCR, and whilst the above two examples are from Sudan and Egypt, they are also levelled at UNHCR in Uganda, Kenya, Libya and Ethiopia. Libya, however, remains the worst situation with criminals and extremists including Islamic State running amok and no functioning government in place.

Over the past few months we have witnessed the shelling of the detention centre in Tripoli by Haftar forces in which 53 refugees – mostly Eritreans – died. The UN has called this act a war crime and the situation is under investigation. The current conditions in Libya make it very difficult to assist those trapped inside the country and despite ongoing advocacy and lobbying by many organisations and activists, the situation on the ground remains dire.

The situation of Eritrean refugees stranded in Yemen is marginally better than those in Libya. In 2017, EMDHR worked with partner NGOs in getting assistance to nearly 1,000 Eritrean refugees who were in a refugee camp just outside Hodeida in Yemen. The refugee camp was only 40km away from where the Saudi coalition was bombing, which meant that UNHCR, the Red Cross and other organisations were unable to provide support without getting security access from the Saudi led coalition. Governments were lobbied to put pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop bombing to ensure humanitarian assistance could be reached. UNHCR was given access to the camp and all were registered with UNHCR. As cholera had begun to spread in the camp, all those affected were taken to the hospital in Hodeida.

In 2018, in the detention centre in Hodeida, there were 105 Eritrean refugees held in prison for having entered Yemen illegally, most having been there for two years. The prison guards of the detention centre had fled due to the ongoing conflict in the area and the 105 Eritreans were left to their own devices with no access to food, medicine, sanitation or any humanitarian assistance. All 105 needed to be registered with UNHCR to qualify for assistance and be relocated to a third country. EMDHR worked with Eritrea Focus, partner organisations and human rights activists to assist the detainees. All were registered with UNHCR but on their way out of Hodeida they were caught by Houthi rebels. When some tried to escape the Houthi rebels fired killing 17 of them. The remaining 88 have since been relocated to third countries.

The Khartoum Process

In November 2015, during the Valletta Summit on Migration, the Khartoum process was mandated to monitor the implementation of the initiatives and actions under the Valletta Action Plan. The EU initiative to control the flow of migration into Europe has been a humanitarian disaster. EMDHR, along with the Network of Eritrean Women, EEPA, Eritrean Law Society, human rights activists and other humanitarian organisations, raised their concerns at the increased risks of torture, kidnapping, abuse and death of refugees.

The following African countries are signatories of the Declaration of the Ministerial Conference on the Khartoum Process also known as the Rome Declaration: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Egypt, Kenya and Tunisia.

It is ironic and insulting that those African countries that are the root causes of their people migrating in the first place are also signatory to the Khartoum Process. This endangers the wellbeing of these refugees and forces them to take difficult and life-threatening journeys in order to find protection and security. This increases the level of desperation and results in more people crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

As a result, in October 2017, EMDHR along with Connection e.V., War Resisters International, EEPA, PRO ASYL and the Eritrean Law Society conducted a conference in Brussels aimed at EU Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament with the aim of influencing EU policies towards refugees and Eritrea.

The EU is outsourcing its immigration controls to third world dictators and the Libyan coastguards who are themselves implicated in criminality, smuggling and serious abuses at the detention centres. The detention centres in Libya are paid, courtesy of the EU, these very polices neither stop migration into Europe nor keep it safe. Through its very policies the EU is embroiling itself in crimes against humanity and all in the name of keeping immigrants out. However, there has been no evidence that this has reduced the flow of migration or people taking dangerous risks in search of protection.

The securitisation argument of keeping Europe safe also holds no basis, as outsourcing immigration controls to criminal elements in Libya and funding the Eritrean regime, which is implicated in human smuggling, is not providing Europe with any security. Libya sits on the periphery of Europe so funding the coastguards and other elements in Libya is only enabling the growth of criminality, terrorism and the trade of refugees, which is becoming big business.

As in 2015, when EMDHR attended the Valletta Summit we reiterated the need of the EU and the international community to provide protection to Eritrean refugees in neighbouring countries, instead of financing a regime that is hell bent on the destruction of the Eritrean people. We ask the EU and the international community to stand with the Eritrean people and spend their money on securing refugee camps such as Shagarab in Eastern Sudan and providing refugees with a means of rebuilding their lives.

The current policy of the EU and the international community in bringing Eritrea in from the cold since the peace deal with Ethiopia in June of 2018 is reaping no benefits to the Eritrean people as more and more continue to flee repression inside Eritrea.

It is the lack of hope that drives people to take desperate measures with their lives. If people had safety and protection in the neighbouring countries in Africa, then no one would risk their lives in the Sahara Desert or crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The ill-fated decisions of the EU are one of the causes of the very migration that they are trying to stop.