

# Human Trafficking and the Human Rights Agenda Against Eritrea

[March 16, 2013](#)

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## Introduction

On March 1, 2013, Joel Millman of the Wall Street Journal published a piece entitled “Ruthless Kidnapping Rings Reach From Desert Sands to U.S. Cities.” The article chronicles the touching personal accounts of Eritrean refugees being kidnapped and taken for ransom in Egypt’s Sinai desert. As disheartening as this piece may be to even the most apathetic observers, Eritreans are growing increasingly aware of the fact that similar articles highlighting the trafficking of Eritreans are becoming a regular occurrence. Although human trafficking, smuggling, and migration have been longstanding problems that have plagued the so-called developing world, it seems somewhat curious that Eritrea is suddenly getting the brunt of the international attention. Why now? Although increased international attention may be positive in that it sheds needed light on the plight of the affected migrants, the reality is that pieces like this are often politically motivated, lacking context, skewing the facts on the ground, and serving as part of larger campaign to vilify and isolate Eritrea.

Before we delve into this whole human trafficking ordeal, we must note that Eritrea was the target of UN sanctions in 2009. Since then, the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) has been regularly reporting on Eritrea’s role in Somalia to the Security Council. The group has made many ridiculous claims ranging from Eritrea’s alleged support of al-Shabab in Somalia to a failed bombing attempt on an African Union summit in Ethiopia. Both accusations were later shown to be false [1, 2].

As the last SEMG report reveals, linking Eritrea to terrorism is a futile task. [3] The expectations of the nation seem like a moving target and now the new focus of the international media and the SEMG is on Eritrea's "use of revenues from the taxation of Eritrean citizens in the diaspora, from human trafficking of refugees through Sudan and Egypt, and from gold mining." [4] The emerging concerns regarding a sovereign state's use of its revenues from any legitimate source—be it from a diaspora tax or gold mining or whatever—is a mystery unworthy of pursuit. The human trafficking issue, however, is a serious allegation that may be used in conjunction with broader human rights allegations to build a case for the expansion of UN sanctions on Eritrea. Thus, the issue requires further inspection.

In a speech regarding human trafficking delivered at the Clinton Global Initiative on September 25 of last year, President Obama made the following remarks:

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. We're helping other countries step up their own efforts. And we're seeing results. More nations have passed and more are enforcing modern anti-trafficking laws. [5]

What kind of "partnering" is he talking about, exactly? It's not within the US's authority or obligations to help people escape from a nation. To do so would be human smuggling. President Obama is essentially admitting to taking part in smuggling people out of Eritrea and North Korea. The US can only support those who take refuge in the US following immigration from another nation. The president's comments came as surprise to many Eritreans.

About one month later, Eritrea's presidential advisor, Yemane Gebreab, explained that "Eritrea is a victim of human trafficking" and that "for a number of years now, some people have felt that one way that they could weaken Eritrea would be by encouraging Eritrean youths to leave the country in larger numbers." [6] Are his claims valid? Is there a systematic effort to drive youth out of Eritrea?

### **Linking Eritrea to Human Trafficking**

Let us rewind to May 5, 2009. In a wikileaked diplomatic cable entitled "**Promoting Educational Opportunity for Anti-Regime Eritrean Youth,**" the then US Ambassador to Eritrea, Ronald K. McMullen explained 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." [7] He then goes on:

Post intends to begin adjudicating student visa applications, regardless of whether the regime is willing to issue the applicant an Eritrean passport and exit visa. If an applicant is otherwise found eligible for a student visa, Post will issue it in a Form DS-232...With an Eritrean passport and an F1 visa in a Form DS-232, the lucky young person is off to America. For those visa recipients who manage to leave the country and receive UNHCR refugee status, a UN-authorized travel document might allow the young person to travel to America with his or her F1 in the DS-232.

...Due to the Isaias regime's ongoing restrictions on Embassy Asmara, Post does not contemplate a resumption of full visa services in the near future. However, giving young Eritreans hope, the chance for an education, and the

skills with which to rebuild their impoverished country in the post-Isaias period is one of the strongest signals we can send to the Eritrean people that the United States has not abandoned them. Were we to begin processing student visa applications and require a regime-issued passport, we would be seen as strengthening the dictatorship's hand. Thus, the limited category-specific exemption outlined above is key.

The cable's title alone, reveals the ambassador's intentions. And if one wonders why brain drain is an issue in the developing world, perhaps this cable may provide some insight. What young person, anywhere in the world, wouldn't want a chance to come to the US? Though the more important question is, why now? Why restart issuing visas in 2009 after a two year suspension? Perhaps the answers will become clear shortly. McMullen, who clearly seeks to weaken the Eritrean "regime" (as in "government we don't like"), also makes curious mention of preparing for a "post-Isaias period," which becomes more interesting when one considers that his doctoral thesis at the University of Iowa was on the "Economic Consequences of African Coups D'etat." [8] He also served as the Charge' d'Affaires in the Fiji Islands during the 2000 coup d'etat. In another leaked cable he predicted the Eritrean government is "one bullet away from implosion" and posed that "any sudden change in government is likely to be initiated from within the military." [9] McMullen is no longer the ambassador but in light of the recently fabricated "coup" rumor that the international mainstream media has been recklessly trumpeting, [10] perhaps the US sent McMullen to make use of his expertise. As [Rafael Correa](#) once jokingly stated, "the only country that can be sure never to have a coup d'état is the United States because it hasn't got a U.S. Embassy."

While on the one hand secretly promoting Eritrean youth migration, the US administration was simultaneously taking actions against Eritrea for not doing enough to stop it. One month after McMullen's cable announcing the secret restart of F1 visa processing, in violation of the basic tenets of consular relations, the US Administration suddenly classified Eritrea as a "Tier 3" nation in the US State Department's June 2009 "Trafficking in Persons Report." [11] Keep in mind that Eritrea didn't even make the list in 2008 and, unlike other nations that started off with Tier 1 and 2 warnings, Eritrea jumped straight to Tier 3. The entire reasoning behind doing this is that it allows trafficking nations to meet the "minimum standards" by the following year. [12] As a result of this unprecedented move, President Obama added Eritrea and 5 other African countries to a blacklist that would subject them "to the trafficking sanctions, which can include a ban on non-humanitarian and trade-related aid and U.S. opposition to loans and credits from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank." [13]

What did the report say about Eritrea, exactly? In essence it stated that Eritrea was a "source country" for human trafficking and that it didn't do enough to prevent the practice. That could apply to almost every nation on the planet. Notably, the report focused more on "large numbers of migrant workers" and made almost passing mention of the Eritrean government being "complicit in conscripting children into military service." In spite of no significant policy changes to the Eritrean national service program, subsequent reports, which are released annually, focused less on the "migrant workers" and increasingly more on the "conscripts," "adolescent children" being sent to Sawa, and "child laborers." More on this later.

Following the TIP report, US ambassador McMullen's writes in an August 26, 2009 leaked diplomatic cable about a young unnamed Eritrean "who is preparing to flee the country" and

supposedly confesses the intricate details of his escape plan. [14] McMullen writes that he will “use one of the Eritrean National Security Officers (ENSO), who he claimed to be the ringleaders in smuggling of Eritreans to the Sudan border” and “he stated the cost at 80,000 nakfa.” This is the first time we see official US documentation of claims that Eritrean government officials are directly involved in the smuggling of citizens outside the country. This is despite the fact that about a year earlier the Chargé d’Affaires, Matthew D. Smith, confessed in another leaked diplomatic cable 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.” [15]

In spite of the Eritrean government’s efforts to combat smuggling, the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) produced a report in 2011 that expanded on McMullen’s claims. The report states:

421. The well-documented exodus of young Eritreans to escape poverty or obligatory “national service” represents yet another opportunity for corruption and illicit revenue. People smuggling is so pervasive that it could not be possible without the complicity of Government and party officials, especially military officers working in the western border zone, which is headed by General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”. Multiple sources have described to the Monitoring Group how Eritrean officials collaborate with ethnic Rashaida smugglers to move their human cargo through the Sudan into Egypt and beyond. This is in most respects the same network involved in smuggling weapons through to Sinai and into Gaza.



422. According to former Eritrean military officials and international human rights activists, military officers involved in the practice charge roughly \$3,000 a head for each person exiting Eritrea.

...The Monitoring Group has obtained details of a Swiss bank account into which the proceeds from smuggling have been deposited and has provided the Swiss authorities with information related to this account, together with the personal and contact details of the Swiss-based coordinator of this trafficking ring and details of the coordinator's Egypt-based associates. [\[16\]](#)

For the SEMG's extraordinary claims it cites as its only sources an "interview with Eritrean individuals directly involved in people smuggling operations" and an "interview with Eritrean source, Switzerland, March 2011." In the 2012 follow-up report, the SEMG repeats the same human trafficking claims, citing no sources as evidence. "The trafficking of arms and people is managed by the same networks using the same vehicles, and the same Eritrean officials are implicated," the report states. The SEMG then claims to have acquired 1,300 testimonies of which "61 were from Eritreans who identified the names of Rashaida smugglers." Artfully interweaving groups of similar testimonies as vignettes, the report attempts to illustrate the validity of earlier claims made by the SEMG. Finally, it shows photos of body wounds of two unnamed and faceless torture victims. The annex is only 3 pages long, filled with photos, and has nothing to do with human trafficking allegations.

After reading both reports, one is left scratching their head. That's it? No real people's names? No bank account numbers? No photos of human traffickers? Where is the hard evidence? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. To put

things in perspective, imagine a man is brought to trial on charges of torture and the prosecuting team presents the following as their “evidence” against him:

1. Claims against him by unnamed interviewers with no transcripts for the court to review
2. Pictures of unnamed and faceless victims he allegedly tortured
3. 61 snippets of testimonies by the nameless victims who he allegedly tortured
4. Claims against him by people who openly call themselves his “opposition“
5. Claims against him by one of his former torturer buddies, who is unnamed

The defendant then demands access to the evidence and witnesses for cross-examination but his request is denied. Based on the information, he is then found guilty and expected to accept his sentence. Would that be justice? Of course not. However, this is exactly what Eritrea has had to face regularly in regards to the UN Security Council and SEMG reports. This system of international law requires incredible trust in the prosecutors—the SEMG, in this case—who Eritrea had no say in appointing. And if we think that the SEMG is actually a committee of independent experts as opposed to a prosecuting team, then why would the head of the SEMG, Matt Bryden, say “we’re trying to make the case that any improvement in Eritrea’s conduct is the result of sanctions, and that it’s too early to lift them because of the other violations they have committed”? [17] In essence, he’s saying ‘yeah, I know we couldn’t find evidence that they support terrorism but please keep the sanctions because of this new human trafficking



ordeal.’ In other words he is prosecuting and making a case against Eritrea and, unfortunately, it’s completely within his mandate to share his opinion [18]. That’s UN justice for you. The SEMG’s “evidence” would be considered a joke if wasn’t so serious. According to the UNSC, the successful implementation of “targeted sanctions” on any nation is premised on the expectations that the “panel of experts” will uphold the highest standards of evidence, which is the key tenet of the 2003 Stockholm Process. In this regard, the 2003 UNSC states:

While recognizing that it might sometimes be necessary to uphold the confidentiality of sources of information available to expert panels or monitoring groups regarding sanctions busting or non-compliance, the Stockholm paper notes that the credibility of the findings and the integrity of the process required that evidence be as transparent and verifiable as possible....sanctions should be based on concrete evidence of violations of international law or Council obligations, and not based on presumptions, media reports or motivated allegations. [19]

The SEMG report clearly falls short. To make matters worse, Eritrea doesn’t get to comment or defend itself at any point in the process because according to the SEMG, which unprofessionally leaked the report to the media before Eritrea could see it, [20] “the Government of Eritrea failed to provide responses to any Monitoring Group correspondence and declined to grant the repeated requests.” How convenient. Where have we seen this sort of tactic before? For years, the world has been unable to hear Eritrea’s side of the story:

**A. On the Kenyan defections:** “Eritrean officials were unavailable for comment on Tuesday.” [21]

**B. On Eritrea's alleged bombing of the AU (proved false by WikiLeaks [22]):** “Eritrean officials were unavailable for comment on Tuesday.” [23]

**C. On claims of human trafficking:** “Eritrean government...did not respond to requests to provide information for this report.” [24]

**D. On relations with the US:** “It has been difficult to talk to Eritrea frankly. We have had trouble getting them to talk to us. I sent the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs to talk with Mr. Isaias and he didn't see her.” [25]

**E. On breakdown of US-Eritrea relations:** “Eritrean officials were not immediately available to comment on the decision” [26]

The list goes on and on, ad infinitum. The point is that Eritrea is not allowed to defend itself in court, in the media, in reports, or anywhere in the international arena. It's no surprise that Eritrea is so misunderstood by the world. In contrast, the darlings of the mainstream media, the US and Ethiopia, were also accused of violating the Somali arms embargo by the former Somalia monitoring groups yet we saw no prosecution by the UNSC. Is this justice? No way! In the words of Richard Pryor, it's “just-us” and unfortunately Eritrea isn't one of “them.”

Following the SEMG report, the UNHCR released a report in November 2012 entitled “Refugees and the Rashaida: human smuggling and trafficking from Eritrea to Sudan and Egypt.” [27] The document states that “it has come to light that some members of the military and Eritrean Government are complicit in smuggling” and it references the 2012 SEMG report. It talks about General Teklai Kifle, adding no new information, and then goes on at length about the Rashaida ethnic group's involvement in the human trafficking business. In regards to

both of them, “it is thought there are varying levels of experience and organization within the groups of Rashaida who engage in taking Eritreans to Sinai. However other networks, such as those organized by some members of the Eritrean Government for smuggling arms are highly organized.” In other words, the government is the syndicate—the major player. What’s interesting about this particular report is the divisive new ethnic and regional dimension it seems to take:

There is a marked difference between the majority of the refugee population and those now leaving Eritrea. Those now leaving the country are young, Christian, Tigrinya from urban areas. Much like young Sudan-born refugees, the new arrivals are generally unwilling to remain in an enclosed camp setting without access to higher education or employment.

...Eritrean brokers are key to arranging onward movement with Rashaida from within the camp. The facilitators in the route are usually of the same ethnicity as those embarking on the movement (Hamood 2006: 50). Furthermore, life in the refugee camp is characterized by ethnic divides. Different ethnicities are thought to have different aspirations. One testimony states that people from Akele-Guzai region are thought to have strong connections abroad and to be most likely going to Israel. Those from Maekel region are believed to be going to Europe, while those from Gash Barka are simply associated with smuggling people out of Eritrea and settling in Sudan (Mehari 2010).

Turning to the reference section to investigate the source of the aforementioned claims, the report cites an “unpublished paper” by someone named “Mehari, K” (Mehari, K. 2010. ‘Desert in Disorder’ unpublished paper). Investigating the rest of the

citations for follow-up is a futile task as most references are made to personal interviews with individuals like Meron Estifanos, who was integral in propagating the fabricated “coup” in January 2013 and using it as a springboard for the so-called “Forto 2013” campaign. [28]

Returning to the latest publication of the US State Department TIP report, we hear echoes of the SEMG’s allegations of corruption by senior Eritrean army officers. As opposed to the 2009 report, the 2012 publication is focused less on migrants workers more on youth conscripted into national service. More notably, the report seems to focus on the Eritrean government’s alleged conscription of minors. It states that “adolescent children that attempt to leave Eritrea have been forced into military service despite being younger than the minimum service age of 18. As part of the requirements to complete their senior year of high school, adolescent children are also sent to Sawa, Eritrea’s military academy, prior to their eighteenth birthday.” Surprisingly, this claim was later cited by Child Soldiers International in a 2012 case study to support the claim that Eritrea uses child soldiers. This “study” was, in turn, posted on the UNHCR website and is currently being used by journalists and various NGO’s to propagate the notion that Eritrea’s use of “child soldiers” is driving youth out of the country.

Nowhere is the international media’s desperation to point out the Eritrean government’s blunders more evident than in its claim that Eritrea uses “child soldiers.” When the average person reads about child soldiers in Africa, she/he may conjure up the classical CNN-promoted image of regime-indoctrinated 9 year-olds mowing down civilians. Perhaps the image is sometimes a wee bit less graphic but the reality is that the claims of child soldiers in Africa perpetuates the stereotype of a barbaric Africa out of control and encourages intervention

against nations like Eritrea. Thus, such claims must be taken seriously. In regards to their Eritrea study, Child Soldiers International states the following:

To prevent increasing evasion of national service by school leavers, the government announced in 2003 that the final year of secondary education, Year 12, must be performed at the Sawa Military Training Camp in western Eritrea near the border with Sudan. Because the Year 12 designation is based not on a child's age but rather on the school grade achieved, some Year 12 students are under 18 years old. According to a recent US State Department report on human rights in Eritrea, "Students at Sawa were typically 18 years old or older, although a fair percentage were as young as 16 years old".

The government denies underage conscription and argues that students attending the twelfth grade in Sawa should not be confused with national service conscripts. However, the Year 12 students at Sawa have military status and are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence and subject to military discipline. They are therefore in reality soldiers, even if not fully operational members of the Eritrean National Army. [29]

The sad part about this is that the "Eritrea recruits child soldiers" claim is entirely based on this hair splitting of mandatory twelfth grade education. Such reporting is irresponsible for two reasons. Firstly, this report is based on non-independent politically biased sources like the US State Department. Secondly, even if 16-year-olds attended Sawa they are not considered members of the Eritrean National Army, as CSI even admits. Consideration should also be given to the fact that while most of the world submits to more lax standards on child soldier laws enshrined in the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child (CRC), Africa has collectively gone above and beyond by signing the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which by default accedes to the “Optional Protocols” of the CRC and increases the minimum military recruitment age from 15 to 18. [30] Given these more stringent laws and the known fact that most reported child soldiers are between ages 15-18 years old, it’s no surprise that half of the world’s child soldiers are in Africa. [31] Regardless of the facts, the media is quick dish out the child soldier label in Africa. There’s a reason why the spineless international media points out “child soldiers” in Eritrea while it ignores “child soldiers” in the UK, which is also a signatory to the Option Protocols and refers to the exact same argument as Eritrea. [32] Let us also refresh the UN’s memory and recall that in 2002, the UNSC Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, visited Eritrea to assess the use of child soldiers. He concluded that there was “no systematic use of child soldiers” and said that “the absence of the ‘child soldiering’ phenomenon was particularly impressive since no other conflict zone he had visited recently had been free of the problem.” [33]

As shown above, there seems to be a concerted effort to link Eritrea to human trafficking. The reality is that we have yet to see any hard evidence to support this allegation. To make matters worse the international press almost reflexively blames it on child soldiers, forced labor, and lack of [insert word like freedom, democracy, religion, or other’s words used to destroy Iraq, Libya, etc.]. As some of the wikileaks diplomatic cables suggest, the US State Department has made efforts to drive youth out of Eritrea to weaken the government. It then turns around and blames the Eritrean government for “human trafficking.” These actions are part of a broader concerted and systematic effort by the US Administration to destroy Eritrea



through the control of human migration. To understand this we must go back in history.

## **History of Migration in Eritrea**

When Eritrea gained independence in the 1991, there were approximately 500,000 Eritrean refugees living in the Sudan. [34] At that time, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) deemed the Eritrean refugee situation in East Sudan as a “protracted refugee situation.” Spanning back to the 1960’s, it was the world’s second longest standing refugee program after Palestine’s. [35] One year after independence, about 70,000 refugees returned home. In subsequent years, repatriation dropped dramatically. By 1995, there were still 282,000 refugees living in the Sudan, despite peace in Eritrea and despite the nation entering the so-called “African Renaissance.” [36] In a surprisingly honest 1996 Inter Press Service article, Arnulv Torbjornsen, UNHCR-Sudan chief at the time, admitted that “we (UNCHR) created a monster in Sudan” and that “we still support 2,000 jobs in the refugee business there, and there are vested interests in keeping the Eritrean refugees. If they repatriate, their refugee empire will collapse. We have to take a lot of responsibility for creating the situation in Sudan.” [37] He then goes on to explain that 80-90% of the refugees want to repatriate in Eritrea. He also said that “UNHCR conducted a survey in the camps in August 1995, and all said they wish to go home. But perhaps only about 50 percent of those spontaneously settled want to return – they have shops, houses, children in school, etc.” Therefore, complete repatriation was impossible, despite peace and development in Eritrea, due to the ineffectiveness of UNHCR and the adoption by refugees of a new cultural and economic life in the diaspora.

In 1998, Eritrea was plunged into a two-year war with Ethiopia, displacing hundreds of thousands once again. By war's end, there were 50,000 returns and with hostilities over, UNHCR invoked the "cessation clause" (under Article 1. C. (5) of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees [38]), which would terminate Eritrean refugee status as of 2002 unless individual refugees could demonstrate a continuing need for international protection. Thus, Eritreans in the Sudan would no longer be considered refugees but rather undocumented "migrants" and incoming refugees would no longer be accepted "prima facie" (i.e. automatically without processing) as they had been for decades. To gain UNHCR recognition and resettle in a wealthier nation, many Eritreans began to seek asylum—whether real or not—on the grounds that they would be persecuted if they returned to Eritrea. Thus, at this point incoming Eritreans transitioned into "asylum-seekers" as opposed to refugees. As one UN report explains "the number of Eritrean asylum seekers entering Sudan has grown quite dramatically, from around 1,000 in 2003 to almost 33,000 in 2008, with a somewhat smaller figure (between 22,000 and 25,000) in 2009 and 2010." [39] This rise in asylum-seekers stems from the sudden cessation of prima facie recognition, which had been in place for decades and created a continuous pipeline for many Eritreans to resettle in much wealthier nations around the world. Instead of considering this reality, the UNHCR put together a 2004 position paper, taking a reductionist outlook and concluded that there was a rise in Eritrean asylum claims and decreased repatriation because "the human rights situation in Eritrea has seriously deteriorated in the past two years...with regard to the treatment of opposition political groups and movements, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, arbitrary detention...and the treatment of draft evaders." [40] The paper relied almost entirely on highly biased and politically motivated US State Department annual

human rights reports on Eritrea. It also speckled in supposedly “independent investigations” by Amnesty International, which:

1. Did not collect its data from within Eritrea; [41]
2. Relied purely on the questionable personal accounts of nameless asylum-seekers that seek resettlement; and [42]
3. Has historically been used to promote imperial humanitarian intervention in non-western nations. [43]

Notably, the UNHCR paper did not seek or consider the accounts of Eritrean officials or, as some may prefer, the work of independent observers. The paper, which strongly argued that Eritrean asylum-seekers should not be returned to Eritrea, signified a new post-2004 policy direction for UNHCR that would only serve to perpetuate migration out of Eritrea. The “cessation clause” was revoked, meaning undocumented migrants would no longer be carefully reviewed on a case-by-case basis but rather en masse. Eritrea is still dealing with the consequences of this decision.

For UNHCR to somehow expect 100% of Eritreans to gleefully return to post-war poverty in the face of a decades long culture of resettling in other countries is quite ludicrous. Many still hadn't returned in 1996 while the honeymoon of independence was still there. Significantly, the UNHCR position paper—and their many other publications to follow—failed to make the slightest mention of the other etiologies of increased asylum and dwindling repatriation:

1. **Natural economic migratory patterns.** According to the Harris-Todaro theory of migration, migrants make a rational decision to increase their welfare or utility by moving to another place where they can expect to earn a higher income. [44] This is evident all throughout Africa

and is a significant driving factor in “brain drain.” Why is Eritrea, a remarkably poor nation, exempt from this consideration?

2. **“No peace no war” situation.** Despite the cessation of hostilities in 2000, the threat of a return to war in Eritrea is real and unrelenting. The Ethiopian government not only refused a “final and binding” ruling that would normalize relations but it also encroached on the Temporary Security Zone (buffer), which is now sovereign Eritrean territory [45]. In fact, Ethiopia initiated an attack on Eritrea last spring [46]. The year before that, Ethiopia openly called for the overthrow of the Eritrean government, violating resolution 3314 (XXIX)(3)(g) of the UNGA. [47] Thus, the threat is very real today. It was even more real back then. Why was this not considered?

3. **Internally displaced people (IDPs).** Returning refugees had to compete for resettlement with the 210,000 IDPs that were already present in 2000. This cannot be ignored, considering that there were still 45,000 IDPs in 2005, who would not be fully resettled until mid-2008. [48] Many of them were among the 80,000 forcefully expelled from Ethiopia, after Meles Zenawi infamously stated that his government could “expel anyone even if we don’t like the color of their eyes.” [49]

4. **Severed Eritrea-Sudan relations.** On account of the ruling National Islamic Front’s support of terrorist groups like the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement that were radicalizing Eritrean refugees in East Sudan during the 1990’s, official diplomatic relations between the nations were terminated in 1995. [50] This made tripartite coordination between UNHCR, Eritrea, and the Sudan

difficult. Diplomatic relations were only resumed after 2006.

**5. Protracted refugee situation.** As alluded to above, the presence of a decades-long UNHCR administered refugee program in East Sudan has created an economy and culture that inhibits its termination. In fact, various refugee camps economies were so successful that they became self-reliant and transformed themselves into villages. [51] In addition, various camps were seen as assets to the Sudanese Government, as large local mechanized farms became dependent on the cheap labor of Eritrean refugees. [52]

**6. Reduced UNHCR donor funding.** With the war over, donors expected Eritreans to return home and were reluctant to pledge more funds for East Sudan. [53]

**7. Recurrent droughts.** During periods of drought some Eritrean families would relocate to the Sudan.

**8. UNHCR-Sudan's ineffectiveness.** UNHCR ignored the self-criticism of Torbjornsen. It was only in later publications—when the damage was already done—that the organization came to grips with its general ineffectiveness:

The internal factors which have visibly affected the operation in eastern Sudan include UNHCR's recurrent financial crisis; lack of consistent long-term vision compounded by a lack of institutional memory; changes of senior management without effective accountability, bringing about frequent changes of direction ... Disregarding the history of the operation has invariably led to repeated reinventions and ultimately the waste of opportunities and resources. [54]

Following the UNHCR's change in policy, it was discovered that the UN Peacekeeping Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE), which was present in Eritrea from 2000 to 2008, had also been involved in the trafficking of Eritreans yet UNCHR reports fail to mention or downplay this key fact. Instead they point the fingers at the Eritrean government, the Rashaidas, or whatever boogeyman fits their agenda. Let us recall that in a January 18, 2007 wikileaked diplomatic cable entitled "UNMEE: Confronting Sexual Abuse and Exploitation," the US Chargé d'Affaires in Eritrea, Jennifer McIntyre, wrote that "since the establishment of the UN Peacekeeping Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2001, there have been few reported incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse and trafficking in persons within Eritrea." However, she then goes to make the following admission:

What has been an on-going problem is human smuggling, with one highly visible case in fall 2006 of a UN Volunteer who attempted to smuggle several Eritreans to Ethiopia in an UNMEE vehicle. (Refs B&C) Other smuggling cases have predominantly involved local staff crossing the border in UNMEE vehicles. In one case, upon arrival in Ethiopia the local staff called UNMEE headquarters in Asmara to inform UNMEE staff where in Ethiopia they had abandoned the vehicle. [55]

This diplomatic cable validates what Eritrean government officials had been saying for years, despite downplaying or outright denials by UNMEE. In addition to illegally spying on the Eritrean Defense Forces, peacekeepers were accused of trafficking Eritreans, having sex with Eritrean children, and making pornographic films of Eritrean women, contrary to traditional culture. [56, 57] It was only in 2007 that UNHCR finally reported—albeit via passing mention—that “according to the refugees, some members of the United Nations



peacekeeping mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) were involved in human trafficking.” [58] And for what reason were they doing this, exactly? In a meeting with a group of Eritreans, a candid Italian UN officer admitted that “peacekeeping is a lucrative business and that is why I am here.” [59] In 2008, Eritrea had seen enough and the “peacekeepers” were eventually kicked out. However, the damage had already been done. A pipeline outside of the country had been created through the work of foreign smugglers. Often times this smuggling leads to exploitation, which then deems it as “human trafficking.” [60] To this day Eritrea is still dealing with this issue.

Another important point illustrated by McIntyre’s leaked cable is that Eritreans were being smuggled into Ethiopia. Historically, Eritreans have migrated to the Sudan for refuge and hope of resettlement but migration to Ethiopia became somewhat of a new phenomenon that only took place after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia. Why is this the case? According to the US government-funded Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR), which is responsible for “orienting” refugees, the “Eritrean refugees first crossed into Ethiopia in May 2000 after the 1998-2000 border conflict” and “many have fled conscription and come to Shimelba, a refugee camp just 25 kilometers (air distance) from the Eritrean/Ethiopian border.” [61] They claim the camp is made of 60% Tigrinyas and that “roughly speaking, about half the cases in the P2 group [those eligible for group US resettlement] were born in present day Ethiopia, were deported by the Ethiopian Government between 1996-2000, and then later fled back to Ethiopia.” In other words, half of those eligible for US resettlement on the basis that they are Eritrean are actually Ethiopian. The document then states that the second largest group is that of the Kunamas. COR then goes on to explain that “the camp is run by the Ethiopian

government with UNHCR oversight. There is a ‘central committee’ that is elected by the camp population, and the committee represents the refugees on various issues, liaising with NGOs and the Ethiopian government.” As we will see, this has led to a new sort of politicized resettlement program of supposedly Eritrean refugees.

In 2007, UNHCR announced that “700 ethnic Kunama refugees from Eritrea” were resettled in America from the Shimelba Refugee Camp. [62] Notice that it doesn’t simply say “Eritreans” but rather takes a divisive turn by singling out one ethnic group from Eritrea. This is uncharacteristic of the highly nationalistic Eritreans (“kulu dihiri hager” or “everything after nation”). So what’s going on here? Well, we learn from COR that “for some Kunama, being in Shimelba is akin to ‘returning home,’ excepting the irony that they now are refugees in their own homeland.” What COR is highlighting is that fact that Kunamas are located on both sides of the border. During the Eritrea-Ethiopia war, many Ethiopian Kunamas were displaced and found refuge at the Shimbela refugee camp. Still, why is it that only Kunamas, whether Ethiopian or Eritrean, were being resettled in the US?

We learn from the Chargé d’Affaires in Ethiopia, Deborah Malac, in an October 6, 2008 wikileaked diplomatic cable entitled “The View From Inside Ethiopia’s Eritrean Refugee Camps,” that politicized resettlement was being used in the Shimelba refugee camp to organize an Eritrean opposition:

UNHCR officials declared that they were unaware of any Eritrean opposition activity within Shimelba, though one Protection Officer noted that some Tigrinya refugees had requested urban relocation due to opposition harassment in the camps. ARRA [Ethiopian Administration for Refugee/Returnee Affairs] officials stated that opposition

activity within the camps was not permitted, but a handful of Shimelba Kunama refugees insisted that, in fact, the opposition “controlled” activity within camp and moved in and out freely. They also alleged complicity between ARRA and the Tigrinya and Kunama opposition. They said that the Kunama opposition, DMLEK [Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama], ensured that all elected Kunama officials to the refugee council were either DMLEK members or sympathetic to the opposition. [\[63\]](#)

It doesn't end there:

According to the refugees, DMLEK used intimidation tactics to force compliance from uncooperative refugees by threatening to use DMLEK's “relationship” with both ARRA and UNHCR to ensure that the offending individual “would never leave the camp.” One refugee, after refusing to join DMLEK, claimed he was arrested by the Ethiopian police on a trumped up charge and held for several weeks. Another refugee, who was a veteran of both the Eritrean liberation struggle and the 1998-2000 border war, said that when he arrived in Shimelba, ARRA offered to send him to Addis Ababa, and provide him with a vehicle, if he agreed to work in the opposition's radio station. When he refused he was told he would never be allowed to leave, and that he would never be resettled. Another refugee said that the largely Tigrinya “Sedeg'e” opposition group tried to force him to join by telling him that if he did not, he would never leave the camp. (Note: Sedeg'e is also known as the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front (ERDF), and is one of the three groups that joined together to form the Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF). The DMLEK and the ENSF are both

members of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). End note.)

The refugees said that armed persons could often be seen in the camp. They said sometimes the armed persons were local Tigrayan (i.e. Ethiopian) militia, but other times the armed men were opposition. The refugees said that some DMLEK members had family living in the camp and would come and go regularly. (Note: PolOff saw several armed Tigrayan militia walking through the camp at various times.)

(C/NF) PolOff could not find any Tigrinya refugees who would speak as openly as the Kunama, but the Kunama refugees said that the Tigrinya were dominated by Tigrinya opposition groups just as the Kunama were dominated by DMLEK. The Kunama refugees asserted that some Tigrinya refugees regularly left the camp to receive military training for short periods of time, and then would return. At one point during a conversation between PolOff and contacts in the camp, the contacts visibly stiffened, and warned PolOff that they were under observation by what they termed as a “politically active” Tigrinya refugee.

Is this a refugee camp or rebel training camp? It's sort of hard to tell. This seems very reminiscent of the Syrian Free Army organizing in Turkey near the border before they started operating in Syria. Anyway, the cable continues:

(C/NF) The Kunama refugees also said that DMLEK was opposed to resettlement of the Kunama refugees, and therefore, pressuring people not to resettle. The refugees stated that DMLEK wanted the people to stay to be used as a resource, and wanted the young men to join their

organization to fight Eritrea. They said that DMLEK was spreading misinformation about life in the United States including showing the movie “Roots,” alleging that the Kunama would be treated like slaves in America. One refugee noted that in the last year, positive reports from Kunama who had already resettled were beginning to counter DMLEK’s negative message.

...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. End Comment.

Thus, it comes as no surprise when websites like Asmarino.com—that brand themselves as “Eritrean opposition”—write articles with headlines like “Peaceful demonstration in Eritrean refugee camp Ethiopia (Shimelba) 06/12/2009.” [64] Anyway, from reading past US State Department “Proposed Refugee Admissions” reports for successive fiscal years, we learn about the US’s role in bringing the Kunamas to America. The Kunama case was first mentioned in the FY 2003 report (published in 2002), when they explain that “among groups under consideration for possible P-2 designation are...Kunama Eritreans in Walanibhy Camp in Ethiopia.” [65] Explaining why they are receiving P-2 designation, the report states that “these 4,000 Eritreans have

no local integration prospects and are viewed with suspicion by Eritrea due to their decision to seek refuge in Ethiopia during the war. We will actively pursue an appropriate P-2 designation for this group during FY 2003.” They were still under consideration in FY 2003 and 2004. [66] In the FY 2005 (published in 2004) we learn something new. The report says “we continue to monitor the situation of the group of Eritrean Kunama in Ethiopia and have urged UNHCR to consider a group resettlement referral of those who do not choose to voluntarily repatriate to Eritrea by the end of 2004.” [67] Thus, we learn that it was the US, and not the UNHCR, that made the request for resettlement. It is usually the other way around: UNHCR makes the referral and the resettling nations choose whether or whether not to resettle them. Why they specifically requested to resettle Kunamas is a mystery. They do the same thing for religious minorities in Iran and Bantus in Somalia. If not for genuine concerns for persecution, one can only suspect an agenda to forge a sub-national identity and foment division. In any case, in the FY 2007 report they finally said that they were processing up to 2,500 Eritrean Kunama in Ethiopia, with the vast majority slated to come to the USA in FY 2007. [68] The rest is history.

Thus, as the above shows, external entities have been using the refugee situations in the Sudan and Ethiopia to drive a politicized migration out of Eritrea. We have shown how US State Department reports were used by UNHCR to grant Eritreans prima facie status following 2004 to expedite resettlement processing and how they were granted P2 status (group resettlement in US reserved for rare minorities) to resettle them in large groups.

Moving on to more recent times, the US State Department’s “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2012” states the following:



For the first time in 20 years, staff representing the Departments of State and Homeland Security began processing Eritrean refugees inside Sudan residing in a remote camp along the eastern border. This initiative is designed to bring hope to individuals who can neither return to Eritrea nor locally integrate in Sudan.

...Eritreans continue to seek asylum in neighboring countries due to political tensions and increasing political repression; many are attempting dangerous onward migration to Europe and the Middle East in search of better economic opportunities. [69]

Thus, they are focusing more on resettling Eritreans living in East Sudan on the basis of political repression. To call them “army defectors” or “work migrants” in search of a better life would mean that they would have to be returned to Eritrea, as practically every nation in Africa—dealing with the same internal problem—has decided to do despite threats from UNHCR (Libya, [70] Egypt, [71] the Sudan[72], Angola [73], Tanzania [74], etc.; see below).

Alas, we arrive at the latest Proposed Refugee Admissions publication. The FY 2013 report states the following:

Both Eritrea and Sudan are currently designated as “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Both Eritrea and Sudan are currently designated as “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The USRAP continues to be available through Priority 1 referrals to Sudanese, Eritrean, and other refugees who are victims of religious intolerance. Refugees from Eritrea and Sudan with refugee or asylee family members in the United States also may have access

to the USRAP through Priority 3, subject to its resumption. Certain Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia may have access to the USRAP through Priority 2.

Three countries of origin (Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea) presently account for the vast majority of U.S. admissions from the region. In East Africa, we continue to process P-1 Somalis in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps. We are coming closer to completing P-2 processing of Eritreans in Shimelba camp in Ethiopia, but will continue to process P-1 UNHCR referrals after the P-2 group is completed. We were able to conduct the first DHS circuit ride to Sudan in over twenty years to process the first group of a protracted caseload of Eritrean refugees there. [\[75\]](#)

Note that Eritreans and Sudanese are the only groups explicitly named that are granted P1 status ANYWHERE on the grounds that they are undergoing religious persecution. Somalis are restricted to certain refugee camps. What African wouldn't take advantage of this fact? Is it any surprise that many of them are claiming Eritrean identity (see below). Also, if lack of religious freedom was truly worth P1-status everywhere in the world, then Saudi Arabians would be coming droves. However, we know that's not the case. In regards to Africa specifically, the report makes the following proposal:

From East and Southern Africa, we expect 9,000 admissions, primarily Somalis in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and South Africa; Eritreans in Ethiopia and in Sudan; and additional small numbers of P-1 referrals of various nationalities in the countries above, as well as in Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

...Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, we anticipate up to 1,500 Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and other sub-Saharan African refugees to be processed in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Russia.

A total of 2,032 Eritreans are slated to come to America this year, making them the 6th highest ranking resettlement group. This is amazing when one considers that Eritrea ranks 112th in population size and only contributes 0.079% of the world's population. Much like the Palestinians and Israeli-Jews, the Eritrean population has a very high proportion of its people living in the diaspora with anecdotal numbers placing the diaspora population at ~1.5 – 2 million versus a domestic population of 6 million. Like the Israelis, Eritreans maintain dual citizenship and actively participate in the Eritrean domestic economy. From the FY 2013 report, we also learn of another concerning piece of information: most of the Eritrean refugees targeted for resettlement are of working age and male. In a section tabulating the age data of the top 20 most resettled groups, Eritrean refugees have the highest percentage of “working age” resettlement in America (84%), suggesting preferential recruitment of youth that would have otherwise been developing their homeland. All the other refugee groups don't even come close. This is in line with McMullen's aforementioned comments on focusing on the youth. Clearly, the United States is set on driving young Eritreans to resettle outside of Eritrea. Finally, it should also be noted that Eritrean refugees are the most predominantly male resettlement group (73.8%), beating the next group by almost 13% (the Sudan had 60.8%). In the past, this has made depression a significant issue as males have been unable to find Eritrean mates in the new land [76].

## **Resettlement in Third Countries**

As a result of the actions by the US and its client states to preferentially resettle Eritreans outside of Eritrea, migrants from throughout East Africa have picked-up on this trend and are using it to their advantage. It is well-documented that migrants originating from countries other than Eritrea regularly claim Eritrean identity to increase their chances of acquiring visas and gaining refugee status. Nowhere is this more obvious than in than in the case Israel.

In a March 2008 interview with Haaretz—long before Eritrea was in the human trafficking limelight—the Eritrean Ambassador to Israel, Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas, said that he sent a letter of protest to the Israeli Foreign ministry explaining that the refugees (referred to as “infiltrators”) were “not political refugees, but rather work migrants or army deserters.” The Haaretz article goes on:

The Eritrean ambassador, Tesfamariam Tekeste, noted...that his letter of protest included several issues of concern to his government. First, he said, at least half of the infiltrators represent themselves as Eritrean while in fact they are from other African states, such as Sudan or Ethiopia. “They know the Eritreans automatically receive a six-month visa, so they pretend to be Eritrean,” he said.

The letter also mentioned the fear that hostile elements helping to smuggle Africans into Israel could exploit them for carrying out terror attacks. “If that happens, the accusing finger will point to Eritrea,” Tekeste said.

“Israel is turning itself into a migration destination for Eritrean citizens fleeing from army service or looking for work,” Tekeste said. “The fact that you issue six-month visas encourages people to come here.” [76]

Unfortunately, comments from Eritrean officials—as opposed to personal accounts in Human Rights Watch reports—often fall on deaf ears. Few believed the ambassador. However, in May of 2011 we learned that he was right all along. According to Haaretz, an “asylum seeker, who can only be identified as Ibrahim, came to Israel from Eritrea in November 2009. He was arrested a month later and held at the Givon prison in Ramle for a year and a half. The prolonged detention resulted from the Population and Immigration Authority insisting that he came, in fact, from Ethiopia.” He was then asked to provide an Eritrean birth certificate or prove his identity. Being unable to do so he was questioned by the Population and Immigration Authority. Ibrahim then “attempted to escape during the interview, and eventually admitted he was Ethiopian, rather than Eritrean, and was therefore immediately returned to custody.” [77]

It doesn't end there, however. In October of 2011 we learned from another Haaretz piece that false claims of Eritrean citizenship were so common by Ethiopian “infiltrators” that the Interior Ministry began to seek “documents issued by the Ethiopian consulate...to attest to the fact that asylum seekers in Israel who claim to be Eritreans [were] entitled to Ethiopian citizenship and [were] therefore not eligible for asylum.” Haaretz also “obtained information which shows that the Ethiopian consulate’s documents are routinely issued in almost every case in which the documentation is sought by the Israeli Interior Ministry.” In addition, the newspaper also “obtained minutes of the meeting from a committee that advises Interior Minister Eli Yishai on refugee matters showing that the Ethiopian consulate almost always issues the transit documents for asylum seekers at the Interior Ministry’s request, relying on Israeli authorities’ representation that the person in question is Ethiopian.” [78]

By 2012, 52% of Jewish Israelis (compared to 19% of Arab Israelis) viewed the so-called African infiltrators as a “cancer.” [79] And with more reports of asylum fraud, news of the migrants quickly caught the media’s attention, spurring further investigation by Israeli journalists. One reporter for Ynet decided to go undercover in a predominantly Eritrean and Sudanese neighborhood to shed light on the lives of the refugees. In his article he reports:

My cover story has not been finalized yet, but luckily I run into Jeremiah, who’s been in Israel for three years now. “What do I tell those who ask how I got into Israel?” I ask him. “Lie,” he says. “Don’t tell the whole story. The Israelis, and mostly the non-profit groups working with the infiltrators here, like to be lied to.”

“Say you were a soldier, and that if you return to Eritrea you’ll get a death sentence. Keep in mind that you must be consistent with your story. The bottom line is that everyone uses the story I’m telling you here, and this way they fool everybody,” he says. “Almost none of them arrived on foot from Egypt to Israel. None of us crossed any deserts...it’s all nonsense.” [80]

If Jeremiah is telling the truth, then refugees are regularly exploiting Eritrean identity. With merely the hope of raising their quality of life, who can blame them? It’s simply way too easy given the fact that, according to UN statistics, 90% of Eritrean refugees are eligible for refugee status. [81]

Over time, it became increasingly clear to Israeli officials that practically all the “infiltrators” were not refugees but rather “migrants.” As the Minister for Education, Mr. Gidon Sa’ar, announced, “we need to stop the flooding of this country with immigrants from Eritrea. They are not refugees, but rather labor



immigrants.” [82] The former head of the Population, Immigration and Borders Authority, Mí. Yaakov Ganot also acknowledged that “in our examinations, I would say that 99.9 percent of them are here for work. They’re not asylum seekers: they are not at any risk.” [83]

The abuse of the asylum system is not only limited to Israel. We see the same thing happening in the United Kingdom. In a 2004, UK comptroller a House of Common commissioned report entitled “Improving the Speed and Quality of Asylum Decisions.” The report went on to state that, “disputed nationality is a key issue in Ethiopian applications. The Directorate generally sought to remove failed applicants to Eritrea irrespective of whether the applicant had ever been there, and adjudicators often disagreed with this approach. The Directorate has taken steps to improve its country information and refusal letters.” [84] Then on June 16, 2009, the Daily Telegraph reported that former Miss Ethiopia beauty pageant winner, Jerusalem Mehari, was caught abusing the asylum system by taking on an Eritrean identity. She first “renounced her Ethiopian citizenship in 2007, a few days before her UK student visa expired, and claimed Eritrean nationality.” Her claim was that she “was a Jehovah’s Witness and there was a risk of her suffering persecution in Eritrea.” Sarabjit Singh of United Kingdom’s Home Office said that “the only reason for seeking and maintaining Eritrean nationality is to claim the right to remain in the UK...What the claimant is trying to do is nothing short of an abuse of the asylum system.”

In Toronto last year, a refugee by the name of Nighisti Semret was stabbed to death on her way home from work. She claimed to be of Eritrean origin and was granted asylum in Canada in 2010. According to the Toronto Star, she became a member of the local St. Michael’s Eritrean Orthodox Church and “while members of Toronto’s close-knit Eritrean community said

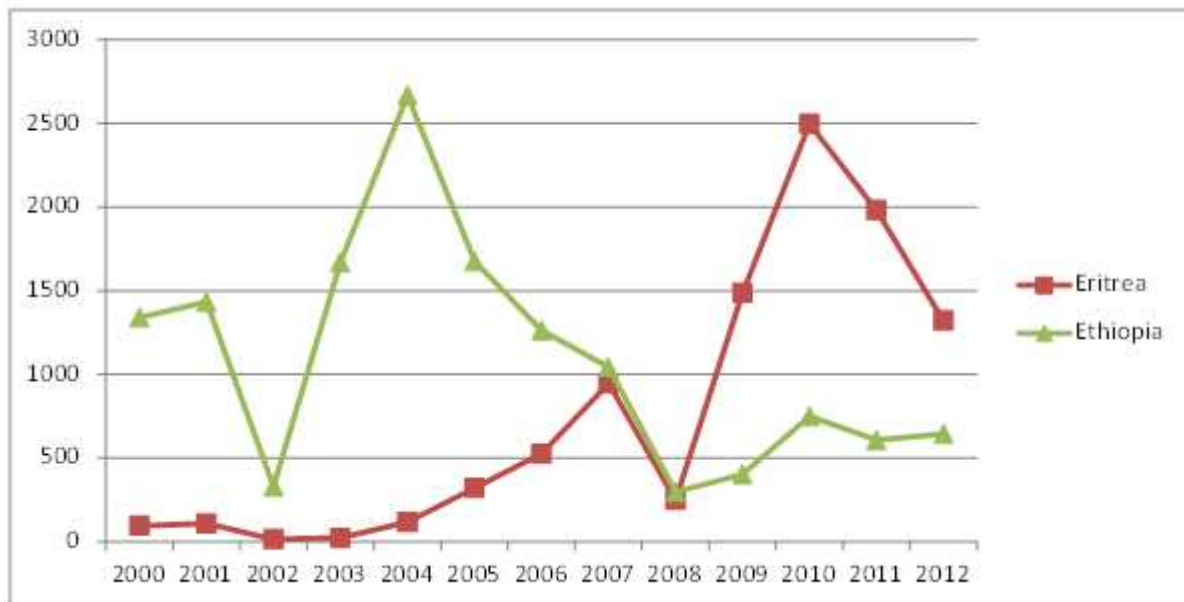
Semret was not well-known because she hadn't been in Canada long, a local Eritrean church offered to pay for her funeral with funds from the community.” Although the article admitted to not knowing why she sought asylum, they were quick to point out that Eritrea “is ruled by one of the most repressive regimes in the world.” [86] As later reported by Sam B of Natna blog (site down), she was later found to be an Ethiopian by the Eritrean community. [87] After learning of this information, the police notified local reporters who did not publish the new information but instead increased their attack on Eritrea. As Sam B notes, Joe Warmington of the Toronto Sun even poses that the Eritrean government may have had a motive to kill her. “Could that motive have stemmed from a scam from her former country where refugees are shaken down and threatened to pay a special tax back to their homeland or face retribution?” he asks. [88] In spite of full knowledge of her identity, the Eritrean community “did not interfere in the prayer or vigil held for her. They in fact fully supported it. As one community leader put it; ‘she has no one, Ethiopian or otherwise, she is our sister, too.’” [89] Sadly, stories like these don't make the headlines.

Asylum fraud under an Eritrean identity also happens regularly in the United States as well. According to an article published in the Oregonian on October 13, 2012, a group of Eritrean and African refugees were resettled in Threemile Canyon Farms in Oregon via the International Rescue Committee [90]. The article states that among the refugees is “Thierry Gasasu, an Eritrean.” Most Eritreans reading this are probably chuckling at this quote. Although there are an array of different ethnic groups in Eritrea, they know that Gasasu is not an Eritrean name. In fact, it is a well known Rwandan name. Honest error? Perhaps. The reality is that this same sort of error keeps happening again and again, often going unchecked by the media or their watchdogs. For instance, back in 2010, the New York

Times falsely claimed that an Ethiopian indicted on terror charges was of Eritrean origin. On March 10, 2010, however, Radio Sweden, reported that “Sabrina Schroff, the man’s lawyer in the United States, says that the Ethiopian native denies all the accusations. The New York Times identifies him as Eritrean, but the Swedish Foreign Minister holds that he is originally from Ethiopia.” [91] Despite the NYT’s error CNN was still calling him a “resident of Sweden originally from Eritrea” almost two entire years later. [92]

The above cases of asylum fraud and false claims of Eritrean identity cannot be taken lightly. Firstly, they only represent the cases of those who were caught. How about the countless others? As illustrated above, many of the false asylum-seekers cases are of Ethiopian origin, which is likely due to the shared cultural, linguistic, and physical features of the sisterly peoples. Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa, is 15 times more populous than Eritrea. It also has multiple active insurgencies and multiple reports of genocide in different parts of the country. In fact, post-Meles Zenawi Ethiopia, a ethno-federalist state with a quickly growing Muslim protest movement, [93] is among the top 15 states expected to disintegrate and become ungovernable in the next fifteen years, according to the “Global Trends 2030: Alternative Trends” published by the US National Intelligence Council. [94] Thus, how is it possible that Ethiopia comprises less asylum-seekers than Eritrea (43,400 from Eritrea vs. 42,500 from Ethiopia)? [95] As illustrated in the many cases above, the authorities of resettling nations are reporting of growing numbers of Ethiopians claiming asylum under an Eritrean identity, dating as far back as 2004. If most nations with the exception of the United States get their referrals from the UNHCR, why do no official UNHCR documents make no mention of this trend?

If we also compare the US resettlement data from the department of Health and Human Services website [96], we see that Eritrea has had progressively increasing resettlement numbers while Ethiopian resettlement numbers have waned (Fig. 1). The drop in FY 2002 is due to 9/11. From early 2007 to mid-2009, the US embassy stopped processing non-immigrant visa, which may account for the dip in US resettlement. [97] If that is in fact the case, then that suggests that the issuing of visas by the US Embassy in Eritrea has a significant effect on US resettlement. This is something that should be monitored closely. 2,032 are expected to be resettled in the US this year.



*Figure 1. Refugee Resettlement in the United States since FY 2000.*

## **Football Players**

By now, almost every Eritrean is aware of the repeated high-profile defections by the Eritrean national football players during matches in other African countries. In the case of Tanzania, 13 football players, who participated in the July 2011 CECAFA Kagame Cup, failed to show up for a flight back to

Asmara. They later reported to the Home Affairs Ministry asking for asylum but, according to the Tanzanian National Refugees Committee, “none of the applications met the criteria for refugee status.” [98] The UNHCR then intervened calling for their protection while arrangements could be made for their transfer to a third country. Ten months later, we learn from the Houston Chronicle that four of the players had already made it to Houston, three were due to arrive one month later, four were resettled in Boston, and two in Virginia. [99] How is it possible that every single one of the 13 players was able to arrive in America so quickly? According to the US State Department, only less than one percent of refugees worldwide are ever resettled in a third country, let alone America. [100] This case may come as a surprise to many Eritrean refugees around the world who have had to languish in refugees camps for years on end awaiting resettlement. The article then goes on to explain that “after their escape in Tanzania, where [the players] outran their handlers and met at a rendezvous spot before going to the US Embassy to seek protection. They were certified as refugees by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and spent months in Romania before being approved for placement in the U.S.” The fact that they planned, in advance, to go to the US Embassy is quite telling of the current US Administration’s role in promoting youth migration. High profile asylums of Eritrean sports figures are designed to send a message to the Eritrean football-loving youth that loudly declares, “if you leave your country, then USA has your back.”

And make no mistake about it: the US knows the cultural significance football to Eritreans. Following the first defection of 4 football players in Kenya, US ambassador McMullen acknowledged in a 2010 diplomatic cable under the derisive subheading “SOCCER TEAM 1 – REGIME 0,” that “Eritreans are mad about soccer” and that the Kenyan defections “will be

stunning news for the Eritrean population.” [101] This first round of defections, however, did not take place through the US Embassy. They were discovered to be hiding in a refugee camp under the protection of UNHCR and were granted automatic group asylum in Australia eight months later. [102] Apparently, their case takes priority over the millions of Somalians sitting in the same Kenyan refugee camps, fleeing civil war, drought, and religious persecution. Sensational headlines from the Associated Press, re-printed by ESPN and Sports Illustrated read, “Official: Players say death awaits them in Eritrea.” [103] Why does the AP take the asylum-seekers words at face value when they clearly have a vested interest in inflating their story for the purpose of resettlement? To this day, we have yet to see any evidence of deportees being executed by Eritrean authorities; only the claims of asylum-seekers.

It should also be mentioned that in the case of the Tanzanian defection, the players were transported via emergency evacuation from Dar es Salaam to a holding facility in Romania. Do all Eritrean refugees get this kind of treatment? Upon further inspection, we learn that this facility is the Evacuation Transit Center that was built in 2008 (officially, 2009) “by the Romanian government, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to provide a temporary haven for refugees in urgent need of evacuation from their first asylum countries due to life-threatening conditions...it received its first group of refugees, 40 Eritreans, last November and all have been found resettlement homes.” [104] Since then, there have reports of the transportation of large groups of Eritreans. In one case, 30 Eritreans were transported from Tunisia. [105]. This is important because it signifies a growing trend of expedited large group evacuations of Eritreans from atypical locations. The asylum-seekers no longer have to be at a sub-Saharan refugee camp to await processing. They can be



in a US Embassy, like the Tanzanian players, or perhaps in the Middle East under temporary protection status. In the words of the US State Department's "Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2012":

And according to the Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, we anticipate Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean and other African refugees to be processed in Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. We will also process individuals who were forced to leave Libya as a result of the conflict there, some of whom will be interviewed at the UNHCR Evacuation Transit Center in Romania. We project as many as 1,300 individuals will be referred to the USRAP from the Tunisia/Libya border, and as many as 500 individuals will be referred to the USRAP from the Egypt/Libya border, during calendar year 2011. [[106](#)]

How many of those 500 were Eritreans? We don't for sure. However, we do know that after 3 years of operations, the facility has housed 600 refugees, which, according to the UNHCR, includes "Eritreans, Sudanese, Palestinians, Ethiopians, Sri Lankans, Iraqis and Nigerians." [[107](#)] Of that list, only Iraqis rank higher for US resettlement, according to the Proposed Refugee Admission report for FY 2013. That should tell us something.

Thus, it is clear that Eritreans are deliberately being resettled in third countries with the complicity of the international media. Eritrea maintains that it is a victim of the policies of external entities while the US and various human rights groups point the finger at the lack of human rights in Eritrea. Some groups have conducted independent studies and have come to different conclusions in regards to the causes of migration out of Eritrea. According to conclusions of a 2009 study conducted by the

Global Forum on Migration and Development, in cooperation with the European Commission and the Eritrean Government:

Migration is not a phenomenon that happens only in Eritrea. It is a global issue that needs global collaboration for a viable solution acceptable to all parties involved. Eritrea is a poor country and therefore this circumstance serves as a main factor for migration. To make migration a positive contributing force to development, Eritrean migration policy needs to be more flexible and up-to-date. The benefits of migration accrue in terms of transfer of money (remittances), technology and know-how. Important as they are, remittances don't require the physical movement of the migrants to the country.

To achieve all these, there is a need for planned and dynamic handling of the benefits of migration. This has to be done without compromising the rights and economic status of citizens by promoting openness and freedom of movement but at the same time not compromising the national interest. Therefore, the policy has to aim to address the manpower needs of the country emphasizing creation of jobs (following labour intensive technology in production) and In-country Human Resource Development Schemes as well as encouraging remittance and technology transfer. [[108](#)]

They don't blame the Eritrean government for human trafficking, child labor, or human rights abuses. It does suggest "promoting openness and freedom of movement but at the same time not compromising the national interest." Unfortunately, these conclusions fell on the deaf ears of the international media as they do not fit the "human rights agenda."

**The "Human Rights Agenda"**

So what does all this human trafficking business mean anyway? If we consider the above and inspect some of the recent developments in regards to human rights of Eritreans, we begin to see some trends. Most notably, it seems like the international mainstream media is trying to connect human trafficking of Eritreans to “human rights abuses” by the Eritrean government—the “human rights agenda.” The press often sites the usual suspects: US State Department human rights and TIP reports, US-funded NGO’s, “Eritrean” opposition websites and members, SEMG reports, and biased “experts”/“journalists” on Eritrea. In each case, the excuse for people leaving Eritrea is always the same: human rights abuses. Not all the other possible causes mentioned above. No one ever considers the words of independent analysts or Eritrean officials. Most importantly, they ignore the words of the people living in Eritrea with the excuse often being that Eritreans are too scared to speak up. In saying so, they are unknowingly calling the Eritrean people cowards, which is an insult considering what Eritreans have gone through to achieve the liberation of their nation. In contrast, however, they seem to have an incredible fondness for the words of Eritreans that leave their nations—i.e. asylum-seekers. Asylum seekers—whose hopes of resettlement rely on stories of persecution—make up practically the entire basis of the reports and articles by HRW, AI, SEMG, Dan Connell, and many others who seek regime change in Eritrea. Is it any surprise then that the foundation of their entire “human rights abuse” argument relies on asylum-seekers? Is it any surprise then that they fight tooth and nail to “protect” them? Is it any surprise then that they are promoting youth migration, politicizing it, and then calling it regime sponsored “human trafficking?” No surprise at all.

What is a surprise, on the other hand, is the number of times that the UNHCR publishes or references the work of petty anti-

Eritrean websites, organizations, and individuals who take the “human rights” stance. It should be made clear that these entities are not only “anti-regime,” as some like to pose, but rather outright anti-Eritrean since they all have (1) called for sanctions against Eritrea; (2) practically ignored or downplayed the ever-present existential threats against Eritrea; and (3) consistently repeat the same line used by the late Meles Zenawi that “we like the Eritrean people, we just want to get rid of their government.” With that said, let us review how many times each of these anti-Eritrean elements has been published or referenced by UNHCR:

**Human Rights Concern, Eritrea (Elsa Chyrum):** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)

**Assenna.com:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)

**Asmarino.com:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#), [11](#), [12](#), [13](#), [14](#), [15](#), [16](#), [17](#), [18](#), [19](#), [20](#), [21](#), [22](#), [23](#)

**Gedab News:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)

**Nharnet.com:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#)

**Awate.com:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#), [11](#), [12](#), [13](#), [14](#), [15](#), [16](#), [17](#), [18](#), [19](#), [20](#), [21](#), [22](#), [23](#), [24](#), [25](#), [26](#), [27](#), [28](#), [29](#), [30](#), [31](#), [32](#), [33](#), [34](#), [35](#), [36](#), [37](#), [38](#), [39](#), [40](#), [41](#), [42](#), [43](#), [44](#), [45](#), [46](#), [47](#), [48](#), [49](#), [50](#), [51](#), [52](#), [53](#), [54](#), [55](#)

**Dan Connell:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#)

**Léonard Vincent:** [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

Perhaps this will help Eritreans learn how to prioritize their enemies. The same Awate.com that spread the rumor that the Eritrean president was likely dead is being published or cited by UNCHR documents almost 55 times. [[109](#), [110](#)] UNHCR

also cites the work of the same Léonard Vincent of Reporter Without Borders (RSF), who openly admitted in [his book](#) that he illegally smuggled an Eritrean Ministry of Information employee through the assistance of RSF personnel and the French Foreign Office. You simply can't make this stuff up. It should be noted that for some of the documents, the UNHCR website has a disclaimer that reads, "This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States." If that's the case then why publish it in the first place while not publishing material from non-US funded independent groups or Shabait.com, the Eritrean Ministry of Information website, in response to human rights allegations? Why are they so one-sided?

In light of the clear bias for anti-Eritrean entities, let us put things in perspective. Imagine you're a young bright-eyed UNHCR intern, fresh out of Harvard, whose dream is to one day work for Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or some other non-profit organization that the media says helps the disparaged people of the world. At orientation, your boss assigns you to work at a refugee camp in East Sudan next month and suggests that you read up on the situation in Eritrea. Like a good intern, you log into the UNHCR website and access [RefWorld](#), the supposed "Leader in Refugee Decision Support." You read through countless documents on Eritrea, meticulous in your reading and checking up on all citations. You also check out the US State Department-funded COR website for some extra background on Eritrean refugees in Kassala. After a while, you start to think, "surely it can't be that bad," so you check out some Eritrean websites for Eritreans' personal views of their country. You remember all

the websites listed in the citations of the UNHCR website so you check them out. After reading all the latest articles from Awate.com, Asmarino.com, Assenna.com, and their ilk, you come to the heart-crushing conclusion that Eritrea must be the most horrible place on Earth. All your dream organizations, like HRW, AI, RSF, and many others have nothing positive to say about life in Eritrea. You come to see the Eritrean government as an enemy of the Eritrean people that uses the “CIA” argument as a scapegoat for its failures—essentially what the media tells you. Although, you may have some doubts when talking to average Eritreans at the local community center, who often speak wonders of the Eritrean government and tell you about the FBI harassing them for supporting the Eritrean government, you have trouble accepting the distant notion that there is some crazy conspiracy to destroy Eritrea. Surely, you’re not crazy! You accept that it’s just another African tragedy. Hopeless. Now all you want is to be part of some great cause—like your hero Rachel Corrie, perhaps. As a result, you join in on the “human rights agenda” against the Eritrean government.

What we are seeing now is the “human rights agenda” on full display. Following the fabricated coup in January and the failed attempt to turn it into a campaign, [111] we see people like Dan Connell and Elsa Chyrum going around the world giving talks on human trafficking in Eritrea [112]. We see people like Meron Estifanos and the so-called “International Commission on Eritrean Refugees” writing letters to the UN Secretary General, urging him to launch an investigation into what is causing the human trafficking of Eritreans. [113] In each of these instances, these individuals and groups have been pointing the finger at the Eritrean government and we are now seeing increased efforts to see actions taken against Eritrea for alleged human rights abuses.



At its 21st session on September 27, 2012, the Human Rights Council considered the situation of human rights in Eritrea under the terms of the confidential complaint procedure (1503 procedure). By this method human rights groups and victims of human rights abuses file confidential complaints to the HRC. However, according to resolution 21/1 on Eritrea, the HRC ultimately decided to switch to the public procedure (1235 procedure) under which it can hold an annual public debate about the alleged gross violations of human rights in question. [114] This essentially represents an escalation of the case. If no change is noted in regards to the human rights situation in Eritrea, the HRC can have the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC ) pass a resolution condemning Eritrea. According to the Human Rights Education Association, this would serve as public condemnation that “tarnishes the reputation of the leaders in the state in question and discredits their legitimacy as political elites.” [115] Resolution 21/1 also called for a “Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea” to investigate the complaints and report back to the HRC during the twenty-third session in June 2013.

On September 28 2012, Ms. Beedwantee Keetharuth, a lawyer from Mauritius who worked for Amnesty International’s African Regional office in Uganda and is touted to have “extensive experience in monitoring and documenting human rights violations across Africa,” was appointed as “UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea” (Fig. 2). According to the HRC’s meeting minutes:

Eritrea noted the decision of the Council to refer the situation in Eritrea to the public and reminded the Council to abide by the principles of neutrality and impartiality. The Council had clearly violated the provisions prohibiting politicised action and had not justified its motion to disregard those basic principles and criteria of

admissibility. Eritrea therefore rejected the decision of the Council because it was politically motivated and did not accept the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea. [116]

Following her appointment, there was no mention in the UN press release or any media reports about Eritrea's rejection of her appointment [117]. Without that needed context for the reader, they instead say that "she had requested meetings with the country's diplomats" but unfortunately, "the meetings had yet to take place." [118] Once again, Eritrea is made to appear uncooperative because Eritrea's voice is silenced. It should come as no surprise if her future report says "I had trouble getting a hold of Eritrean officials."



*Figure 2. UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea, Beedwantee Keetharuth (Sudan Tribune)*

Upon further investigation we learn that Elsa Chyrum, the Director of [Human Rights Concern, Eritrea](#), was key in getting Ms. Keetharuth appointed. According to the "Eritrean" opposition website Asmarino.com:

Elizabeth (Elsa) Chyrum has been instrumental in bringing about the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to Eritrea; four years' work has culminated in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) appointing Ms. Beedwantee Keetharuth as Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea.

Mrs. Chyrum has been advocating and lobbying at the HRC for recognition of the severe human rights crisis in Eritrea since September 2008. She is passionate about justice for Eritrea, and has doggedly campaigned for the appalling human rights record of Eritrea to come to the fore of the international agenda. She has done this, and more, largely by funding herself and occasional contributions for travel and other expenses from well-wishers and sisterly organizations. [[119](#)]

Acting in concert with other self-proclaimed African human rights activists, Ms. Elsa sent multiple letters curiously addressed to "African Heads of State" [[120](#), [121](#)] urging those states with the "highest standards of human rights" to apply for the 5 vacancies in the African Group of the HRC. Exactly which benevolent African leaders did she send them to? We may never know for sure but what we do know is that Ethiopia, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Sierra Leone were all elected to the African Group last November. Add in Uganda (in office until December 2013) and we have a dangerous anti-Eritrean triumvirate of IGAD members that will decide on Ms. Keetharuth's report in June 2013. [[122](#)] Ethiopia was voted in despite a letter of opposition from 18 AU nations. [[123](#)]

In addition, we can't ignore the glaring fact that the US was also elected into the HRC last year. [[124](#)] During the Bush Administration's term in office, the US opted to sit out in protest of the HRC's excessive focus on the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. [125] In 2009, however, Obama decided to change directions and the nation was voted in. Now that the US has been re-elected and is in the company of its client states in IGAD, the US-driven, anti-Eritrean campaign is expected to continue with an East African face. Last year, Nigeria, Djibouti and Somalia led [126] the HRC to create a Special Rapporteur on Eritrea with US co-sponsorship [127] and we can pretty much expect the same moving forward. It's also critical to note that the Kampala-based East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) was granted "special consultative status" with the ECOSOC earlier that year. [128] What does that mean exactly? The EHAHRDP, an umbrella human rights organization with a nightmarish acronym, has the power to make recommendations to the HRC and push for resolutions that promote its agenda. Elsa Chyrum's Human Rights Concern Eritrea is part of that network and as the EHAHRDP website states, ECOSOC status will allow its "network members to deepen their engagement at the UN Level." [129] If history is any indication, her influence will serve as a destructive force against the Eritrean people. Back in 2011, an article on the HCRE website declared that "as we celebrate International Human Rights Day, we welcome the Security Council Sanctions on Eritrea as a means of bringing to light some of the human rights abuses being perpetrated every day on Eritreans." [130] Anyone who calls for sanctions on a nation is an enemy of that nation. There has never been an example in history where UN sanctions have benefitted the people of a nation. How, then, can one be Eritrean or a friend of Eritrea and wish for sanctions on Eritrea?

## **The Global Human Rights Regime**

Intervention in the name of human rights is the emerging tool of imperialism and we have seen a dramatic increase in targeted actions towards sovereign nations—particularly African

nations—by the [Global Human Rights Regime](#) (GHRR; not my term). Prior to 1990, there were only two UN sanctions: Rhodesia in 1966 and South Africa in 1977. Both failed to accomplish their stated goals. The 1990's saw an explosion of UN sanctions, predominantly used against African nations. Despite the use of “panels of experts” and “monitoring groups” none of them worked. After a series of studies, the UN then decided to transition into using “targeted” sanctions in the 2000's. Again, those didn't work either. Eritrea, sanctioned in 2009, is a testament to this reality. In fact, the sanctions only strengthened the Eritrean people's support of their government, as was evidenced by the international Hizbawi Mekhete campaigns (“popular resistance”), in which citizens around the world raised more money in support of their government, [\[131\]](#) and the massive, worldwide anti-UN demonstrations held on February 22, 2010. [\[132\]](#) In the spirit of resistance, Eritreans also initiated the [E-SMART](#) campaign (“Eritrean Sanctions Must be Annulled and Repealed Today”), which led to the creation of a website that is now the authoritative internet resource for understanding the facts and myths regarding the UN sanctions on Eritrea.

The Human Rights Council is also a new creation that came into existence in 2006 in order to promote the agenda of the GHRR. The HRC adopted special complaint procedures and special rapporteurs were given mandates to investigate alleged abuses. The US initially tried to appear as though it didn't dominate the institution by taking a back seat and supporting it monetarily during its early years. China, Cuba, and other nations quickly took advantage by employing “bloc voting” to protect themselves from actions against their countries. Thus, the US position changed under Obama in 2009 as the country was elected into the HRC and quickly used its influence in the institution to invoke Responsibility-to-Protect (R2P) against

Libya in 2011. The actions of the HRC were coordinated with those of the UNSC. Damaging human rights reports by Human Rights Watch, which is a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, were used to further justify intervention in Libya. The International Criminal Court, which was established in 2002 and has issued 21 arrest warrants (all Africans!), issued an arrest warrant for Muammer al-Gaddafi. In a destructive symphony of the UNSC, HRC, ICC, HRW, and other international institutions, an African nation was brought to its knees. The well oiled GHRR acted in full force and wiped the Libyan Jamahiriya off the planet in almost the blink of an eye. The odd thing, is that there seems to be an overwhelming propensity for the GHRR to take actions against African nations relative to others nations of the world. As an African nation, Eritrea is now becoming the increasing subject of their focus.

US troops are now slated to enter 35 African countries this year. [\[133\]](#) As Pepe Escobar wrote in a 2011 article for Al Jazeera, “Africom has some sort of military “partnership”–bilateral agreements–with most of Africa’s 53 countries” but “the exceptions: Ivory Coast, Sudan, Eritrea and Libya. Ivory Coast is now in the bag. So is South Sudan. Libya may be next. The only ones left to be incorporated to Africom will be Eritrea and Zimbabwe.” Thus, Eritreans must be ready for any eventuality as the external forces that seek regime change in Eritrea–for simply not following their rules or refusing to kneel down–are left with no choice but to pull the human rights card. The “terrorism” card didn’t work. The fabricated “coup” card didn’t work. They are now desperate for something–anything–as was seen by the arson of multiple Swedish community centers [\[134\]](#). Their desperation for an excuse makes them dangerous. “Human trafficking” just might be their excuse. Will Eritreans allow the “human rights” card to destroy Eritrea? That answer lies solely in the hands of Eritreans.



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