

UNOFFICIAL PROTOCOL
Knesset Foreign Workers Committee
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**Knesset Discussion of Eritrea with
Eritrea's Ambassador to Israel Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas**

MK Nitzan Horowitz, Committee Chairperson- Opening Remarks

Today we will discuss these main issues:

- 1) Temporary Group Protection to Eritreans: the reasons behind it, the time period for this protection, and the procedures to be implemented once the protection ends
- 2) Migration from Eritrea or back to Eritrea (monitoring of those on the move in terms of their numbers and locations)
- 3) Human rights in Eritrea and the country's overall situation
- 4) Connections between Eritreans in Israel and Eritreans in Eritrea (i.e. money transfers)

Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas (Eritrean Ambassador to Israel)- Opening Remarks

The Ambassador first made it clear that he was only here to brief the government and not to address questions or concerns by any of the NGOs present. He accepted that they were present for the discussion, but given that this was his first time at the Knesset to give a talk, he wouldn't spend any time dealing with third party organizations. His caution came from his inexperience as a member to a Knesset discussion, he said, and not because he wasn't ready to confront the NGOs - he could, but he would do so another day. When Chairperson Horowitz interrupted to tell him that it was procedure in an open discussion for all parties, including NGOs, to have a say, the Ambassador retaliated that he was shocked NGOs were even in the room ("Why are they here for my first briefing?"). Horowitz mentioned it might be wise to hear what NGO representatives had to say and that both parties might find they actually agreed on certain issues. However, the Ambassador replied that all NGOs were a problem when it came to the migration issue at hand, and that with all due respect to the Knesset's procedures, he was only here to give a briefing, and refused to deal with them. The migration issue at hand, he claimed, had many dimensions: why are there so many Eritreans in Israel? What were they motivated by? What have they suffered? How did they even leave? (*and "Why?", as interjected by MK Regev*).

The Ambassador explained that Eritrea had fought for its liberation and its independence without any foreign assistance, relying entirely on its own vigilance. Thirteen countries still fail to recognize Eritrea as an independent state, showing that there still remain challenges to Eritrea in its search for sovereignty. Other challenges come in the shape of Eritrea's unpopular isolationist ideology. Eritrea has never allowed for foreign intervention on its territory, and has never given in to foreign pressure. This has caused dislike amongst foreign countries, who call Eritrea a "bad example of a good example". Eritrea's desired autarky is perceived as self-destructive when the government makes decisions such as rejecting international food aid. However, this decision was based on the observation that international food aid crippled South African societies. The international community, in response to Eritrea's lack of compliance to their agenda, attempts to block the Eritrean economy, blackmailing its people into submission and portraying it to the world as a rough, undemocratic country.

(The Ambassador was interrupted here as the democratic nature of Eritrea was questioned, a Knesset member asking when was the last time the country held elections). Democracy, the Ambassador retorted, was a process, and not a given to be instantly enforced. Neighboring African countries that tried to set up a democracy too fast and hold elections right away had found that the situation resulted in bloodshed. Eritrea would not make the same mistake - they had their own recipe. The people of Eritrea would first

build up their nation from its war-torn state of devastation. After that, the subject of elections could be considered. For now, the economy was the priority.

(Chairperson Horowitz interrupted here to ask that the focus be placed on the issue of refugees - and, MK Katz added, on whether or not they could return to Eritrea). The Ambassador claimed that he loved Eritrea and its people very much. Like Israel, he mourned the migration phenomenon and saw it as a very big problem. However, he said, Israel is the party that made matters worse by granting, from 2006-2008, 6 month work permits to migrants. This was a huge mistake as it created a pull factor. The Ambassador claimed he had predicted this *(a statement verified by MK Regev, who clarified that he was indeed in office during the events he describes)*. He had complained when the number of migrating Eritreans was small, and the problem could still be solved amicably. However, now, his worst prediction had come true. Eritreans would now travel through Sudan and Sinai to get their work permit, finding themselves subject to “manipulation” (ie inhumane treatment). Migrants from other African countries would claim to be Eritrean just so they could get their own work permit. The Ambassador mentioned that his office had been willing to co-operate with Israel on this issue for years, and that the Eritrean government had assured since 2008 that Eritreans who returned home would be safe. Only draft evaders would be punished as per domestic law on sanctions against evading national service. To prove his point, the Ambassador pulled out a copy of the *Haaretz* dated 25 March 2008 where he was quoted as saying, about other African migrants, “they know the Eritreans automatically receive a six-month visa, so they pretend to be Eritrean”. The article also quotes him as saying “the fact that [Israel] issues six month visas encourages people to come here”. Those who return “won’t be hurt [...] Army deserters will be treated in accordance with the law and drafted”. The article mentions the Ambassador’s letter of protest on the issue, to which he hadn’t yet received a response from Israel.

**Note by the Transcriber: It may be worth mentioning here that this same article also mentions that the reason for the visas being distributed was that “The Israeli embassy in Asmara recently sent a report to Jerusalem indicating that Eritreans who were returned to their homeland ‘will be placed in rows and shot or thrown into torture chambers’. Other articles on this same issue were published in the Haaretz that very same day, entitled “Refugees say returning home means certain death”¹ and “Torture and Prison Await”.*

The Ambassador continued his speech by saying that many asylum seekers claiming to be Eritrean were not actually from Eritrea. When MK Katz then asked “So we don’t have 45,000 Eritreans?”, the Ambassador responded that this was an exaggeration.

As for the UN’s position on Eritrea (a topic brought up by Chairperson Horowitz), the Ambassador blamed the demonization of Eritrea by the international community. He claimed that if he were to take all of the UN resolutions against Israel and compile them, he could also point his finger at Israel and call the country “hell on earth”. However, he wouldn’t do such a thing, because you can’t take UN statements at face value. Chairperson Horowitz interjected that Israel had never been deemed unsafe for its own nationals - the UN’s position that Eritreans were unsafe if forcibly returned was not an invention, but an international stance. The Ambassador responded that this was also due to Eritrea’s unpopularity amongst the international community. The latter was only cutting and pasting from various opposition sources to make Eritrea look bad, despite no one having given them the mandate to do so.

Eritrea’s current position, he went on, concerning returning nationals, was that they wouldn’t accept forced repatriation. Only those who had returned voluntarily would be welcomed. When MK Katz enquired about the possibility of a monetary incentive to promote voluntary returns, the Ambassador

¹ Lee, Vered. “Refugees say returning home means certain death”. *Haaretz*. 25-March-2008.
<<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/refugees-say-returning-home-means-certain-death-1.242459>>

responded that this did not show proper respect to human beings. If Eritreans wanted or still want to leave Eritrea, it is their choice. However, wherever they go, the Eritrean government demands that they be treated in a humane manner. If they want to come home, they may do so, as the Ambassador claimed hundreds had already done this year. When Chairperson Horowitz asked if Eritrean government then issued passports to its nationals to allow for their entry and exit, the Ambassador specified that he gave them travel documents. Eritreans may do whatever they want, it is their decision.

MK Shlomo Mola

MK Mola wished to talk about Eritreans being able to go home safely and a possible co-operation between Israel and Eritrea on this issue. He knows, like the Ambassador, that not all those in Israel claiming to be Eritrean were actually from Eritrea. However, for those who were, it was necessary to find a way to return these people home under humane conditions. After all, he said, Israel is not a country for refugees. Obviously, these people were welcomed to Israel, assisted by NGOs in their day to day lives, provided with food, healthcare, etc. This is normal treatment to be expected in Israel; however, now is the time for them to return home. The Israeli government kindly asks of the Ambassador to work and co-operate with them in returning Eritrean citizens to Eritrea. MK Mola also stated that those convened were not here to talk about the democratic nature of Eritrea, or when it was to hold elections, or question its current domestic situation... the point of the discussion was solely to create a partnership between both governments through which Eritreans could be distinguished from non-Eritreans and returned home.

Avi Granot (MoFA)

Avi Granot first established that Israel was struggling to understand Eritrea as a country. Although Israel has had relations with Eritrea since the latter's independence, and this relation has often been very strategic, Israel does not necessarily agree with all of Eritrea's policies. Their choice of isolationism is entirely up to them - however, that is not something desirable in a bilateral relationship. Full diplomatic relations with Israel will entail an open correspondence and co-operation from both parties. The Ambassador's position that no one would be returned to Eritrea unless they volunteered wouldn't solve anything; in fact, it probably meant 99% of Eritreans would remain in Israel. Furthermore, Eritrea does respect international standards and humanitarian law, meaning Eritrea's reputed poor human rights record would be problematic in their relations. In short, the situation at hand had resulted in a dilemma as Israel was torn between its responsibility towards the people (ensuring their human rights are respected and sanctioning Eritrea) and its responsibility towards the state (maintaining good relations with Eritrea). There was currently no solution to this dilemma. Third state resettlement had been considered, but given Africa's current overwhelming burden of 20 million refugees and asylum seekers (including 200,000 Eritreans in Ethiopia alone), this was not possible.

MK Yaakov Katz

MK Yaakov Katz first outlined what was going to happen in regards to the migration phenomenon in the next couple of months. Israel was currently building a fence and fining business owners employing foreign migrants (including Eritreans). Soon, these people would be sent to "open cities" in which they will be provided with food, shelter, healthcare, but no employment of any kind. MK Katz then enquired as to whether or not such measures would increase voluntary returns to Eritrea, and if so, what would be the conditions for returnees in Eritrea? Would they be welcomed? Arrested? Held accountable for their leave? Would they be able to keep the money that often comes with signing a voluntary return? Could they buy a house with it? What about their possessions? ... *(Ambassador mentioned that he had taken note of these questions and would answer them later)*

Shmulik Bachor (Member of National Security Council in PMO)

He expressed his desire to know, without asking any provocative questions, why people in Eritrea chose to escape? What was the Ambassador's answer to the question? Why would people in a country clearly working so hard on building itself back up chose to give up and cross the border?

MK Dov Khenin

MK Khenin was concerned by the large community of Eritreans currently in Israel. The situation, as all those present knew, was very complex, and connected to a lot of social issues. Though there were problems prior to the arrival of African migrants, the influx of thousands of people into poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods had only made matters worse. The migrants lived in horrible conditions, often sleeping outside in the street or on park benches. MK Khenin had been curious as to why they had been willing to travel so far, go through so much, leaving their family and home behind, and come here. When he had gone around and asked the migrants, specifically Eritreans, they had given very grave arguments about the situation in their home country. Their arguments were often backed by international findings. In other words, the situation truly is so bad that people are allowed to run for their lives and seek asylum. MK Khenin did not doubt that the Ambassador would be willing to give the Knesset the official government position on this issue, but he now found it had to take seriously. He compared the situation to having the North Korean government or Syrian Ambassador equally claim that returning nationals would be safe.

Israel was aware that there were problems in Eritrea, and couldn't just ignore the domestic situation by walking away eyes shut. It would take a lot of convincing and a lot of hard evidence for the Eritrean government to prove that returning nationals would be safe. If the Ambassador wished to co-operate, he would have to persuade everyone in the room, all of his own people as well and the international community that all returning Eritrean nationals would be treated in a humane and secure manner. If such persuasion could not be accomplished, then the Eritrean government would continue to be in a bad situation.

Ambassador Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas

The Ambassador first wished to establish that his government was not one who confiscated possessions or money from its citizens – and this includes as MK Katz proposed, any potential money accompanying voluntary returns (around \$5000). The Ambassador also confirmed that this was an exorbitant amount when compared to the Eritrean minimum wage. The Ambassador was not here to discuss money or human rights in Eritrea. He himself had fought for the liberation of his country - no one could tell him anything about human rights. If people wanted to properly judge the situation, they should come to Eritrea and see for themselves. Comparisons to North Korea were insulting. MK Katz then asked if a delegation could be sent to Eritrea, to which the Ambassador replied “Of course”. He warned that Eritrea was not heaven - no place could be after years of civil war. The economy was very poor, but progress was being made. The country's policy was one of investment as opposed to consumption, to the benefit of future generations. The Ambassador compared this process to the Kibbutz communities that initially developed in Israel. Ancestors of those in the room today had built up the modern Israeli economy in the same way Eritrea was building up its own future – building entails sacrifice. If Israel really wanted to assist Eritrea, it would invest in it, not condemn its principles and policies. Eritrea couldn't afford to spend lots of money all the time if it wanted to ensure the well-being of its future generations. The country itself wasn't given to the Eritrean people as a gift, but was fought for and paid for heavily. It is totally understandable for Eritreans now to want to save up as much of their resources as they could. No judgment could be made on these current policies unless people actually came and observed them in action. The Eritrean

government, the Ambassador claimed, has been through a lot, and has the right to make its own decisions. It is going through the same economic stages as Israel, and has the right to refuse foreign assistance.

Dr. Irit Beck

Dr. Beck agreed with the Ambassador that Eritrea started out as a war-torn country devastated by years of civil conflict and she stated that Eritrea was the hope of Africa, a country that was to be a modern, democratic nation. However, 20 years later, this project has entirely collapsed. Eritrea is today one of the worst dictatorships in the world. Even in the African context, it is unique in its oppressive and repressive regime. It was ranked to worst country for freedom of expression (even beating North Korea). The Ambassador believes that there is an international conspiracy against his country - Dr. Beck, on the other hand, believes the world is treating Eritrea too softly. This lack of decisiveness is partially due to Eritrea's geographically strategic position, leading to international double standards. When Chairperson Horowitz interrupted Dr. Beck to demand, on behalf of the Ambassador, if there were any facts to back up her statements, she answered positively. As a researcher, she claimed, she has access to good information from international reports, and one on one conversations with various individuals. All of her data is based on relevant sources.

Ambassador Tesfamariam Tekeste Debbas

The Ambassador retaliated that Dr. Beck exemplified the problems of academia - all she had done was read from biased sources without actually going to Eritrea. Again, collecting UN Resolutions and Reports against a country would immediately demonize them, Israel included. However, that is not a trap the Ambassador would fall into - he chooses to read *beyond* what is written. Eritrea is being blatantly demonized despite no one knowing anything about it. The Ambassador even offered to provide information about all the schools, hospitals and roads being built, which is something he noted was never talked about in the media. The regime in his country was based - after being asked this by MK Katz - on social justice. It was far from being 100% perfect, and there were many obstacles in the way. However, Eritrea was headed in the right direction. The Ambassador also reassured MK Katz that the money given to volunteer returnees would not be taken by the Eritrean government, and just because newspapers have claimed so in the past does not mean it is true. Even in Israel, the Ambassador claimed, the press could not be trusted; only government officials could give accurate reports on various issues. Newspapers would and will always remain biased.

When Chairperson Horowitz then asked whether there was actually any interest in Eritreans remaining in Israel as the money they sent home could be taxed by the Eritrean government. The Ambassador replied that he never made anyone come to his office to do give him money. He encouraged people to send money back home to support their families, and anyone who wishes to do so is welcome to drop by his office. The only regulation Eritrea has that pertains to this situation is the "recovery tax", which charges Eritreans abroad for using services in Eritrea itself. The Ambassador said the diaspora was willing to pay this tax and it was never forcibly imposed upon them. The tax contributes to the Eritrean national budget. The Ambassador then compared this to Israel who also collects money from Jewish people abroad, and claimed they were being hypocritical on questioning Eritrea about its donations.

Yonatan Gher, Director, Amnesty International Israel

Yonatan first mentioned that everything the Ambassador was saying he was obligated to say by the Eritrean government, and that any deviation from it could result in the man's arrest and detention (as was the case for the Eritrean Ambassador to China, Ermias Debessai, now a political prisoner). Yonatan then continued to summarize Eritrea's rights record, discussing arrests, detention, tortures and executions that

could arise for religious or ethnic reasons, the country's indefinite military service and various forms of state-legalized slavery - including sexual exploitation.

Chairperson Horowitz interrupted to ask where all of this data came from and if the references were reliable. Yonatan responded that he had three pages of references to reports made by the UN, Amnesty International itself, the US State Department. The Ambassador stated that these allegations had been made before, but that there had never been any hard evidence - which Yonatan then claimed he did have. The Ambassador continued to defend himself by saying Yonatan had never been to Eritrea. When asked if he was allowed to come, the Ambassador responded yes, but with a clear, transparent agenda. When asked if Yonatan would be allowed to leave, he did not answer but declared that these questions were insulting.

In response to the allegations Yonatan mentioned were made against Eritrea for supporting terrorism (notably terrorist group Al-Shabaab), the Ambassador said that such support was non-existent. Eritreans, he went on, had been victims to terrorism themselves. Eritrea was just being used as a scapegoat for a failed policy in Somalia. There was no evidence to be found for any violence in Eritrea aside from that instigated by the British colony. All Eritreans have melted into a pot due to a common enemy during the fight for independence. In 5 or 10 years, Eritrea will be the most democratic country. When Yonatan mentioned that Eritrean support for Al-Shabaab was evidenced by the UN, the Ambassador asked that the subject be changed. Avi Granot (MoFA) also interrupted to mention that links between Eritrea and terrorist groups dated back from 2008, and there had been no new information since. The last report for the UNSC presented last week actually demands that the latter lessen sanctions on Eritrea due to no connection having been found between the country's government and Al-Shabaab. Chairperson Horowitz put an end to the debate by demanding that Yonatan's documents with references be given to him after the meeting. The Ambassador continued to deny Eritrean support for terrorist groups, also mentioning that other Eritrean alliances, such as that with Iran, were equally fabricated. He was then interrupted by Isayas, an Eritrean asylum seeker also present in the discussion.

Isayas, Eritrean Asylum Seeker

Isayas interrupted the Ambassador by claiming that everything the latter was saying was a lie. After being granted permission to speak by the Chairperson, he introduced himself as an Eritrean Refugee and addressed the Ambassador as "Mr. Dictator". The latter claimed fraud at having to confront his own people, but was interrupted by Sigal Rozen (Public Policy Coordinator for the Hotline for Migrant Workers), who told him that this was how democracy worked: everyone had right to speak (to which the Ambassador retaliated that democracy had its limits before Chairperson Horowitz called the discussion to order).

Isayas claimed his government was lying and was a corrupt, oppressive institution. There was no legal representation of the people. All Eritreans were "dispersed like seeds" because of the dictatorship that was ongoing in their country. He came to Israel because, he claimed, there was no hope for him back home, where he was a prisoner. He had no option but to cross Sinai and live in Levinsky Park with hundreds of other refugees. He stays here because he wants human rights, and is afraid to go home where he knows innocent are killed. The Ambassador interrupted him here to thank him for betraying his country (which Isayas quickly interjected that he loved his country more than the Ambassador does). The Ambassador then told Isayas that if the latter truly wanted liberation, he would do as the Ambassador had done: be courageous and come fight. He claimed Isayas would then find that he had no support. Isayas also didn't have to cross so many borders, the Ambassador continued, and could have stayed in Sudan - his story made no sense. How was he going to fight will remaining in Israel? He had no guts.

The Ambassador then explained that when he was in Germany, he turned down the option to become a doctor and had the guts to come and fight for Eritrea, whereas in this scenario, Isayas chose to be a beggar. He told Isayas that all of his slow talk would take him nowhere, and only once he had begun to wage an armed struggle and created a good scheme for a government would anyone be willing to talk to him seriously.

Closing remarks

MK Katz concluded that there would be a delegation to Eritrea, and asked that the Ambassador be in contact with the relevant Ministries so that the project could be arranged. Chairperson Horowitz agreed that the delegation project would be seriously discussed although he understood that the authority to plan such a delegation lies with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and he thanked the Ambassador for coming. He stated that this sort of discussion would surely not be the last, and promised to extend an invitation to the Ambassador whenever his country was being discussed in the Knesset. He also let the Ambassador know that the latter could send his opinions in a written format should he be unable to attend, and they would be treated with the utmost consideration. Isayas attempted to interrupt to give more information about the situation in his country, but was told by MK Katz that such interjections were rude. Chairperson Horowitz then ruled that there was no time for any further comments (despite Sigal Rozen's protests on Isayas' behalf). The discussion ended.