

**“BETTER
A PRISON
IN ISRAEL
THAN
DYING
ON THE
WAY”**

**TESTIMONIES OF REFUGEES WHO “VOLUNTARILY” DEPARTED ISRAEL
TO RWANDA AND UGANDA AND GAINED PROTECTION IN EUROPE**

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Acknowledgments

We thank The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants for the assistance in publishing this report, Emanuel Yemane, Saad al-Din Ibrahim, Mutasim Ali, Dawit Demoz, Kebedom Menegisto, Yousif Mouhammad, Adi Drori Avraham, Gilad Lieberman, Sigal Kook Avivi, Yael Agur Orgal, Prof. Tomer Broude, Dr. Yochay Nadan, Lena Rotenberg, Gali Shapira, Iris Tubia, Or Koren, Hamoutal Sadan, Shaba Sadan, Rachel Lee, Yotam Gidron, Edi Saar, Erez Segal, Gilad Reich, Misha Shenbrot, Shana Krakowski, Traci Siegel, Reut Shpatz Nissani.

We are particularly grateful to all the participants in the study who agreed to share the details of their difficult journey.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on interviews conducted with Eritrean refugees who left Israel under the “Voluntary Departure” program to Rwanda and Uganda. There – in contrast to the promises made to them by the State of Israel – they were not granted protection, forcing them to embark on a dangerous journey ending in Europe. This report focuses on the “Voluntary Departure” policy and how it affected the lives of those who left Israel under it. This policy has been implemented since late 2013 vis-à-vis Eritrean and Sudanese residing in Israel. In January 2018, shortly before the publication of this report, the State of Israel announced an escalation of the measures it implements against this population; one such measure is a plan to forcibly deport asylum-seekers to a third country, i.e., not their homeland.

The report is based on a qualitative research made up of 19 interviews with Eritrean refugees who left Israel between 2014–2016. 11 interviews were conducted in Germany and eight in the Netherlands, the countries of residence of the interviewees, in which the overwhelming majority received refugee status. An analysis of their responses shows a similar pattern: promises made by the Israeli government, both in court and to those departing, about what awaits them after their arrival to Rwanda and Uganda, went unfulfilled. Instead of being granted access to a process of applying for asylum or work permits, the deportees, upon landing, were placed in a precarious situation: the travel document they received in Israel, the only identifying document in their possession, was taken away from them. They were transferred to a hotel guarded by an armed sentry and prevented, under threat, from leaving the hotel. None of them were given the opportunity to apply for asylum. Lacking identifying documentation, exposed to robberies, threats and arrest, they were forced to embark on a dangerous journey that included passing through South Sudan, Sudan and Libya in search of safety. Throughout the journey, the refugees were subjected to human trafficking, incarceration, the threat of forcible deportation to Eritrea, harsh conditions of starvation, violence, slavery in torture camps in Libya and a dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to Europe. The interviewees described a perilous journey permeated with an all-encompassing fear of death: many witnessed the death of fellow travelers during the crossing of the Sahara Desert, in the torture camps in Libya and as they drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Among the dead were others who had who left Israel “voluntarily.”

This conclusion is in congruence with findings of previous reports published by Israeli and international NGOs that collected testimonies in African countries of those who “voluntarily” departed Israel. These testimonies were recently buttressed by a statement of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) about dozens of similar testimonies the agency collected in Italy. Taken together, several hundreds of testimonies have been collected. Thus, the report confirms that the alarming patterns documented by previous reports have not changed. In addition, this report, for the first time, details additional stages in the journey of those who departed. Little information was available about these legs of the journey – and especially about what the interviewees experienced in Libya and during their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea– until their arrival in Europe.

The conclusions of this report are clear: the promises made to those “voluntarily” departing are not kept, and more so, the implementation of the “Regulation of Removal to Third Countries” gravely endangers the mental health, safety and life of men, women and children, and has already cost of the lives of an unknown number of human beings. The testimonies brought to the fore in this report are a call to stop the planned deportation policy and to regularize the status of the asylum-seekers residing in Israel.

BACKGROUND: FROM ISRAEL TO RWANDA AND UGANDA – THE “VOLUNTARY” DEPARTURE PROGRAM AND THE PLANNED FORCIBLE DEPORTATION

BY: SHANI BAR-TUVIA²

In Israel 37,288 men and women currently reside who irregularly crossed its southern border.³ Most are Eritreans (71%) who fled the dictatorship in their country⁴ and Sudanese (21%), many of whom arrived from the Darfur region that underwent what many in the international community recognize as genocide, and other areas in Sudan that have witnessed over two decades of ethnic cleansing. Most arrived in Israel between 2006 and 2012,⁵ which is when the construction of the border fence with Egypt was completed. Since 2013, only a few “infiltrators”⁶ entered Israel, but the official policy remained: “to make their lives miserable” until they leave.⁷ At the same time, Israel recognizes that it cannot forcibly return these people to their countries of origin.⁸ In line with Israel’s policy, several measures were adopted by the State over the years against Eritreans and Sudanese, including incarceration in the Saharonim Prison and the Holot Detention Facility, prevention of official work permits, healthcare and welfare services, as well as economic sanctions.⁹

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3. According to data of the Population Immigration and Border Authority (PIBA). See: “Data on Foreigners in Israel”, January 2018. <http://bit.ly/2Ej13EY>.

4. For more on the human rights situation in Eritrea, see for example the report of the Commission of Inquiry established by the UN to investigate the matter. The report, published on June 8, 2016, entitled “Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea” found that the Eritrean regime is to blame for crimes against humanity. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP1_read-only.pdf

5. See PIBA, “Data on Foreigners in Israel”, January 2018. <http://bit.ly/2Ej13EY>.

6. This is how the State of Israel labels those who entered Israel in an irregular manner through its southern border with Egypt.

7. This phrasing was used by the Minister of Interior at the time, Eli Yishai, in an interview to Ynet News on August 6, 2012. See <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4269540,00.html> The Chairman of the Knesset Internal Affairs and Environment Committee, MK Dudi Amsalem, described the policy in a less harsh but just as direct manner during a hearing held by his committee on November 21, 2016: “We are in a kind of a transition phase, when the State... is still not sending them home... and we’re trying to create an incentive for them to leave on their own.” All the protocols of the Knesset hearings are available in Hebrew on the Knesset’s website <http://m.knesset.gov.il/Activity/committees/Pages/Default.aspx>.

8. Representatives of the state acknowledged this on multiple occasions over the years. At times, the policy, at least concerning citizens of Eritrea, was even labeled by representatives of the State as “temporary protection” or “group protection.” See the words of Avi Himi, the Head of the Advisory Committee to the Minister of Interior on the Matter of Refugees, during a hearing at the Knesset Internal Affairs Committee on October 14, 2013: “We took into consideration the decision of the Israeli government that they [Eritreans] are under a status of temporary protection.” For a relatively recent statement about Israel’s official policy not to forcibly return Eritrean and Sudanese nationals, see comments by Yossi Edelstein, the Head of the Enforcement and Foreigners Unit at the Ministry of Interior, during a hearing at the Knesset State Control Committee on March 20, 2017: “I am saying that we are implementing a policy of non-removal and non-return toward subjects of Eritrea and Sudan.”

9. For further information see the State Comptroller report, “Foreigners who Can Not be Removed from Israel” report 64C from 2014: <http://bit.ly/1AbQl2Y>; A book edited by Tally Kritzman-Amir, “Where Levinsky Meets Asmara: Social and Legal Aspects of Israeli Asylum Policy (Van Leer Institute 2015); and an article by Ruvy Ziegler, “No Asylum for ‘Infiltrators’: The Legal Predicament of Eritrean and Sudanese Nationals in Israel” (2015) 29(2) Journal of Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law.

In 2013, Israel stepped up efforts to bring about their departure after reaching secret agreements with two “third countries” in Africa¹⁰ to which Israel began transferring Eritreans and Sudanese in late 2013 and early 2014.¹¹ As of September 2017, 3,959 Eritreans and Sudanese left Israel under this arrangement.¹² Until recently, the departure to these two countries was defined by the State as “voluntary,” but due to the legal status and the restrictive measures implemented against them by the State, the voluntary nature of this departure is highly in doubt.¹³

Until 2013, Israel prevented Eritreans and Sudanese from applying for individual refugee status, under the pretext that they cannot be removed anyway.¹⁴ In 2013, the policy supposedly changed, and the state began allowing them access to Israel’s asylum system, but no notification was made on the matter to inform the relevant population.¹⁵ In reality, Eritreans and Sudanese nationals could not access asylum due to severe deficiencies in the operation of the asylum system. Over the years, serious accessibility problems were reported concerning the (only) office of the asylum unit in Tel Aviv, problems that have reached their zenith in the past two years.¹⁶ In late 2017, a adjudicator at the Appeals Tribunal who initiated a spontaneous visit to the asylum unit reached the same conclusions.¹⁷ Recently, the UNHCR described the failings of Israel’s asylum system, in a scathing and extraordinary address to the court. In its address, the UNHCR argued that Eritreans and Sudanese are entitled to international protection, that it cannot be assumed that a person who has not filed an asylum claim in Israel is ineligible for refugee status, and that Israel’s asylum system, since its establishment in 2009 and until today is inaccessible, inefficient and unfair.¹⁸ Since 2013, those who have been able to file an asylum claim and were not rejected outright,¹⁹ rarely received a response or were denied refugee status. Only ten Eritreans and one Sudanese national were granted refugee status until today, meaning less than one percent.²⁰

10. See statement by Minister of Interior Gideon Sa’ar at the Knesset Internal Affairs Committee on August 28, 2013.

11. To this day, Israel refuses to disclose the identity of the countries, as well as the details of the agreements with them, but their identity is known in light of the multiple testimonies of those who reached Rwanda and Uganda on flights from Israel. See a report on departures to Uganda from Ynet News, August 29, 2013 <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4424022,00.html> and a report on departures to Rwanda from Haaretz, April 4, 2014 <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-israel-sends-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda-1.5243981>.

12. For data on departures during 2014, see the response of the State as part of High Court of Justice (HCJ) case Desta and others, (8665/14), January 27, 2015. Available At: <http://bit.ly/2DFaqB5>. For data on 2015–2017, see the response of the State as part of HCJ case Ester Tsegay Gresgeher and others (2293/17), November 16, 2017. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2GaWIV4>.

13. Under international law, for departure to be considered voluntary, it must not be carried out from a place where the refugee has no rights or ability to obtain legal status. For UNHCR regulations on the matter from 1996, see: UNHCR, “Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection”, <http://bit.ly/2egD1ii>.

The UNHCR reiterated this position explicitly with regards to the “voluntary” departure from Israel to countries of origin. See a report published in Haaretz, February 26, 2013 <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-israel-secretly-sent-back-1-000-to-sudan-1.5231464>.

14. This policy was articulated numerous times by several Israeli decision-makers and was summarized clearly in the words of Justice Fogelman, in paragraph 15 in his ruling regarding Asafu (Administrative Appeal 8908/11), July 17, 2012: “In accordance with the policy applied to citizens of Eritrea, even had the appellant filed an asylum claim... it would not have been examined.” Even after the possibility to apply for asylum was supposedly provided to citizens of Eritrea and Sudan, the Minister of Interior Gideon Saar admitted in a Knesset Internal Affairs Committee hearing (December 2, 2013) that the asylum applications of those who can be deported are being prioritized over those of applicants who cannot be deported (Eritreans and Sudanese).

15. Appeals Tribunal, Appeal (Tel Aviv) 1279–16, November 6, 2016.

16. See for example a report in Haaretz from April 21, 2017 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-restricts-asylum-requests-despite-un-convention-1.5463482>. The severe problems in accessing the asylum unit led to the filing of a petition to the HCI, which is still pending (HCJ 7501/17 the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants vs. Minister of Interior).

17. Appeals Tribunal, Appeal (Tel Aviv) 4881–17, December 12, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2n2S4j6>.

18. UNHCR’s position on the status of Eritrean and Sudanese nationals defined as ‘infiltrators’ by Israel, November 2017: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a5889584.html>.

19. Regarding the policy of outright rejections due to “delays in filing” asylum claims, see the decision of the Appeals Tribunal, which prohibited the State from continuing to apply it. Appeals Tribunal, Appeal (Tel Aviv) 1279–16, November 6, 2016.

20. The data appears in the address of the UNHCR to the court (note 18 above) and in the statement of the attorney general of PIBA at the Knesset Internal Affairs Committee, November 29, 2017.

In contrast, in 2016, 91.4% of Eritreans who filed asylum claims in Europe were recognized as refugees.²¹

In April 2015, the Israeli government formed a new plan to augment the rate of departure of Eritreans and Sudanese and announced that all those who will refuse to “voluntarily” depart to a third country will be jailed in Saharonim Prison indefinitely. The attorney general set six conditions for the implementation of this policy, central among them is that the life and liberty of the deportees will not be at risk in the country of destination, and that the deportees will enjoy a “dignified life” there and at least “the prospect of remaining, working and making a living”.²² As part of the legal proceedings in court against this policy, spanning between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2017 (and concerning Rwanda alone), the State promised that changes and improvements were made to the agreement with the third country. The State promised to improve the monitoring of the implementation of the agreement and to maintain contact with the deportees, as well as to guarantee that the travel document will remain in their possession after landing.²³

In August 2017, the High Court of Justice ruled that as long as the agreement concerns what is defined as “voluntary departure,” a person cannot be jailed to force him to agree.²⁴ However, the court found that it has not been proven that Rwanda (without explicitly stating its name, due to the secrecy of the agreements) is an unsafe country for those departing, or that the agreements (which the judges became privy to, but not the appellants) are being violated by Rwanda. This ruling was made despite dozens of testimonies and affidavits of those who “voluntarily” departed Israel that were submitted to the court. Several issues that emerged from the testimonies disturbed the court, but the justices sufficed themselves by expressing hope that the State’s promises to address the problems will be kept, and that the supervision over the implementation of the agreement and the fate of the deportees will be improved.²⁵

In November 2017, the Israeli government announced that it intends to bring about the departure of Eritreans and Sudanese even without their consent, thus abandoning the fig leaf of “voluntary” departure. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that he had reached a new agreement with a destination country in Africa.²⁶ The Rwandan minister of foreign affairs acknowledged that negotiations between Israel and Rwanda about the matter are ongoing, but she added that the agreement is yet to be reached and refused to confirm that it will include forcible deportations.²⁷ Israeli media reported that Israel will pay Rwanda \$5,000

21. For an interactive and clear presentation of the data, see a report by the Migration Policy Institute, “Asylum Recognition Rates in the EU/EFTA by Country, 2008–2016”, <http://bit.ly/2n53oet>.

22. See the letter of Dina Zilber, the Deputy Attorney General, to Adv. Anat Ben Dor and Elad Cahana, April 2, 2015. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2niXoFl>.

23. Tsegeta vs. Minister of the Interior and others (Administrative Appeal 8101/15), August 28, 2017. Paragraph 58 in the ruling of then Chief Justice Naor.

24. Tsegeta vs. Minister of the Interior and others (Administrative Appeal 8101/15), August 28, 2017.

25. Tsegeta vs. Minister of the Interior and others (Administrative Appeal 8101/15), August 28, 2017. Particularly paragraphs 57–74.

26. See a report published by Ynet News on November 19, 2017. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-5044929.00.html>.

27. See Haaretz report from November 23, 2017 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/rwanda-ready-to-take-10-000-asylum-seekers-from-israel-1.5626741>.

for every deportee.²⁸ Uncharacteristically, the UNHCR expressed concern about this plan in two separate statements.²⁹

In parallel to these statements, the government undertook several measures ahead of the implementation of the forcible deportation plan. It passed legislation that extends the operation of the Holot Detention Facility by three months only, thus tying the closure of the facility with the beginning of the deportation.³⁰ At the same time, the Ministry of Interior increased pressure on Eritreans and Sudanese to depart “voluntarily.”³¹ On January 1, 2018 the ministry published the “Regulation on Removal to the Third Countries.” Under the regulation, “Starting in February 1, 2018, an infiltrator from the state of Eritrea or Sudan [sic] whom... the Border Control Officer found to fall within the population targeted by the implementation of this regulation... will receive a written notification... that he must leave Israel within 60 days.”³² The new regulation is even more far-reaching than the April 2015 plan, against which the appeal was filed. Thus, for example, it does not exclude those who filed or will file asylum applications after January 1, 2018, in contravention of the demands of the attorney general from April 2015 and of international law. Following the publication of the regulation, which mentions agreements with “two African countries,” and the announcements about the intention to commence with deportations in the coming months, senior officials in Uganda and Rwanda rushed to deny the existence of agreements with Israel on the matter.³³

The new deportation plan raises serious legal and moral qualms, which are accentuated by the testimonies presented in this report.

28. See Haaretz report from November 20, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-to-pay-rwanda-5-000-for-every-asylum-seeker-deported-there-1.5466805>.

29. “UNHCR concerned over Israel’s refugee relocation proposals”, November 17, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2zf62qT>; “UNHCR appeals to Israel over forced relocations policy”. January 9, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2rxRqQ1>.

30. See a report published by Ynet News, December 12, 2017. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-5055834.00.html>.

31. On January 1, 2018, the Ministry of Interior published an information sheet in four languages titled: “Special Track for infiltrators for Voluntary Departure from Israel” The sheet was published online and in the relevant Ministry of Interior offices. The English version is available at: https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/news/voluntary_return_operation/he/exit_eng.pdf.

32. Population and Immigration Authority, Regulation on Removal to Third Countries (Regulation 0.9.0005), January 1, 2018. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/policy/third_country_deportation_procedure/he/10.9.0005.pdf. As is apparent from the wording of the link, even in the eyes of the authority the procedure amounts to “deportation” (while in Hebrew the word “harhaka” is used, literally meaning “distancing”).

33. See a report from the Associated Press, January 5, 2018. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/policy/third_country_deportation_procedure/he/10.9.0005_0.pdf.

PREVIOUS REPORTS

The testimonies appearing in this report follow the testimonies provided in previous reports. Those reports were based on dozens of testimonies of Eritrean and Sudanese who “voluntarily” departed Israel in 2014–2015, most of them collected in Africa. Two of the reports were published by Israeli organizations: a report by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants and ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, published in April 2015, was based on testimonies of 24 refugees who left Israel in 2014 to Rwanda and Uganda. The report found serious shortcomings in the “voluntary” departure process, including the forging of travel documents by at least one employee of the Immigration Authority. The report argued that Rwanda and Uganda are not providing to the deportees the protection they are entitled to under international law, forcing them to continue on a perilous journey in search of asylum.³⁴ Another report, published by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants in December 2015, included nine affidavits of those deported to Rwanda and Uganda. The report exposed the absence of the mechanism to ensure the safety of the deportees, reports on confiscation of the travel documents in Rwanda, as well as incarceration, smuggling and robberies en route to Uganda.³⁵ Similar findings emerged from 17 testimonies collected by Prof. Galia Sabar as part of research she conducted in Uganda and Rwanda in 2015.³⁶ 22 additional interviews with deportees were conducted by the international Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) in September 2015.³⁷ The organization collected testimonies from Eritrean and Sudanese as who had left Israel in 2014–2015 and presented similar findings about the lack of protection and exposure to harm in Rwanda and Uganda. In January 2018, the UNHCR issued an extraordinary statement, further bolstering these findings.³⁸ According to the UNHCR, between November 2015 and December 2017, the agency collected 80 testimonies of Eritrean asylum-seekers who left Israel to “third countries in Africa” (whom the UNHCR does not name explicitly). In the one-page statement, the UN body argued that the situation the deportees found themselves in was completely different from what they had expected: those who departed Israel did not feel safe, in part because local officials knew that the deportees are carrying cash on them. The interviewees reported feeling that they have no choice but to try and embark on a journey spanning South Sudan, Sudan and Libya. Some of them reported the death of fellow travelers, many of them were incarcerated, subjected to abuse and various forms of torture, before crossing the dangerous sea route to Italy.

34. Hotline for Refugees and Migrants and ASSAF “Where There is No Free Will: Israel’s “Voluntary Return” Procedure for Asylum-Seekers”, April 2015. <http://hotline.org.il/en/publication/where-there-is-no-free-will/>

35. Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, “Deported to the Unknown”: testimonies of asylum seekers who left Israel to a third country, December 2015. <http://hotline.org.il/en/publication/deported-to-the-unknown-2/>

36. See the opinion of Prof. Galia Sabar, as it appears in the appeal of Israeli human rights NGOs against the forcible deportation agreement to the third countries, April 2015. <http://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PetitionAgainstForcibleUgandaRwanda.pdf> (Hebrew)

37. “I Was Left with Nothing”, International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI), September 2015. <http://refugee-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/IWasLeftWithNothing.pdf>

38. See the UNHCR statement <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548e064/unhcr-appeals-israel-forced-relocations-policy.html>

The findings in this report correspond with the conclusions of reports and statements proceeding it. Our findings, similarly, show serious flaws in government policies and grave dangers that await those departing Israel. Thus, our findings reinforce the conclusions of previous reports about the dangerous shortcomings of this policy and its consequences for those “voluntarily” departing, as well as those set to be deported from Israel. This report includes the testimonies of refugees who left Israel in 2016, thus showing that the worrisome state of affairs sketched in previous reports has not changed. Finally, this report details, for the first time, additional legs in the journey of those who departed Israel. Very little was known about those parts of the journey – and in particular what the refugees experienced in Libya and while crossing the Mediterranean Sea– until they reached Europe. Thus, this report expands our understanding of the travails faced by those who departed Israel beyond the information provided in previous reports.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research is to describe the process of departure of Eritrean refugees who lived in Israel and "voluntarily" departed to Rwanda and Uganda, what they experienced in those countries after landing, and the hardships they endured in every state they crossed until reaching Europe. The interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The researchers, which at the time of conducting the research resided in Berlin, were contacted by refugees who "voluntarily" departed through social media and by telephone. Additional interviewees were recruited through the connections of NGOs and activists in Israel and around the world. Participants in the first group of interviewees then connected the researchers to friends and acquaintances who had also left Israel and reached Europe, and those connected the researchers with additional acquaintances and so forth.

The researchers conducted 19 interviews between July–December 2017 in various cities across Germany and the Netherlands, where the interviewees reside: 11 in Germany and eight in the Netherlands. 16 of the interviews were conducted in person, at a coffee shop or the home of the interviewee, and three were conducted over the phone. Every interview lasted between an hour to two hours. Usually, the interviews were carried out as part of a longer meeting, which included an informal introductory conversation. With most of the interviewees, a connection was formed and maintained even after the interviews were concluded.

The interviews were carried out utilizing a structured questionnaire, which included questions about demographic data, the circumstances of the departure from Israel, what happened once the interviewees landed in Rwanda or Uganda, as well as experiences in each one of the countries they crossed on their way to Europe. The fact that the interviewees resided in Germany and the Netherlands for several months to years prior to the interviews, and all but three (who still await a decision on their matter) received refugee status, provided access to the full story of their journey, both technically and emotionally; technically, access to the interviewees and their stories is limited to non-existent while they are in Rwanda, Uganda or the countries they passed along the way; emotionally, being present in Europe, which for most of them means arrival to safety, including legal status and protection, provided a "safe space" to reveal their stories. It was apparent that the interviewees felt comfortable during the interviews, and that it was important for them to testify to what had happened to them, in part due to the sense of responsibility toward their friends who are facing a similar threat. The interviewees expressed a clear message of wanting to prevent other from undergoing the difficult journey they managed to survive.

The interviews were carried out while adhering closely to principles of research ethics, protecting the dignity and privacy of the interviewees. Thus, all are presented in this report under pseudonyms.

All interviewees were conducted in Hebrew, except one, which was carried out in English. Most interviewees wished to speak in Hebrew, and some even expressed excitement about speaking this language after a long period during which it

was not possible to do so. Some mentioned that they worry about forgetting Hebrew. This is not merely a technical detail, but it reveals something significant about the interviewees: they spent many years in Israel, learned the Hebrew language, and naturally, formed a connection to it. However, since Hebrew is not the mother tongue of the interviewees, this manifests in the language register of the interviews, which will be provided in the findings chapter. The interviews were parsed utilizing a method of thematic content analysis MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software.

The demographic details of the interviewees: interviews were conducted with 19 Eritrean men. The interviewees arrived in Israel between 2008 and 2012, and most of them arrived in 2010 and 2011. They left Israel between 2014 and 2016. The average duration of living in Israel is five years. All “voluntarily” departed to Rwanda, except one who left to Uganda. Five of the interviewees left Israel after February 2016,³⁹ four of them to Rwanda and one to Uganda. 16 of the interviewees were granted refugee status in the European countries they reached: eight of them in the Netherlands (where refugee status is granted for an initial period of five years), and eight in Germany (where the status is granted for three years, initially). Three additional interviewees who live in Germany are in the midst of the asylum application process and are awaiting a response from authorities.

39. At this date the government committed before the courts to improve the process of departure, including a promise that those departing will be able to keep a copy of the travel document after landing, as well as follow-up over the phone about their situation. See footnote 32 above.

PSEUDONYM	ARRIVAL YEAR TO ISRAEL	DEPARTURE FROM ISRAEL	DESTINATION OF DEPARTURE	CURRENT COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE	CURRENT LEGAL STATUS*
Tsegay	2010	Dec 2014	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Tesfalem	2010	June 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Gebremariam	2010	June 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Habtom	2007	March 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Yohanes	2010	June 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Haile	2009	June 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Daniel	2009	March 2016	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Johnny	2010	June 2015	Rwanda	Netherlands	Refugee
Gabriel	2010	Oct 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Samson	2012	April 2016	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Kidane	2008	June 2014	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Kiflom	2010	April 2016	Rwanda	Germany	Under review
Dawit	2010	Dec 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Under review
Emanuel	2011	April 2016	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Tesfay	2011	Dec 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Under review
Aaron	2010	Aug 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Isayas	2010	Dec 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Abraham	2010	Dec 2015	Rwanda	Germany	Refugee
Brehane	2011	April 2016	Uganda	Germany	Refugee

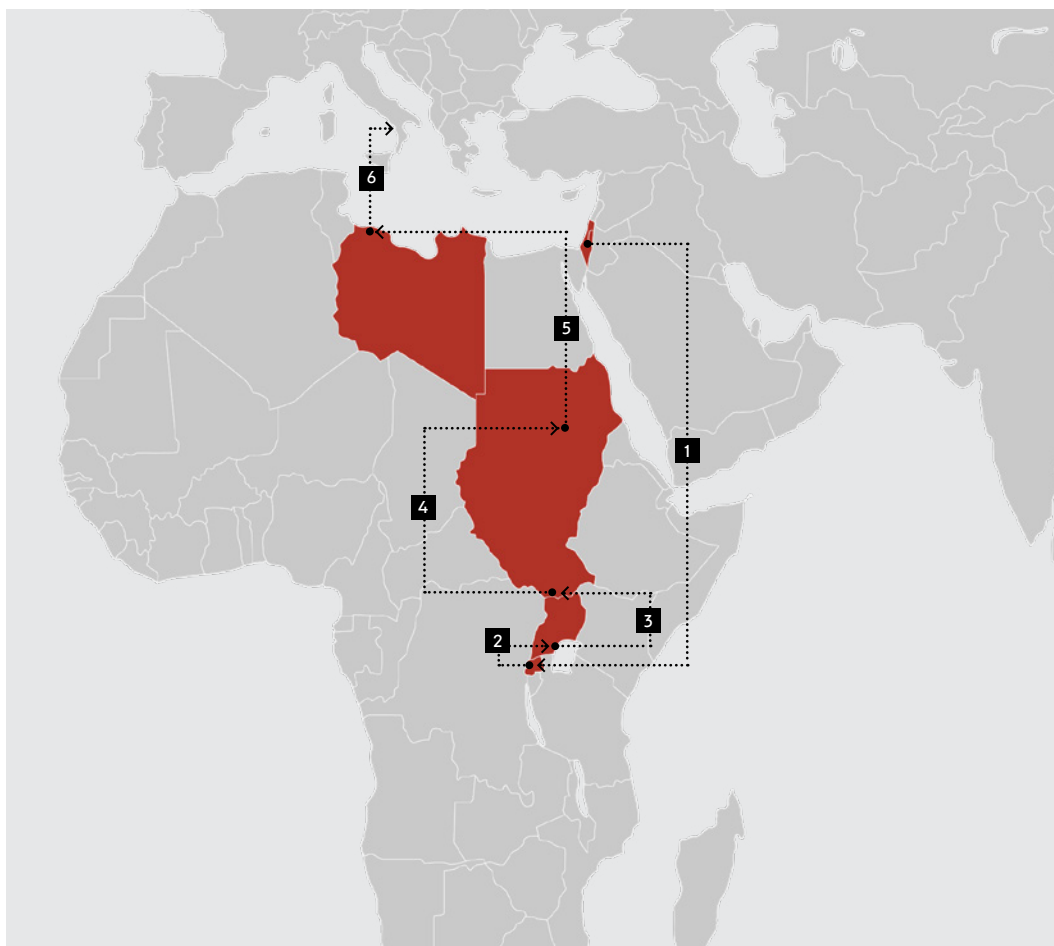
* “Refugee” means a legal status granted to the interviewees after their individual asylum claim was examined by the authorities of the European country they have reached. In Germany, it is initially granted for a period of three years and in the Netherlands for a period of five years.

* “Asylum application under review” means that the interviewee filed an individual asylum claim and awaits a response from authorities.

FINDINGS

The findings will be presented in three sub-chapters: first, the process of “voluntary” departure of the interviewees from Israel to Rwanda or Uganda. Then, their journey after landing in Rwanda or Uganda will be presented chronologically, including their crossing through South Sudan, Sudan, Libya and sailing across the Mediterranean Sea, until their arrival in Europe. In every country the interviewees passed, the report will describe the dangers and hardships endured by the refugees and the challenges of finding protection and safe haven. Finally, the lives of the interviewees in Europe today will be described, including their mental state and their concern for friends who remain in Israel.

> THE INTERVIEWEES’ JOURNEY FROM ISRAEL TO RWANDA, UGANDA AND ONWARD TO EUROPE



- 1 > From Israel to Rwanda
- 2 > From Rwanda to Uganda
- 3 > From Uganda to South Sudan
- 4 > From South Sudan to Sudan
- 5 > From Sudan to Libya
- 6 > From Libya to Europe

A. THE PROCESS OF “VOLUNTARY” DEPARTURE FROM ISRAEL TO RWANDA OR UGANDA⁴⁰

The interviewees corroborated one another when describing the way they left Israel: most said that when they went to renew their temporary residency permit at the Ministry of Interior in Israel, they received a notice that their visa will be renewed only for a month or less, following which they have to choose between two options: incarceration in the Holot Detention Facility or departure to a “third country.” The interviewees described being pressured to leave, pressures that at times included promises about what awaits them in the third country. Most reported that they did not receive detailed information about what awaits them in Rwanda or Uganda. Some of them received general promises that included access to an asylum process and work permits. Once they agreed to leave, Israeli authorities pressured them to leave as soon as possible, within days or a week. Most did not have time to receive compensation from work places in which they had worked for years or to properly say goodbye to friends and family. Tesfalem, Brehane and Haile described it thus:

“I was in Israel for five years, worked in a shawarma [stand]... [In the Ministry of Interior] they told me ‘go to Rwanda or stay here in prison in Holot.’ They said Rwanda is better.” (Tefalem)

“The visa ran out, so [in the Ministry of Interior] they told me ‘no one will give you work... without work you know what type of life... it’s hard.’ I wanted to go, the best thing would be to return to Eritrea... I love my country... But it’s impossible to return... because we have a dictator in Eritrea, our Prime Minister is the most dangerous in the world.” (Brehane)

“[At the Ministry of Interior] they told me ‘you can’t stay here’ ... you can live in Rwanda... the Israeli government is giving them... a lot of money and you can live there... they gave me a paper⁴¹ but... it was written in Hebrew and I don’t understand it... I signed, because I didn’t know how it is, I thought that it’s good... after 15 minutes he calls me... ‘in a week you’re going’ ... Because of this I didn’t ask for compensation or my salary, I left everything... [I said] ‘I have many things I need to arrange’ and they told me ‘you don’t have time, you’re going.’” (Haile)

All interviewees reached the airport, where they received a travel document and \$3,500 in cash from a representative of the Israeli government and boarded an airplane.

40. The matter of whether the departures are indeed “voluntary” was discussed at length in prior reports, including in “Where There is No Free Will” by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants and ASSAF, which was based on testimonies of asylum-seekers. The report detailed the array of pressures applied on asylum-seekers to “voluntarily” depart, including prolonged incarceration in Saharonim Prison and the Holot Detention Facility, denial of refugee status, denial of work permits, a requirement to renew stay permits frequently, and degrading treatment by authorities. For more, see <http://hotline.org.il/en/publication/where-there-is-no-free-will/>

41. Referencing the form one signs to declare they are leaving “voluntarily.”

B. THE JOURNEY FROM RWANDA OR UGANDA TO EUROPE AND HARDSHIPS ALONG THE WAY

RWANDA: “It was the opposite... we found nothing”

18 of the 19 interviewees left Israel to Rwanda. Their description of what happened upon landing in Rwanda tell a similar story: promptly upon arrival, a man waited for them at the airport, and some described that they did not go through passport control but through a separate line. The man instructed them to get into a vehicle and took them to what they described as a hotel. He ordered them to remain in their rooms and not leave them. All interviewees except one testified that the travel document given to them in Israel, which was valid for just a few days but was the only identifying document in their possession, was taken away from them. This was also the case for those who had left Israel in mid-2016. Daniel was the only interviewee who managed to keep a copy of his travel document. This is how Isayas narrated it:

“I landed in Rwanda. We got off the plane... someone who works at the airport took all of our documents. We asked him why? They responded that they’ll give us something else instead... but they never gave us any documents... Once you leave Israel, no one knows who you are... They put us in a prison they called a hotel, a guard kept watch over us so we don’t leave... But the State of Israel says that you can get documents and receive asylum and that you’ll have a good life, like a dream.”

Samson recounted what happened upon landing at the airport:

“They come [with] a small car and don’t talk, don’t say ‘drink water’ ... They threw our bag in the car and ‘come on, come on!’ don’t talk... We got in the car and they closed us off... Where are we? I don’t know... There was a small house there like a hotel, but it’s not a hotel... Two people would sleep in a bed for one person.”

Another interviewee, Kidane, asked that the documents confiscated from him to be given back, but was refused.

“This guy from the immigration... He said... that he’s taking [the document] from the people who come and gives it back to the Israeli immigration, if he gives them back the ‘passport’ he gets money.”

All the interviewees testified that they stayed in the hotel for only a few days before being smuggled to Uganda. An armed man guarded the hotel. Some of the interviewees reported that they were forced to pay hundreds of dollars for their stay in the hotel. Some also reported that their phones were taken from them. It was evident from the testimonies that the refugees felt scared, pressured and insecure. Some stressed the fact that they had never been to Rwanda – they don’t know the country, don’t know the local language, have no connection to people living in it and don’t have a way to navigate the country on their own. Tsegay, for

example, described that the man who ushered them to the hotel threatened him and his friends that if they leave the hotel, they will be caught by the police and sent back to Eritrea. All were told that they can not remain in the hotel and must leave Rwanda. Isayas described it thus:

“Three days after this man [picked us up from the airport], he came and told us ‘you must leave to Uganda’... He said we must get ready and that he’ll take us to Uganda, I asked where are our documents and why must we leave? He said that we must... I didn’t plan on crossing to another country... I left my country as a teenager and I am tired of moving from one country to another... [But] until I reach a quiet [place]... I must go... If it’s impossible in this country, if this is not good for me... [I] must look for another way.”

Due to the pressure exerted on them to leave Rwanda, all the interviewees emphasized that they did not have an opportunity to apply for asylum. The interviewee did not receive any information about the possibility of applying for asylum and do not know a single person who “voluntarily” departed Israel and remained in Rwanda. Habtom mentioned his dread of approaching authorities in Rwanda without an identifying document, fearing that he will be forcibly returned to Eritrea. Kiflom and Yohanes reported:

“Where is RSD [Refugee Status Determination], UNHCR? I asked him... ‘We don’t have that in Rwanda’, he told me. ‘You [can go] to Uganda, Kenya... Here there is no camp,’⁴² he told us.” (Kiflom)

“What they said in Israel is that you have the UN there and you can apply [for asylum], but this is not true.” (Yohanes)

Dawit described how he was denied access to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

“We said we want to go to the UNHCR... But they tell us ‘no, no, no, you have a permit for three days... If you do not move to another country [by then] we will return [you] to your country... We are afraid... [We said] ‘okay, we want to move to Uganda, but how?’ ‘You pay 150 dollars and you cross’.”

Tesfay described how all the money the State of Israel gave him upon departure was taken from him in Rwanda:

“I never saw a country like this in my life. We are at 4 AM in Rwanda, we come... and they take us, three people... we got into the car... after that... they say ‘give us money’ and we said ‘for what?’... but there’s nothing to do, I gave them 3,500 [dollars], everything! Because it was in the bag, everything! ... Later I spoke to my brother [in Israel]... and he also does not believe me, ‘why are you saying this? It can’t be that you go to a country and they take 3,500 from you’... he is right not to understand, [in the end] he sent me 1,000 dollars.”

42. Referring to a refugee camp.

One after the other, the interviewees describe their extreme fear of staying in Rwanda without an identifying document or a stay permit. Kidane, for example, recounted his anxiety about remaining without an identifying document:

“We were afraid... We have nothing, not paper, not ID... It was hard, without nothing you can not move around... If we like leave [the hotel]... there is no one to take responsibility for us... We don’t know, we don’t have information... What they told us in Holot is one thing and what happened after we arrived... it was the opposite... we found nothing.”

In addition, none of the interviewees received a call from Israeli authorities after their departure. In a few cases, the Immigration Authority took their phone number or the numbers of their friends who remained in Israel – but no contact was initiated with them after departing Israel. Tesfay even described that in light of the hardships he encountered in Rwanda, he tried calling the number he had received from an employee of the Immigration Authority prior to his departure from Israel, but he was unable to reach anyone.

As is apparent from the testimonies, the promises that were made to the deportees prior to leaving Israel, as well as the promises made by the State in court, were not kept. Lacking protection, under pressure and threats, the interviewees were forced to continue on a perilous journey, seeking shelter. This is how Yohanes and Kidane described this:

“They told us that in Rwanda we will meet the immigration office... ‘You will get what you want, you can also stay in Rwanda, you will have all the things there’... but as we get out of the airport, they send [us] to Uganda.”
(Yohanes)

“They said that in Rwanda like you apply for asylum... Where is that? If we really could apply for asylum, the immigration could have taken us straight [to ask for] asylum... [but instead] they tell us to leave the state of Rwanda? They tell us we have only three days permit to stay in Rwanda [and] after that we... have to leave the country... why they tell us this, why they lie?”
(Kidane)

> FROM RWANDA TO UGANDA

As mentioned, none of the 18 interviewees who had landed in Rwanda stayed more than a few days in the country, during which they remained at the hotel. Their testimonies outline the operation of a human trafficking and smuggling network, which begins with the officials who pick up the interviewees at the airport in Rwanda. These officials are connected to smugglers who charged the deportees hundreds of dollars for an irregular crossing of the border with Uganda, and those in turn, work with elements inside Uganda. Tsegay recounted:

“He receives us, the one who took us from the airport, and brought us someone else [and said], ‘[my friend] knows how to take to you Kampala⁴³’.”

43. Capital of Uganda.

Kidane added:

“This guy work from the immigration... he takes us all the way to the border with Uganda, and then he calls a guy he knows in Uganda to receive us, who will take us [into] Uganda. We walked until the border in a car, and after the border we crossed on foot, so we won't be caught.”

The journey from Rwanda to Uganda lasted between several days and two weeks. The irregular border crossing was described as perilous. Tesfay, for example, said that he paid \$300 and walked for two weeks on foot to reach Uganda. Some of the interviewees were robbed on the way of all the money in their possession. Meanwhile Gabriel and Samson recounted:

“After about three hours we reached some soldiers... They came with a rifle, shut our eyes and told us to go back... They checked what we have... Took everything they found... I for example had 3,500 [dollars] from Israel and 1,200 dollars out of my own pocket... they said that they were from the government of Uganda.” (Gabriel)

“We walked to Uganda and paid each 500 [dollars]... we walked for several hours... [we encountered] Ugandans... they said pay money, ‘for what? We paid 500’, and they told us ‘we don't know where you came from’... If we say no, [they] tell the police, ‘[these] come from Israel’ but we... afraid. So we paid. When I give them the 3,000 [dollars] everything from Rwanda [to] Uganda, everything runs out.” (Samson)

UGANDA: “The police catch you and they don't tell you ‘[you can] apply for asylum’, they only want money”

Brehane is the only one among the interviewees who “voluntarily” departed from Israel to Uganda. His story also demonstrates the wide gap between the promises given to him in Israel and the reality that awaited him. Similar to other interviewees, he was not given a phone number he could call upon departure from Israel. Brehane recounted being taken from the airport to a hotel, where he waited for someone to come and explain to him how to file for asylum, but no one came. He described being forced to pay \$700 to move from the hotel to the Ugandan capital:

“They told us in Israel, ‘they receive you, there are people working with us... they await you there’... But everything is the other way around... We went, entered some place... They told us ‘tomorrow morning we come and take you... Do you want to get out [of] this place? Everyone pays 700 dollars... We take you to Kampala’, I say, why should I pay? They said ‘if you do not pay, you will stay here in this place.’ Brehane paid this sum and left to Kampala. But immediately upon his arrival, he was detained by the police: “The police caught us... because we did not have an ID.”

The rest of the interviewees, who crossed from Rwanda to Uganda, described various perils they were subjected to upon arrival. Many were detained at the border or immediately after crossing it, as they had no identifying document. The only way to get out of detention was to pay exorbitant sums in bribes. Habtom, for example, was jailed for six days. “There was police on the way and someone told them that we’re coming from Rwanda and don’t have a passport. So we were in prison, there was no light at all. Everyone had to pay 600 dollars to one of the senior people of the police.”

In addition to the incarceration, interviewees recount instances of robberies that left them penniless. This is Dawit’s story:

“[In Uganda] they take us to a hotel... 3 people [asked] ‘do you want to see this country?’ We say ‘yes, okay’, they take us on a motorcycle... outside [of the city] and one takes out... a big knife and tells us... give us money or we kill [you]... and they take all that we had... 3,500 dollars... clothes, cellphone, they take everything... and we don’t know what to do, we don’t have a note,⁴⁴ if we go to the police, we are afraid.”

It becomes apparent from the interviews that the deportees’ arrival from Israel made them more vulnerable and more likely to be robbed, threatened and extorted for money. Isayas described what happened in Uganda: “If people think that we came from Israel, they think that you have a lot of money, everyone tries to steal and rob you.” This state of increased vulnerability due to being known to have arrived from Israel characterized the entire journey of the refugees. Similar events unfolded in other countries, as will be shown below.

In addition to experiencing robberies and incarceration, the interviewees describe being unable to access the asylum system in Uganda as well. Kidane described:

“In Uganda... the police catch you and they don’t tell you [you can] apply for asylum, they only want money. They know we came from Israel... Who tells them? I don’t know, but they know. They also don’t want that we... apply for asylum.”

➤ FROM UGANDA TO SOUTH SUDAN

After varying periods of time, all the interviewees who had arrived from Rwanda, as well as Brehane, continued to South Sudan. Some of them fell in the hands of human traffickers who sold them. Tesfay, for example, recounted how he paid a smuggler \$700 to cross from Uganda to South Sudan, and the smuggler sold him to another trafficker and disappeared:

“We paid him, and he told us ‘I take you in my car [to South Sudan]’ ... He took us to other people, for money... He left.. [We asked] Where [is he]? [They said] ‘we don’t know him... give us money.’ We say... ‘How do we pay? We paid 700 [dollars]... From where will I bring you?... [They] throw me to the floor... They took me this way from here, my arms, blood came out, they beat me... this way, with a knife.”

44. Identifying document.

As can be seen from the descriptions of the interviewees, the crossing of the border from Uganda to South Sudan was also carried out through a network of smugglers. Gabriel described the difficulties entailed in crossing the border:

“It was too hard... All the way with no water, no nothing... I don't know, I don't want to repeat this. It was very hard... We were in the car for almost three days... With goats and sheep, we hid on top... It was a long truck, covered on top, for the animals... We didn't know the road, and because we don't have any paper, someone from the Ugandan forces, I think like a smuggler... received us at the border from the smugglers... We paid them 2,000 dollars to cross.”

Isayas describe violence and robbery:

“Human traffickers, they told us they will take us to South Sudan and that we must pay, at the border they took all of our money and abandoned us... Someone from the army and two civilians came to us and asked to see our documents, but we don't have any documents... So they said we must come with them to prison, we said... that we're not criminals... they asked for money... took all the money we had... [later] they caught us again, I don't know every time how they discover that we came from Israel, who tells them? ... They searched us again... Took us to this kind of a wooded area... They told us to pay... They beat us, we didn't have anything, and they said they'll take us to prison.”

SOUTH SUDAN: “They shoot and take money”

Arriving in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, and staying there, was described by all interviewees as extremely dangerous. The refugees were afraid of walking outside after dark, of being robbed or subjected to violence. For example, Kiflom recounted: “Juba... they shoot and take money, there are many thieves... you have to stay at the hotel.” Dawit and Johnny narrated similar ordeals:

“We entered Juba, it was dangerous... the people... think that all Eritreans have money... They catch you, ‘give money’... You walk half an hour and you pay money... if you believe me or not... Just in Juba [I paid] \$2,500 for this. (Dawit)

“We entered... they took everything from us... They also beat you, ‘Where are you from? Eritreans? Why did you come here? They beat, and if we tell them that we were in Israel, it's very hard... just ‘give us, give us the money’ ... very dangerous.” (Johnny)

Another source of danger the interviewees described was the connection between representatives of the South Sudanese regime with the Eritrean dictatorship, which could pose a real threat to the lives of those deported from Israel:

“[In] Juba, the friends... At the border, they also caught us... I wasn’t with them... I have luck... I love to drink coffee, so I went to drink coffee... Suddenly, the police came and took them... They told them to call the Eritrean embassy... If they don’t call the Eritrean embassy, they don’t release them.” (Kidane)

> INCARCERATION IN SOUTH SUDAN

Some of the interviewees described stretches of detention lasting between several weeks to months in a regime prison in South Sudan, due to their lack of documentation. For some of them, this was not the first or the last period of incarceration. Johnny, for example, was jailed in Uganda for a week, afterwards in South Sudan for two weeks, and later in Sudan for ten days. Only payment of bribes allowed him to go free. Aaron described a similar ordeal:

“I entered prison... In Juba [for] a month... All the money [that I had received from Israel], the police take... [The jail in Juba] is the most dangerous, you have no food... no bed, clothes, nothing... You stay for a few days, until the money arrives, if you don’t have money or passport, you stay... [in the end] a friend of mine and also my sister... in Israel... they send me money.”

> FROM SOUTH SUDAN TO SUDAN

From South Sudan, the interviewees continued north to Sudan. The journey lasted between two to three weeks, and was described by many as a highly dangerous crossing of borders. Many had to pay \$1,000 to smugglers for the journey. They walked on foot, constantly fearful of being caught by the police. Tesfay described that he drank one small bottle of water per day and did not eat for two weeks. Others reported eating once every two days. The road was described as replete with robbers, and many died on the way. Gabriel recounted:

“This was the worst road in our journey.... The road is full of thieves... They just want our money... They don’t know if you are a human being or an animal... All the time you have to pay. If not, they kill you, beat you, throw you in the sand... Many people died this way, people who were in Israel with us and we still don’t [know] if they are alive.”

Another threat that accompanied the journey is the risk of being forcibly returned to Eritrea, as described by Samson:

“I was a week there [in Juba]. I would go crazy, my head would not stop... I looked for a way... I don’t have a paper, I have nothing, and this is why I go on the road [of] thieves... On the road there were thieves at night who did [makes sounds of gunshot], we got out of the car... ‘give us money or we kill you or we [return] you to Eritrea’. I am scared for Eritrea... I was afraid... I gave them my phone and gave them money.”

Brehane too, described an incredibly difficult journey. He was saved by paying money to a trafficker who smuggled him:

“The road from Juba to Sudan is the most most dangerous in the world... One day you eat and another you don’t eat... They don’t let you sleep... People catch us... They have a gun... They ask us ‘where are you going?’ [we said] ‘we’re going to Sudan,’ we also had the contractor⁴⁵ with us... so our contractor... took the money to give to them... after 15 days... we entered Sudan, and God saved us, thanks be to God.”

SUDAN: “[In prison] Those who pay, get out, those who don’t - will be returned to Eritrea”

After a long hazardous journey, the interviewees reached Sudan. Upon arrival in Khartoum, the capital, many were jailed for varying periods of time. In Sudan, too, the interviewees had to pay a bribe to be released. Johnny, for example, was jailed for ten days. Samson, who was incarcerated for a week, described how he was caught: “I came to Khartoum and I was... in prison, for what? ... The police saw me, coming all of us by bus, searching for paper, passport... I don’t have any... We were five people who came from Israel... And we have nothing while all these people have a passport.” Samson recounted the conditions in jail, his mental state and the fear of forcible return to Eritrea:

“They took us at night to prison... closing us in... under⁴⁶ [it was] hot hot hot... Later I spoke [to myself]... I thought about my entire life... ‘Those who do not pay, we will send them back to Eritrea’ they say... I said... ‘I will give you a number to call in Israel, tell them to send me money’... Those who pay get out of jail and those who don’t pay will be returned to Eritrea... If I return to Eritrea, what can I tell you? They’ll kill me, because of this... I cry cry for a long time, I was like a crazy person.”

> FORCIBLE RETURN FROM SUDAN TO ERITREA

The dread of being forcibly returned to Eritrea from Sudan was apparent in many of the interviews. This fear was among the factors pushing the men to continue their journey north to Libya. Kiflom, for example, who was also jailed in Sudan, reported:

In Khartoum, the police caught me, ‘where are you from?’ ... We must not say we came from Israel, or they will beat us... He asked ‘do you have a visa?’ – ‘no, we don’t’ ... He took me to prison. He said ‘you go back to your country, Eritrea’ ... My friend who was in Israel and was returned from Sudan to Eritrea together with his wife... So what to do? I decided that I’m going to Libya.”

In addition to the fear of being deported from prison in Sudan to Eritrea, the interviewees reported that agents of the Eritrean secret service are operating freely in Sudan. Dawit and Kidane described it thus:

45. Referring to a smuggler.

46. Referring to an underground prison.

“In Sudan... I was afraid... In Sudan they have [Eritrean] employees... If they know that [you] are in Sudan, if they know that you left the Eritrean military, they want to catch [you]... It’s people you think are your friends... But they all work for the security [in Eritrea]... If I came back to my country, what expects me, I know it... If they catch me... they can kill me.” (Dawit)

“In Khartoum [there is] a car, like the CIA of Eritrea... They... move around... [if] they catch you they can send you to Eritrea... Because of this fear we didn’t like walk around freely. Most of the time we would stay at home... we didn’t go out.” (Kidane)

Samson described how he was saved by chance from forcible return to Eritrea, as opposed to four of his friends who were returned and their fate remains unknown:

“We got out [of prison in Sudan], they [were] not calm, my friends... [they said] ‘we’ll go to Libya, it’s not good [in] Sudan... The police may kill us... because we don’t have a document... I told them, ‘relax, my head isn’t well, I was in prison now, I can’t go.’ They said ‘no Samson, we’re going.’ I told them ‘I will sit here for a while.’ [They] went, four people... [and] they were returned on the way... to Eritrea... Now where are they? I don’t know... [maybe] they will die in Eritrea... After that I didn’t sleep at all at all... I was afraid, I was a month there in Khartoum... My head the entire time not sleeping all day thinking about life, what will I do? Then I went [to] Libya.”

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE SAHARA FROM SUDAN TO LIBYA: “We dumped the dead on the floor”, “At night it comes to our head, it returns”

From Sudan, the interviewees proceeded on a journey through the Sahara Desert to Libya, a journey whose duration varied. At this point in their narration, it was evident that many of the interviewees struggled to speak. Statements such as “it’s hard for me to talk about this,” and “I don’t want to remember” repeated themselves. They described that most of the way was traversed in small Toyota trucks, each of them crammed with about thirty individuals. They were in the hands of smugglers, to whom they paid thousands of dollars. They were deprived of basic necessities, experienced violence and life-threatening situations. Many of the interviewees describe deadly car accidents, in which some of them were injured but received no assistance or medical care. Kiflom recounted: “The people who took us to Libya beat us. They said, ‘Get in the car, come on, fast, fast. Get out of the car, fast, fast...’. The car [dug] into the ground and could not get out. They told us, ‘Take everything off the car... push the car.’ We pushed.” Tesfay added: “If someone said, ‘[I want to] pee’, they said, ‘no’... [If someone said,] ‘We’re sick’, they said ‘what do we care? God willing you’ll die’... What do they care?”

Some of the interviewees only paid to cross the Sahara, while others paid the smuggler in Sudan for the journey all the way to Italy. Emanuel said:

“5,500 dollars [I paid] from Sudan to Italy, everything paid together... [In Sahara] the road in a car... very very difficult. I can not talk about it in Hebrew, it’s hard for me to talk about it... Many people fell... we stayed there for three weeks... in some place, I don’t know, in the Sahara... The coordinator⁴⁷ told us ‘wait, wait.’”

Kidane fell out of the vehicle and his legs were badly injured. He described being able to walk only with the help of his friends following the incident. Samson explained that during the drive in the Sahara, he fell out of the truck, broke both of his arms and his life was saved only thanks to his friends:

“I fell out [of the car]... broke my arms... They say ‘dead, dead, dead’ ... I didn’t hear and because [my mouth] was closed I couldn’t talk. They said, ‘come on, come on, throw him away.’ But I have friends... they poured water on me like this, and threw me in the car once again.”

Tesfay testified about rape of women by the smugglers:

“Girls, he would take her, take her to sex. If you say ‘no’, he killed you, he will also give it to you with a knife, you can’t talk... there’s nothing you can do.”

> DEATH IN THE SAHARA

The blistering heat, scarcity of water and food, the travel conditions and the violence meted out by the smugglers resulted in the death of many in the Sahara. Some of the interviewees knew friends and relatives who died along the way, while others witnessed such deaths with their own eyes. Some testified that they were able to bury the dead, while others reported that the vehicle simply kept driving, leaving the bodies behind. For example, Brehane, Tesfay and Kiflom recounted:

“The road to Libya... dangerous, the most dangerous... What can I say... Several people fell [out of the truck] in the Sahara... We left them and went... We were more than 20 who came from Israel altogether... Those who died on the way, I know... I don’t want to say the name... One of them I know, a friend of ours who fell, he did not drink, they don’t give you food... after that, that’s it, he died.” (Brehane)

“Two were sick... After they died... We said ‘people are dead’ [they said,] ‘why should we care?!... God willing you will die too’... After that we threw [the dead] to the floor, that’s it, [they]didn’t even give us a blanket, [I swear] on my mother.” (Tesfay)

“Desert. No water. Very very hot... we ran out of food. One young woman and one young man died. There is a lot of sun... This is why people died... We buried them... on the way... I don’t want to remember this. It’s hard to think about this... At night it comes to us in our head, it repeats... It wakes me up, what I saw... I don’t want to remember this... I want to close that door.” (Kiflom)

47. Referencing the smuggler

LIBYA: “Like Sinai”, “In Libya, a human being is not a human being”, “I saw people- I did not know if they are dead or not”.

Following a precarious journey through the Sahara, the interviewees reached Libya.⁴⁸ The human traffickers brought them to camps, some of which were described as large overcrowded warehouses in which hundreds of people were jailed together. There, the interviewees were held for several months. Those who managed to pay the smugglers a large sum on money, were moved to a larger prison; those who did not, were jailed in incredibly overcrowded conditions. Migrants jailed in these camps are raped, subjected to violence daily, denied food and water, denied medical treatment and enslaved (forced to perform labor without payment). Many became ill and some died. More than once, in addition to the sum the interviewees paid the smugglers before reaching Libya, the interviewees were forced to pay additional sums in ransom to get out of those camps alive. In some cases, after they paid the ransom and left, they were caught once again and forced to pay another ransom. When describing these ordeals, some of the interviewees recalled the torture camps in Sinai, in which they were held en route to Israel.⁴⁹ Johnny recounted:

“All the time you are sick. All the time you are hungry. All the time it’s hot, all the time it itches... If you were lucky, you eat once a day... enclosed [space] all the time, no light... We were also in Sinai, we saw also... everything, in Sinai... After that we reached Libya, the same thing.”

Similar to when they recounted what happened in the Sahara Desert, while describing what had happened to them in Libya, the interviewees would often pause, speak in a trembling voice, cry and struggle to speak.⁵⁰ At times, it seemed that “there are no words to describe this,” as Isayas characterized it. Yet some of the interviewees managed to put into words the horrors they survived:

“They close you in their place, like a prison... If you pay a lot of money... it’s big. If you don’t pay, it’s small, many people together... Maybe 400, 200... together... The body itches all over... No water... No shower... I was there for three months... Those who did not have money to pay, stay there longer. I saw people [I didn’t know whether] they are dead or not dead... They were very sick. One man died. People cry all day. [They told us,] ‘quiet!’ ... All day beatings... What a life.” (Kiflom)

“Many beatings... Over our heads... [We were] a month without anything, no water, no food... In the jail of the police... 200 people... No light... Everything is black like this... They said ‘you don’t pay me – people here die... Call your father, your mother... Tell your father “I am dead”’. This is what they told me... Later, we are outside [he] tells me to pay again... We paid 5,000 dollars. Then we paid again 1,400 [dollars] once again [to the same person].” (Abraham)

48. For more on the conditions of migrants in Libya, see the statement by the UN Human Rights Chief, November 2017: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22393&LangID=E> as well as the UN report on the inhumane conditions in the torture camps in Libya: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf

49. Thousands among the asylum-seekers who have reached Israel were jailed and subjected to torture in camps run by smugglers in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. For more, see: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/afro40012013en.pdf>

50. For more on the mental state of the interviewees, see part 3 of this chapter.

“You are closed inside... Eating and sleeping there, 800 people in a small room... Everything is dirty, everyone is sick, boys, girls. I can’t talk about it... They beat... [I do] work without nothing... Threatening, killing quietly.” (Daniel)

“If there are new people, there is food, if there are no people, no food. One bathroom for 600 people... No electricity... There is beating, people die... There is no hospital, no nothing. There were women and children there too. (Habtom)

“There is rape... There are many things. I like don’t want to talk about it... We were two months there... Every day they come and beat us, they like see you as animals, not people.” (Kidane)

While most interviewees described being jailed together in one room with several hundreds of people, Brehane recalled being jailed for three months in one room with 1,500 people. He also related that those who were unable to pay the ransom suffered from greater violence, starvation and denial of food:

“I was in Libya for three months... 1,500 people in a room... People are sick, you don’t shower for days, you don’t go to the bathroom... I had a little bit of money, thanks be to God, but [people] who didn’t have... Every day, they would beat them... They don’t give them food, no shower... If they don’t pay... God help them... A human being is not a human being in Libya.”

Many of the interviewees described being sold from one trafficker to another, each time being forced to pay additional sums of ransom. Kidane also described cases of slavery:

“I was in a difficult situation... After in [Sahara] I fell from the truck and my knees got messed up... After that they also beat me [in Libya]... When they want you to pay money... If you are late, they kill you or cut off your hand... People who paid money, they take [their] money and sell them... to other people. After that, how will they get money? [If not] he kills them [or] he takes them to work... Some hard work of construction, [or] he takes weapons... I remember one he [shot] him in the knees... afterwards they amputated his leg.” (Kidane)

Dawit recounted:

“I entered Libya, they catch me... Mafia... I paid 1,500 dollars... I was sick... If I don’t pay it... they [move you to] another person and then you pay more, even six thousand. [I] paid five thousand dollar to come to Italy.”

In addition to the harsh conditions, many of the interviewees witnessed death around them. Tesfay and Aaron described:

“I didn’t see something like [this place] in my life... How many people died?... [Also] small children... [Every] day one person died, two people died... Because how do you eat one kilogram of pasta for ten people per day?” (Tefsay)

“A young woman in Libya, I saw this with my own eyes... We entered [together], after that she had... She... I don’t know how... After this she died... She paid money, paid everything. [They said] ‘tomorrow or the day after that you leave,’ after that she died... [She was] sick, but there is no hospital... No bed, [sleep] on the floor.” (Aaron)

The smugglers would dispatch boats from Libya in the direction of Italy only when they could load many hundreds of people on them. Habtom, for example, reported that it took a month from the moment he reached the camp in Libya until 500 additional people arrived. Only then the smugglers said that it’s possible to embark on the journey by sea.

CROSSING THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA FROM LIBYA TO ITALY: “We were ten people from Israel- Only three survived”

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe was done on boats loaded by the smugglers with many hundreds of people, to reduce costs.⁵¹ The crossing was described as exceptionally dangerous; in many cases, the boat’s motor stopped working mid-journey. The lucky ones were saved by European rescue ships. Johnny, Brehane and Kidane recounted:

“[On] the way, it was dangerous, difficult... The motor... It would stop... Everyone cries... There were many children, pregnant women.” (Johnny)

“After six hours in the city... The motor doesn’t work... But there was nothing we could do, just wait, we waited, and God heard us, and people of Italy came... and took us on a big boat.” (Brehane)

“[It was] very hard... We were 300 people. On the boat, you can’t sit, sitting on one another. After a journey of about six hours... it broke... oil... started coming out... We started [to try] to stop the oil... But it’s impossible... There’s one from Eritrea who is in Switzerland... We called him, he called for Italy’s help, after... eight hours they came, if they had not come... we would [drown] in the sea.” (Kidane)

Other boats sunk at sea with all their passengers. Many others died due to illnesses or suffocation due to the extreme overcrowding on the boats. Some of the interviewees witnessed such deaths:

“We were four hours at sea, on the waves, 500 people... Motor broke, no motor on the ship... Downstairs, there’s no air... it’s very hot... two-three people died every day.” (Abraham)

“I saw 400 people inside... the water, they drowned. I saw people got in and all of them died on the boat, I saw... Nine boats went into the sea, we were before this ship, many children died, I remember... I don’t have the strength anymore to talk about it.” (Yohanes)

51. For more on the dangers entailed in crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to Europe, and the deaths along the way reported by various organizations, see: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

“We entered at 4 o’clock into the sea, after two hours broken... the motor... I swam for two–three hours, [after this] they came to rescue us... We went 500 people into the sea, and out of them returned just maybe 100 people... maybe... from Israel, there were ten people on the boat, and we got out only three, you understand? Seven people died... After three days, I didn’t know where I was, my head was upside down... Because I saw people... maybe fifty children, five year olds, four year olds, six year olds, half year olds... [When] I entered Italy, I went to the hospital and asked where are they? They told me dead... I cried... For what? For what? Are we not human?” (Tesfay)

Other interviewees reported losing family members and friends along the way. Dawit lost his wife, who was two months pregnant:

“We entered in peace but... my wife... we were not together... Different people caught me and my wife... She came on another boat, and this is why my wife died... 450 people dead [on that boat].”

Isayas recounted that his partners in the journey, some of whom departed Israel after him, drowned at sea:

“There were people who came from Israel after me... and just because I came before them, they took us to the sea, and the rest stayed behind us... When I reached Germany, I heard that all of them are dead... They were all from the place where I was [in Libya], from my group, not just those who were from Israel... Because their families sent the money too late... They died in sea... I can’t... I can’t... It’s very hard for me. Lucky for me, I reached Italy and from there to Germany, they gave me asylum and I have a good life here. But think about the people who left Israel to have a better life and did not make it.”

C. THE LIVES OF THE INTERVIEWEES TODAY

All interviewees survived the hazardous journey. Arrival in Europe concluded this chapter in their voyage. After reaching Italy, some of the interviewees continued to Germany, and some to the Netherlands. There, within one to several months from the moment of applying for asylum, 16 of them received refugee status. Many stated that during their refugee status determination interview (RSD), they mentioned living in Israel. Samson, for example, described that he underwent one asylum interview that lasted three hours, and five weeks later, he was granted refugee status for a duration of three years (at the initial stage).

In addition to receiving legal status, the interviewees were granted social rights such as rent assistance, participating in local language courses, as well as professional courses to enable them to integrate into the local workforce. This is how Tesfay in Germany and Habtom in the Netherlands described it:

“Now, thanks to God... I’ve been one year and four months in Germany. Great... I will tell God thank you very much first of all... I am okay, they gave me a house, they gave me a passport... They said ‘go to school’ and I go to school. What I say... I am being heard.” (Tefsfay)

“I wanted to reach the Netherlands... In the Netherlands it was quick, after two months I received a visa for five years... I got an apartment, I also have health insurance. Every month they give me money... Now I study language in school and they pay. I can study for two years. I want to study flooring, I work in this now, but with wooden floors. In Israel I worked in this too, [but] I don’t have a certificate that I worked in this in Israel, and here I need a document that I know how to work in this. They help you find work in your profession, I pay taxes if I work in this.” (Habtom)

THE MENTAL STATE OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Although there is no longer a physical threat to the lives of the interviewees due to the protection they have been granted in Europe, the effects of the multiple traumatic experiences they survived on their mental health are still evident. Many described suffering from repeated and uncontrollable thoughts about what had happened to them, nightmares and insomnia. Some of them have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are receiving psychiatric assistance from the mental health services in their host countries. This was evident during the interviews, particularly when they described what had happened in the Sahara Desert, in Libya and while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. When retelling those stories, the interviewees would at times cry and have trouble speaking. Kiflom and Aaron described:

“[In the Sahara] people died and we buried them... This life... I don’t want to remember this. It’s hard to think about this... At night, it returns to our head. It returns. I don’t want to remember. It wakes me up, what I saw, people dying, no food. I don’t want to remember this. It’s a problem... I want to close that door. (Kiflom)

“We will talk, but I don’t have the strength to talk... There are times I cry... It’s hard... What I saw... My friend died. A mess. It’s not good, it’s the most dangerous in the road... I don’t have the strength to speak.” (Aaron)

Dawit, whose wife drowned in the Mediterranean Sea during their joint journey, said that after he reached Germany, he suffered from depression and tried harming himself. He was directed to psychiatric care:

“When I came here, my head went crazy, I wanted to kill myself... I felt I have nothing left in this world. So they sent me to a doctor and gave me pills, and now I am a little better, but without the medication, I cannot sleep... In Sinai, on the road to Israel, six of my friends died. At sea, my wife died... and I remember them, each and every one, and it does not leave me.” (Dawit)

Isayas described feeling guilty for surviving, while his partners in the journey, did not:

“The first time I saw them on Facebook,⁵² I couldn’t. We were together, sleeping, eating together, I got a sick feeling... You know that I’m lucky? That I have relatives in Canada and America who sent money... I have luck.”

Despite the arduous journey and the traumatic experiences they have endured, the interviewees reported that these days, they are trying and mostly succeeding, each in their own way, to establish their life in their welcoming countries. They are making an effort to obtain mastery of the local language, study and find work. In addition, the mere fact that they shared their stories, despite the difficulties this entailed, attests to their mental resilience. Many of them stay informed of news in Israel and the world, and some are taking part in activism among their communities in the countries they have reached, as well as from a distance, through social media.

CONCERN FOR THE LIVES OF THOSE REMAINING IN ISRAEL

All the interviewees described their journey as a road that “must not be traveled on.” They expressed deep concern for the lives of their friends and relatives among the refugee communities residing in Israel, who may “voluntarily” depart or be deported to Rwanda and Uganda, to a “fifty-fifty” journey, in which life and death are both likely outcomes. It was apparent that this concern was one of the motivating factors for revealing what they experienced and granting an interview for this research, despite the challenges this entailed. The interviewees repeatedly

52. Referencing photos of the dead he saw on Facebook.

thanked us for the opportunity to convey their message through these interviews. When they were asked what they would advise a friend who remained in Israel and called to ask whether it would be better to go to prison or leave Israel, all responded the same way. All said, without any hesitation, that although they managed to reach countries where they gained safe haven and rights, they would not embark on this journey again: “It’s better in Israel in prison than dying on the way,” said Tsegay. Samson stated: “You want to die? Then go back, if you don’t want to die, stay in Israel.” Dawit and Brehane responded:

“I will tell him not [to] come... If he comes from Rwanda, Uganda... He could die, and also [pay], what I worked... Five years I spent making the money... that I [paid] for this trip... Better to wait until peace come to our country or we replace our president... But if he goes [to] Rwanda... It’s fifty-fifty, he could die or he could come here like me.” (Dawit)

“If he wants to leave Israel to Uganda, he is really better off staying in Israel... In my life I’ve never seen such a life as in Uganda, Juba, Sudan, all [the way] it’s something difficult, difficult... Because I passed through this place, I don’t want another person to pass through it... And to the government in Israel... they shouldn’t say that everything is okay with Uganda, don’t say that because I saw with my own eyes... Israeli people must stop this... I don’t know what to say, I just pray that from today, people who live in Israel will have the best in life, this is what I pray, and also that it will be good in our country, [so we can] go back.” (Brehane)

CONCLUSIONS

1. THE PROMISES MADE BY THE STATE OF ISRAEL REGARDING WHAT AWAITS THOSE “VOLUNTARILY” DEPARTING TO RWANDA AND UGANDA – ARE FALSE

The findings of this report clearly demonstrate that the pledges the State of Israel made in court and to those leaving prior to their departure regarding what awaits them in Rwanda and Uganda – were not kept. In contravention of the promises regarding access to an asylum application process, granting of legal status, work permits, upon landing, the deportees were exposed to danger and threats.

In Rwanda, the testimonies show that upon arrival in Kigali, local authorities confiscated the travel documents issued in Israel, which was the only identifying document in their possession. They were taken to a hotel guarded by an armed man, where they were forced to stay under threats. One of the interviewees was robbed of all of his money by those who met him at the airport. None of the interviewees were granted access to an asylum application process. Under pressure, they were forced to continue the journey in search of protection and asylum. According to the testimonies, the crossing of the border to Uganda was done with smugglers who cooperate with the officials who met the interviewees at the airport and took them to the hotel. None of the interviewees remained in Rwanda or knows others who departed from Israel and remained in the country. This matches the data of the UNHCR: as far as the agency knows, out of the thousands of refugees who “voluntarily” departed Israel to Rwanda, only seven remained in the country.⁵³ As for Uganda, there as well, the interviewees did not have access to an asylum application process, and they were exposed to robberies and incarceration. In addition, although in February 2016 the State promised the court to improve the protection of those departing, including a promise to allow them to keep a copy of the travel document after landing, as well as to keep track of their situation via phone calls, this report does not find any difference in the narratives of those who left prior to February 2016 and those who left afterwards.

53. This data was provided by the UNHCR and pertains to departures up to November 2017. See: <https://theconversation.com/threat-of-expulsion-hangs-over-thousands-of-eritreans-who-sought-refuge-in-israel-and-the-us-87898>

2. EMBARKING ON ANOTHER JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF SAFE HAVEN

A direct link can be drawn from the circumstances the interviewees found themselves in while in Rwanda and Uganda, where they became deprived of documentation and protection, and were exposed to robberies, threats and incarceration, to their push to continue a life-threatening journey in search of a country that can offer them asylum. The interviewees detailed a long list of travails they have had to endure in the various countries they crossed: torture, slavery in the torture camps in Libya, as well as a dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. The testimonies clearly indicate that due to the only identifying document in possession of the deportees being taken from them in Rwanda and Uganda, along with the money the State of Israel had given them upon departure being on their person, which people in the “third” countries knew of – increased their vulnerability throughout the journey, at times resulting in a threat to their lives.

This vulnerability originates in the Israeli policy, which left them for many years without a legal status, as well as numerous sanctions including incarceration in the Holot Detention Facility, the application of the wage deduction law,⁵⁴ and the dysfunction of the asylum system – all intended to incentivize them to leave. When these policies were compounded with the threat of incarceration, the refugees’ vulnerable state was exploited to coerce them to leave Israel under false promises. Facing this pressure, often feeling complete despair, they were boarded on flights from Israel to a country they have never visited, whose language they do not speak, and to which they have no connection.

3. THREAT OF DEATH THROUGHOUT THE JOURNEY

The findings of this report attest to the constant threat of death the interviewees endured throughout their voyage:⁵⁵ many witnessed the death of their fellow travelers while crossing the Sahara Desert, in the torture camps in Libya, or by drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. Others testified about cases of death that they have heard about, as well as people who were forcibly returned to Eritrea, jailed upon their return, their fate remaining unknown. Among the deaths that the interviewees witnessed first-hand were those of people who “voluntarily” departed Israel. The interviewees stressed time and again that they were among the lucky ones who managed to survive the journey, unlike many others.

54. See Reuters report, July 3, 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-migrants/feeling-unwanted-and-unwelcome-african-migrants-hit-by-new-tax-in-israel-idUSKBN19O1KB>

55. Similar testimonies about asylum-seekers who “voluntarily” departed Israel and died along the way can be found in the 80 interviews collected by the UNHCR in Italy, about which the UN agency reported in January 2018. For the full statement by the UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548e064/unhcr-appeals-israel-forced-relocations-policy.html>

4. FORCIBLE RETURN TO ERITREA

The findings of the report include testimonies about Eritreans who “voluntarily” departed Israel to Rwanda or Uganda who were forcibly returned to Eritrea from one of the countries along the way – South Sudan, Sudan or Libya. Although Israel admits that it can not deport Eritrean back to their homeland, it appears that as part of the “voluntary” departure program, Israel is vicariously exposing them to the threat of forcible deportation to Eritrea.

5. THE STATUS OF THOSE WHO DEPARTED

None of the interviewees received refugee status in Israel, but almost all were granted this status after their asylum applications were examined in Germany and the Netherlands. The refugee status was granted to them within a few months and even a single month from the moment they had applied for asylum. Some of the interviewees reported that they stated during the asylum interview that they had lived in Israel. This exposes the failings of Israel’s asylum system and reifies the widespread criticism it receives. These findings bolster the assumption that similarly to the interviewees in this report, many Eritrean and Sudanese nationals residing in Israel are eligible for refugee status, but are denied the status to which they are entitled under international law.⁵⁶

56. For more on the failings of Israel’s asylum system, see a report by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants <http://hotline.org.il/en/publication/no-safe-haven/>

AFTERWARD

The findings of the report paint a troubling picture about the safety of those “voluntarily” departing Israel. The testimonies of the interviewees prove that the commitments made by the State of Israel toward them – including granting of legal status and protection in Rwanda and Uganda – were not upheld. In light of this, they were forced to continue on a journey in search of safe haven, during which they were exposed to robbery, imprisonment, torture and the threat of death. These findings corroborate the conclusions of previous reports, as well as the statement by the UNHCR. The combination of the interviews included in this report along with previous reports, adds up to a collection of hundreds of testimonies. In light of the new plan proposed by the Israeli government to forcibly deport the tens of thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese residing in Israel, the testimonies found in this report should serve as a warning sign. The regulation concerning deportation to “a third country” is problematic for many reasons, some of which have been discussed before. Among the causes for concern are the deportees’ rights to international protection,⁵⁷ their residence in Israel for many years, the secret nature of agreements concluded with the third countries, and the great expense that this plan entails (the payment of \$5,000 to the “third” country for every person who leaves or is deported accounts for only some of those costs). In addition, this policy has no precedent among Western countries.⁵⁸ In line with the aforementioned, this report concludes that the implementation of deportations to a “a third country” poses a grave threat to the mental wellbeing, safety and lives of men, women and children. To this day, this policy has cost the lives of many who reached Israel in the hope of finding shelter and did not find it there. It is impossible to read the testimonies brought forth in this report otherwise; they are a clear call to stop the looming deportation policy and regularize the status of asylum-seekers residing in Israel.⁵⁹

57. As described in this report, the State of Israel insisted for years that it does not deport Eritreans and Sudanese back to their homelands. Furthermore, Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers are recognized as refugees at high rates across the world. The UNHCR consistently upholds the position that Eritreans and Sudanese nationals in Israel are in a refugee-like situation. According to the UNHCR, the lack of Israeli recognition of their refugee status stems from the failings of Israel’s asylum system, not because they are not deserving of international protection. For more, see: UNHCR’s position on the status of Eritrean and Sudanese nationals defined as ‘infiltrators’ by Israel, November 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a5889584.html>

58. For more on why this policy is unprecedented among Western countries, see: <https://www.ecre.org/oped-israels-plan-to-deport-eritreans-and-sudanese-to-rwanda-is-a-wake-up-call-for-europeans/>

59. Possible solutions to the refugee question in Israel are to conduct real and fair examinations of asylum claims, encourage geographical distribution of refugees while granting them work permits, and directly investing in south Tel Aviv neighborhoods that have absorbed many refugees. See for the example the call by the forum of refugee rights NGOs in Israel <http://hotline.org.il/en/asylum-seekers-from-eritrea-and-sudan-in-israel-december-2017/>