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ERITREAN REFUGEES ARRIVE AT ADDIS ABABA FROM JAIL IN EGYPT: AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO COURAGEOUS SURVIVORS

By The America Team for Displaced Eritreans

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This morning we had a long discussion with two of the latest deportees from Egypt. These were two young ladies, both in their mid-20's, who were willing to share their harrowing experience of their flight from Eritrea.

The America Team had worked with Mr. Hamdy Azazy of New Generation Foundation for Human Rights (El Arish, N. Sinai, Egypt) to have 12 women prisoners transferred from Arish prison to the airport for the trip to Addis Ababa, earlier this month. Mr. Hamdy had provided a list of the names of the refugees, and we attempted to meet them In Addis Ababa.

Unfortunately, almost all on the list had already left Addis-Ababa and gone to the refugee camps in North Ethiopia. The 550 Birr given by ARRA to each deportee upon arrival cannot last that long here in Addis; the public transport to Shire alone costs around 300 Birr. So most leave for the camps after spending only one night here, unless they get help from friends or relatives.

So we interviewed the two who were still in Addia Ababa. The first we will call Ms. A. She was the one who was acting as translator for the group that Mr. Hamdy helped in rescuing from the Egyptian prison. The other we will call Ms. B.

Here is a detailed report of their experience under their respective names. Ms. A did most of the talking. Ms. B was more subdued, and needed considerable encouragement to start her talking. In the course of the interview, when asked whether she experienced any bad experiences under her captors, it was evident that she was trying her utmost to prevent herself from an emotional collapse. It seems certain that she had had some really bad encounters with her captors, but she recounted only the heart rending experiences of another young lady, we will call Ms. C.

From their story, this human smuggling and trafficking business is a systematic, sophisticated, and well organized business, with many multinationals involved, and possibly the 'corrupt' or otherwise support of Security/Police/Military officials in many countries, at least Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt. What is more, many Eritreans are not only colluding in this business, but they are also participating in the brutalities put upon their fellow countrymen and women.

According to the ladies, there are at least four well organized Bedouin outfits/gangs running the business in the Sinai desert:

1. Kemal's 'outfit;
2. Abdella's outfit;
3. Am Sultan's outfit; and
4. Am Yosuf's outfit.

The most notorious ones, where most of the rapes and tortures reported have taken place, were outfits Nos. 2 and 4.

The persons who act as translators (mostly Arabic-Tigrigna) in all the camps were claimed to be Eritreans. The 'names' of three such persons were given by the ladies: Mensur/Matusala, Yonas/Yonus, and Daniel for outfits 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

Now to their stories:

Ms. A, from Asmara, started her journey in September, 2010. She fled from Eritrea through the town of Tessenei, which borders the Sudanese town of Kessela.

On the way from Kessela to the UNHCR run camp for Eritreans called Shera'ab , she and her group of five were hijacked by Bedouins and taken all the way to the Sinai, free of charge.

Most of the trip was uneventful, Ms. A says. She and her group travelled on the back of a pickup truck. When passing checkpoints, towns and cities, they were covered by canvass. What she vividly remembers is the police escort, with siren and armed police, that they were given when passing through the 'big' city, Cairo.

Upon reaching the Sinai, her group was handed over to the Am Sultan outfit; and, she thinks it is this group that had hijacked them in Sudan. Through an Eritrean translator 'named' Daniel, the group was asked to pay 3000 USD each. This will be the price they have to pay for the free journey to the Sinai, and most importantly for winning their freedom and a walk to the Israeli border. They were held in the middle of the desert. The outfit had no holding places in which to keep them. They live in mobile tent-like structures and in their pickup trucks. The hostages were kept in the cave-like juttied-out mountain sides. All of them were chained at their ankles. They were provided with mobile phones in order to contact their relatives. Ms. A. was able to deposit, through a relative, the amount requested at a contact number in Eritrea. She doesn't know where or who. But the outfit didn't take her, as promised, to the Israeli border. They instead 'handed her over' ("sell" is the word the ladies used) to the notorious Am Yosuf's outfit.

This outfit had two corrugated iron structures which Ms. A. could see. She was put in one of them, a 4 X 4 structure, where there were already 34 ladies. She was chained at the ankle like them. The males, mostly young men, were living in the other shed. She estimates their number at around 30.

Conditions at the 'camp' were horrible, according to Ms.A. Daily food consisted of one bread, sometimes to be divided among 2-3 inmates, and an additional meager supply of 'tihnia' (sweetened sesame seed). No sanitation facility at all; whenever somebody in their cell wanted to relieve herself, all the chained group had to move as one mass outside towing their chains; and, the only time they are allowed to move outside is during these times. For the three months she stayed in that cell, she never had enough water to satisfy her thirst, let alone wash her face.

Though Ms. A. claims she had never been molested or raped, she had witnessed at least five girls from her group being unchained, repeatedly, mostly at night. They usually returned after an absence of an hour or so, sobbing and shaken. What they recounted is mostly sordid acts, perpetrated sometimes by single men and at times by multiple men.

Most of the torture was limited to the men. The women could sometimes hear their screams. Theirs was mostly limited to slaps and dragging. The condition within the corrugated iron structure was like hell itself: it was baking hot during the days, and biting cold at night. Especially during the days, the bad odor emanating from their body added with the stifling heat was sometimes so intolerable that there were so many times she wished to die. That no body died in her group is a miracle, says Ms. A.; but one expectant mother gave birth to a dead baby.

Through the three months she stayed in that camp, her group were harassed daily, sometimes many times in a day, to come up with 10,000 USD, the amount of money that would win them freedom and a walk to the Israeli border. Their translator was a man 'named' Yosef/Yosuf, who claimed to be an Eritrean from the town of Tessenei. Ms. A's relatives again came to her help by depositing 8000 USD, again to the groups' contact somewhere in Eritrea. With two other girls who had also managed to secure their release by paying the requested money, she was taken to what they said was the Israeli border. After their escorts left them, they had not walked for half an hour before the Egyptian army picked them up. They were taken the same night to a prison inside Egypt, Arish Prison, where she stayed for 4 months. Conditions there were much better. And it is while here inside the prison that she came to know Mr Hamdy. She also remembers two other frequent visitors: an Egyptian Catholic, and a UNHCR officer.

Ms. A. was deported to Ethiopia on 21/6/11.

Ms. B. is from Mendefera. She left Eritrea in 8/2010, taking the same route as Ms. A, i.e. through Tessenei. But upon reaching safely at the UNHCR run camp of She'gereab, she paid 3000 USD to human smugglers who promised to take her to the Israeli border.

But, on reaching the Sinai, the smuggler sold her and her group of 15 to the Abdella outfit.

The camp this group runs is much the same as what Ms. A. described, and their daily routine, food and sanitation are also alike.

What was different was the harassment, beatings (again mostly limited to the men folk), and the frequency of the rape incidents. Though she denies being raped, Ms. B. preferred to talk about the almost daily raped Ms. C, who was finally so emotionally fraught and physically weak that she was left unchained, free to roam the compounds.

The Eritrean translator for their group was again an Eritrean, 'named' Matsula/Mensur. Their daily haranguing consisted of the same message: pay 10,000USD or suffer the consequences of life there.

Rescue came for Ms. B. and her group when one day the captive men in the nearby iron structure overwhelmed their guards, and they came to ladies' cell and unchained them. Ms. B. estimated 63 people from the camp escaped that night. After almost 2 hours of running in the direction of what they thought would be the Israeli border, they spotted a fence. But before they reached it, they heard a volley of gunfire coming out of nowhere in the dark. She heard people screaming and falling to the ground.

She had helped Ms. C. all the way while running. She was among the four dead. Two men and another woman also died then. At least one other escapee was seriously wounded. She thinks he must have been taken to a hospital, but she never heard of him or his whereabouts.

Ms. B and her group of 'captured' were taken to the Arish prison, where she met up with Ms. A. They are now friends. Ms. B. admires Ms. A. and gives credit to her communication skills with Mr Hamdy, and with the other people, which, she thinks, facilitated their deportation to Ethiopia.