



AN EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF ERITREAN REFUGEES IN SUDAN AND EGYPT

Thousands of Eritreans have fled the oppressive regime that has abused Eritrea and its people since the late-1990s. Many of these have attempted to get to a civilized life by leaving Eritrea over its western border into The Sudan, with an aim of getting to supposed safety in Israel.

The following is a transcript of an interview conducted by The America Team for Displaced Eritreans in October, 2010, with a 40 year-old Eritrean man who experienced the corruption of Eritrean security forces, and cruelties of human traffickers in Sudan and Egypt as he attempted this flight for freedom. He was fortunate to come away with his life, and be sent recently from Egypt to safe haven in Ethiopia.

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Question: Can you describe what happened when you left Eritrea in 2009?

Reply: There was no problem crossing the border – but soon in Sudan, I ran into Rashaida [an ethnic Arabic-speaking cross-border group that operates from the border with Eritrea all the way to Egypt – ed.]

This is how it worked: upon arriving at the border, Eritrean security forces required payment of US\$2,000, or they would return us to the government. After we paid, we were taken across the border and turned over to the Rashaida, who were obviously working in cooperation with the Eritrean security forces.

As we were turned over to the Rashaida, they made payment to the security forces, because we were an article of commerce, of value to the Rashaida. Thus the security forces were paid twice for us. If an asylum seeker cannot pay the \$2000, the security forces said that we “can send the money when we get a job in Israel.” In reality the crossing is allowed because the forces will still be paid by the Rashaida.

Sometimes, local people such as shepherds at the border take some money for passing the border, and turn the refugees over to the Rashaida. (Some are lucky enough to get through without facing the security or the Rashaida, but Rashaida will almost certainly be encountered before making it into Egypt, in attempt to get to Israel.)

WITH THE RASHAIDA

The Rashaida then put us into a building, where we stayed for 17 days, while others were brought. Everyone was then put into 6 open trucks.

It was to take a day-and-a-half to cross the desert to Egypt.

But it took 2 additional days, because the trucks broke down – and they would get bogged down in the sand, and the refugees would have to push the truck to free it. After getting loose, any refugee that didn't make it back into the truck right away was left behind in the desert.

At the Sudan-Egypt border, the Rashaida turned the refugees over to Egyptian Bedouins in exchange for payment.

WITH THE BEDOUINS

[As with donkeys and cattle] the Bedouins would beat the refugees with sticks when more speed or effort was required. The Bedouins had Toyota pick-up trucks.

19 people were loaded into one pick-up. The space was so inadequate that they had to put their chin between their knees. All of our possessions were taken by the Egyptians. No food or drink was provided.

Oh, I just remembered an incident while crossing the Sudan desert: in the trucks we had no water to drink and everyone was dehydrated. Then we saw lightning and I thought, "God will help us!" It rained some distance away, and waters came flooding by us. We grabbed some water in plastic cups, but it was black with dirt – but we drank it out of desperation.



**Eritrean Refugee Giving this Interview to
The America Team for Displaced Eritreans**
Addis Ababa, October, 2010

In Egypt there were 55 of us in 3 pick-ups. 6 more pick-upfulls were brought to have us all in one area.

With our group of 55, 2 escaped. The Bedouins kept asking us where the two were. One of us spoke fluent Arabic and said that the two had run away and that we knew nothing. The Bedouins then beat the man savagely with sticks because he did not give them any information they wanted. Then they asked me – one threatened me and cocked his rifle... but he did not shoot. I could have snatched the gun from him and used it – but I recalled hearing about youth from Adi Kayieh who had done this in the Sinai area and who had killed many Bedouins, but who were then all killed themselves. There were women and children in our group whom I did not want to jeopardize.

Before fleeing, one of the escapees had spoken to me and offered a route to get into Israel on their own, but I declined. I am glad I lived to some day take care of my children.

Then our group went in 3 pick-ups to another place, where all 53 of us were loaded into one larger truck. We were then taken to a place where we stayed for 15 days – hot in the day, cold at night.

Then we were put into an Isuzu truck and taken to another place – it was nighttime – we did not know where we were, but could see city lights off in the distance.

INTO THE PITS

Then we arrived at a place and were made to descend ladders into a large water-retention basin. Even our pregnant women and children had to go down the ladders. Water and food were dropped down to us.

Later, we were moved to another water-retention basin. The trip there was very difficult: in order to keep as much clothing as possible, we had all put on as much as we could, so we had on several layers of clothing. In the truck we were forced to sit crammed together, with our chins on our knees. We got extremely hot – everyone began sweating profusely. The perspiration collected in the bottom of the truck – and believe it or not, it ran out of the truck like a stream of water!

While we were in this last place, the Bedouins approached the Arabic-speaking refugee, and said that because he is Muslim, they would work with him and extract more money from the others and give him \$200 from each of them.

The man then came to me and explained what had happened and that these captors were not going to help the group. We then decided to escape at night, when the group was allowed to leave the retention basin to sleep on the ground. And we escaped. After we left and were walking for a while, we regretted it and returned to the group.

SEEKING OTHER BEDOUINS

The Bedouins are competitors in dealing with refugees. They used the Arabic-speaking man to communicate with our people, and with other captive groups, and provided him with a cell phone. He served as an interpreter between Eritrean refugees and their Rashaida captors in Sudan, and Bedouin captors in Egypt. Knowing that they were at high risk with the present captors, he called another group of Bedouins and said how they could come and pick them all up.

Then one night, our entire group slipped off into the dark, and went to meet the 4 trucks of the other competing Bedouins.

OUT ON OUR OWN

When the trucks never showed up, the group decided to return to the first Bedouins. But when we assembled, we realized that 7 were somehow missing – and with these missing, the Bedouins would punish us, so we decided to strike out on our own.

We found a farm and slept there for the rest of the night. While there, 3 of the 7 that had left, rejoined us. We tried to make a deal with the farmer, but he said that there were spies all around, and based on his recommendation, we gave ourselves up to a soldier who had come to the farm.

We were all taken to an Egyptian jail. Then we answered the soldiers' questions about how we got there, and took them to see the last place the Bedouins had us.

LIFE IN THE EGYPTIAN JAIL

Back at the prison, the soldiers tried to separate the Arabic-speaking man from us because he was a Muslim, but he refused preferential treatment and said that we were all Eritreans and ready to cooperate. He always acted with the rest of his compatriots.

We never got enough food, not edible, not enough clothing and blankets. We decided to go on a hunger strike. There were 32 people in one room. We acted together as one unit. We held loud prayer sessions each evening. Finally, the jailers had enough of it and broke us up into small groups, in different cells.

Question: Can you tell us about some more troubling incidents along the way?

Reply: We were not treated as people. Some died along the way because of dehydration because of lack of water to drink.

Question: Did you have the usual way of burying someone who died along the way?

Reply: No. Normally you see someone covering their feces when relieving themselves in the desert. But in our case, when someone died, they were simply left on the ground. If we were to try to stop to bury someone, I'm sure we would have been shot.

Let alone allowing us to bury the dead, they even left people behind alive, when they had been pushing the trucks in the sand dunes of the desert.

They even killed 2 brothers when they asked for water.

Question: You fought for many years to liberate your country. Now after liberation, you left your country once again. What do you think would happen if you returned to Eritrea?

Reply: If I go back to the leaders who do not want to listen to their people, you know what can happen to me, because I left the country illegally and they could do anything to me.

Question: If people don't pay money to the traffickers, what happens to them when they don't pay?

Reply: They kill some who do not pay. People are given 5 days to pay the fee. They charge a \$50 phone fee and \$50 for food.

60 people were in jail in the Sinai. The captors were beating them, pouring urine on them, and other abuses. The Eritreans were fed up with this treatment. On August 15th (2010), they overpowered the guards and took 2 AK-47s and fled as two groups, each with one gun.

They started their journey to Israel. After a while, Bedouins in armed trucks approached them. With one group, 17 including the man with the gun were killed and the remainder captured. But the other group continued, and crossed two highways and was heading to cross a third when the Bedouins caught up to them and fighting broke out.

The man with the gun was killed first while exchanging fire. Another refugee picked up the gun and continued fire. Again, this guy was killed. A 3rd person took over with the gun. Government forces then attacked the group. As with the first group, many were killed and the remainder captured – except that the man with the gun and one other managed to escape. They eventually made it to the border and entered Israel – the only ones successful out of the group of 60.

The remainder of the interview is a detailed account of the process of payment to the Rashaida, and of the trip up the Sinai. It summarizes the process of human trafficking of Eritrean refugees in Sudan and in the Sinai.

The America Team will make the full interview available on DVD in early 2011.