Pre- and Post-Migration Patterns of Victimization among Eritrean Refugees in the Netherlands

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Daniel R Mekonnen[♣]

"If there is any place called hell in the world, it should be in Libya."
An Eritrean refugee recounting his experience of the journey in the Sahara Desert, a place where secondary victimisation occurs most frequently.

Abstract

Forced migration is one of the major indicators of human insecurity. Throughout its history, Eritrea has seen a recurring cycle of mass political violence and contagious regional armed conflicts. As a result, Eritrea is one of the leading refugee-producing countries in the world. After independence in 1991 Eritrea has seen a major decline in the mass exodus of its population. The trend has completely changed in the aftermath of the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict and particularly after 2001 when Eritrea became one of the most repressive regimes in the world. By examining forced migration as one of the major indicators of human insecurity, this paper discusses pre- and post-migration patterns of victimisation among Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands and in so doing the paper analyses the challenge from a victimological and human security perspective. The study is based on narratives of victimisation told by Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. The data, obtained between April and October 2010, is gathered by open-ended narrative interviews with a number of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands, a majority of whom have arrived in the country after 2002.

***Key terms**: forced migration, victimisation, victimology, human security, human rights, trauma*

1. Introduction

Eritrean history is marked by a recurring cycle of political violence and contagious regional armed conflicts. This has made the country one of the major spots of mass victimisation. Eritrea is also one of the leading refugee producing countries in the world. The trend was halted for a brief moment after the country's independence in 1991. However, with the advent of a full-fledged authoritarianism in 2001, which is preceded by the 1998–2000 border

[♣] Dip Law (Asmara), LLB (Asmara), LLM (Stellenbosch), LLD (Free State); Bank of Ireland Fellow at the Irish Centre for Human Rights, NUI Galway; formerly Judge of the Zoba Maekel Provincial Court, Eritrea; email: danielrezene@gmail.com. The author is indebted to the interviewees who were willing to share their experiences. The financial and institutional support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and INTERVICT at Tilburg University, respectively, is duly acknowledged. Errors are attributable only to the author.

conflict with Ethiopia, forced migration has again become one of the distinctive trademarks of Eritrea. Given this sad reality, the designation of the Eritrean population by Gaim Kibreab as a society severely inflicted by a "powerful obsession to migrate"[1] should come as no surprise. This is further epitomised by the metaphoric observation of Nathaniel Meyers who travelled to Eritrea in mid-2010 and observed that *Prison Break*[2] was the television series most Eritreans wanted to watch.[3] Beneath this penetrating metaphor is the tragedy of Eritrea becoming an open giant prison where every member of the population consider themselves prisoners and relatives outside of the country are deemed rescuers. Similarly, Tania Müller also notes that as a result of the unbearable situation in the country, Eritrea's brightest minds "spend their mind devising strategies how to best leave the country."[4] In a broader African context, this resonates with the observation of Yash Tandon, who holds, "The most shocking aspect of Africa today is the exodus of its people."[5] This reality is harsher in Eritrea than in many other African countries.

In 2008, Eritrea was the second highest refugee-producing country in the world in absolute numbers.[6] Despite its small population size, the figures are exceedingly fear-provoking. On the other hand, the Netherlands is one of the major recipients of refugees in Europe. In 2009, nearly 15 000 new asylum applications were filed in the Netherlands.[7] These include a considerable number of applications by newly arriving Eritrean asylum seekers.[8] According to experts, the 2009 statistics portray an increase of eleven per cent in the total number of

[1] Gaim Kibreab "The Eritrean Diaspora, the War of Independence, Post-Conflict (Re)-construction and Democratisation" in Ulf Johansson Dahre (ed) *The Role of Diasporas in Peace, Democracy and Development in the Horn of Africa* (Lund: Lund University, 2007) 99.

[2] This is a prominent American television serial drama on the story of a man who was wrongly sentenced to death, and the effort of a brother to help the prisoner escape prison.

[3] Nathaniel Meyers "Africa's North Korea: Inside Eritrea's Open-Air Prison," *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2010, also available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/africas_north_korea?page=0,0.

[4] Tania R Müller "Bare Life and the Developmental State: Implications of the Militarisation of Higher Education in Eritrea" *Journal of Modern African Studies* (2008) 46(1): 136.

[5] Yash Tandon "Questions for Our Nordic Friends," in *Africa in Uncertain Times*, Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), Annual Report, 2009, 13.

[6] UNHCR *Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*, (2009) 16.UNHCR 2009.

[7] Arno Sprangers and Han Nicolaas "Stijging aantal asielzoekers in Nederland iets groter dan in EU (Number of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands Increases Slightly Higher than in EU)," available at http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/C24A6C4E-FCCC-4951-994B-3BB73EB391DF/0/2010k2b15p25art.pdf (accessed 1 September 2010).

[8] In this work, the term refugee is used in the context of both asylum seekers and refugees. However, in a strict terminological sense, an asylum seeker is a person who has applied for protection as a refugee and whose application is still pending; while a refugee is a person whose application has been granted.

asylum seekers in the Netherlands, compared to that of 2008.[9] Understandably, migration is one of the major pre-occupations to policy makers in the Netherlands as is the case in other parts of the European Union (EU).[10] On the other hand, the alarming level of mass exodus from Eritrea is one of the main indicators of human insecurity in Eritrea in particular, and in the Horn of Africa in general. As a result, Eritrea, as one of the leading refugee-producing countries and the Netherlands, as one of the major recipient countries, make a good combination for an exploratory study which analyses pre- and post-migration patterns of victimisation among Eritrean refugees – which is the main objective of this paper.

2. Narratives of victimisation by Eritrean refugees

As noted before, the Netherlands is one of the main destinations of Eritrean refugees in Europe. Compared to other European countries, the number of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands is relatively low. However, the number is predicted to grow steadily as long as the major causes of forced migration remain unresolved. The fact that the Netherlands is favourably approving[11] a very high number of asylum applications from newly arriving Eritrean refuges is another reason to predict a considerable increase in the near future. According to data obtained from the Netherlands Immigration and Naturalisation Service, in 2009 there were 486 new asylum applications by Eritreans.[12] Compared to 2008, when there were 252 applications from Eritreans, the figures from 2009 have almost doubled, indicating the growing number of Eritrean refugees in the country.

The fact of Eritrea becoming again a centre of victimisation and an unprecedented scale of mass exodus is troubling. Combined with other factors, this poses a serious threat both to the

[9] Sprangers and Nicolaas, note ** above.
[10] See for example, Anna Kicinger "International Migration as a Non-Traditional Security Threat and the EU Responses to this Phenomenon," CEFMR Working Paper, October 2004, available at http://www.cefmr.pan.pl/docs/cefmr_wp_2004-02.pdf; Michela Ceccorulli "Migration as a Security Threat: Internal and External Dynamics in the European Union," GARNET Working Paper No. 65/09, April 2009, available at http://www.garnet-eu.org/fileadmin/documents/working_papers/6509.pdf.
[11] This has been relayed to the author by Mr. Carel Sonneveldt, an asylum screening officer at the Schiphol Asylum Application Centre, in an interview with the author on 12 October 2010. Mr. Sonneveldt particularly states that an Eritrean asylum seeker who cites one of the following major grounds of victimization has a very high probability of acceptance: religious persecution, prolonged military conscription and the state of "illegality" created by crossing the Eritrean borders without proper documentation. It should be noted that most people are forced to cross the border "illegally" due to the impossibility of obtaining exist visa and passport from government authorities.
[12] Data obtained on 24 August 2010 from Mr. Stefan de Boer, Deputy Head of the Information and Analysis Centre at the Netherlands Immigration and Naturalisation Service.

very existence of the country and to human security in the region, as also stressed by a 2010 report of the ICG.[13] This claim can be supported by the following narrations of Eritrean refugees. The data also reveal the extent to which the Eritrean population in general and the youth in particular are affected by the challenge and how they are escaping from it. The narrations epitomise thousands of other untold stories of Eritrean refugees in different parts of the world. Nonetheless, by no means do these narratives purport to be representative of all accounts of Eritrean refugees. They are meant only to reflect the general pattern of victimisation described by many Eritrean refugees in different parts of the world.

The information presented in the following stories is gathered by open-ended narrative interviews with twelve Eritrean refugees, a majority of whom have arrived in the Netherlands after 2002. The year 2002 is chosen as an important milestone for the following reason. This year represents a time when the mass exodus of Eritreans has taken a new shape. This is so because of the widespread political clampdown that took place in Eritrea in the preceding year, when members of the G-15,[14] journalists of the private media and others were arbitrarily arrested by the Eritrean government. Preceded by the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia, this period denotes the opening of a new episode in the post-independence history of Eritrea, a time when a full-fledged authoritarianism took deep roots in the country. Since then the mass exodus of Eritreans has continued unabated. The second most important factor is that which is noted by Kibreab. In the year 2002, the Eritrean government promulgated the Warsay Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), which made the requirement of national military service programme (NMSP) indefinite. In real sense, this means the introduction of a lifelong military conscription that has degenerated to a form of forced labour, a practice the prohibition of which has now become a peremptory norm of international law (a norm from which no derogation is ever permitted). The apparent consequence of this is mass exodus of an unprecedented scale.[15]

The interviewees with Eritrean refugees were conducted between April and October 2010. Due to time constraints and higher levels of apathy in Eritrean diaspora communities, solicitation of interviews with a larger number of refugees was not possible. The data

[13] International Crisis Group (ICG) *Eritrea: The Siege State*, Africa Report No. 163, 21 September 2010.
[14] G-15 stands for the Group of 15 senior government officials who initiated a reform movement in 2001 and remain in detention without trial since then. Some of them have reportedly died while in detention.
[15] Gaim Kibreab "Forced Labour in Eritrea" *Journal of Modern African Studies* (2009) 47(1): 4, 49.

gathered from the interviews is therefore supplemented by the following additional information: a) interview with an asylum screening officer from the Netherlands Immigration and Naturalisation Service; b) interview with admissions manager at the Central Brabant Newcomers and Refugees Foundation, an NGO that supports refugees; c) person-to-person conversations with a number of key Eritrean informants, who are well informed about the dynamics of forced migration in Eritrea; d) focus group discussions with a number of Eritreans residing in the Netherlands; e) personal observations of the researcher over extended period of time on the plight of Eritrean refugees and the overall human rights crisis in Eritrea; f) reports of international publicists and human rights advocacy groups.

The apparent limitation of the research in terms of soliciting a bigger number of volunteer interviewees requires a little more explanation. At the beginning of the research, a call for interviews was widely publicised in prominent Eritrean dispora websites, news outlets and paltalk mediums.[16] Even then, the turnover was not sufficient. This is mainly due to the pervasive level of political apathy in Eritrean diaspora communities and also due to widespread fear of reprisal[17] on the part of many refugees, as will be discussed in some of the case studies below. The majority of the interviewees were therefore contacted via acquaintances and social networks of Eritreans in the Netherlands. This strengthens the requirement of strict anonymity and confidentiality, a factor which is also highlighted by other researchers who have conducted similar interviews with Eritreans. Following the approach adopted by Hirt,[18] Kibreab,[19] Müller[20] and Arnone[21] the names of all Eritrean interviewees have been anonymised and specific characteristic features of the interviewees have also been disguised to protect the identity of interviewees. Religious affiliation and gender of interviewees have been left intact. All of the interviewees are individuals whose

[16] The call was posted on the website of www.awate.com and www.togoruba.com, two of the widely read Eritrean daispora websites. It was also announced in the *Voice of Meselna Delina*, an Eritrean radio programme broadcasted from South Africa. This is addition to dissemination of the information in the *Hidmo Meneseyat Eritrea Discussion Forum* at paltalk. In recent years, paltalk has become one of the most effective social and political forums of Eritrean diaspora communities. Efforts to broadcast the call for interview at *Radio Erena*, another Eritrean radio programme broadcasted from Paris, were not successful.

[17] One person approached by an acquaintance of the author has, for example, particularly cited fear of reprisal as a main reason for his refusal to be interviewed.

[18] Nicole Hirt "'Dreams Don't Come True in Eritrea': Anomie and Family Disintegration due to the Structural Militarization of Society," GIGA Working Papers, 119/2010, January 2010, 7-9; Robert K Merton *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 15.

[19] Kibreab 2009, note ** above, footnote 15.

[20] Müller, note ** above, footnote 14.

[21] Anna Arnone "Journeys to Exile: The Constitution of Eritrean Identity through Narratives and Experiences *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2008) 34(2): 329.

application for asylum is already accepted. This reduces the risk of over-exaggerating one's own plight on the part of the interviewees with the motive of enhancing the acceptability of asylum application.[22] In one instance, data was collected from a person who has been granted asylum in another European country but happened to be in the Netherlands at the time of the interview.

Most of the interviewees characteristically display multiple incidents or levels of victimisation as a result of exposure to multiple traumatic events that took place in multiple contexts.[23] The first level of victimisation is that which occurs in Eritrea. This type of victimisation often results from a prolonged stay in the military, and the resultant abuses or other types of human rights violations. The second level of victimisation takes place once the victims flee the country. The starting point for this is most of the time arrival in the immediate neighbouring countries, such as Ethiopia and Sudan. This continues to other "corridor countries," such as Libya, and to a certain extent also Italy and Malta. The most notorious places where most interviewees suffer from a second level of victimisation are Sudan and Libya. The third level of victimisation is that which takes place after arrival in the final destination, which is the Netherlands.

2.1. Primary victimisation

As a country ruled by one of the most repressive regimes in the world, Eritrea is replete with all major sources of victimisation. The most common cause of victimisation is prolonged military conscription. The Eritrean government adopted a national military service programme (NMSP) in 1991 which was fully implemented as from 1994. Accordingly, every adult member of the Eritrean society between eighteen and forty-five years of age is required to fulfil an eighteen-month NMSP. The programme is composed of a six-month military training and a one-year voluntary service, rendered mostly in the army. In the first few years, the Eritrean government has shown some degree of respect to the maximum limit of eighteen months. However, after the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia, the government has

[22] This is based on the cautionary note of Kibreab 2009, note ** above, 50.

[23] This characterization is based on Tim Hope et al "The Phenomena of Multiple Victimization: The Relationship between Personal and Property Crime Risk" *British Journal of Criminology* (2001) 41: 595–617. This paper focuses on what the authors define as "multiple crime-type victimization (MCV)," a concept which denotes the extent to which persons are victimized by more than one type of offence over a given period.

utterly undermined the eighteen months limit and kept hundreds of thousands of conscripts in the army under indefinite military conscription, and with a nominal pocket money which in real sense is meaningless in terms of improving the lives of the soldiers or that of their family members. Hundreds of thousands of Eritrean youth have been trapped in this quagmire for several years, some of them for more than fifteen years, and they still do not see any end to this abusive practice. Military discipline is extremely harsh and in many instances army commanders employ excessively abhorrent punishments such as torture and extra-judicial killings. Frustrated by such abusive practices, tens of thousands of Eritreans are fleeing the country in unprecedented manner and this makes one of the most common causes of victimisation described by the interviewees. Semere, a twenty-nine-year old interviewee, shares his experience as follows:

> I was conscripted to the army in May 2000. After taking my military training in the Gahtelay Training Centre, I was assigned to the 32nd Division, which by then was stationed in a place called Keskese. When I arrived in this place, I meet some people who have been in the army since 1994 and whose most productive age was being wasted in a gruesome military life. I immediately began to think about my future, contemplating that I may also have to stay in the army for the same number of years as those colleagues or even more. That was unbearable. I could not really see a bright future of my life. I was then to witness a dreadful experience which involved a brutal punishment of some female members of the army. The ladies were punished for returning a week after their official leave but the punishment was harsh. As I saw them, their hands were tied up from behind, their heads shaved, and milk spilt over their body.[24] This sounded quite "normal" to those who were in the army longer than myself but for me it was dreadful. I saw several other brutal methods of punishment at other times and I finally decided to leave the army, to go anywhere before it was too late, and search for a better life, rights and dignity. Accordingly, I left Eritrea in October 2000 and arrived in the Netherlands at the end of 2002.[25]

The story of Semere resonates with that of Desta who describes the main reason for his decision to leave Eritrea as "a prolonged practice of military conscription," a practice which has made his personal aspirations unrealisable and his future unpromising.[26] Desta, who has spent twelve years in the army, narrates a personal experience which involves a brute method of punishment meted out against him on the instruction of a senior military officer who had an

[24] This type of punishment is very common in the army. Milk is spilt over the body of a tied up prisoner to attract flea on the body of the victim and make the punishment degrading. For sexual violence in the army, see generally Cecilia M Bailliet "Examining Sexual Violence in the Military within the Context of Eritrean Asylum Claims Presented in Norway" *International Journal of Refugee Law* (2007) 19: 471–510.

[25] Interview with Semere, 2 August 2010.

[26] Hirt, note ** above (131–132, 163), characterises this as "social anomie," a state of large scale disturbed order and societal disintegration as a result of the inability of a large proportion of the society to realize one's personal aspirations. Hepner and O'Kane on their part investigate the challenge by adopting the concept of biopolitics, which they define as "a state-led deployment of disciplinary technologies on individuals and population groups." Tricia Redeker Hepner and David O'Kane "Introduction" in David O'Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds) *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (Berghan Books: Oxford & New York, 2009), cover page, xxxiii–xxxiv.

axe to grind against him. Accordingly, with his hands tied up from behind, he was made to spend fifteen days in the open air, day and night. He was untied only for few minutes a day when he had to eat and urinate. During this time, he was given only a small piece of bread and water as a meal three times a day. The punishment was meted out in a place called Mai Idaga. The season was winter and Mai Idaga is one of the coldest places in Eritrea at this time of the year.[27] This type of punishment is also reported, for example, by some former conscripts interviewed by Kibreab who told the latter that even refusal to provide personal service to superiors (such as washing clothes, socks or cooking) is subject to this kind of punishment.[28]

In most cases, primary incident of victimisation suffered by interviewees was gauged by the answer they gave to one of the first questions in the interview, which asks, "Why did you leave Eritrea?" Hagos answers the question as follows:

> After the end of the border conflict with Ethiopia, I began to understand things clearly. That is when the exploitation by superiors was taking a different shape. Soldiers were forced to cultivate horticultures owned by superiors at no benefit to the soldiers themselves. They were also forced to build houses for their superiors. It was sheer exploitation. I was once asked to build a house for my superior but I refused. I even insisted that if one has to build houses, it should be for the internally displaced persons who are living in make-shift camps and not for the superiors who are in a much better position than others. My superiors did not like my principled position on this issue and I was intimidated seriously by reason of which I finally decided to leave the country.[29]

A fourth example comes from the testimony of Mehari who has been victimised by illegal detention of thirteen months in one of the most notorious prison centres, called Shadshay Brigade (the Sixth Brigade). Mehari was jailed for returning to his unit later than the last day of his official leave. According to Mehari, the reason for his delay was an injury he sustained while on leave and he had proper documentation on this. In spite of this, the commander of his division gave a unilateral order the effect of which was indefinite imprisonment. He describes the living condition of the prison as extremely harsh. One day, a number of prisoners escaped while they were escorted by prison guards for urination. The guards retaliated by beating all prisoners, including those did not try to escape. Mehari was recovering from the injury he sustained while on official leave. Apparently, he was one of those who did not try to escape. Nonetheless, he was beaten seriously by the prison guards who over-reacted to the adventurous measure of the absconders. Mehari sustained serious

[27] Interview with Desta, 16 October 2010.
[28] Kibreab 2009, note ** above, 58.
[29] Interview with Hagos, 2 July 2010. For similar accounts, see Kibreab 2009, note ** above, 60–63, citing a former conscripts.

injury as a result of the beating and fainted. He was then rushed to a military clinic and spent there a few days from which he escaped to Sudan in 2007. He arrived in the Netherlands in January 2009.[30]

The last example in this section comes from Gile, who is a former freedom fighter of EPLF, the predecessor of PFDJ, the sole legal political party in Eritrea. He arrived in the Netherlands by the end of 2003. He first fled to Sudan, then crossed the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea before his arrival in Italy and finally in the Netherlands. He left Eritrea after he was illegally detained while in the army. He suffered the illegal detention for expressing a view unfavourable to his superiors. He expressed the view in a meeting held in the awake of the reform movement of the G-15. The meeting was convened by a senior ruling party official who urged attendants of the meeting to condemn the reformers. Gile objected the call for condemnation and expressed his concern on the ground that it would be unfair to condemn the G-15 in their absence and based only on one side of the story. He was arbitrarily detained on such grounds. Fortunately, his imprisonment did not last long. The commander of his division decided to shorten the period of the illegal detention, because as a trainer of a specialised course, Gile was indispensable in his division. After his release from detention, Gile knew he was no longer safe in the army and decided to leave the country.[31] The plight of Gile resonates with a story narrated to Kibreab by a former Eritrean conscript, who says those who expose the failures of the military leadership or challenge the commanders are subject to harsh punishment, including extra-judicial killing.[32]

2.2. Secondary victimisation

Secondary incident of victimisation takes place when victims cross the Eritrean border and reach one of the neighbouring countries, notably Ethiopia and Sudan. This experience continues in all transit countries until one reaches the Netherlands. The causes of victimisation at this level include natural and man-made tragedies. Sometimes, the incident giving rise to victimisation may take place in the border between Eritrea and the neighbouring countries. A typical example of victimisation which combines both natural and man-made tragedies is described in the following story of Hagos, a 41-year old refugee:

[30] Interview with Mehari, 22 August 2010.
[31] Interview with Gile, 4 September 2010.
[32] Kibreab 2009, note ** above, 58.

> I left the border village of Ali Gidir at 7pm and travelled for several hours until I was confronted by a herd of about 150 cows. I have heard rumours that the cows in the Gash-Barka Region are very wild to strangers and I was too scared when surrounded by such a big herd. I tactfully avoided what could have been a certain deadly attack by the herd and continued my way to Sudan. However, the experience was traumatic. Around 2am of the same night, I lost my direction and ended up approaching the border guards. I saw a guard in a distance of 100 meters and quickly hid myself behind a tree. However, a number of soldiers came closer to the tree to capture me. I made some strange sound by colliding a stone and a small piece of metal I have been travelling with. I did this to disguise a typical machinegun sound heard when the device is being loaded and miraculously the trick has worked. I heard the soldiers saying, "He is a jihadist, ignore him, and let us go before he shoots." And they went back immediately. I then continued my journey, at times confronting some wild animals in the midst of the wilderness. Around 7am the next morning, I crossed the Tekeze River and arrived in a small border village of Sudan.[33]

The experience of Hagos is one of a few exceptions, because most Eritreans cross the border to Ethiopia and Sudan with the help of smugglers who are perceived of having discreet deals with senior military officers in the border surveillance unit. Without such deals it is extremely difficult to smuggle people from Eritrea to neighbouring countries, because the Eritrean borders are heavily guarded by the border surveillance unit which operates on a strict "shoot-to-kill" policy. Ali, for example, travelled to Sudan with the help of smugglers, who charged him exorbitant price in exchange for the risky service they provided. He describes his journey to Sudan as one which involved a chain of smugglers who ended up fighting against each other on the amount of money each of them should receive from the "clients." Ali was forced to leave the country "illegally" when he was refused an exit visa to pursue postgraduate studies after he secured a scholarship in the Netherlands. It is a matter of routine practice that individuals within the age of military conscription, 18 and 45 years of age, are not allowed to leave the country even for academic purposes. In rare instances, individuals may obtain permission to travel abroad and this normally happens on the basis of preferential treatment and loyalty to the ruling party, PFDJ.

The option Ali had was to leave the country with the help of smugglers. The experience was life threatening. As a result of the disagreement between the smugglers, Ali and nine other individuals were held hostage for ten days in a Sudanese border village. One of the smugglers, who believed that he was underpaid by his counterparts, held them hostage until such time when he would settle the outstanding money with his counterparts. Ali's proficiency in Arabic meant that he overheard what was supposed to be a confidential phone conversation between the man who kept him hostage and another smuggler who was talking from the other end of the phone. Ali was extremely traumatised to hear the hostage taker

[33] Interview with Hagos, 2 July 2010.

threatening the other man that unless the outstanding balance is settled, he would starve the hostages to death ensuring that they would not make it to their final destination which was Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. The victims were locked in a small room with only a brief break every evening. They were severely impoverished as a result of a shortage of food deliberately imposed on them by the hostage taker. The person provided them with a small quantity of bread which is sufficient only for bare survival. Ali recounts that "for the hostage taker, the victims were nothing more than valuable merchandises that should be kept only as long as the hostage taker settles his disagreement with the other smugglers." Fortunately, recalls Ali, the smugglers resolved their problem after ten days and the victims were released right away. [34]

From all transit countries, where a secondary level of victimisation takes place, Libya stands out as the most notorious. Most Eritrean refugees have dreadful memories about their experience in Libya. Six of the interviewees in this research made their way to Europe via Libya. After entering Sudan, most refugees continue to Libya. The travel from Sudan to Libya is extremely hazardous. The border between Sudan and Libya is entirely part of the Sahara Desert, the world's largest hot desert, and this is the only way people are smuggled from Sudan to Libya. If one crosses the Sahara Desert and reaches Libya alive, it is considered a miracle. The next step is crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach the southern tip of Italy, which is the first European point of entry for many Eritreans. The suffering Eritreans endure in crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea is comparable only with paranormal stories told by best seller novels or by Hollywood adventure movies. The corresponding level of trauma and psychological harm is difficult to imagine. The following examples illustrate this.

From Sudan to Libya people are transported by overcrowded vehicles. Most of the vehicles used in this trip are four-wheel-drive Toyota Land Cruisers. Normally, these vehicles may carry a maximum of seven or eight people. However, the smugglers sometimes transport about forty people at a time in these vehicles.[35] Depending on the condition of vehicles and other factors, such as the astuteness of the smugglers in terms of driving in the right direct, the journey may take a minimum of eight days. In his journey from Sudan to Libya, Ande crossed

[34] Interview with Ali, 22 August 2010.
[35] Interview with Hagos, 2 July 2010.

the Sahara Desert in 2008 aboard an overcrowded Toyota Land Cruiser. In his case, the journey lasted for a total of twenty-one days. On their way, they were intercepted by Darfur rebel groups who extorted US$ 30 from each person at a gun point.[36] Another victim, Haile, crossed the Sahara Desert in March 2003, with other twenty-seven refugees in another overcrowded Toyota Land Cruiser. In the middle of their journey, the driver of the vehicle, who is also the smuggler, told the refugees that he would divert to a nearby spot to fetch a spare part and while doing so he ordered them to stay in the same place where he was about to leave them. Strangely, however, he asked the three female members of the group to accompany him. According to Haile, this was a pretext to isolate the women from the rest of the group and create conducive atmosphere for rape. Cognizant of the dodgy schemes of the smuggler, the refugees resisted in one voice and saved the women from a possible rape. The smuggler continued the journey without further ado. However, after a short while he was unable to drive the vehicle due to excessive intake of recreational drug. The victims had to wait for hours until the driver regained his consciousness and was able to drive.[37]

One of the most traumatic incidents described by another interviewee is the death of some sixty-five refugees in the middle of the Sahara Desert.[38] The travellers were trapped in the desert as a result of technical malfunction of the vehicle which was transporting them. All sixty-five people perished in the same spot as a result of exposure to prolonged hunger and dehydration. A number of corpses were traced a few hundred metres away from the place where the vehicle was trapped. It appeared that some of the victims tried to continue the journey on foot after the vehicle was trapped but they were unable to move more than a few hundred metres. It was not clear if these victims were Eritreans, because the Sahara Desert is also crossed by other African immigrants. A similar account is, however, given by Mehari, who says, "In our case, we buried four Eritreans and twelve Somalis in the Sahara Desert." Recounting his experience in Libya, Mehari says, "If there is any place called hell in the world, it should be in Libya."[39] As told by all interviewees who passed through the Sahara Desert, their vulnerability in Libya was exacerbated by the fact that there are many local people in Libya who have made it their "profession" to extort money from refugees. They do this with excessive brutality and violence. Libya is a transit country to many African refugees

[36] Interview with Ande, 22 August 2010.
[37] Interview with Haile, 24 July 2010.
[38] Interview with Desta, 16 October 2010.
[39] Interview with Mehari, 22 August 2010.

who aspire to enter Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. This has created not only a wide network of smugglers operating from Libya but also gave rise to the emergence of a large number of people who are actively involved in the business of extorting money from refugees, a practice which is accompanied by brute physical violence, such as stabbing and beating.

The longer one stays in Libya the more they are vulnerable to repeated actions of extortion. As a result, most people rush to cross the Mediterranean Sea even when there are strong waves in the sea, making it extremely difficult for navigation with the small boats of smugglers. Travel in the sea has its own ordeals. Solomon crossed the Mediterranean Sea in July 2003. In the middle of their journey, his group lost direction and stayed in the sea for six days. They were luckily rescued by a passing Tunis ship. With hindsight, he describes his experience as an insanely outrageous. He still does not believe if it has ever happened.[40] Similarly, after losing their direction in the middle of the sea, Hagos and his group were rescued by a Spanish ship which offered them a sanctuary in the sea for eight days after which they were taken to Malta.[41]

From the above it is clear that by the time they arrive in the Netherlands, Eritrean refugees have already sustained immense psychological harm and trauma. There is a general consensus among researchers that refugees are some of the most susceptible group of people to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is due to the fact that their experience is bound to expose them to poly-traumatic events that occur in multiple contexts overtime.[42] As a result, they require tailor-made psychological support mechanisms that should facilitate speedy recovery and healing. Several of the interviewees have agreed on the need for such support mechanisms but lamented on the fact that these services are not adequately available. This resonates with the observation of Hanneke Ermstrang, who is the Admissions Manager at the

[40] Interview with Solomon, 2 August 2010.
[41] Interview with Hagos, 2 July 2010.
[42] Michael Hollifield et al "Measuring Trauma and Health Status in Refugees: A Critical Review" *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2002) 288(5): 618; Annette A. M. Gerritsen et al "Physical and Mental Health of Afghan, Iranian and Somali Asylum Seekers and Refugees Living in the Netherlands" *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* (2005): 7; Derrick Silove et al "Anxiety, Depression and PTSD in Asylum Seekers: Associations with Pre-Migration Trauma and Post-Migration Stressors" *British Journal of Psychiatry* (1997) 170: 351; Derrick Silove "Trauma Exposure, Post-Migration Stressors, and Symptoms of Anxiety, Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress in Tamil Asylum-Seekers: Comparison with Refugees and Immigrants" *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* (1998) 97: 175.

Central Brabant Newcomers and Refugees Foundation, an NGO that supports refugees and asylum seekers.[43]

Ersmstrang holds that refugees undergo a medical check-up before they are formally interviewed by the Netherlands Immigration and Naturalisation Service. The medical check-up is mean to find out, among other things, whether individuals are physically and mentally fit for a formal interview. In terms of assessing the mental fitness of refugees and most importantly in terms of gauging trauma and psychological problems, Ermstrang believes that the mechanisms employed by the immigration department are not sufficient. She particularly questions the competence of the medical experts who conduct the examination, for they are nurses and not properly trained professionals such as psychologists. In elaborating this, Ermstrang mentions a case of a refugee from Benin whom she believed was extremely traumatised and unable to stand for a formal interview. After being asked some fifteen or twenty standard questions by a nurse, which is the current regular mechanism utilised to gauge trauma and psychological harm among refugees, the person from Benin was said to be competent to do a formal interview. This is indicative of the need to critically assess whether the current psychological support mechanisms available for refugees are commensurate with the needs of victims of gross human rights violations. In this regard, it is important to heed the advice of Louis Loutan et al who suggest as follows. In the case of refugees, the mechanisms adopted to assess psychological trauma, such as the standard questionnaires used by psychologists, need to be culture-specific in order to ensure better results.[44]

2.3. Tertiary victimisation

Tertiary level of victimisation is that which occurs when the refugees arrive in the Netherlands. For many people, arrival in the Netherlands heralds the down of a new era, the end of an ardours journey and the beginning of a dignified life. However, in some cases, it does not necessarily mark a break with the enduring cycle of victimisation. The challenges some Eritreans face in the Netherlands are by no means comparable to the hardship they undergo in Eritrea and the transit countries they cross before they arrive in the Netherlands, particularly Sudan and Libya. There are, however, some disturbing incidents of victimisation

[43] Interview with Hanneke Ermstrang, 8 September 2010.
[44] Louis Loutan et al "Impact of Trauma and Torture on Asylum Seekers" *European Journal of Public Health* (1999) 9(2): 96.

even after the arrival of refugees in save heavens, such as the Netherlands. This is best explained in the context of what Müller describes as a remarkable level of control the Eritrean government enjoys over its diaspora communities.[45]

In proportion to its small population, Eritrea has one of the largest diaspora communities in the world. The total population of Eritrea is estimated at four million.[46] Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are currently about 1.5 million Eritreans scattered throughout the world, stretching from Africa, to the Middle East, to Europe, to North America and to Australia. The Eritrean government enjoys extraordinary control over diaspora communities which is no less effective than the control it enjoys over the population inside the country. One of the most effective methods by which the Eritrean government enforces its control over diaspora communities is the imposition of a 2% income tax from every Eritrean who lives anywhere in the world.[47] This tax regime was promulgated by Proclamation No. 67/1995, officially titled, *Proclamation to Provide for the Collection of Tax from Eritreans who Live Abroad and Earn an Income*.

As noted by Kibreab, Eritrea is one of the few countries in the world that levy income tax on their diaspora communities. Eritreans are required to pay the diaspora tax regardless of whether they have adopted foreign citizenship. Most importantly, individuals have to fulfil this onerous obligation in disregard of the fact that the income from which this tax is collected is already taxed in the source country. This raises critical questions on the legality of the practice, which in effect is a practice of double taxation.[48] In addition to being a major source of revenue to the Eritrean government, the 2% tax regime is used an effective control mechanism over diaspora communities. Accordingly, "all government services, including those which are supposed to be intrinsic to citizenship rights are dependent on payment of the 2% diaspora tax." These include a number of services such as: obtaining or renewing an Eritrean passport and other documents such as birth, marriage and death certificates; buying,

[45] Müller, note ** above, 125.
[46] Since independence in 1991, no official census has been conducted in Eritrea. Surveys are conducted in the country by different actors and the estimation of Eritrea's total population is based on such surveys. Arnone, however, writers: "The Eritrean diaspora accounts for one quarter of the entire Eritrean population: 1 million Eritreans live abroad, only 3 million in Eritrea." Arnone, note ** above, 325, citing Khalid Koser *New African Diasporas* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[47] Müller, note ** above, 125; Kibreab 2007, note ** above, 106.
[48] Kibreab 2006, note **, 106.

selling, inheriting and transferring property; traveling to Eritrea, and other similar services.[49] Experience shows that the diaspora tax is also collected even from refugees who do not have a formal salary in which case the "tax" is collected from social welfare benefits. In addition to the payment of the diaspora tax, individuals who are believed to have left Eritrea "illegally" are forced to sign a self-incriminating statement of treason. As a case study which features the above two elements, the experience of Haile is most illustrative.

Haile arrived in the Netherlands at the end of 2003. He left Eritrea after he was tipped by friends that the government was to arrest him in retaliation for his support to the reform movement of the G-15. Like most refugees, he first crossed to Sudan, then to Libya, then to Italy, finally arriving in the Netherlands. After obtaining his asylum protection from the Netherlands, he applied for family reunification and this was accepted by the Netherlands. His wife and children are still in Eritrea. It is difficult to bring them without obtaining the relevant documentation, such as birth and marriage certificates, from the Eritrean authorities. In order to obtain the relevant documentation, Haile had to report to the Eritrean Embassy in the Netherlands, where he was asked first to sign a self-incriminating statement "for betraying his country." He was also asked to pay the 2% diaspora tax. By then, he was not working and did not earn any income. He was however told to pay the 2% tax from his social welfare benefits, which is considered by the embassy as an "income." He fulfilled both requirements, hoping that he would get the required clearance from the embassy without which his wife and children wound not get the documents they require from the Eritrean authorities back in the home country. However, in a sudden twist of events, his wife was asked to bring a letter from the Eritrean Embassy in the Netherlands, confirming the loyalty of her husband to the government. This document was never to be obtained from the embassy, because Haile is "a designated disloyal," even after paying the 2% income tax and signing the self-incriminating statement.[50]

Another characteristic feature of Eritrean diaspora communities is that they are deeply infiltrated by government informers and spies who report on the activities of others in a systematic and orchestrated manner. Some individuals even go to the extent of intimidating dissidents, as has happened to Gile in 2010. Gile is an outspoken critic of the Eritrean

[49] Kibreab 2006, note **, 106–107.
[50] Interview with Haile, 24 July 2010.

government, who has left the country in 2002 after he was briefly jailed for expressing his views which were not agreeable to his superiors while he was in the army. After his arrival in the Netherlands, he has been openly criticising the policies of the government in several instances. He also participated in organising some social and political events which were not likeable by government supporters. As a result, he received a number of intimidations by anonymous phone callers by reason of which he had to change his phone number after repeated intimidating calls.[51] In light of the above, it should come as no surprise to say that Eritrean diaspora communities host a significant number of human rights abusers who are legally, peacefully, openly and comfortably living with survivors of victimisation in the same communities without any legal consequences. As a very important factor that perpetuates victimisation, the distinctive role of diaspora actors in this regard merits an independent investigative research.

The above reveals that the arrival of Eritrean refugees in some save heavens, such as the Netherlands, does not necessarily imply the end of the history of victimisation. For some refugees, it is the beginning of a tertiary level of victimisation. In several instances, newly arriving Eritrean refugees are generally despised by government supporters.[52] The latter category of people is part of what is widely known as the first generation of Eritrean refugees. Many of them have left Eritrea during the war of independence. For them, migration in the post-independence era is equivalent to treason, for they believe that the major causes of migration have been eliminated when Eritrea was liberated in 1991. This claim is however hypocritical at worst and illogical at best, for those who despise new comers have never been willing to repatriate ever since Eritrea's independence, the reason being the alarming level of political repression and economic hardship in the country.

The unabated continuation of tertiary victimisation in diaspora communities is a stark reminder of the pervasive culture of impunity in Eritrea. As noted by Metin Basoglu, impunity is a toxic substance which forces victims to develop a sense of anger, injustice, rage and distress, even after their arrival in safe heavens.[53] This has apparent implications on these

[51] Interview with Gile, 4 September 2010.
[52] On a related note, Müller opines that "individuals who define themselves outside the military collective [thinking of the PFDJ] are regarded as betraying the nation, and can in the eyes of the state's leadership legitimately be reduced to their bare life." Müller, note ** above, 115.
[53] Metin Basoglu "Rehabilitation of Traumatised Refugees and Survivors of Torture" *British Medical Journal* (2006) 333: 1230.

save heavens, which are host countries such as the Netherlands, in the sense that it has far-fetching implications on the wellbeing of victims. Speedy recovery from trauma and the psychological impact of victimisation is an important component for the empowerment of victims of human rights violations and by extension for ending the culture of impunity in Eritrea. This may not be possible when victims feel threated by continued intimidation and blackmailing and most of all by the enduring presence in their host communities of notorious government operatives who are perpetuating a perennial cycle of victimisation. Challenging the actions of such collaborators is one of the most important strategies in curbing the major causes of victimisation and designing effective mechanisms for the empowerment of victims.

3. Conclusion

Using data collected from Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands, this paper analysed pre- and post-migration patterns of victimisation among Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Although the data has geographical limitations restricted only to one country, it epitomises the plight of newly arriving Eritrean refugees in different countries, particularly those who have left Eritrea after 2002. The data shows that there are multiple levels of victimisation suffered by Eritrean refugees. The first level of victimisation is that which takes place in Eritrea. One major cause of victimisation at this level is prolonged military service which has now degenerated into a form of forced labour, a practice the prohibition of which has now assumed the status of a peremptory norm of international law. The second level of victimisation takes places when victims flee Eritrea and begin an arduous journey via the most common transit countries, such as Sudan and Libya, the latter being the most notorious place for secondary victimisation. The data reveals that the causes of victimisation narrated by interviewees at this stage are comparable only with paranormal stories told by best seller novels or Hollywood adventure movies. The corresponding level of trauma and psychological harm suffered by Eritrean refugees is difficult to imagine.

Eritrean refugees suffer from a third level of victimisation after their arrival in the Netherlands. In the normal course of things, arrival in the Netherlands should have been seen as a beginning of a new era of hope, dignity and safe heaven. In some cases, it is another stage of transition to tertiary victimisation. As a result of a remarkable level of control the Eritrean government enjoys over its diaspora communities some Eritrean refugees are not immune

from victimisation even after their arrival in the Netherlands. The case of Gile and Haile are most illustrative in this regard. The diaspora income tax regime officially implemented by Eritrean embassies and consular missions is one of the most common causes of tertiary victimisation in diaspora communities. Eritrean diaspora communities are deeply infiltrated by government informers and spies who report on the activities of exiled opposition groups and activists in a systematic and orchestrated manner. This has given rise to a significant number of human rights abusers who are legally, peacefully, openly and comfortably living with survivors of victimisation in the same communities without any legal consequences. There is a need to curb this by appropriate prosecutorial and non-prosecutorial approaches available under the domestic jurisdictions of those countries which host human rights abusers. These are very important steps both for the empowerment of victims of human rights violations and for ending the protracted culture of impunity in Eritrea.

This study also showed that Eritrean refugees are exposed to poly-traumatic experiences that occur in multiple contexts overtime. In practice, however, the psychological support mechanisms available for Eritrean refugees are very poor. This is indicative of the need to critically assess whether the current psychological support mechanisms available for refugees in the Netherlands are commensurate with the needs of victims of gross human rights violations.