

The Second Eritrean Exodus: Emerging Patterns of Migration and the Urban Dimension

Tesfalem T Araia¹

¹University of Witwatersrand, African Centre for Migration and Society, Johannesburg, South Africa

tesfalem.araia@wits.ac.za

The Eritrean war of independence coupled with successive draught drove over a million Eritreans out of their “home”. While it is difficult to provide with accurate demographic figures, the majority of those who participated in the first exodus (1958-1991) appeared to be “rural refugees”. They either left rural areas or arrived in rural refugee camps in the Sudan where some continued to participate in the local agricultural activities in order to supplement the often inadequate humanitarian aid they received. A significant number of the refugee communities were integrated (both socially and economically) into the host society and some (fortunately) remained there even after Eritrea attained independence despite the repatriation initiatives of the UNHCR. In December 2002 the UN refugee agency declared a cession of its recognition of Eritreans in the Sudan as “*prema facie* refugees” justifying that “the root causes [war of independence] of the Eritrean refugee problem no longer exist”.

The UNHCR’s decision however came at the wrong time when a new exodus had already started in earnest. The old refugee camps such as “Shegerab” were reactivated forcing the UN organization to consider its position on Eritrean asylum seekers later on. Even though the Ethio-Eritrean border war served as a catalyst, political deterioration and human rights abuses in independent Eritrea is the major cause that is continuing to drive hundreds of thousands of Eritreans out of the country. The perpetual military mobilization which has kept the nation technically on a war footing has dashed the hopes of the post-independence generation for better life and the return of the first generation of refugees. Interestingly the composition of the ongoing ‘out’flux of people differs from the old one in that the current migrants appear to be predominantly young, urban, and educated. Unlike the old generation of refugees, it is unlikely that the new ones can be integrated into the local rural life in the neighboring countries. This paper aims to examine the emerging patterns of movements, and their urban features. Ethnographic data collected from the Eritrean migrant community in South Africa (Johannesburg and Pretoria), online interviews with migrants in different parts of the world, and secondary sources will inform the paper.