



TESTIMONY:

WITNESS: JOHN G. STAUFFER

PRESIDENT, THE AMERICA TEAM FOR DISPLACED ERITREANS (EIN 27-2142524)

BEFORE: THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JULY 9, 2015: *AFRICA'S DISPLACED PEOPLE*

HELD BY: THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Mr. Chairman, my oral testimony is essentially set forth as the first part of my written testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Subcommittee members and staff, for conducting this important hearing. I'm honored to participate today.

I am John Stauffer, president of The America Team for Displaced Eritreans, which is a small US-based nonprofit that assists refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, located in northeast Africa.

We maintain a web site at EritreanRefugees.org.

Many years ago I was a teacher in Eritrea with the U.S. Peace Corps. And now, for the past 11 years, I have, along with other Team members, assisted Eritrean refugees fleeing acute oppression and abuse in their country.

As part of our work, we seek assistance and protection for individuals or groups of refugees in dangerous situations, when we are contacted by victims or their relatives. We have helped refugees in at least 15 different countries in Africa, and elsewhere. We operate by alerting and then working closely with UNHCR, pertinent local NGOs, local government officials, or other Eritreans, any of whom may be able to help the refugees on an urgent basis.

We also assist Eritrean refugees who are in need in the United States.

Eritrea is a police state, often referred to as the "North Korea of Africa." On June 8th of this year, the UN Human Rights Council released a 480-page report on human rights offenses conducted in the country since independence in 1993.

In Eritrea, there is extensive, abusive, essentially unpaid endless military conscription – often characterized by survivors as slave labor. Soldiers accused of any infraction or dissatisfaction are often tortured. There is total lack of basic human rights: almost no freedom to worship or to congregate; no free speech, no public media. There is ongoing surveillance, threats and intimidation; and abuse of the families of those who flee the country. And there is acute and extensive torture of those who are imprisoned.

It is no wonder that, as a consequence of those conditions, thousands of citizens – mostly young people and often unaccompanied children – flee the country every month. Initial destinations of flight from Eritrea include:

- **Ethiopia**, to the south, where about 100,000 Eritrean refugees now reside, primarily in refugee camps, most surviving with little to do and no hope for the future.
- **Sudan**, to the west, where there are also refugee camps, plus many urban refugees – here, life is equally hopeless, and kidnappers and human traffickers lie in wait.

Sudan in particular is often the starting point for new and horrific ordeals:

- Eritrean security police operate freely in eastern Sudan and in Khartoum, and seek out and haul back to Eritrea, high value targets, such as government officials and military officers who have sought refuge.
- The refugees may be kidnapped and extorted locally for a few thousand dollars, or taken off to Egypt or Libya where they are abused.

In 2007, Eritreans were paying smugglers to move them across Egypt to the Israel border, where thousands entered with a hope for asylum. But by 2009, a system of human trafficking developed... not for servitude, but for the purpose of torture for extortion of huge amounts of money.

Groups of refugees would be either double-crossed by their paid smugglers, or be kidnapped in Sudan, and then be trucked into Egypt, and sold to rogue Egyptian Bedouins, and end up in torture and camps in northern Sinai.

The refugees would be tortured continuously and mercilessly to extract ransom from their impoverished families in Eritrea or in other countries.

As torture, molten plastic from burning bottles and bags would be dripped onto bare skin, causing excruciating pain. Victims were tied and left on the ground under the blazing sun. They were burned with cigarettes and electro-shock. Women were continually raped, often gang-raped, and men were raped as well. Victims were threatened with extraction of body organs.

The victims were forced to call relatives by cell phone, and they were tortured while on the phone so their relatives could hear their screams.

The torture business became more lucrative, and typical ransoms grew from a few thousand dollars to least \$30,000 per person. Relatives who managed to raise the funds became impoverished for life.

When the Morsi government in Egypt fell in 2013, the Egyptian army restored its presence in northern Sinai, and the atrocities against the Eritrean refugees abated there.

We learned recently at a conference in Geneva that 7,000 Sinai torture survivors are presently in Israel.

But kidnapping, extortion and torture of Eritrean refugees continue to occur in Sudan, Libya and possibly other parts of Sinai. Still there seems to be little governmental effort in Sudan and Libya, to stop it; to the contrary, corrupt security officials often know of the traffic and torture, yet look the other way.

Tragically, many Eritrean refugees are torture survivors – from their time in Eritrea, or from the period of their flight, or both.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, once again, for considering these observations.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To the Mediterranean – Because the conditions of refugee life in Ethiopia and Sudan is so trying, the refugees there sometimes pay smugglers to take them to Libya with an objective of getting to a more sustainable life in Europe. But the smuggling often turns into trafficking, whereby the refugee becomes a victim of extortion and violent abuse. In some cases, the refugee is forced onto a thoroughly unsafe fishing boat bound across the Mediterranean in exchange for further payment, or even under threat of death if he or she doesn't board and pay. Thousands of Eritrean refugees have been sent to Europe this way, without regard to their well-being; and well over 1,000 have died at sea because of disasters resulting from gross overloading or grossly inadequate boats. The Mediterranean tragedy has been met with scorn from the dictator of Eritrea, who condemns all those who flee Eritrea as traitors.

Resettlement – The reception that Eritrean refugees receive in countries of refuge has been mixed. In the U.S., the very limited number of refugees who have been officially processed by UNHCR overseas then admitted to our country by the State Department, of course, have been treated well during the resettlement process here, through the hard work of the network of non-profit resettlement agencies that spans our country. In Israel, the far larger number of Eritreans – larger in both absolute and proportionate terms – was originally well tolerated; but as the numbers grew they came to be resented, threatened with expulsion, and often imprisoned. Now Europe, faced with vast numbers of Eritrean and other refugees arriving from the Mediterranean, is filled with confusion about how to deal with them, and in many quarters, with considerable hostility toward the refugees. In North Africa and the Middle East, the refugees are often imprisoned by the governments there, and they live with little personal security.

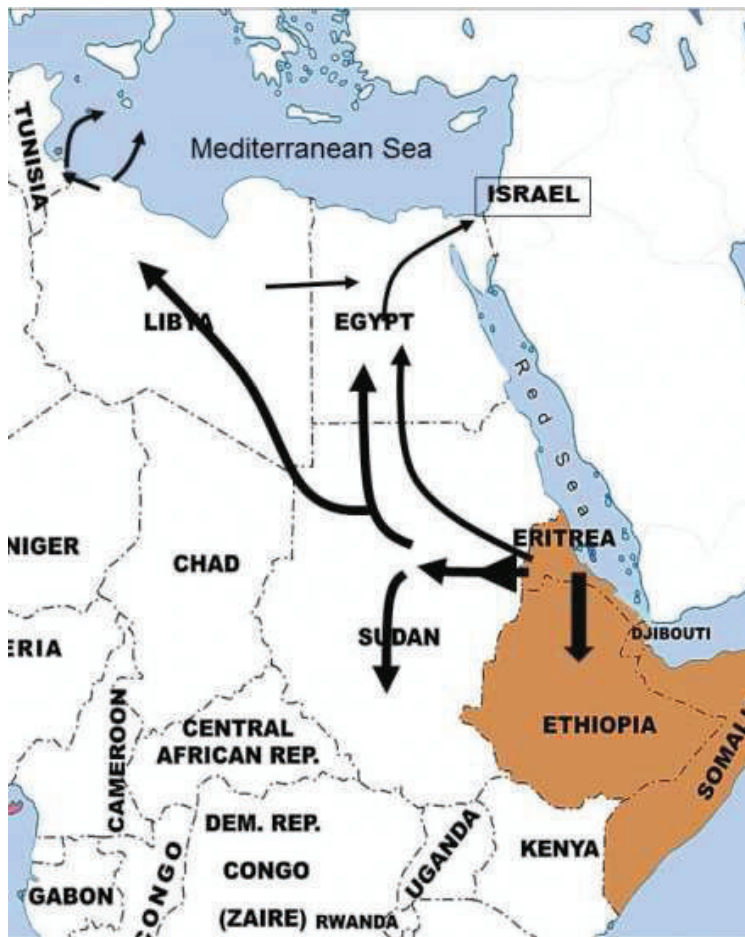
And as the final insult upon injury, the Eritrean regime imposes a 2% income tax on all of its expatriates; and through its secret agents, it illegally extorts the tax payments from refugees worldwide, including in the U.S.

The plight of Eritrean refugees is so dire, so complex, so little known, and in some countries so misunderstood that it shocks all normal sensibilities. The America Team, naturally, has been attempting to bring an awareness of these conditions into the light of day. Among other things, we and another

organization have just produced an hour-long documentary on the situation, which we expect to be released in August, 2015.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, once again, for considering these observations. We would be boundlessly grateful if the U.S. government could help find solutions for any and all parts of the problem – from conditions within Eritrea proper to the desperation of Eritrean refugees in flight around the world.

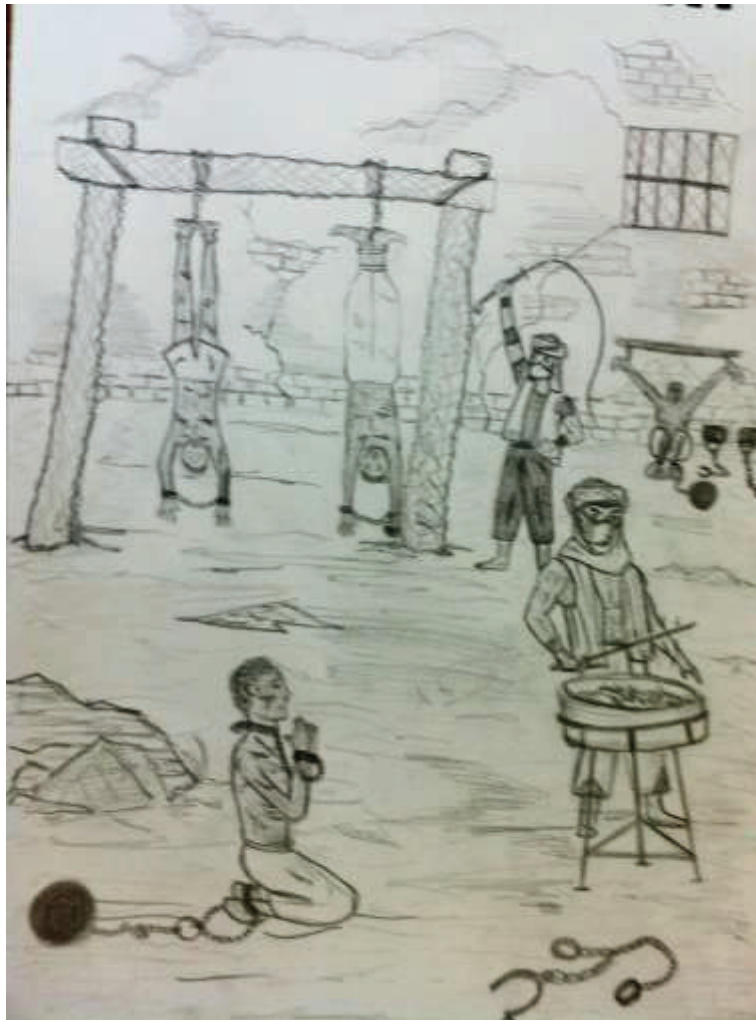
The Flow of Flight from Eritrea



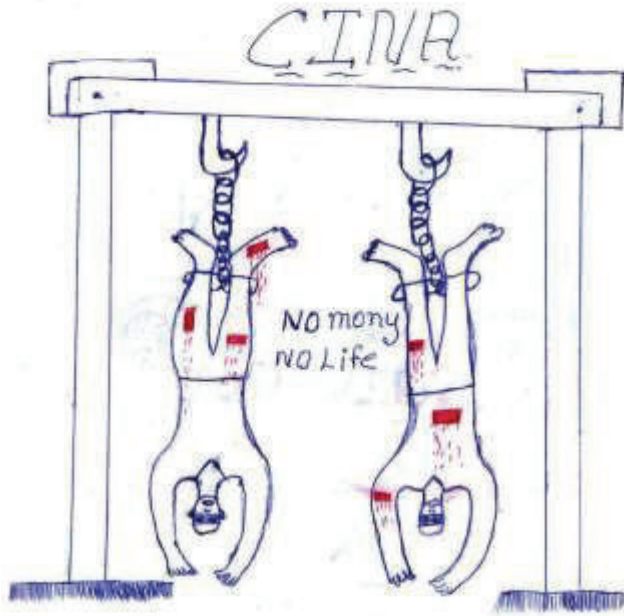


A torture camp in Sinai

ARTWORK FROM SINAI TORTURE SURVIVORS,
DONE WHILE JAILED IN SINAI BY EGYPTIAN POLICE

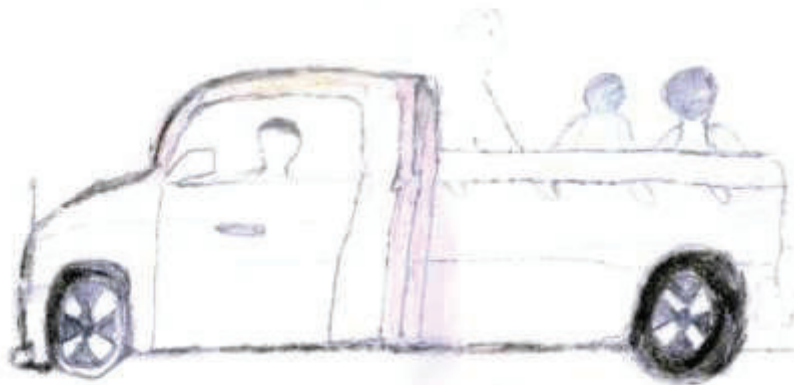


CINA



CINA SEA
CINA FIRE
CINA DESERT
CINA BAD

by Solomon
Abraha.



VICTIMS OF TORTURE IN THE SINAI



VICTIMS OF TORTURE IN THE SINAI

