



Written Testimony of:

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“Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis”
before the

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, and members of the Commission, on behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss UNHCR's ongoing work assisting Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers.

My name is Jana Mason, and I am the Senior Advisor for External Relations and Government Affairs at UNHCR's regional office in Washington, D.C., a position that I have held since 2008. During my tenure, I have repeatedly seen the critical role of the Commission in shedding light on numerous human rights and humanitarian crises around the globe. Our office has enjoyed an excellent working relationship with the Commission, and we look forward to continued collaboration.

OVERVIEW OF UNHCR

UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, is mandated by the international community to ensure refugee protection and to identify durable solutions for refugee populations. UNHCR has nearly 470 offices in 130 countries around the world. More than 85% of our staff serve in deep field and in hardship locations, working tirelessly to assist the world's most vulnerable people.

UNHCR's mandate and international law define a refugee as a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While refugees and asylum seekers (people whose claims to refugee status have not yet been determined) are our core constituency, UNHCR's populations of concern also includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons.

The vast number of forcibly displaced persons around the world—currently at more than 65 million—and the growing complexity of displacement make our work and that of our partners both more challenging and more needed than ever before. We recognize and greatly appreciate this Commission's ongoing support of UNHCR and your concern for vulnerable people worldwide.

KEY MESSAGES

- UNHCR remains highly concerned about the half a million Eritrean refugees who have left their country in search of international protection. As part of **one the largest refugee groups on the African continent**, many Eritrean refugees have fled to the neighboring countries of Ethiopia and Sudan, with some continuing on treacherous journeys via the Sinai or Libya to reach Europe. Of particular concern to UNHCR are the **high numbers of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean refugee children who are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation**.
- Along the way, **refugees fleeing Eritrea are exposed to extortion and the horrors of kidnapping for ransom, imprisonment, torture, rape, trafficking, and even death at sea**. These individuals are extremely vulnerable and require urgent international protection.
- **UNHCR has been increasing its efforts to combat the trafficking and smuggling of refugees and asylum seekers. We undertake these efforts with a range of partners, including governments, UNICEF, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), IOM, and other partners**. Activities have included awareness raising campaigns for refugees and asylum seekers; efforts to support the criminalization of smuggling and trafficking; capacity building for local

authorities, immigration officials, and border guards; and offering support to victims of trafficking and smuggling in certain contexts. **When speaking about trafficking, smuggling, and the broader context of mixed migration, it is also worth emphasizing the distinction between refugees and migrants.** Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives. **Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom.** Despite this distinction, however, migrants and refugees are both at risk of trafficking and related human rights violations.

- **Eritrean refugees, like all refugees who endure difficult circumstances during their displacement, require long-term solutions.** In the case of Eritrea, this would ideally take the form of a resolution to the domestic challenges that have led so many to leave the country in the first place, which would in turn allow for the voluntary repatriation of Eritrean refugees. In the meantime, while awaiting such a resolution, some Eritreans—particularly the youth—decide to move onwards because of a lack of hope and prospects for the future. For example, in many refugee camp situations in Africa, there is limited access to quality primary and secondary education, and there is little access to skills training or job opportunities. Smugglers are tempting refugees with the promise of a better future elsewhere. UNHCR and its partners are working to ensure that these vulnerable refugees receive appropriate legal status and assistance they so desperately need. **However, broader solutions are needed for Eritrean refugees—including more resettlement and family reunification—so that refugees have a legal pathway to improve their lives, without having to turn to unscrupulous human smugglers.** These life-saving protection efforts remain severely underfunded by the international community.

SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW

UNHCR has a small presence—14 staff total—inside Eritrea, with our office based in Asmara, the capital. Inside the country, we work to assist and try to find solutions for the roughly 2,400 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries. Most of them—some 2,300—are camp-based Somali refugees, and the remaining 100 are urban refugees from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sudan. Among the solutions that we pursue for this group are third-country resettlement and, for some, voluntary return to their home country.

UNHCR estimates that there are currently about half a million Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers globally. Of these, young adults make up a significant percentage; for example, in one camp in Shire, Ethiopia, 75% of the Eritrean refugees are under 25 years of age. Tight restrictions on the issuance of passports and exit visas from Eritrea result in many being forced to violate the law when fleeing the country.

As of March 2018, about 168,000 registered Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are in Ethiopia, a nation that hosts over 900,000 total refugees and asylum seekers. About 115,000 Eritrean refugees were estimated to reside in Sudan at the end of 2017, based on Sudanese government figures. However, in both countries it is difficult to know for certain how many Eritreans have departed for subsequent locations. Since 2016, we've seen a steep decline in the number of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers crossing into Ethiopia and Sudan. Refugees report that this decline has been due to increased border monitoring inside Eritrea. However, since the beginning of 2018 there has been a noted increase, with over 3,700 Eritreans entering Ethiopia and almost 2,000 entering Sudan during this time.

In Ethiopia, most Eritrean refugees reside in camps in the Shire and Afar regions, while some 14,000 Eritreans are benefiting from Ethiopia's generous out-of-camp policy and mainly reside in Addis Ababa. There is a high percentage of unaccompanied minors and separated children in the camps, and with limited access to basic services, there are few opportunities available to them.

Sudan has hosted Eritrean refugees in its camps in the Kassala and Gedaref regions in the east for more than forty years, which makes this one of Africa's most protracted refugee situations. UNHCR, together with the Government of Sudan, also assist Eritrean refugees in urban areas, particularly in Khartoum, where there are ongoing challenges to legal and physical protection as well as to basic services including education and health.

Approximately 140,000 Eritrean refugees resided in Europe at the end of 2016, the last year for which such statistics are currently available. Major host countries include Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. In 2017, an additional 500 Eritrean refugees were resettled to Europe, while over 1,100 arrived in the United States.

The Eritrean refugee situation is particularly notable for the secondary movement of those who flee. In most cases, Eritreans first cross the border into Ethiopia or Sudan. However, as noted earlier, many Eritrean refugees, especially children and young adults, proceed to travel to third or fourth countries or even beyond that, motivated by a desire for better educational services, to reunite with relatives abroad, and/or to improve their living conditions or economic prospects. Many refugees consider reaching Europe to be their sole option for achieving a lasting solution. For example, some Eritrean refugees entering through the eastern part of Sudan first travel to Khartoum before pursuing a northern migratory route to Libya, and from there they travel onwards—with the help of people smugglers—to try to reach Europe.

Some have taken even less direct routes. Approximately 27,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are living in Israel, along with nearly 8,000 Sudanese—although Israel has not received any Eritreans or Sudanese since May 2016. Since Israel took over refugee status determination from UNHCR in 2009, only ten Eritreans (and one Sudanese) have been recognized as refugees. In contrast, the asylum approval rate for Eritreans in European Union member states, for the period 2008-2015, was over 90%. Recognition rates for Eritrean asylum seekers in the United States are close to 70%.

Earlier this year, Israel began deportations of many of Eritreans and Sudanese, offering them either indefinite detention or a \$3,500 cash grant and relocation to a country in Africa that is not their home country—widely reported to be Rwanda. Those who chose the latter experienced security threats following the relocation and were then smuggled through Uganda and elsewhere to try to reach Europe. UNHCR identified 80 cases of Eritrean refugees or asylum seekers who were relocated by Israel and subsequently risked their lives by taking dangerous onward journeys to Europe via Libya. We interviewed these individuals in Rome and learned that they had traveled hundreds of kilometers through conflict zones in South Sudan, Sudan, and Libya after being relocated by Israel. Along the way, they suffered torture, extortion, and other forms of abuse before risking their lives once again by crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. Some of them said that people traveling with them had died en route to Libya. UNHCR is currently working with Israel and the international community to find alternative solutions for protection of asylum seekers, in line with international standards.

THE REFUGEE JOURNEY AND UNHCR's RESPONSE

In 2011, UNHCR issued new *Eligibility Guidelines* to assist decision-makers, including UNHCR staff, governments, and private practitioners, in assessing the international protection needs of asylum seekers from Eritrea. These guidelines are legal interpretations of the refugee criteria based on the social, political, economic, security, human rights, and humanitarian conditions in Eritrea.

The guidelines for Eritrea were issued against a backdrop of continuous high numbers of asylum applications by Eritreans, which required an update on the particular profiles for which international protection needs may arise. Claims lodged by asylum seekers from Eritrea, whether on the basis of the

refugee criteria contained in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) and its 1967 Protocol and/or the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention), will generally need to be considered on their own merits according to fair and efficient status determination procedures and up-to-date and publicly available country of origin information.

UNHCR considers that individuals with the profiles outlined below require a particularly careful examination of possible risks. These risk profiles, while not necessarily exhaustive, include (i) persons avoiding military/national service; (ii) members of political opposition groups and government critics; (iii) journalists and other media professionals; (iv) trade unionists and labor rights activists; (v) members of minority religious groups; (vi) women and children with specific profiles; (vii) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals; (viii) members of certain minority ethnic groups; and (ix) victims of trafficking.

Making the decision to leave one's country, whether alone or with family, is never a choice taken lightly. This is especially true for families that include vulnerable individuals such as children or the elderly. Often, conditions at home pose such great challenges, with little hope of rapid improvement, that facing danger and leaving for the unknown presents a better opportunity. This has been in the case in Eritrea, where hundreds of thousands have left, risking their lives and livelihoods.

More than 116,000 people from a variety of countries, including refugees, crossed the sea to Italy in 2017 alone. Since January 2018, nearly 6,000 refugees and migrants have reached Italian shores, with the large majority of sea arrivals having departed from Libya. Top nationalities include Eritrean, Tunisian, Nigerian, Pakistani, and Libyan. As of mid-March 2018, more than 3,000 refugees and migrants have been disembarked in Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard.

The long, challenging journeys through multiple regions and countries that I mentioned previously pose great risks to the refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR continues to be concerned about the potential for trafficking, kidnapping, and smuggling of individuals, along with extortion and violence. Eritreans and others who make this journey often lack legal and physical protection and have little choice but to submit to their abusers' demands.

People in need of international protection often make their journey without being aware, able, or willing to avail themselves of refugee status determination options and protection services that may be available along the way. In Libya itself, people of concern are living with host communities but, because of the security situation in the country, have restricted freedom of movement. Others are currently out of reach, detained in official detention centers run by Libyan authorities, or in warehouses or "connection houses" operated by smugglers or traffickers. As noted above, UNHCR and our partners in government, the wider UN, and the private sector are undertaking a variety of efforts to combat trafficking and smuggling.

UNHCR values the efforts and shares the legitimate interest of governments to combat trafficking in persons, a crime that may entail serious violations of the human rights of its victims, and we specifically draw attention to the humanitarian consequences of this crime. We urge countries to adopt a human rights-based approach to human trafficking, calling them on them to not only identify and prosecute the perpetrators but also include measures to address the protection needs of victims or individuals who are or who have been at risk of being trafficked.

In Europe, UNHCR works with those who make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. Given the scale and complexity of the needs, UNHCR is stepping up its response to help government authorities respond to the many challenges they are confronting. It is UNHCR's field-based assessment that many of those who attempt the dangerous journey to Europe through Libya would not risk it if they were better

informed of the perils involved. Nor would they risk their life if adequate protection, assistance, and solutions were available and effective across the various African countries they cross prior to reaching Libya, and in Libya itself. Rescue at sea, in line with international maritime law and human rights standards, remains imperative. Support to Libyan border management authorities, including the coast guard, must be accompanied by building adequate reception and asylum systems. UNHCR has also made specific recommendations that could help tackle trafficking, including the freezing of assets, travel bans, disrupting the supply of revenues and materials, robust prosecutions, and sanctions against known senior figures and companies engaged in trafficking.

It is crucial to emphasize that the risks involved in these journeys are not limited to adults. Many children have suffered from physical and psychological cruelty on their journey, including sexual and gender-based violence. UNHCR recently heard the story of an Eritrean boy known as “Solomon.” He is fourteen now but was just ten years old when he fled his home. He was repeatedly bought and sold by traffickers on his journey. At one point, held by captors in Libya, he lived for a month in a room with hundreds of other people, was given little food, and suffered almost daily beatings. He was then crammed on a boat for Europe with 900 other refugees and migrants on a journey in which many people died. Luckily, and unlike so many others, he arrived safely in Italy. However, to this day he has not been able to reunite with his aunt in the Netherlands. Stories like Solomon’s are all too common.

To help raise awareness and combat trafficking, UNHCR supported an information campaign, “Telling the Real Story,” which highlighted concerns related to trafficking, smuggling, and kidnapping in Sudan and Egypt by reporting on torture, hostage-taking, and very high ransom payments. While many refugees know that the journey is dangerous, they often do not understand the full extent of the risks and the suffering that may lie ahead, and they may have unrealistic expectations about life in other parts of the world. “Telling the Real Story” includes a collection of authentic stories, told by the refugees and asylum seekers themselves. They speak to their own communities and share their experiences, good and bad. Through these testimonies, those who might choose to embark on the journey are informed of the full scope and perils that they may encounter, in order to help them make an informed decision.

CONCLUSION

UNHCR continues to provide life-saving protection and assistance in countries where Eritrean refugees, along with refugees and asylum seekers from other nations, have sought safety. Our humanitarian response, and that of our multiple partners, includes food, medicine, water, sanitation, and shelter, among other forms of assistance. We have also responded to the situation of Eritreans and others facing danger in Libya by providing vulnerable individuals with lifesaving evacuations to Niger, where they temporarily reside while UNHCR secures a permanent solution in a third country. UNHCR resorts to this evacuation model in situations where asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in life-endangering circumstances. This is a last resort option and requires extraordinary levels of support from all parties involved; we’d like to particularly recognize the government of Niger for being a close partner for UNHCR in this endeavor.

UNHCR hopes to be able to carry out more evacuations throughout 2018 to provide solutions to refugees and asylum seekers from a range of countries including Somalia, Eritrea, and Yemen. Since November 2017, UNHCR has evacuated over 1,300 refugees and asylum seekers out of Libya to third countries. However, let me stress that our efforts will remain limited in scale as long as resettlement commitments remain insufficient. I would like to reiterate the High Commissioner’s urgent call for 40,000 resettlement places for refugees located in 15 countries along the Central Mediterranean route.

These refugee evacuations and relocations must be part of broader asylum-building and migration management efforts to address the complex movement of migrants and refugees who embark on perilous journeys across the Sahara and the Mediterranean. There is a clear need to create more regular and safe opportunities for refugees to find safety and international protection, and to address the root causes and drivers of displacement.

UNHCR has also continued its engagement with the government of Eritrea on family reunification for a number of unaccompanied and separated children in countries in the region, in accordance with international standards. And, in several countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan, we have provided legal counseling and assistance, as well as capacity building support to government authorities, to ensure effective protection of children.

The Eritrean refugee crisis presents a number of protection challenges for a highly vulnerable population on the move throughout a large geographic region. The international community must remain vigilant about both the causes and the impacts of this crisis, and must increase its political and financial engagement to meet these challenges.

I thank you again for convening a hearing on this important issue, and I would be happy to answer any questions.