

## **An Open Letter to Israel: Eritreans are NOT Economic Refugees**

Tricia Redeker Hepner

Do not be manipulated by the propaganda of a dying dictatorship.

The northeast African nation of Eritrea is today among the highest refugee-producing countries in the world. The central reason that Eritreans today are fleeing their country is related to “national service,” or what scholars, exiled Eritrean political leaders, and human rights organizations have identified as a campaign of forced labor or slavery.<sup>1</sup> The campaign, known in Tigrinya as *warsay-yike’alo*, was first implemented in 1994 and officially required 6 months of military training and 1 year of “service” to the state of all men and women ages 18-45, with very few exceptions. However, due to a variety of related factors – the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, the Eritrean government’s failure to implement the ratified constitution, and an internal political crisis in 2001 that resulted in numerous arrests of political reformists, journalists, religious leaders and laypeople, and other imputed dissidents – the national service campaign results in indefinite conscription.

The majority of Eritreans would undoubtedly be proud to serve their nation in the official 18-month program. In practice, however, the *warsay-yike’alo* campaign has made life in Eritrea unsustainable. Conscripts are taken from their families at ever younger ages and held in service for many years; they are paid extremely poorly and cannot support their families or form family units of their own. They are subject to harsh military discipline that rises to the level of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. “Service” to the state often entails sexual servitude for young women and hard labor in mines for young men. Higher education has been devolved to the military, and leaving the country legally, even to visit relatives abroad, is almost impossible for anyone except the elderly and the very young. The fact of political repression in Eritrea today cannot be separated from economic hardship. Both are related to the nature of authoritarian dictatorship under Isaias Afwerki and the Peoples Front for Democracy Justice (PFDJ) regime. Both political repression and economic deprivation are operationalized through the *warsay-yike’alo* campaign.

Despite the enormous risks and the emotional and physical pain of separation from one’s country and loved ones, Eritreans have fled their country by the tens of thousands. For

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countries of first or even second asylum, particular stresses on political and economic resources, security concerns, and debates about cultural belonging can become very serious indeed. Yet, it is essential for host countries like Israel – a nation Eritreans view as a guarantor of human and refugee rights by virtue of its own historical foundations – to recognize that the situation in Eritrea is unique in several respects. Akin to Cambodia under Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge, or North Korea under the Dear Leader, Eritrea is ruled by a highly personalized dictatorship with a singular, mass militarized system of rule that renders anyone who resists a political dissident who may be imprisoned, tortured, raped, or extrajudicially executed.

Moreover, Eritrea has for decades been politically and economically sustained by a vast and diverse diasporic network of emigrants and refugees from previous political eras, many of whom have not lived in Eritrea since independence in 1993 and have remained loyal to the regime because it provides certain benefits, rewards, and a sense of belonging and pride. Such loyalists have accepted uncritically the propaganda of the regime and vehemently denied the empirical suffering of their compatriots in Eritrea.

The PFDJ party itself co-evolved with this vast and global diaspora as a decentralized network, itself comprised of party officials, cadres, loyalists, and *seleyti*, or spies. Embassies and consulates serve as the nerve centers of this vast network. What remaining legitimacy the PFDJ party commands for Eritreans is largely rooted in its ability to generate economic and political support from those outside the country. Those who deny, defend, or remain willfully ignorant of the current reality are actively consenting, and supporting, the PFDJ's legitimacy. But where the PFDJ cannot rely on consent, it resorts to creative and pernicious forms of coercion and political-economic extortion. As my own research and that of other scholars has documented, this pattern developed in the 1970s and continues unabated today. Recent refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to multiple forms of interference designed to maintain the PFDJ's power through fear and political manipulation. Families of refugees are threatened, imprisoned, fined or harmed; refugees or asylum seekers are pursued by PFDJ operatives wherever they are and often forced to sign forms of "regret" (*te'asa*) or letters and petitions against the UN Security Council resolution sanctioning Eritrea for allegedly supporting Somali extremists. They are harassed and insulted by supporters of the regime, threatened to keep quiet, and subjected to "meetings" with ambassadors and other PFDJ party officials, often at the behest of the host country governments who either do not comprehend the situation or believe the recent PFDJ propaganda that Eritreans are not refugees, but economic migrants.

The latter campaign is among the most damaging tactics deployed by the PFDJ regime to date, and not just for Eritreans. It is a campaign that intentionally makes rights-respecting countries complicit with the illegal and inhumane practices of the Eritrean regime, and it undermines the very basis of international human rights law on which refugee protection rests.

Ambassador Tesfamariam Tekeste's statements that "there is no political issue nor is it a matter of political prosecution [sic], it is simply an economic matter," and that Eritrean asylum seekers "just want to avoid military service" is part of a calculated strategy to manipulate host country governments and erode refugee protection generally. The Eritrean regime despises the very notion of human rights, and if successful, this current campaign will allow the PFDJ to make a mockery of the international human rights and humanitarian laws to which Israel and other host countries are signatory. The ambassador's "invitation" for Eritreans to return home under promises they will not be harmed is similarly a calculated move to exploit the suffering felt by refugees and asylum seekers. It is the persuasive, innocuous face of a much darker reality in which PFDJ has abducted asylum seekers from neighboring countries and refugee camps, and imprisoned and disappeared refouled asylum seekers from Malta, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere.

And it is not only in Israel where this strategy is being tested. In Uganda, PFDJ party operatives are similarly trying to convince the Office of the Prime Minister that Eritreans are "economic migrants" and enticing Eritreans to return home to visit. And certainly some people will be able to do so, and will not be harmed: by making good on their offer for a select few, the PFDJ will further undermine the findings of scholars, the testimony of Eritrean asylum seekers, the critiques offered by human rights organizations, and the international concern voiced by the UNHCR that Eritrean refugees must under no circumstances be returned to Eritrea.

This effort to portray Eritrean refugees as "economic migrants" is part of the systematic, geographically decentralized and highly coercive apparatus of the PFDJ regime, cultivated over several decades. It functions in several ways: it disguises the brutality of the authoritarian regime and the bondage of national service from those loyalists who continue to embrace and promote the propaganda of the regime. It plays upon the fears and concerns of host countries towards refugee influxes by denying the political basis for their exile and casting them as "economic migrants." It makes a mockery of the central principle in international refugee law of *non-refoulement* and manipulates host countries into violating this principle in contravention to their own obligations. It undermines the empirical findings of scholars and human rights investigators and contradicts the overwhelming testimony of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers. In short, it attacks the very foundation of asylum itself. And it forms another facet in the evolving, adaptive strategies of the PFDJ to control the Eritrean population – wherever they may be - through fear and coercion disguised as benevolence and nationalist commitment.

To those nations and governments like Israel -- who ostensibly believe in the basic principles of human rights and dignity, who embrace democratic norms and the rule of law, who guarantee the rights and freedoms of their own populations, and have long welcomed refugees and exiles into their midst -- do not be misled. Do not play the fool for a brutal and insidious regime while its people look to you for protection. Eritreans are not economic migrants. Nor are they "draft

dodgers” or military deserters. They are bona fide refugees who are clearly and incontrovertibly entitled to the basic rights under international law that they have been so systematically denied at home.

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