

# **Refugees and the Development of Africa**

## **The Case of Eritrean Refugees in the UK**

By Petros Tesfagiorgios

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### *About the Author*

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## Refugees and the Development of Africa: The Case of Eritreans

*A pregnant Eritrean asylum seeker is imprisoned for arriving to the UK without the required documentation. She hardly speaks any English and therefore cannot advocate on behalf of herself. She will give birth to her child in prison.*

This is just one example of the horrific situations that Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers (ERAS) have to face as a result of UK immigration policy. They are unable to remain in the UK, and also unable to return to Eritrea because, according to the Home Office, their safety cannot be guaranteed. Thus, the Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers are forced to live in destitution. Typically, once their claim for asylum is rejected, Eritreans are given 21 days to vacate their accommodation, their benefits are discontinued and they are not given permission to work – a combination of factors that makes it near impossible to survive.

This study will highlight what is often neglected in the immigration debate – the experience of the very people whose lives are destroyed by the UK immigration law, the asylum seekers themselves. The study is based on the transcripts of interviews with more than 400 Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers; interviews that were carried out by the Home Office as part of their initial application for asylum\*. Of those 400, 30 people were interviewed once again so that insight could be gained into their experiences of living in the UK once their claim for asylum is rejected.

*\* Names have been altered in order to protect the identities of asylum seekers whose stories are being told.*

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to:

- Explain the situation of Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers in Eritrea and the reasons why they had to seek asylum in the UK.
- Bring about a better understanding of the severity and nature of the problems and disadvantages faced by refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea in the UK.
- Promote examples of good practice in policy making and service delivery which strive to overcome hardships and acute disadvantages faced by vulnerable members of society.
- Emphasise the importance of integration of refugees within the mainstream society and the contribution this will make to the African economy and the current global drive to “Make Poverty History”.

## **African Refugees in the United Kingdom in the 70s and 80s**

In the period following the Second World War, after the terrible tragedy which claimed the lives of millions of people and revealed to what extent human beings are willing to go in the pursuit of power, the plight of refugees was alive in the mind of peoples in the West. Western governments championed the rights of persecuted people to seek asylum in countries that could offer them protection. The United Kingdom responded to the 1951 Geneva Convention with practical, sustainable and forward-looking policies:

- **Refugees were treated sympathetically and political parties were active in raising awareness and understanding among their constituencies of the issues refugees faced.**
- **Institutions which supported refugees were close to the refugee communities. They worked in partnership to capacity build, train and empower refugee communities.**
- **There was affirmative action in education, housing and other social services.**

### **The Eritrean Experience:**

Until 1993, there were no cases of refusal of Eritrean asylum seekers in the UK (around 20,000 applications were made over 20 years). On the contrary; on the basis of compassion and family reunion many Eritrean refugees were allowed to bring their dependants from camps in the Sudan and other places where they were stranded. Formed in late 1977, the Eritrean Relief Association in the UK (ERA-UK) was active in providing services to Eritrean Refugees. It forged good working relations with UK charity organizations such as:

- United Kingdom Immigration Advisory Services (UKIAS) in matters of immigration.
- The Refugee Council (RC) in housing, education and other services.
- World University Service (WUS) in Higher education, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> degrees, and PhDs.

ERA-UK's mandate was to help Eritrean refugees in the UK and to raise funds for refugees in Sudan and the internally displaced people in the liberated areas of Eritrea (Areas under the EPLF administration).

The World University Service gave scholarships to refugees who wanted to pursue higher studies, first degrees, second degrees, masters and PhDs. This was a formidable long-term investment to the most disadvantaged people at that time. Refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe etc. seized the opportunity and got higher education.

Charity organisations such as the Refugee Council were working in partnership with others to provide services to Eritrean refugees. A committee composed of the World

University Service, RC and ERA was formed to find houses for elderly Eritrean women. Out of this African Refugees Housing Action Group (ARHAG) evolved. The RC was also empowering refugees through training and capacity building.

When it comes to immigration, the United Kingdom Immigration Advisory Service (UKIAS) was working closely with ERA to learn about the refugees' plight, the background history that gave rise to the influx of refugees, information that enables them to advocate on behalf of the refugees, and so on.

As a result of the positive government attitude towards Eritrean refugees and the excellent work carried out by the above-mentioned organisations, Eritrean refugees were able to transform their economic and social status in Britain. Some have gone back to Eritrea after independence in 1991 to help in the re-construction of the newly born country. Below are some of the Eritrean refugees who finished universities in the United Kingdom achieved a great deal as a consequence:

Returned to Eritrea:

1. Dr. Tekeste Gebray – Studied Agriculture in the UK and specialised in satellite images. After independence he joined the Ministry of Agriculture. He was then elected to be the Secretary General of Intergovernmental Agency for Drought and Development (IGAD).

2. Menat Berhane: Solar energy expert – he served under the Ministry of Energy installing solar panel for peasants. He lost his life during the fighting in a helicopter crash which was caused by either a technical failure or shot down by an Ethiopian missile.

3. Mohamed Saleh Hagos: Property Developer in London bought a dilapidated OMO factory and transformed it into viable modern factory that has the capacity to supply Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen with soap. His partner is the British corporation Unilever.

4. Abdu Ibrahim: A successful shopkeeper in the UK, he introduced modern and all purpose photocopying to Eritrea. He is the agent of Xerox.

5. Dr. Seife Berhe: Geologist, advised the Ministry of Mines and formed an exploration company called "Africa Minerals". His partners were Britons from the UK.

6. Tzehanesh Tekle and Nebyat Tekle: Two amazing sisters who had a modern women's clothing shop in Baker Street, London. The former is an anthropologist who opened an English School in Asmara. The latter invested in a small garment factory. Their history is an inspirational success story for women refugees in the UK.

Examples of successful Eritreans still living in the UK:

7. Tzegai Yohannes: Director, Evelyn Oldfield Unit at Holloway which provides professional training for refugee organisations in London

8. Dr. Maknun Gemaladin: Consultant on communities.

9. Dr. Beniam Tesfahanes: Medical Consultant in Sheffield.

10. Mibrak Ghebreweldi: Runs a successful Interpreting and Translating company that deals in 100 different languages.
11. Aman Mohamed Hagos: Owns a very busy printing press in London.
12. Many also run Eritrean restaurants selling traditional delicacies.

N.B. Many Ethiopian refugees who got their degree in Britain have played a very critical role in the Government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi:

1. Dr. Abdelmegid Hussen: Became the Minister in International Economic cooperation. He survived assassination meant to be for Hosni Mubarek the Egyptian president in Addis Ababa he was sitting with him at the back of the car.
2. Kebede Tadesse: Minister of Health
3. Dr. Gebreab Barnabas: Vice Minister of Federal Affairs
4. Dr. Kassu Illala: Minister of Transport

These people shared the same vision with Eritrean freedom fighters and supported the right to self-determination of oppressed nationalities in Ethiopia and the right to self-determination of the Eritrean people. They worked in solidarity to overthrow the Military Dictatorship of Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam in Ethiopia.

## **Eritrean Refugees in the UK Today**

The European political landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade. The solidarity of the people in the West with refugees in the post- World War II era was eroded by the ideology of “Fortress Europe”, an ideology that pushes for draconian laws that make it difficult for immigrants and asylum seekers to come to Europe.

Today the media representations of refugees and asylum seekers utilise hostile and sensational language. Asylum seekers and refugees are referred to as “illegal immigrants, criminals, bogus and welfare scroungers”. These representations mask the immense contribution that migrants have long made to the British culture and economy.

During 2003 it was estimated that (not an official figure) more than 2,000 Eritreans were refused asylum. Many Eritreans, the majority of whom are women, raised the alarm of homelessness and destitution in the Orthodox Church in Camberwell Green. They went there for spiritual consolation and guidance. Many Eritreans rose to the challenge, and the Eritrean Education and Publication Trust based in Lambeth launched a seminar to highlight the problems. The UNHCR and Amnesty International representatives gave talks. The seminar may have contributed to the UNHCR’s decision to issue a recommendation in January 2004 that protection should be given to Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers. The Home Office made a concession to accept fresh applications. This was made public and promoted by the Hammersmith Law Centre in February 2004. On April 19, 2004 Eritrean Elders Welfare Association (EEWA) joined the rescue mission to facilitate fresh application to the Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers in order to ease their sufferings. A study was also undertaken to highlight the extent of the problems a year later by April 2005, EEWA

have helped more than 400 refused asylum seekers in the process of making fresh applications and it is still carrying out the work.

It has to be made clear that the many refused asylum seekers from Eritrea found themselves in the legal advice desert. Their existing solicitors at the time of refusal told some that their cases are now closed, and they can't be helped any longer. Also, many dispersed Eritreans lost contact with their solicitors or did not have right to appeal. In any case they came to EEWA, panicked, desperate and in need of help and legal advice. EEWA launched an appeal for pro bono legal advice for this group of Eritreans, and these new solicitors have done many of the fresh applications. Credit must be given also to those Eritreans who work with law firms as caseworkers and interpreters. They were instrumental in spreading the information concerning the fresh applications.

The vast majority of those applying for asylum in the UK are fleeing conflict and persecution. Less than 2% of refugees have made it to the UK as they mostly go to Asia and Africa. Many would like to go back home if conflicts and repression ended.

### **Background History of conflict in Eritrea:**

Like most of African States, Eritrea was forged into a nation state under Italian colonial rule (1889-1942). With the defeat of the Italians in World War II, the British Administered Eritrea for 10 years. In 1950 the United Nations passed a resolution federating Eritrea with Ethiopia against the expressed wish of the people. Ten years later Emperor Haileselassie forcefully annexed Eritrea to Ethiopia.

### **Repression and Resistance:**

During the federation period and the subsequent annexation, the people of Eritrea were subjected to extreme forms of repression by the Ethiopian Government. All democratic institutions such as political parties, trade unions and student unions were banned. Freedom of expression was denied and peaceful protests were met by killings, imprisonment, torture and other forms of human rights violations. All this gave rise to the beginning of an armed resistance by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961. In 1970 a splinter group from the ELF formed the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).

### **A History of Victimization:**

In 1950, when the UN passed resolution No. 390 A/V which federated Eritrea to Ethiopia, it was not concerned that it was forcing Eritrea into a union with a repressive feudal regime. Ethiopian Emperor Menelik 11 (1889-1913) created a strong feudal Empire by invading the Oromos and other peoples in the South. Some Ethio-phile historians called the invasion a civilizing mission, though the Oromos tell a different story of atrocities, humiliation and wanton killing that reduced the number of their population by millions.

The debate on the decolonisation of Eritrea in 1950 was summed up by the then US State Secretary when he insisted "Eritrea has to join our ally Ethiopia". US foreign

policy was intent on making a dominant Ethiopia the cornerstone of its plans for the Horn of Africa. It trained and equipped the Ethiopian army with modern armaments. However the Ethiopian economy remained backward. 80% of Ethiopian people survived on subsistence farming and lived a life of perpetual poverty and ignorance. The famines, which beset the country in the 1980s, were largely man-made.

### **The Cold War:**

Within the context of cold war logic, the Soviet Union trained and equipped the Somali Army. Thus a proxy war was unleashed in the Horn of Africa. Such was the solidarity of the superpowers to the people of the Horn of Africa: modernize their army, make a lucrative profit on arms trade, protect the farmers in the West through subsidies, and impose a chronic famine and ignorance on the people of Africa. This pattern of proxy wars that impoverished the majority of African countries can be seen in the distractive civil wars of Angola, Mozambique and Congo.

And today the West and the Soviet Union do not seem to have learnt much from their past mistakes. They are pouring billions of aid into Ethiopia, thus allowing PM Meles to purchase more arms instead of accepting the decision of the Boundary Commission which is believed to hold the solution to a lasting peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Although PM Meles has the credentials of an able statesman who has won the friendship of Tony Blair and also allowed a free election hitherto never seen in Ethiopia, the purchase of arms and the build up of soldiers along the Eritrean-Ethiopian border may result in another humanitarian catastrophe if war breaks out. PM Meles is talking about his commitment to peace but doing the opposite on the ground; this is his strategy to win friendship with the West. For the people of Eritrea it is a sign of deception. On the other hand, it gave the Eritrean Government an excuse to abandon the demobilization program of the army composed of youth who are serving the national service. The national service becomes open-ended, thus forcing thousands of young Eritreans to go into exile.

### **Refugees from Africa:**

Refugees from Africa were – and are – forced to leave their homes as a result of wars and conflicts sustained over many years. The Horn of Africa is particularly disastrous.

- Sudan: 20 years of civil war have claimed the lives of 2 million people, while a million more fled their villages and now live as refugees outside their home.
- Eritrea: 30 years of War for Independence (1961-1991) saw \_ of a million Eritreans become refugees. After 6 years of a honeymoon period of independence, a senseless and destructive war erupted between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998 and is the main factor in the creation of refugees.
- Ethiopia: has to fight wars on many fronts. In Ethiopia against movements of oppressed nationalists. The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) today's ruling elite. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) still operating. The Ogadeni Liberation Movement in the East bordering Somalia and intermittent war with Somalia. The backward Ethiopian economy cannot sustain the war on many fronts so the leaders have been propped up, funded and armed by the West and the Soviet Union as part of the superpowers' chase game for the domination of Africa. That is why it is imperative for the West to attach pre-conditions to the ways in which their debt relief and aid are spent.

- Somalia intermittent war with Ethiopia over the Ogaden and civil war for the last 11 years.

## **The Eritrean Diaspora:**

**1<sup>st</sup> Phase:** Around 1967 the ELF became active in the Eastern and Western lowlands of Eritrea. Emperor Haileselassie reacted with a “scorch the earth” policy of destroying villages by bombardment, killing people and their animals. At that time about 30,000 people - mostly nomads and peasants - fled to the Sudan.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Phase:**

As repression increased the Guerrilla war was intensified. One significant characteristic of the people of Eritrea is a tradition of resistance to foreign rule and repression. Their history is marked distinctively by heroic resistance and untold sacrifice sustained for 4 decades.

By 1977 the two fronts, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) liberated all of Eritrea with the exception of few towns including the capital Asmara that was encircled for a final push to victory. However, with the decision of the Soviet Union to support the military Marxist dictatorship in Ethiopia, that deposed the Emperor in 1974, the situation changed dramatically. In 1977-78 with the purchase of modern armaments worth 5 billion US dollars from the Soviet Union, the Ethiopian Junta launched a large scale offensive and regained all the lost territories. The onslaught was accompanied by blanket air and artillery bombardment of more than 100 villages. Thousands of people from the cities and rural areas fled to the Sudan, and from there trickled to the rest of the world.

In 1991 after 13 years of guerrilla and positional warfare the Ethiopian army was defeated. The EPLF government inherited a shattered economy and a dilapidated infrastructure. The fabric of the Eritrean society was in tatters; one in three Eritreans was now a refugee.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Phase:**

After independence, the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea left their hostility behind and looked forward to living in peace as good neighbours. These unprecedented rapprochements won them sympathy from all over the world. President Issayas Afeworki of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia were characterised as enlightened young leaders who would deliver their people from wars, poverty and ignorance and give them peace, progress and prosperity. The International community was convinced that an African renaissance was on the making.

All these visions were shattered when in 1998 a senseless border war erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This war claimed the lives of over 100,000 on both sides, while more than 70, 000 Eritrean and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin living in Ethiopia were deported and one million Eritreans were internally displaced when Ethiopia occupied uncontested territories. Although the two leaders signed an agreement to stop the war in December 2000, the threat of war is dragging on. The Ethiopian Government refused to abide by the decision of the Border Commission. To date tension prevails on the border, despite its being monitored by 4000 United Nations peacekeeping forces.

This climate has become the main reason behind the Eritrean Government's refusal to demobilize its large army and to channel them into productive activities. The soldiers who served in the national army became disillusioned and thousands of their ranks started to leave the country. This was exasperated when in September 2001 the Government silenced government officials who called for reform by jailing them without the due process of law. Subsequently all private papers were shut down and elders who ventured to reconcile were not spared. Religious minorities were also prosecuted. All this gave rise to the huge outpour of Eritrean refugees. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders have chronicled all persecutions in Eritrea.

### **The Study:**

The study is action-oriented. As soon as problems which required immediate attention were revealed, initiatives were taken to address them. The following three initiatives have been undertaken by the Eritrean Elders Welfare Group (EEWA):

1. Arrange fresh application for those who wanted to do so. Supply copies of UNHCR documents and other relevant documents on request.
2. Arrange visitation to mentally ill. This was attempted with the help of St. Anthony Eritrean Women's group. This initiative stalled due to a lack of expertise, funds, etc.
3. Prison visits: This was initiated after the implementation of Section 2, in September 22, 2004. St. Anthony Eritrea Women's group continues to make visits to those still detained.

### **Statistics**

The following information was collected about the Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers interviewed in order to illustrate the ways in which these Asylum Seekers differed from one another, and how different groups were affected differently by the law.

#### **Age Range:**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Percent</b>
20 – 25	19%
26 – 31	24%
32 – 39	31.10 %
40 – 45	16.8 %
46 – 47	7.9 %
Above 48	0.8 %

19% of the 400 people are between the ages of 20 and 25. These are the ages when they would be finishing secondary school and beginning their first degrees or engaged in first time employment.

24.4 % Of the 400 ERAS are between the ages of 26 and 31. This is the most productive age, a time when they should be working hard to transform their economic and social status in the UK. However, since they do not have permission to work but cannot go back home, they are still living in the UK and wasting away. They have become non-persons because the British Government is not concerned about their future.

### Years in Waiting:

Date of arrival	Present date	Years in waiting	Percentage of total
1998	2005	7	8
1999	2005	6	11
2000	2005	5	3
2001	2005	4	7
2002	2005	3	32
2003	2005	2	36
2004	2005	Less than a year	3

22% of the 400 Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers have been living in the UK without the permission to work from 5 to 7 years. Given the opportunity to learn and work during these years they could have successfully established and enjoyed an ordinary life in the UK. Instead, they continue to live a hand-to-mouth existence, impoverished and destitute, with nothing to offer their family back home. Refugees from Eritrea who arrived during the positive time for refugees in the UK, such as Mohamed Hagos, Dr. Tekeste, and others, became successful individuals. These success stories illustrate the enormous difference work permits can make to asylum seekers' lives, and the huge contrast between a good immigration policy and a bad immigration policy; a policy that builds people and a policy that destroys lives.

32% of the Eritrean Refused Asylum Seekers have been without work permit for 3 years pending their determination or refused asylum, and 36% for 2 years. This may look justified taking into consideration the backlogs that the Home Office has to clear. However 2 to 3 years without work is enough to erode one's self esteem and expose them to boredom, helplessness and depression, symptoms exhibited by most ERAS.

Economically this policy does not make sense. While they could be working and paying taxes, asylum seekers are forced to survive on benefits, while additional strain is placed on community organisations, family members and friends who are forced to support them.

**Gender Issues:**

Gender	Percentage
Male 160	40
Female 250	60

60% of the 400 are women. It has been established over and over again that in conflict situations it is the women and children who suffer the most. The case of Eritrean women is no exception. Today, more Eritrean women and children are languishing in the various refugee camps in Sudan. However, they also suffer persecution and oppression in Eritrea. Women were culturally prohibited from the kinds of jobs that might give them self-sufficiency such as trading and farming. Women were not allowed to own land. During the armed struggle the EPLF strived to bring equality between men and women. The Eritrean revolution was supposed to be not only for independence from Ethiopian rule but also against traditional laws that oppressed women. However, after independence the women were not empowered enough to continue the march to emancipation. There was, and still is, tension between the old and the new values.

“Labyrinths- Legal Advice for Asylum seekers in London”, a report commissioned by the Mayor of London in February 2005, stated: *“Women, like other groups, can lack expert advice available about asylum support. A 70 year old Eritrean Woman had been sleeping on Waterloo Bridge as a result of the failure to refer her to a local authority for a community care assessment”* (p 78).

**Inconsistency of determination:**

Significantly, some of those who passed through the same experiences in Eritrea and whose stories have striking similarities, are being treated differently by the immigration authorities. Some get accepted while others are refused. The story of Gabriel revealed this.

Gabriel was born and brought up in the liberated areas in the late 70s. Both his father and mother were killed in combat. He was sent to fight in 1998. In 2000 when the Ethiopian army captured uncontested territories his unit suffered setbacks when the Ethiopian army encircled them near the Sudanese border. He saved his own life by escaping to the Sudan and then making his way to the UK. Once in the UK, he was refused asylum. A friend of his who had a similar but less harrowing story was accepted. In “Right First Time? Home Office Asylum Interviewing and Reasons for Refusal Letters” by Ellie Smith, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture also points out this inconsistency:

*“the refusal letters examined in this study revealed that the caseworkers’ analysis of torture testimony was consistently weak, and that medical evidence was frequently downplayed, ignored or even disputed. The handling of expert evidence is of great concern, since it indicates a failure to appreciate the corroborative value of evidence of past persecution, and strongly suggests a presumption, in the absence of contrary expert opinion, to know more than the clinical expert about facts and opinions*

*contained in the medical report. Such conduct can only impair the quality and reliability of an asylum decision, and should not continue. "*

Likewise, an immigration monitoring Watchdog said that over four years the levels of appeals had been consistently above the expected rate of 15%. In the case of asylum seekers from some countries with well-known records of persecution, up to 40% of initial refusals of asylum in 2003 were found to have been wrong.

Percentage of asylum rejections overturned on appeal 2003:

Somalia:	38%
Sudan:	38%
Eritrea:	33%
Iran:	30%

### **The Refusal Letter:**

When the Asylum application was exhausted and the applicants were refused they are served with a letter that makes them destitute. The year 2003 was particularly bad. Estimates suggest that about 2000 Eritreans were refused asylum.

The standard letter is as follows: A letter to an Eritrean Woman (name has been changed).

HOME OFFICE  
IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY DIRECTORATE  
NATIONAL ASYLUM SUPPORT SERVICES

Date 25 July 2003

Applicant:  
M/s Hiwot  
Birmingham (address)

Following confirmation that your application for asylum has been refused and fully determined, I am writing to advice that you no longer qualify for support under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

**The support that you have been provided with is to be discontinued. Support is provided for a period of 21 days following the notification of the resolution of your asylum claim, which is deemed to be received 2 days following the determination of your asylum application. Our records show that your claim for asylum was determined on the 24 July 2003; therefore the period of support ends on 15 August 2003. You must now leave the United Kingdom.**

Within 21 days hundreds of people found themselves destitute and homeless. Many women with nowhere to go went to the Eritrean Orthodox Church for help. The situation alarmed the Eritrean communities, the various religious establishments, the parish, the Mayor of London, the UNHCR and the anti-deportations lobbies.

### **Consequences of Refusal:**

1. Creates destitution and homelessness
2. Forces asylum seekers to take up illegal jobs thus leaving them exposed to many dangers
3. Creates mental health problems
4. Puts pressure on the Eritrean community in the UK. Churches, and many institutions such as the Greater London Authority (GLA) who do not want to see refugees sleeping rough in the streets of London.

### **Dispersal Policy:**

In principle we are not against dispersal. London is getting overcrowded and to channel people to go to other cities is sensible. The problem is that these cities do not have any structures in place to meet the basic needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Most of the community support groups, information and advice providers, churches, mosques, restaurants and other service providers that Eritreans need in order to settle into UK society are to be found in London. The dispersal policy has not taken into consideration all this which can help the refugees settle gradually with sustained support from their long established communities and institutions.

### **Criminalising Asylum Seekers:**

Section 2: Criminalizes Asylum Seekers. This is the law enforced on 22 September 2004 which makes it a crime to enter the UK without documents, such as a passport.

A number of Eritreans were put to jail pending trial as a result of this law. Although the sentence was not severe it was between 4 and 6 months but the implications are very bad in that innocent people who are fleeing persecution are branded as criminals. Those who escaped from Eritrea without the government's permission could not own genuine passports for travel. More often than not, asylum seekers buy false passports.

EEWA with the help of St. Anthony Women's Group arranged visits to Eritrean asylum seekers who were detained. The St. Anthony Eritrean Women's Group has carried out visitation to women at HMP, at Brozefield women's prison and Holloway women's prison. An asylum seeker from Eritrea who is being held in Holloway Women's Prison is pregnant and is expected to give birth there. She understands little English and cannot advocate on behalf of herself and her unborn child. Her traumatic experience is just one example of the hardship faced by Eritrean asylum seekers as a result of the current UK immigration policy. Further example of case studies can be found in the appendix.

## The Way Forward:

There is an alternative to destitution, homelessness, illegal work and depression. The alternative is much better, it is humane, and it is the key to understanding and harmony between the rich developed countries and the people in the developing countries who are suffering because of conflicts sustained over many years. This alternative is to allow asylum seekers to engage in legal employment while they are waiting for their decision, or while they are waiting for it to become safe for them to return home.

At the centre of any debate concerning refugees should be individuals and their plight to survive and not only statistics. In the Western world, the emphasis is today being placed on how to reduce the number of those applying for asylum to a minimum, and the obligation to protect vulnerable and persecuted people no longer seem relevant in the race to meet this target.

Whatever happens to African asylum seekers in the UK affects the people of Africa. Thus, policies based on these assumptions cannot address the burning global issues, such as “Make Poverty History”, “Build Africa” and globalization through social cohesion and integration. The commitment to build Africa must be extended to those African nationals who are arriving to the UK as refugees and asylum seekers.

Despite the extremely negative representations and treatment of Eritrean asylum seekers in the UK, there are voices in the UK who understand the plight of refugees and look at the situation sympathetically. In “The City Statement – Joint Statement by Mayors and Leaders of European Cities December 2003”, Ken Livingston said the following:

*“London and other great cities also know that they have most to gain from refugees and asylum seekers, who have contributed enormously to our social and economic wealth. We also have the most to lose from any policies that consign refugees and asylum seekers to long-term poverty and exclusion.”*

The Mayor concluded:

*“Together we have a strong voice in the debate about the future of EU asylum policy.”*

The statement sets out the key principles for an asylum regime which will be orderly, just and sustainable and goes on to suggest that the arrival of migrants, including asylum seekers, can become a positive force in the development of cities.

Do not exclude asylum seekers from getting work permits. They should not be rejected. As a priest who worked with Eritrean Refused Asylum seekers said, *“It is not only they who are suffering, we are also suffering, and it is a bitter humiliation for the human conscience. God told man to eat by his sweat, no man should have the right to deny people work. It is ungodly.”*

Let all asylum seekers work, including refused asylum seekers. Let them contribute to society both in the UK and in their home countries. Abolish *“Prohibited to Work”*

from their photo ID card and put an end to a senseless policy which only causes immeasurable harm.

*The End*

## Appendix A: Case Studies

**Tedros Abraha**, Manchester.

For 5 years, he has lived with a photo ID card marked: “Employment Prohibited”. He calls it an identity card of exclusion. He is now doing community work in order to obtain accommodation and benefits.

*Tedros: I am a graduate of Asmara University. I finished the 18-month national service in 1997. I served one year in the Port of Massawa with the ministry of fisheries and 6 months military training. I was sent to Europe for training courses. In 1999 I was due to go back to Eritrea but I heard that my friends who finished National Service were sent to the army. I knew they would not go willingly they must be forced to go. Prior to my coming to Europe we were talking among ourselves that it is wrong to force people to go to fight. They should have a say in the debate either to go to war or seek peaceful means to end the conflict. The Eritrean Government rejected USA and Rwanda proposals for peace. Had the Eritrean Government accepted the proposal this entire blood bath might have been avoided. We the young generation are excluded from decision that determines our future. It is the old generation who imposes everything on us. We are expected to obey orders or suffer the consequences. If we show any kind of conscientious objections we are prosecuted mercilessly. They beat us, imprison us and send us to hard labour on road construction, they alienate us from our colleagues. The youth over 18 are given one-way ticket to the front line to fight, there is no coming back except for a short time to visit their families under a strict pass paper.*

*Therefore, the option I was left with is to seek asylum. I ended up in the UK to ask for asylum. I preferred UK because I am educated in English in Asmara University and I hoped to continue or rather to specialise in my studies. Also with my English educational background I would not find difficulty to adjust to a new life in Britain. Unfortunately my hopes were shattered when my application for asylum failed. The Home Office did not remove me. It is not sending Eritreans to Eritrea because it cannot guarantee their safety. When the Maltese Government deported more than 150 Eritrean asylum seekers they were put behind bars on arrival. Amnesty International European Union etc subjected the Maltese Government to condemnation. But what is the use if we don't have the right to work and pursue our studies.*

*Every week I go to the police to sign in. In Eritrea the youth is subjected to Government control. One cannot go around freely without “a pass.” They are stopped any time and asked to produce the “pass”. The police often carry out the “rounding up of people” and arrest anyone found without pass papers. Here I am also under the control of the British police. I have to sign every week to prove my presence. I have to live in the same address; any change of address has to be with the permission of the police. I have to be around in case the police want me. I have an ID photo card, on written “Prohibited to Work”. We call it an identity of exclusion from life in the UK. It is a stigma we carry not only in our pocket but in our mind as well. I was not free in Eritrea and I am not free here.*

*I sometimes get backbreaking work. They don't ask me for work permit, so it is possible to do illegal work. Although it exposes us to all kinds of dangerous work.*

*God forbid. When I get work I become happy it gives me the opportunity to make friends with the British people. Once you befriend them they are good and sympathetic to your problems. But sometimes I ran into a problem particularly when the refugee issue hits the media headlines. At that time we do pay a price for it. We face racist remarks from people. One day when the immigration and asylum issue hit the newspaper headlines during the election period, my workmate asked me where I came from. I told him I am an asylum seeker from Eritrea. He said, "What are you people doing here. Why don't you go back home? We are fed up of you people". I said yes, I should have been in my country. These people don't know I have a beautiful small country called Eritrea. There the neighbours know each other and support each other. Children play freely in the neighbourhood in the open air. They are not harassed nor molested. Every body smiles at them. Take care of them. I grew up in the capital Asmara. There is no fear of people. Women can walk alone in the night. No mugging and no harassment. A BBC correspondent once said, "Eritrea is the best country to live in but the worst to work". Because he reported what the Government would not like to hear and was given persona non-grata. Now he is based in Sudan. I love Eritrea. I missed the walk "passagiata" strolling in the main street boulevard of the city of Asmara after 5 p.m. I used to drink cappuccino in the open air. I am educated, of a middle class background.*

*To be fair there are a lot of good people in the UK, conscious people aware of what's going on in the world. But I need a work permit in order to use my potential-to lead a successful life. I could have a good life in Eritrea. But at the moment there is no place for me there. If peace is restored I will be the first person to return to Eritrea.*

#### **Nadia Hassan:**

Nadia is a young Eritrean girl of 23. Her claim for asylum was refused and she was asked to leave her accommodation. She became homeless. Eritrean Elders Welfare Association helped her to apply for homeless accommodation as her English was very poor. Once she re-applied for accommodation she was willing to talk about her problems.

Nadia said, *"Wherever you go for help, people tell you priority is given to single mothers. To families with children. Do I have to carry a child on my back in order to get a roof over my head."* She said this in a very humorous way. Unlike many Eritrean girls Nadia was open and talked with ease. There was no note of desperation in her voice. The Eritrean Elders Welfare Association are fighting to make a difference to the life of these historically victimized Eritreans. I wish that Eritreans who acquired British Citizens and have a stable lifestyle rise up to the challenge and help them.

#### **Gabriel Berhane:**

Gabriel came to the Eritrean Elders Welfare Association office without an appointment. He burst into recriminations, condemnations and regret as if everyone is the causes of his misery. He said:

*"I was born in Sahel in the liberated areas of Eritrea. When I was 4 years old my mother was killed when the Ethiopians dropped bombs from the air. The Ethiopians had air superiority during all the years of struggle, 30 years all in all. I was then sent*

*to Arareb where orphans or children of martyrs were raised. My father used to visit me there. After some time, he stopped coming. Later I was told he was killed in combat. The Ethiopian tried to break through the EPLF strong trenches at a place called Fornello. He got martyred there fighting heroically.*

*Then I joined the revolutionary school. It is called Zero school. We get our classes in a camouflaged area under trees. Nearby there is a safety tunnel; we dug out an underground shelter. When the Miigs come a whistle is blown and we all run to the tunnel for safety. I have never experienced a normal family life.*

*When we won our independence in 1991 I was given to my uncle. I was fifteen. In 1998 when the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia erupted I was asked to help my country, which I did. At the third offensive in May 12, 2000 the Ethiopians broke our defence lines and marched in the Western Lowlands. They captured Barentu and Tesseneti. They evacuated Barentu and we drove them from Tesseneti and we were pursuing them towards Ali Gedir when somehow we were encircled. I fled to the Sudan. Friends of my father helped me to come to the United Kingdom.*

*My claim for asylum was refused, and I was asked to leave the accommodation. My roommate, a fellow asylum seeker, let me sleep in his room without being noticed. He found me a shopkeeper in London. I work for him and he let me sleep in the shop. My life is a misery. Why did my parents bring me to this miserable world?"*

He was taken to a solicitor who agreed to take up his case. His application was processed and sent to the Home Office. His benefits and accommodation is not yet reinstated because he refused to sign Section 4, which would give him welfare support but make him vulnerable to deportation. He is afraid that Section 4 gives the mandate to the Home Office to deport him any time. He doesn't want to risk that because if he is deported he believes he will be shot as a deserter. The fighters know him. He is a staunch fighter, well built and confident. The Eritrean authorities do not tolerate such behaviour.

### **Nazareth Berhane:**

Nazareth came to the EEWA to make a fresh application for asylum and one was arranged for her. She had been suffering from depression.

Q. *When did you get sick?*

Nazareth: *At the beginning of 2004.*

Q. *What was the cause of your illness?*

Nazareth. *After I got a letter of refusal from the Home Office asking me to evacuate my accommodation.*

Q. *How did it start?*

Nazareth: *It was like telling me that a member of my family is dead. I said, "What am I supposed to do? Where can I go? As if a dreadful thing happened to me. I informed my relative who came with me. She consoled me. She was extremely nice to me. She was a lucky person granted indefinite leave to remain. I said why me. People who came with me got accepted.*

*My friend said to me "Nazareth. Don't you worry. Leave their accommodation and come and live with me. We will share everything we have with you and we will go and talk to your solicitor and start a long fight to get accepted."*

*But I started to lose my appetite. I shut myself in my bedroom and refused to go out. I became afraid to go out because when I see people pass by I hear them talking about me. I thought they are planning to grab me and send me back to Eritrea.*

Q: *Did you go shopping by yourself? Alone?*

Nazareth: *At that time, not at all. I was afraid of people. I only go out with my friend. And even then if I see police coming towards me, I quickly hide. I thought they are after me to take me back to Eritrea.*

Q: *Have you ever thought of hurting yourself?*

Nazareth: *Not at all. God tells me it is wrong to take your life. I am useless. I am not educated. I am not working. I depend upon others. I am useless. I am a burden to my friend.*

Nazareth has internalized the system that drove her to depression; she thought she was incapable of realizing her potential by working for her upkeep. She felt as a failure. The Government of Eritrea failed her and the British Government also failed her.

By mid 2005, Nazareth has improved. She was released from the mental hospital. She was given in writing a summary of assessment needs and care programmes. She had a social worker all this time.

The summary: *“Nazareth was admitted to this ward in 2004 experiencing hallucinations. Since then Nazareth has engaged very well with mental health services. Over the past year Nazareth has experienced a couple of setbacks whereby her symptoms have increased, these appear to be in context with increased stress levels related to her ongoing appeal with the Home Office.”*

From this example one can easily see the devastating effect refusals have on vulnerable asylum seekers.

### **Gemila Ibrahim:**

Gemila Ibrahim was refused asylum in September 2003. When she was asked to leave her accommodation she moved in with a friend to share a flat. However, she started to break plates and teacups and became uncooperative and hostile. Her friend took her to her GP. He treated her for depression and prescribed for her sleeping and anti-depressant pills. However the pharmacy refused to give her the medicines for free because as a refused asylum seeker she is not entitled to a free prescription. With no money there was nothing to be done. They went back home sad and helpless.

When her situation worsened her friend took her to a mental clinic in Camberwell area. She told them she cannot maintain Gemila, she has no resources nor the skill to deal with a mentally sick person. The people in the clinic were extremely helpful and put her under their care. She was provided with hostel accommodation and a social worker was assigned to her.

After six months the doctor who treated her for depression examined her again. He asked her about her mood, her daily activities, her eating habits, and concluded: *“I am discharging you from the clinic. We have nothing more to do for you. Your problem*

*is in relation to immigration. We can't do anything about it. You can go back to your GP for your medicines."*

Gemila claimed that she has not improved at all and that her GP cannot help her because she is not entitled to a free medicine from the pharmacy.

Only once the doctor was challenged by the interpreter as to his obligation to provide care for a person in need, he agreed to provide medicine for free and keep Gemila as his outpatient.

### **Kokebe Debesai:**

Kokebe was a student of Asmara University. He was working closely with the President of the Asmara Students Union, who miraculously escaped from Prison.

*I was a senior student in Eritrea, studying economics. In June 2000, we were asked to go to record the losses of all households looted by the Ethiopian army during their brief capture of the Western Lowlands of Eritrea. They asked us to do this as part of the summer work after schools are closed for summer. We were engaging in discussion with the university authorities when we heard that Semere our president was picked up by security officer in the middle of the night and his whereabouts were unknown. The situation turned ugly when we demanded the release of our president. During his appearance in the court the army surrounded us, beat us up and forced us into waiting lorries to Wia, a place in the red sea area where the temperature was about 40 % cc. Two students died of sunstroke. I said enough is enough and I decide to leave Eritrea as soon as I finish the punishment for doing nothing.*

*When I went back to Asmara, I engaged my uncle, a businessman and a close confidant of PFDJ and an apologist for the behaviour of PFDG. He always said, "you young people don't understand. The EPLF have spent years on the trenches, in order to free you from oppression and foreign occupation. You don't expect them to be refined administrators.*

*I said to my uncle: "I have heard you apologizing for the PFDG repression time and time again. I am fed up of these pretensions and lies. I have made my mind to disappear. I am asking you for the last time. Are you going to give me \$3000. Soon his face was changed. His eyes were full of tears.*

*My Uncle said: "Yes, I will give you the money, but at least tell me your plan. I am worried that if you get caught the consequence is severe.*

*After a pause he said, "Before you do so, Can't we hide you here or in the villages? I said, "Uncle you are not talking sense. You know nobody can hide in Eritrea. The neighbourhood association controls the people. You can only travel using passes. They can easily find me in the heinous search and rounding up of people. You know they arrest anyone found without papers He said, "It is just I ran out of any idea of anyway that you can be around close to the family"*

*I said, "Uncle, don't be naïve. The PFDJ is changing the social fabric of the Eritrean Society in an entirely different way from the one the Eritrea people fought for. The*

*people fought not only for the flag but also for the rule of law, social justice, respect of human rights and democracy. Can't you see they are militarizing the whole society?*

*My uncle said: Please don't talk any more with this provocative talk of yours. With such ideology you would not survive in Eritrea. I love you. I will arrange your travel. Don't tell to anybody both your life and my life is in danger from the moment we agreed the escape.*

*The rest is history. My uncle produced a pass for me to go to the border with the Sudan. I then easily crossed the border, went to Libya and make my way to the UK.*