

Central America's Other Refugees

By Dan
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(Photo: Charles Roffey / Flickr)

Central Americans are not the only ones risking their lives to get to the United States through Mexico. Tucked in among this northward flow are hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers from Africa and Asia.

They include hundreds from the troubled northeast African state of Eritrea.

Eritreans have been taking this perilous route for more than a decade to escape the repressive police state their new nation has become. Many have traveled halfway around the world or more just to get to the starting point of this leg of their journey: Quito, Ecuador.

Wode Alem, 39, is one of them. His story is typical.

Wode's Story

Wode Alem fled Eritrea after he was accused of destroying an army truck in a welding accident and was brutally beaten for three months on suspicion he'd done it on purpose. He swears he didn't. When the beatings stopped, he disappeared into Eritrea's draconian prison system with no release—or trial—in sight.

He escaped by hiding in a pile of hay on a plantation where he and other prisoners were forced to work and then

dashing through a hail of bullets to a nearby forest. He paid smugglers to get him out of the country, whose border guards have shoot-to-kill orders for anyone trying to leave. He, like others I interviewed, asked that his name be changed out of fear of retribution against his family in Eritrea.

Wode was born in Addis Ababa, but his parents were Eritreans who had gone to the Ethiopian capital for work in the 1970s. Ethiopia had annexed Eritrea, a former Italian colony, in the early 1960s, but lost it three decades later after a protracted liberation struggle.

Newly independent Eritrea went back to war with Ethiopia over unresolved border issues in 1998—following similar confrontations with each of its other neighbors—and Wode’s family, along with 75,000 other Eritreans, was deported to Eritrea.

Months later, Wode was conscripted into the Eritrean army, first to fight in the Border War, then to work in a military motor pool earning 70 *nakfa* per month (\$4.70 at official rates). This is typical for those in Eritrea’s “national service,” which can last a decade or longer. Because the border dispute has never been laid to rest, the country is in a perpetual and ambiguously defined state of emergency.

I’ve been researching and writing about these issues for more than two years, interviewing Eritreans in refugee camps and communities in Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, and Israel. Over the past three months, I spoke with more than 100 recent arrivals in seven cities in Canada and the United States about why they left and how they got here.

Unlimited national service factored into the decision to leave for the overwhelming majority, though political or religious factors often played a role. Some described incidents of punishment that provided a “last straw.” For example, some were beaten for asking questions at a public meeting, others for getting “caught” praying while in uniform. Others cited accusations of acts of defiance that they insisted they had not committed, and a subsequent fear of detention and torture.

Few appeared to have had much information on what to expect in either the United States or Canada, so “pull” factors were rarely in evidence. Often the determining factor in where they went was the presence of family or friends who could help them.

Many came through personal sponsorship or structured resettlement programs, especially those who went to Canada. But the largest share who came unannounced did so by flying to South America and traveling overland to the Texas or California border. Some crossed with *coyotes* in small boats or swam the Rio Grande. Others walked across bridges and announced themselves when they got here. Until now, their stories have not been reported.

Out of Eritrea

Wode was already on the outs with his superiors when the garage incident took place in 2006. His commanding officer, a colonel, had been bullying him for months after nicknaming him “Amhara,” one of Ethiopia’s dominant ethnic groups, because of his Ethiopian birthplace. He said that one day an oxygen bottle apparently leaked and caught fire from a spark, causing a major explosion in which a fellow worker was killed and the car on which they were working was destroyed. The colonel blamed Wode without an inquiry and called soldiers to take him to prison immediately.

He was driven to a prison in the nearby Ala Valley where he was beaten each day, week after week, as they interrogated him over why he had “sabotaged” the garage by causing the explosion. Each time, he said, he answered the same way: “It was an accident. I don’t know how it happened.” But they kept beating him, using a variety of instruments including fists and feet.

At the end of three months, the beatings suddenly stopped. Eight months later, guards took him out of the holding cell and put him to work on a state-owned farm, along with other detainees. Together they weeded, watered, harvested, and hoed fields of tomatoes and cabbage in a strictly enforced silence.

One afternoon when the guards were some distance away, he crawled inside a large pile of hay and hid. When he saw the detainees lined up for roll call, he slipped out and made a run for the forest, zigzagging as several guards shot at him.

with AK-47 assault rifles (which are not very accurate at long distance). Once he felt safely away he hid again and waited until midnight to move. Then he slipped away. A smuggler arranged his escape to Sudan, from where he flew to Kenya with papers purchased in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum.

The Refugee Business

Wode spent close to two years in Nairobi taking odd jobs as a mechanic until he secured a full-time job in a garage. He saved virtually all he earned beyond his rent and meals until he had \$16,000. With these savings and help from members of his extended family, he came up with the \$40,000 smugglers demanded to get him to the United States.

The trip was managed by a smuggler based in Dubai, the headquarters for much of the clandestine movement of refugees from the region. This smuggler had lieutenants in most major East African cities and many in Europe and the Americas. It is a thriving global business. He, or someone working for him, sent Wode a passport with a visa to Dubai, where he spent five days getting the rest of his papers in order. Then he was put on a flight to Moscow, where he picked up a flight to Havana with three other Eritreans in similar circumstances.

As instructed, they took a taxi to a small seaside hotel that housed 15-20 Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis, all traveling on forged documents. I asked if he'd gone into the sea, but he said they all stayed close to the hotel in fear of being picked up by local authorities. All he remembers is the inside of his room and the sight of other anxious refugees.

During this interlude, the smuggler at the next port of call—Quito—had arranged visas for him and the other three Eritreans with whom he was traveling and sent them by fax. However, on the second day a Cuban soldier came and collected all their passports, telling them to fetch them again in the morning. "Everybody was scared," said Wode. "No one was sleeping."

When they went to the police station to get their passports, they were asked where they were coming from and where they were going. They said they were drivers on their way from Kenya to jobs in Ecuador. At the end of the questioning, they were dismissed and went back to the hotel, frightened that they'd be sent back to Africa. But several hours later a messenger arrived with their passports. "Everybody slept that night," Wode said.

After three tense days, they boarded the flight for Quito, where they were met at the airport by an Eritrean smuggler who took them to his home and immediately burned their passports. From then on they would travel without papers. He gave them new bags and new clothes but no identification. They were warned they would have to cross each border illegally. That night they left.

Latin American Odyssey

Sometime around 8 or 9 p.m., according to Wode, they got out of the car and set off into the jungle on foot, following a Colombian guide hired by the smuggler. Once over the border, they boarded a second-class bus and rode to within several miles of Panama. Again, they set out on foot through the bush. It took them three days this time.

"You couldn't see even the sky," said Wode, describing chest-deep river crossings and blind plunges through mosquito-infested thickets. At some point, their guide left them to return to Bogotá, and they were on their own. Perhaps not surprisingly, the track they were following led to a military camp. When the soldiers saw them, they ordered them to undress completely for a full-body search. The refugees, none of whom understood Spanish, were convinced they were being robbed. But once the search was done, they were allowed to put their clothes back on and taken into the camp where they spent a relatively comfortable night, relieved but anxious about what would come next.

From there, they traveled by foot, boat, and bus to Panama City, where they stayed five days at another hotel crammed with refugees and migrants headed north. Local authorities interviewed Wode and his companions to ascertain their status and then gave them temporary papers to transit the country. When they neared Costa Rica, they again descended from the bus and walked around the border post, destroying their Panamanian papers.

On the other side they caught a bus to San José, where they again went to the local immigration office to plead their

case. And again they were given transit papers to the next frontier, which they crossed on foot out of sight of those authorities. They repeated this across Nicaragua and El Salvador until, by pre-arrangement, they met a boat that took them to Guatemala on a turbulent five-hour trip that left most of them wretchedly ill. Again they walked.

Another smuggler guided them into Mexico and hired a taxi to take them to the immigration office in the Chiapas capital, Tapachula, where they were put in a United Nations-supplied refugee camp that mostly housed other East Africans—some 300-400 by Wode's count. After 21 days, they were given 30-day transit visas.

Bound for America

Five days later, they left for Reynosa just south of the Texas border. They were met there by a Mexican smuggler known to them only as "Tiger," whom they had to pay another \$500 each. After five more days they boarded a boat under cover of darkness and tried to cross the Rio Grande.

"We were not lucky," said Wode. The boat leaked badly and soon sank. One migrant from India drowned, he said. The others made it back to the Mexican shore as U.S. Border Patrol officers arrived on the opposite side.

The next day they tried again with a larger group of 14 people, including six Eritreans, an Indian, and several Mexicans and Somalis. They were divided between two boats this time, both of which made it. Once across, they set out on foot on a road close to the town of Hidalgo. At about 8 a.m., a small plane passed overhead. Soon afterward Border Patrol officers showed up, sending the frightened travelers in all directions.

"I dove into the water," said Wode. "It was too dirty!"

"One officer yelled, 'Come out! I see you,' he said. "The Mexicans were crying. Finally, I came out."

The Africans were questioned separately.

"You guys are from Eritrea or Ethiopia or Somalia, right?" Wode said they asked, clearly familiar with the influx from the Horn. Wode said they took down the details of who they were, where they'd come from and how they did it before being taken to another prison. He spent 45 days there, but he is not complaining. By contrast to what he'd already been through, this was a vacation—and he knew it would end.

Today, Wode lives in a poor working class suburb of Atlanta, along with scores of other recent arrivals from Eritrea. Shortly after his arrival there, he got a driver's license and found work as a driver for a small company. When he had saved enough, he got a used, long-haul truck from another friend on a lease-to-buy arrangement. Now he drives for himself. Meanwhile, he sends what he can to his family in Eritrea.