Middle East Research and Information Project

From Sinai to Lampedusa: An Eritrean Journey

by Dan Connell (/author/dan-connell) | published January 19, 2015

Two human tragedies will forever scar Eritreans' memories of the past decade, during which hundreds of thousands fled repression and despair in their homeland to seek sanctuary in more open, democratic societies: the brutal kidnapping, torture and ransom of refugees in the Egyptian Sinai and the drowning of hundreds more in the Mediterranean Sea when their criminally unseaworthy and overcrowded boats went down, a running disaster epitomized by the October 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck.

Each captured the attention of the international media, if fleetingly. But the two phenomena are connected by more than the fact that so many of the victims come from the small northeast African state of Eritrea, which has lost as much as one fifth of its population of 4-5 million over the last ten years. They also offer a window into the cruel practice of human trafficking that stalks the Eritreans in their quest for a safe haven, most ruthlessly in the Sinai but increasingly in Libya, where the breakdown of order has left the Eritreans and other refugees and migrants vulnerable to a host of predators. None of the many hundreds I have interviewed over the past three years in Africa, the Middle East, North America and Europe embodies this story more than Nataniel, whom I met in the Swedish town of Lindesberg in October 2014. He, like most I spoke with, asked that his surname be withheld to protect his family from retribution at home.

Nataniel was one of the fortunate few who survived the Lampedusa shipwreck, but that was only the last of the trials he faced. His reasons for fleeing Eritrea were typical of the young men and women making this journey over the last several years, though his particular odyssey had more agonizing twists and turns than most. Now 26, he was born and raised in Asmara. The youngest of four children, he has an older brother in the Eritrean army and two sisters still living at home. He had only finished ninth grade when he turned 18 in 2006 and was told he was "too old" to be in school. He was then called up for national service, trained at the Sawa military camp in Eritrea's western lowlands and assigned to an infantry unit where he remained until 2008.

Read more of Dan Connell's interviews with Eritrean refugees at his blog Eritrean Journeys (http://www.danconnell.net/blog).

For background, see Dan Connell, "Escaping Eritrea: Why They Flee and What They Face (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer264/escaping-eritrea)," *Middle East Report* 264 (Fall 2012) and "The Rerouted Trafficking in Eritrean Refugees (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/rerouted-trafficking-eritrean-refugees)," *Middle East Report* 268 (Fall 2013).

On Lampedusa and EU policing of the Mediterranean passage, see Amanda Ufheil-Somers' primer (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer261/lampedusa) and Greg Feldman, "Europe's Border Control with a Humanitarian Face (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer261/europes-border-control-humanitarian-face)," both in *Middle East Report* 261 (Winter 2011).

Nataniel told me that in those two years he lost all hope for his own future after being denied the chance to return to school and seeing others who had been in service for as long as 14 or 15 years under similar circumstances. Fearing he would be tortured and humiliated after a "fight" with his immediate superior, he fled. "I left to find a better life," he says, having little idea then of the myriad hardships and dangers he would confront on the journey or much of an idea of where the journey might end.

His unit was in the Barentu-Tokombia area, not far from the Badme plain where the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia broke out and which is today the reason Ethiopia and Eritrea remain in a confrontation often described as "no peace, no war." Badme was awarded to Eritrea by an international boundary commission in 2002, but Ethiopia refused to give it up and Eritrea refuses to negotiate. The standoff has become the rationale for an undeclared state of emergency within Eritrea under which a previously ratified constitution has been left unimplemented, elections have been indefinitely postponed and all dissent has been branded as traitorous. It is also the justification for the open-ended terms of national service.

Nataniel slipped out of his camp one night with his AK-47 assault rifle and a hand grenade, which he says he kept to make sure he would not be captured and taken back, and he walked eight hours by himself to the border.

Once he was across, Ethiopian authorities registered him and sent him to the Mai Aini refugee camp, one of two such sites at the time in northwestern Tigray. (Two more have been established since 2008.) Nataniel spent two years there with little to do but count the days and dream of something better, as there was then no school at the level he had reached and little work. To that point his story is fairly similar to those of thousands of young Eritreans who have ended up in such camps in Ethiopia or Sudan.

But Nataniel wanted more, so he contacted relatives abroad to get money to pay smugglers to get him through Sudan and across Libya to find a place on a boat to Europe. In July 2010, he paid an Eritrean to get him from Ethiopia to Sudan and left one night in the back of a Toyota pickup with 26 other refugees. The journey to the border was to take four days, with travel only by night, but the refugees never quite reached their destination, the frontier town of Humera. Ethiopian soldiers caught them and took the entire group, all Eritreans, prisoner. But Nataniel speaks Amharic, a major Ethiopian language, and he insisted he was Ethiopian, not Eritrean, just a migrant hitching a ride, so they let him go and he walked the rest of the way to Humera. After two days there, he paid a stranger 200 Ethiopian *birr* (just under $10) to get him across the border to the Sudanese town of Hamdeit. This time he was not so lucky.

Almost as soon as his party got to Sudan they were captured by armed men, whom Nataniel at first thought were Sudanese military. His captors drove for ten hours into the desert to a remote camp where more armed men were waiting with 15 other prisoners and a convoy of more than a dozen Toyota pickups all loaded with contraband, much of it small arms. These were smugglers from the Rashayida people who live along the Eritrea-Sudan border and have been trafficking in illicit goods across the region for decades. In recent years, the Rashayida have come to see young Eritreans from the mainly Christian central highlands as a new revenue source and have been kidnapping them from refugee camps in Sudan and along the border to sell them to traffickers in the Sinai. Nataniel quickly realized where he was -- and where he was headed.

The group set off almost immediately and drove eight days across northern Sudan and Egypt to reach the Sinai where the kidnappers demanded $3,500 from each of their "passengers" before they would release them. Nataniel got the money through a relative in the Netherlands. But he was not let go -- he was instead handed off to Bedouin traffickers who took him and 42 others in two pickup trucks to a compound near the Israeli border where they demanded another $22,000 and threatened to kill all of the Eritreans if they did not pay the ransom.

There were 36 men and seven women, thrown into a windowless room with one toilet, a dirt floor and nothing to sleep on but what they carried. Each day their captors came and demanded money, handing them cell phones and insisting they call relatives abroad to get it. Several came up with part of it -- $5,000, $7,000 -- but none could raise enough. Still, the traffickers kept demanding more and beating their victims over and over as they shouted at them to find a way to get the money, according to Nataniel.

"They would smoke hashish or marijuana and then come to beat you," he says. "You don't say anything, and they just beat you." The traffickers also started taking the women out with them, one by one, and raping them, sometimes forcing them to stay with them through the night.

At last, despairing of being released, Nataniel and his friends approached the women and asked them to steal a key to the room where the others were being held after the traffickers had gotten high and fallen asleep. One Friday, the Bedouins took three of the women. At 1:30 am, one returned with a key and a cell phone and let the captives out.

Once they were alone in the desert, they called an Eritrean in Italy, Alganesh Fessaha, who has helped hundreds of trafficking victims through her NGO, the Gandhi Association. Known to Eritreans as "Doctor Alganesh," both for her knowledge of medicine and the healing impact of her interventions, she told the escapees not to move while she called a sympathetic Bedouin sheikh to organize a rescue party. But the traffickers showed up first and the next thing the freed captives heard was shooting, sending them off in all directions. Three were killed, according to Nataniel. One woman was wounded so badly she could not continue. Her husband stopped to care for her, he says. He never saw them again.

For four hours, the survivors walked, using the stars to keep from going in circles, all the while aware that their captors were stalking them. At six, with dawn breaking, they saw a flag over a group of tents and went to ask for help. They had stumbled into an Egyptian army camp, though, and they were immediately arrested and taken to prison, where they remained for five months.

Sinai prisons are austere affairs, one-story fortresses filled with large empty rooms, each with a single toilet at one end, perhaps a barred window, a peephole in the door and a few straw mats on the cold concrete floor for sleeping. Men are grouped according to the crime they are accused of and women are kept separately. A year and a half ago I visited two of the facilities with Alganesh, who was bringing food and medicines to former kidnap victims jailed under similar circumstances.

Meanwhile, early in 2011 a representative of the Eritrean embassy came to the prison where Nataniel was and told him and the others to let the Egyptians send them back to Eritrea. But, fearing imprisonment and torture if they accepted, they instead asked the Egyptians to bring someone from the Ethiopian embassy. This official said Ethiopia would accept them if they wanted to claim they were Ethiopian nationals, but they would have to pay their own airfare. Nataniel says he and the others got on the phone, raised the money, then flew to Addis Ababa and immediately set about organizing another trip to Sudan. Twenty-five days and $600 per person later, they left.

Nataniel spent two months in the Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan before moving on to the capital, Khartoum, where he settled in for a year and a half, finding a job driving a taxi and getting married. But life was difficult and security was tenuous with corrupt police repeatedly detaining refugees and demanding payment for their release. With no improvement in sight, he set out once again in June 2013, this time headed for Libya and a boat to Europe, paying smugglers an advance of $1,000.

But bad luck seemed to trail his every move.

Near the point where Sudan, Chad, Egypt and Libya meet, he and his fellows' truck was stopped by an outlaw band calling themselves "Chad," according to Nataniel. He does not know if they were from this country or the name was just a gang tag, but they were the most brutal group he had yet encountered.

The Chad gang kept them for two months with barely enough food and water to survive, while demanding a ransom of $5,000 apiece and again providing cell phones for them to beg for it from relatives. There were 131 captives this time, all Eritreans and nearly all insisting they could not come up with the sum, as they had already paid everything they could raise for the journey, according to Nataniel. Again there were beatings to go with the demands, but starvation was their worst fear.

At last, the ransomers agreed to $3,000 per person. Any who could not come up with that amount would die. The captives were told to arrange for it to be handed over in cash to a contact in the city of Omdurman, across the Nile from Khartoum. Those paying the ransoms had either to travel to Sudan or arrange for someone local to make the payment. At last, the money was delivered, the kidnappers were notified, and the convoy set off again for Tripoli. By this time, September, it was late in the season to attempt a sea crossing. Nevertheless, Nataniel paid a smuggler another $1,800 for the chance to try.

At 2 am on October 2, he boarded a small two-level vessel crammed with 520 refugees and migrants. Most were Eritreans, but there were Ethiopians, Somalis, West Africans and Arabs, all poor and all desperate to get to Europe for a chance to change their lives.

Nataniel found a spot on the top deck, under a blazing sun, the wind blowing, no roof or cover and only the food and water they had sneaked on board, as the refugees had been warned not to bring anything that would add weight. The trip was to take three days, but by the evening of the second day, they could see the lights of a city -- Lampedusa, their destination.

At this point the engine failed and the vessel lost all power. The captain, frantic to signal the island for help as the ship began to drift away, lit a torch to get attention. But there had apparently been a fuel leak, and a raging fire broke out. It all happened so fast that it was hard to register the events that followed, according to Nataniel. But people panicked, ran to the side away from the flames, and the boat flipped, sending everyone into the water at once. The boat sank almost immediately, leaving little to hold onto but bits of floating debris.

Nataniel was one of the few who knew how to swim, having learned as a child at the Gurgusum beach outside of Massawa, Eritrea's main port, when an Italian entrepreneur managed the concession. In a touch of irony, the Eritrean government runs the beach today, and most of the staffers are national service conscripts.

He says he spent four hours in the water in the dark with six other passengers trying to reach the shore but not seeming to get any closer. Still, they managed to stay afloat until dawn, when at last a sailboat happened upon them and hauled them on board. When the crew heard what had taken place, they called the Italian navy for help. Soon afterward, four ships steamed up to begin a rescue operation.

One of the vessels pulled up to the sailboat and took the exhausted swimmers off before joining the effort to find and rescue other survivors. They found 157 people still alive, many of whom had lasted that long by clinging to floating bodies. There were no life jackets, according to Nataniel. By most counts, 369 died. The navy found 120 of the dead and retrieved the bodies.

The survivors were taken to a refugee camp on Lampedusa where they received fresh clothes, food and medical attention. Nataniel says they spent a month in this camp before being flown to Rome and paraded in front of the media together with a host of European Union delegates and other luminaries who showed up for the occasion.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Italy declared a day of mourning and announced a new rescue program, Mare Nostrum (Our Sea), under which its navy and coast guard would respond to boats in distress and offload the people on board. Authorities claim that more than 140,000 lives were saved in 2014, a staggering number that those opposed to the influx charge was swollen by the hope it stirred among would-be migrants -- British Prime Minister David Cameron denounced the program for providing the refugees with "incentives" -- but refugees like Nataniel tell a different story, insisting they made this perilous journey because they had no other choice.

Mare Nostrum ended on November 1 under pressure from European Union members concerned at the rising numbers -- yet the exodus of Eritreans that makes up a large share of asylum seekers has reached new heights since then, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which reported record numbers crossing into Ethiopia and Sudan at the end of 2014. Nearly 35,000 Eritreans arrived in Italy by boat last year, according to the UN's International Office on Migration, up from 10,000 in 2013.

For its part, the EU has launched a greatly slimmed-down version of Mare Nostrum under Frontex, its external border management agency, terming it Joint Operation Triton, with a monthly budget of 2.9 million euros ($3.35 million). Under Triton, Frontex says it will deploy three open sea patrol vessels, two coastal patrol vessels, two coastal patrol boats, two aircraft and one helicopter in the central Mediterranean in cooperation with the Italian coast guard.

Bad weather curbs the flow across the Mediterranean over the winter, but the rising numbers of refugees making their way to the coast suggests that the influx in the spring of 2015 will be larger than ever. A three-week trip to six countries in Europe to interview Eritreans who made this menacing passage found that what these refugees were fleeing and what they faced on their journeys were the primary factors behind their drive to reach Europe. If they can no longer count on getting there one way, they will simply find another route, as some already are, making their way to northern Egypt to get boats from there or finding a way to reach Turkey or Greece and trekking across the Balkans.

As for Nataniel, he says he had no idea where he would go when he got to Europe, but he had heard many positive accounts about Sweden's treatment of Eritrean asylum seekers so he decided to try the Scandinavian country. He came to this idea by searching Facebook for the opinions of other Eritreans who had come before him while he was on Lampedusa.

He says others in the group chose Denmark, Norway or Germany after doing similar research, but he is not sorry that he picked Sweden. The cold took some getting used to, as did life in the small rural community, where Swedish Immigration sent him for a three-year transition period, under a policy intended to foster integration even as it gives Swedes greater exposure to the newcomers.

It was still early days for Nataniel when I met him, but he says he is determined to master the Swedish language and find work as a mechanic, a skill he brought with him from Eritrea. He is also eager to bring his wife and young child to Sweden through the country's family reunification program. But for now, he says, he is just glad to be there.

"I have my life again," he says. "I am still living in a camp, but after that I will see what it's like to be Swedish."

Asked if he would ever consider going back to Eritrea, he paused to think, chin in hand, and then said: "If this government changed, I might go back, but for now I do not plan to."

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