

# Forced Migration & Conflict

## Focus on Eritrea & the Horn of Africa

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### **Introduction**

Migration has always existed from the beginning of human history and it is inevitable that people will always for one reason or another migrate. However, when we look at the narrative in the media one could be forgiven for thinking that migration is a new phenomenon and we have a major crisis on our hands. However, there are different kinds of migration like getting a job in another country but in today's context I will be focusing on forced migration and will look at the issues focusing on Eritrea and the Horn of Africa. The whole Red Sea region is extremely volatile

The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict ridden regions in the world and through the centuries there have been conflicts and what we see now is the continuation of previous conflicts in a modern context. The question that we need to ask ourselves is why are people migrating en masse from this part of the world. There has always been poverty but that had not caused migration to high levels in previous times.

As is evident the migration that we are seeing today is because people are being forced out of their lands and country. The reason that people are being forced out is due to regional politics, geo-politics, climate change, conflict and persecution. The regional politics along with the ethnic dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the various monarchs, empires and power struggles has shaped the Horn of Africa into what it is today.

The conflicts in the Horn have also compounded the fragile environment in a region that is prone to drought. In the context of Eritrea during the thirty year war for independence the Dergue regime in Ethiopia cut the trees down in Eritrea to weed out Eritrean fighters who they believed hid amongst the trees. By the end of the war Eritrea's ecology and environment was severely affected and desertification had begun to spread within the country. Since independence the Government has invested in planting trees to reduce the damage caused during the war for independence but there are no easy solutions to this. This continues to affect whole communities today, management of our environment

is fundamental to the survival of the human race. The other shortage in Eritrea but also the Horn and East Africa is the lack of water.

Water has become the new gold and this as we have seen with the dam being built in Ethiopia caused a great deal of tension with Egypt. Whilst conflict has now been averted, what will the future be? With the temperature of the world rising, what will the Horn & East Africa be like and how will it affect future generations? We are already witnessing the effects that drought is having in the region. The Nile which starts in Ethiopia has given rise to empires and whole communities livelihoods are dependent on it, and this still applies today. The Nile plays a huge role in the economy of Sudan and Egypt. Reduction in water would have devastating effects on farming and communities.

The drive by countries in the developing world to get out of poverty and advance like the global north, is driven by not much research into the long-term effects on the environment and the people and see how these affect the communities. The dam in Ethiopia has meant that the level of the water in the Omo river has reduced as the water has been diverted. The communities who depended on the river for their survival now means that they need to find other sources for food and their livelihood. The Government furthermore has not compensated them for the loss of their livelihood and with no other means it has left communities destitute and in poverty. The level of water that goes to Lake Turkana in Kenya has also been reduced as a result and the communities there have also been affected.

We have also seen in Ethiopia arable farmland given to multinational corporations to farm and countries like Saudi Arabia bought land in Ethiopia so they can grow crops to feed their people. To those people whose ancestors had lived on the land for more than Millenia, they have just been thrown out of their land with their cattle and given no compensation or means to start their lives. These are also the most vulnerable in society and do not have the means to fight multinational corporations or challenge the Government. This had been going on in Ethiopia for over 2 decades. Therefore, communities being disenfranchised in a large part has played a role in the ethnic violence that Ethiopia is being plagued in.

The forceful removal of people from their ancestral land, culture, communities and way of living has devastating effects for millions of people in the Horn of Africa. When communities become powerless and unable to raise their voice and have proper legal representation, the only option then becomes violence. Therefore, empowering communities to take ownership of the environment and being able to challenge their

Government and multinational corporations is important in ensuring that those communities continue to survive into the future.

In Eritrea, the Government has also removed people from their land for gold, potash and copper mining. In the Dahlak region which the Afar live in, the land was used for foreign military bases like the UAE and this was partly as a result of the war in Yemen. The Afar who had for thousands of years lived through fishing had this denied to them as military bases were built. This has created poverty, divided families, communities and turned people who worked for a living to refugees in refugee camps.

The repression of the Government in Eritrea is brutal hence there is no independent verification to the extent of the poverty and hunger across Eritrea caused by Eritreans being forcibly removed from their land. There is no independent civil society in Eritrea free press along with the Eritrean National Assembly were shut down in 2001. The repression has deteriorated since then and despite the signing of the peace agreement with Ethiopia in 2018, the human rights abuses have only gotten worse. The hope that many Eritreans had for the opening of civil

society space and families hoped their children who had been stationed by the border with Ethiopia some for 20 years would come back home.

Unfortunately, none of these materialised and further damage was caused to mothers and fathers who eagerly waited for their children. If that was not bad enough Eritrea supported the Ethiopian Government in the war in Tigray and young Eritreans died in a war that was not theirs. Unfortunately, this caused more Eritreans to become refugees. The Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia who had been there prior to the conflict now became the political pawn of regional politics and targets of the various warring parties. Now they were forced to move again and many ended up displaced in other parts of Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya.

The effect of forced migration is the loss of identity, way of life, culture, family and community. This brings with it its own trauma along with the experience of repression previously experienced in the country of origin and in the countries in which people seek safety and security. We have seen in the context of Eritrean refugees and from other parts of Africa of refugees being trafficked, organs harvested and tortured to extort money from their families. Many as a result have died of the abuse and the lack of medical and humanitarian assistance.

Whilst finding safety and sanctuary is very important, the story rarely ends there as those Eritreans who have fled Eritrea are still monitored in the diaspora by the workings of the Eritrean Embassy and their supporters. This compounds the trauma that these refugees have already faced and this in part paralyses them to build their trust, confidence and their lives. Studies commissioned in the Netherlands by the Dutch Government has also shown that it hampers integration into society.

The information about the Eritrean communities in the diaspora was passed to the Eritrean Government by translators and this particularly affected Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees who would be fearful to go to the authorities and also access services. As a result of this the Dutch Government fired all Eritrean translators that were affiliated to the Eritrean Government and ensured that they did not have any access to Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees.

This is not only a problem in the Netherlands but equally in the UK, there have also been Government supporters who have worked as translators here in Bristol. It is just not about giving sanctuary but understanding the political dynamics that caused their forced migration. Those who work as translators and support or work for the regime in Eritrea, pass on information as they have access to their family history and why they left Eritrea. As the Eritrean Government was arresting the families of the children who left illegally this has a direct bearing to their family in Eritrea. Once released their parents are likely to also leave the country and hence the trend continues. Therefore, what happens here also has an impact on those left inside Eritrea and understanding the system of repression in the country and the workings of the regime is crucial to countering the workings and effect of the regime in the diaspora.

Therefore, there need to be security checks on translators and those who have access to Eritrean asylum seekers. It is critically important especially for those who have been trafficked into the UK.

In the UK there still seems to be a lack of awareness of the workings of the Eritrean regime on the communities in the diaspora and more needs to be done to protect asylum seekers and refugees. The fear of the regime still hangs over their heads despite being miles away. There is a shortage of Tigrinya and other Eritrean languages translators in the UK. This creates its own challenges in replacing those that work as translators across the country who support the regime. In Bristol the council needs to devise a system ensuring all those that are providing translation are security checked and measures are taken to ensure the safety and security of those seeking asylum.

The current conflict in Sudan has further exacerbated the refugee situation there. The Eritrean refugees there were again displaced and some went to Ethiopia and some at personal risk went back to Eritrea and other to Egypt and Libya. This has made them more vulnerable to criminals as they exploit their desperation. This has now been compounded with Sudanese people becoming refugees and many are internally displaced whilst others have become refugees in neighbouring Egypt and Chad. Over 300,000 Sudanese have crossed the border into Chad, the drought plaguing the area means that families that were surviving in Chad are now having to share with refugees coming. This has had an effect of increasing the cost of food and medicine, many of which is beyond the means of most people. Therefore, people who were having a meal three times a day are eating twice and in some cases once a day.

The ongoing conflict is creating a humanitarian disaster and one that will affect the region and destabilise the fragile environment that is already under pressure. Whilst people are fleeing due to conflict and disaster the environmental factor is still not being adequately recognised. There is much that stills needs to be done in supporting sustainable development.