

Where Do Eritreans being Deported from Addis Ababa Go?

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Two weeks ago, the Ethiopian government reportedly deported more than 300 Eritreans who had been detained for months via Bure.

However, in a statement on December 13, the Ethiopian Department of Immigration and Citizenship denied the claim, stating that the rumor that "Ethiopia has deported Eritreans to Eritrea" was incorrect and that no Eritreans had been forcibly returned. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told the BBC that some refugees had indeed been deported to Eritrea.

In mid-2023, despite calls from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to end illegal detentions and forced deportations of Eritreans, about 200 Eritreans were forcibly repatriated in late June.

The BBC has investigated this second wave of deportations and the challenges faced by Eritrean refugees at the time. This is the story of one young Eritrean refugee who was forcibly deported from Addis Ababa to Eritrea. His name has been changed for his safety.

Like most young Eritreans who emigrated to Ethiopia, Adam lived in Addis Ababa for seven years with legal refugee documents. He worked whenever he could and endured hardships when he couldn't. However, Addis Ababa, where he had lived peacefully for years, has become increasingly unsafe for Adam and many other Eritrean refugees due to changing political alliances.

Adam became one of the victims of these changes. He was arrested during a mass eviction in Addis Ababa. Despite presenting his refugee ID card, officials claimed it might be fake and detained him for two months without any legal proceedings.

“When I and others like me asked, 'We are refugees. We have documents and UNHCR fingerprints. If you want, you can verify them,' no one listened to us. After two months of imprisonment, they loaded around 350 of us onto five pickups and drove us through the Afar region to the border at Bure,” he recounts. He says the group included elderly men, mothers with children, and young women and men who were forcibly deported from Ethiopia to Eritrea.

What about after they enter Assab?

When they arrived in Eritrea, the security forces welcomed them in an effort to keep them calm.

Three days later, senior officials visited and said, “Welcome to your country!” They assured the group that the government had pardoned them and that there was no need to panic.

The deportees were informed that similar actions had been taken against Eritreans by the Ethiopian government in 1998. They were provided with food, water, and shelter in Assab for six days. Afterward, they were transported by boat from Assab to Massawa on a two-day journey. In Massawa, vehicles were ready to take them to Asmara. However, they were not taken to their families or hometowns; instead, they were transported to Adi Abeito prison for investigation. They were informed of this upon arrival.

The involuntarily deported Eritreans were anxious about their future. During the journey, one individual jumped off a vehicle and escaped. “There was no pressure until that man ran away,” Adam recounted. “But afterward, they forced us to remove our shoes and took us to Mai Sirwa under severe threats, commanding us to ‘sit,’ ‘move closer,’ and ‘sit together.’”

Once in prison, the detainees were told that their families could deliver food to them, but they were not allowed to meet or speak with their relatives. For two months, their families brought them food. Then, the prison warden informed them that they would be released on bail, sent to their assigned military units, or—if untrained—transferred to military training sites.

While awaiting release, Adam explained, “Security officers interrogated us about our entire lives in Ethiopia. Later, when they took one individual from among us—an older man from Arbaete Asmera—we suspected it might be due to some political involvement he had.”

What became their fate after imprisonment?

Later, more than 100 individuals were sent to the military training department. Those who had left the country before being assigned were transferred to the prisons of their respective units. Mothers with children and minors were released on bail of 100,000 Nakfa, Adam said.

Adam himself was transferred to Adi Abeito because his unit was located in the "Western Command." The next day, he was taken to Prima, and four days later, members of his unit came and escorted him away. “They didn’t distrust me when I joined my unit. Even though we were told the government had pardoned us, restrictions on movement were imposed,” he explained.

However, this young man, who had been forcibly returned to Eritrea from Ethiopia, was determined to seek a second chance to leave Eritrea. “Even without experiencing another country, it’s hard to live in Eritrea because of the situation here. With no opportunities, it’s very difficult to stay,” he said.

During the farming season, his unit was extremely busy with agricultural work, leaving him little time to contemplate escape. Eventually, though, he decided to flee to Tigray with two like-minded comrades. Along the way, they encountered a shepherd who offered them water and food.

The shepherd told them he could find someone to take them to Addis Ababa. They agreed to pay 100,000 and 150,000 without negotiating, despite fears of kidnapping and the precarious security situation in Tigray. However, the individuals to whom the shepherd took them demanded four thousand dollars.

When the shepherd informed the smugglers, the main smuggler came, took them to an underground grain warehouse in a village called Entecho, and locked them up. "When he put us there, he told us, 'Call your family and ask them to pay 400,000 birr or 4,000 dollars.' And we telephoned our relatives," he said.

While his two companions arrived in Addis Ababa within a week because their families paid the \$4,000, he could not afford to pay. His mother urged her family in Tigray to involve the police and search for him. Three months passed without any clues to his whereabouts, though the relatives labored to find him. In the grain warehouse where he was detained, several men who arrived after him paid the ransom and left, while he and another individual spent months there. Frustrated, they told each other it might be better to try to run away and face their fate. However, out of fear of being caught, they hesitated to act.

One afternoon, however, when the smugglers forgot to lock the door from the outside, they seized the opportunity and escaped. They asked Muslim men they met on their way to take them to the nearest police station or give them directions, Adam said.

The men asked, "Are you Eritreans?" Although fearful that the smugglers might see them and cause trouble, the men nonetheless gave them directions to the police station. They then went to the police station and reported what had happened to them.

Re-exile to Kenya

At the police station, "They said, 'The government doesn't support what is being done. Welcome, and call your family to let them know you're out on bail.' So we were released on bail without having to pay a penny," Adam said.

Although they luckily escaped the kidnapping, where they were forced to pay money they couldn't afford, Adam went to Addis Ababa because staying in Tigray was not safe. However, he was forced to flee to Kenya, leaving behind Addis Ababa, where he had lived for seven years, due to escalating evictions, arrests, and intimidation.

He traveled from Addis Ababa to Awassa and then to a city called Hageremariam. The next day, he traveled by car to the town of Yabelo. After staying overnight there, they departed for Moyale. Before entering the town, however, they were taken off the minibus. After waiting until it got dark, they were transported to a forest on motorcycles, where all the exiles were gathered before setting off. Since all the villagers in the area cooperated, they were not afraid of being caught.

“The next day, although three people were loaded onto one motorcycle and sent off, the villagers warned them it wasn’t safe. So, we walked for seven hours and entered Kenya,” Adam said. At the border, he said, Kenyans with motorcycles received them and took them to an area inhabited by people that wore flour sack clothing and placed them in a house.

From there, 41 refugees were transported on trucks for 13 hours to a secret shelter for refugees bound for Uganda.

Adam eventually arrived at the Ugandan border along with the refugees heading to Uganda. However, after much wandering, he returned to Nairobi.

Reflecting on his journey, Adam said, "The journey is hard. But every Eritrean who goes through it has no choice. Even if I say the road is dangerous, no one will listen to me. Nevertheless, I want to say that the journey of exile is not easy," he recounted, reflecting on the suffering he endured.