

Eritrea Country Profile

Updated June 2016



Key mixed migration characteristics

- Eritrea is solely a country of origin. Its role in the region as transit or destination country is negligible.
- The prolonged national service obligation coupled with poor economic conditions continues to fuel migration of especially young Eritreans.
- An estimated 5,000 Eritreans flee their country every month. Most spend time as refugees in refugee camps in Eastern Sudan and Northern Ethiopia, from where they engage in onward migration.
- Eritrean refugees in the region are mainly hosted in Sudan (101,751) and Ethiopia (155,862) as of May 2016.
- Mixed migration flows of Eritreans are mostly directed towards Europe, transiting overland through Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, before crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.
- Eritreans were the single largest group of migrants and refugees entering Italy in 2015, totaling 39,162 or 25% of all arrivals in Italy. Eritreans continue to make the crossing in 2016. Between January and May 2016, 6,076 Eritreans arrived in Italy.
- Eritreans are generally granted protection status upon arrival in Europe. In the fourth quarter of 2015, the recognition rate for Eritreans in Europe was 93% (out of 12,935 first instance decisions).¹

As a mixed migration origin country

Eritrea is predominantly a country of origin for Eritrean migrants and asylum seekers who seek refuge mainly in Sudan and Ethiopia from where some engage in secondary migration. Eritreans fled their country in 1960s as a result of the independence war which ended in 1993 and displaced more than a million Eritreans to Sudan, Middle East, Europe and the US. The border conflict with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 further displaced more Eritreans to neighbouring countries in particular Sudan where they sought protection. Most of the newly displaced Eritreans returned to their country after the war with Ethiopia in addition to an estimated 75,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent that were expelled from Ethiopia to Eritrea.²

In September 2001, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) led by President Afewerki came into power and established a closed and highly securitized authoritarian regime which suspended the country's constitution, postponed elections, suppressed media and political freedoms and also detained individuals suspected of opposing the one-party state.³ The government also introduced a mandatory national military service for everyone between the ages of 18 and 50 which is enshrined under the Proclamation of National Service (No.82/1995).⁴ For

persons aged between 18 and 40 years, the compulsory national service consists of six months military training and 12 months of active duty military service, adding up to a total of 18 months. Individuals above 40 years are considered to be on reserve status if they had performed active duty military service.

Conscription into the national service can extend for lengthy periods beyond the 18 month limit and sometimes indefinitely as conscripts face the threat of detention, torture or punishment of their families if they attempt to evade or desert the service.⁵ This indefinite conscription has been cited as one of the main reason for the emigration of Eritreans in large numbers from their country. Human right organizations have also documented various violations of rights in the national service such as low wages (approximately USD43-48 per month), forced labour in construction and agricultural work in government-owned farms, lack of access to health services and conscription of children under the age of 18 years (Amnesty International 2015).

The government maintains that conscription is vital for national security citing threats of attack from its neighbour Ethiopia. The Information Minister Yemane Ghebremeskel is quoted in a media report ⁶ saying that the government was considering wage increase in the national service but there were no plans to scrap or cut the national service. “Demobilization is predicated on the removal of the main threat [hence] prolongation of national service [is] in response to continued belligerence by Ethiopia,” he said.

Because of the restricted or limited options for legal migration from the country, especially for those under the age of 50 years, most Eritreans leave their country illegally often with the help of smugglers. People caught attempting to escape the country are arrested and detained arbitrarily with the duration for detention ranging between six and eighteen months or longer.⁷ The government also reportedly adopts a shoot-on-sight policy towards people found attempting to cross the border with Ethiopia or intercepted leaving by sea.⁸ Eritrean nationals deported from other countries are also detained as they are considered traitors and may face life imprisonment or capital punishment.⁹

Many Eritreans attempting to leave their country illegally do so on foot across the porous border with Sudan in the west and Ethiopia in the south. Others have reportedly crossed national borders hidden under covers of military vehicles to avoid being detected at security checkpoints, an indication of the involvement and complicity of government or security officials in people smuggling and trafficking activities.¹⁰ Eritreans opting for smugglers have reportedly paid between USD 960 and USD 9,600 to facilitate their exit from the country.



Adi Harush (L) and Mai Aini (R) refugee camps in northern Ethiopia which host Eritrean refugees and migrants.
Photo credit: IRC

According to the UNHCR, an estimated 5,000 Eritreans leave their country each month, figures the Eritrean government disputes.¹¹ Many Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers spend time in refugee camps in Eastern Sudan (Shagarab refugee camp) and Northern Ethiopia, from where they engage in secondary movement mainly to Europe via the Central Mediterranean route from Libya or Egypt. As of 31st May 2016, the number of Eritrean refugees in Sudan was 101,751 and in Ethiopia, the number was 155,862.¹² According to senior officials from the Sudanese migration department, at least 150 Eritreans leave their country and cross into Sudan every day.¹³

Eritreans were the single largest group of migrants and refugees entering Italy in 2015, totaling 39,162 or 25% of all arrivals in Italy. Eritreans continue to make the crossing in 2016. After a temporary pause in the early months of 2016, when Eritreans were no longer in the top-10 of arrivals in Italy, there was a spike in arrivals in April 2016. As of 31st May 2016, Eritreans make up 15% of all arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route, with a total of 6,076 arrivals since the beginning of 2016.¹⁴



Eritrean migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea as they attempt the perilous crossing to Europe. Photo credit: The Times

Eritreans are generally granted protection status upon arrival in Europe. In the fourth quarter of 2015, the recognition rate for Eritreans in Europe was 93% (out of 12,935 first instance decisions)¹⁵ with Germany granting refugee status to the highest number of Eritreans at 56,435. Other European countries that granted protection to Eritrean asylum seekers in the same period were the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

Prior to 2012, Israel was a major country of destination for Eritrean migrants. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of Eritreans crossing the border from Sinai to Israel increased significantly from 1,348 to 17,175 and it was estimated that between 2006 and 2012 close to 40,000 Eritreans arrived in Israel, passing through Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Stringent Israeli immigration measures put in place in 2012 and finalised in 2013, including the

construction of a 240km fence along the Sinai (Egypt)-Israeli border and the construction of a migrant detention centre in the Negev desert, reduced this number to almost zero.¹⁶

As a mixed migration destination country

There are no indications that Eritrea is a destination country for migrants in mixed migration flows.

As a mixed migration transit country

There is no evidence that Eritrea is used by mixed migration flows as a transit country. Given its geographical location, the political regime and the options of other countries in the region this is not surprising and is unlikely to change.

Protection issues and vulnerable groups

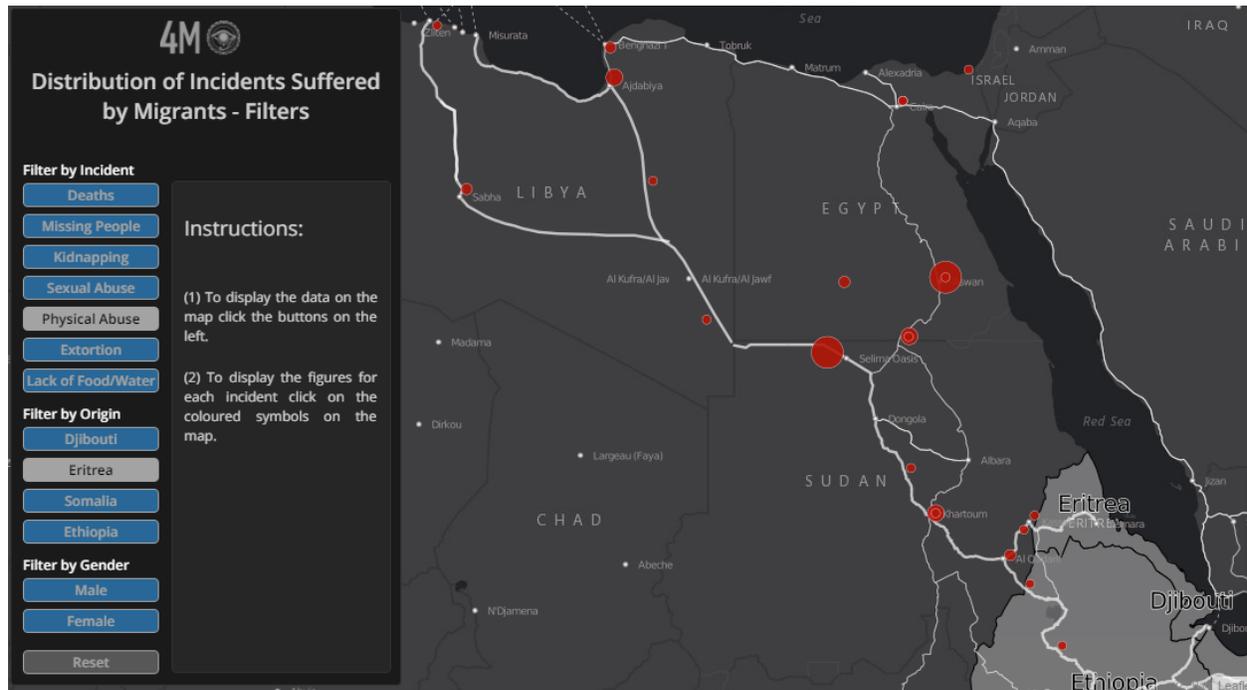
Due to the strict population movement controls exercised by the Eritrean government, especially for those under the age of 50 years, most Eritreans who leave the country do so through illegal means or routes often with the help of smugglers. Eritrean nationals found attempting to flee the country or those deported from other countries are considered traitors and may be subjected to life imprisonment or death penalty.¹⁷ The compulsory national service has been cited as a key driver of migration from Eritrea since conscripts are subjected to indefinite terms and human rights violations. A fact finding mission to Eritrea by Swiss authorities in March 2016¹⁸ concluded that Eritrea had not kept its promise to shorten the compulsory military service to a term of 18 months. In addition, the mission noted that the human rights conditions in the country had not improved.

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea established by the Human Rights Council in 2014, released a report in June 2016 which concludes that crimes against humanity have been committed in a widespread and systematic manner in Eritrean detention facilities, military training camps and other locations across the country over the past 25 years.¹⁹ According to the Commission, crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, torture, persecution, rape, murder and other inhuman acts “have been conducted as part of a campaign to instil fear in, deter opposition from, and ultimately to control the Eritrean civilian population” since 1991. The report further notes that there has been no improvement in the human rights situation identified in 2015.

During the 13th session of the Human Rights Council in 14 March 2016, the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, Ms. Sheila Keetharuth²⁰ expressed concern on the continued forced recruitment of underage children into the national service including through frequent raids, even though the legal minimum age for recruitment into the service is 18 years. This has had an impact on the dreams and aspirations of young people who see no future for them in their country and out of fear of indefinite military conscription, arbitrary arrests and detention, they end up fleeing their country. Unaccompanied and separated Eritrean migrant children are vulnerable to trafficking, smuggling, abduction, physical and sexual exploitation, and detention from the start of their clandestine border crossing and during their journey to neighbouring countries. There has been a steady influx of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean children in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan since 2008. Eritrean children constituted the largest group of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy in 2014 at about 3,394 out of 13,026 and 3,092 out of 12,360 in 2015.²¹

Eritreans leaving their country illegally face significant challenges and risks of abuse during their journeys including abduction, detention, extortion and physical and sexual abuse.²² Eritreans on the westward route to Libya via Sudan prefer to travel straight to Khartoum since they are vulnerable to trafficking gangs who are known to abduct people from the refugee camps in eastern Sudan, particularly from Shagarab.²³

Incidents of physical abuse reported along key migratory routes

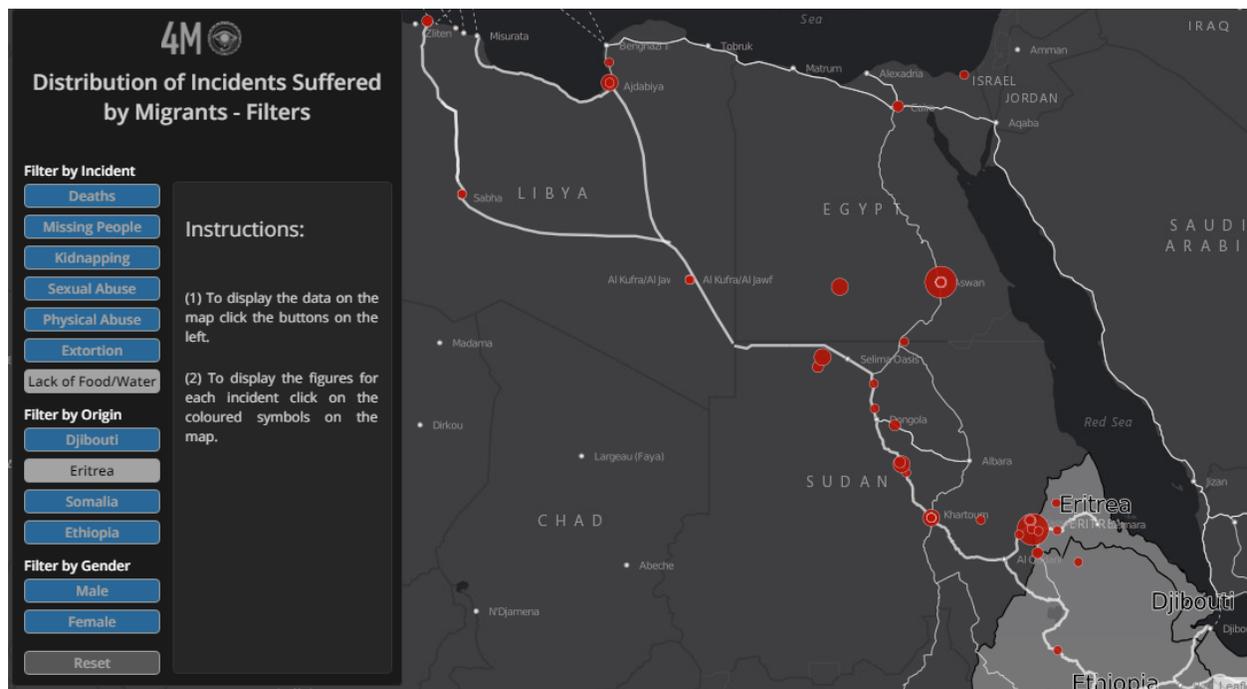


The red dots on the map indicate incidents of physical abuse reported by Eritrean migrants along key migratory routes. The larger the dot the higher the number of incidents (Source: <http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

The risk of detention and deportation of Eritrean migrants from Sudan is also higher in particular following the EU-Africa Valletta Summit held in Malta in 2015 in which EU endorsed its intent to increase cooperation with African states, including Sudan and Eritrea, to address irregular migration towards Europe.²⁴ Media articles in May 2016 reported that Sudanese authorities had launched a crackdown on Eritrean migrants in which more than 900 Eritrean nationals were arrested in Khartoum and a further 400 intercepted in northern Sudan as they attempted to cross the border into Libya.²⁵ Human Rights Watch condemned the deportation of at least 442 Eritreans including six registered refugees, to Eritrea in May 2016, noting that the Sudanese government had denied the UNHCR access to identify those who wanted to claim asylum.²⁶

Eritreans transiting through Ethiopia's refugee camps have reported that smugglers entice people from the camps by offering free travel to Sudan, from where they would be expected to make their first payment. The journey between Sudan and Libya is characterized by significant protection risks including detention, being sold off to ransom collectors in Sudan if migrants are unable to make their first payment, severe beatings, torture and extortion if captured by militias, rape by smugglers and militia and being abandoned in the open desert if Libyan transporters fail to arrive on time to transport migrants onwards to Libyan coast. Eritrean migrants have also been abducted and executed by the Islamic State militants in Libya.²⁷

Incidents of lack of food/water reported along key migratory routes

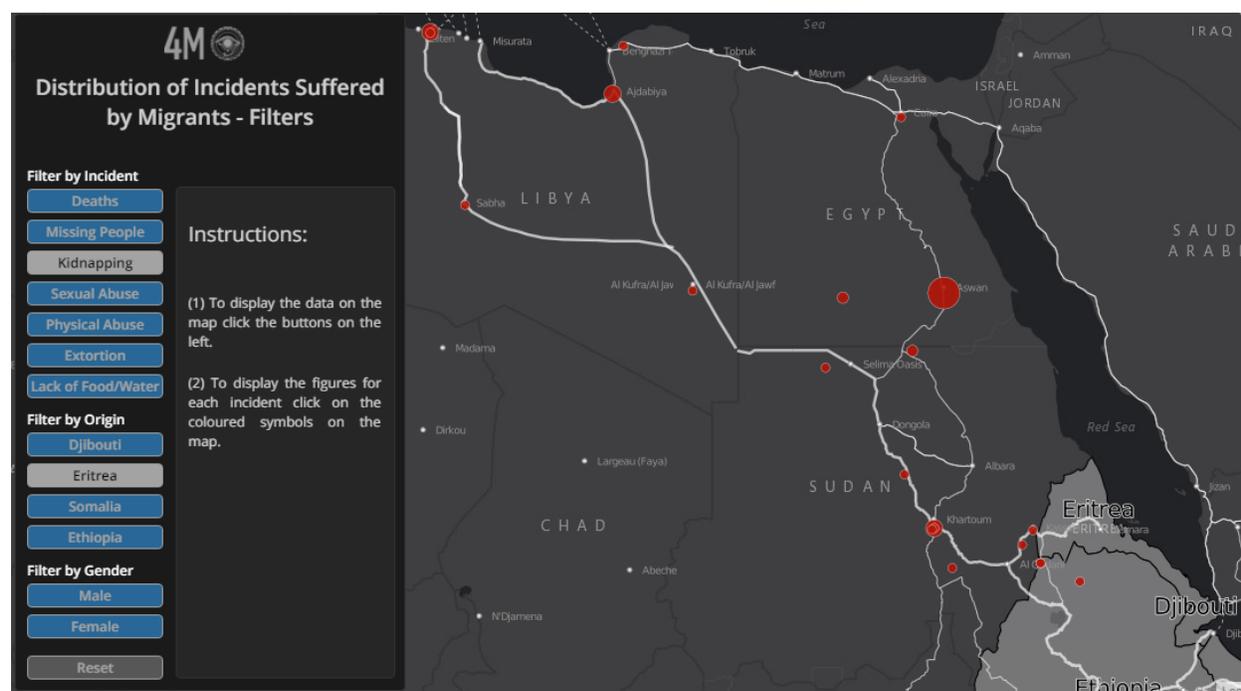


The red dots on the map indicate incidents of lack of food/water reported by Eritrean migrants along key migratory routes. The larger the dot the higher the number of incidents (Source: <http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

To avoid the insecurity in Libya and risks of detention and deportation from Sudan, a growing number of Eritrean migrants are opting to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea via Egypt. Other nationalities using this route include Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians as well as Egyptian nationals. Egyptian authorities regularly detain migrants found trying to leave the country without official documentation and there have been cases where Eritrean migrants were detained in Cairo's Qanatar prison and eventually deported back to Eritrea. In the past, Egyptian authorities returned detained Eritreans to Ethiopia, but since mid-2015, Ethiopia has stopped accepting them.²⁸

The westward route out of Horn of Africa to Europe via Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya and across the Central Mediterranean route is controlled by sophisticated human smuggling and trafficking networks which operate along the route but are frequently interlinked and in communication with each other. Eritrean smugglers and traffickers reportedly dominate this route and collaborate with ethnic Somalis, Ethiopians and Sudanese in order to ease the movement of migrants and trafficking victims across the borders out of the Horn of Africa.²⁹

Incidents of kidnapping reported along key migratory routes



The red dots on the map indicate incidents of kidnapping reported by Eritrean migrants along key migratory routes. The larger the dot the higher the number of incidents (Source: <http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

Following tragic boat accidents near Lampedusa in October 2013 and September 2014 in which an estimated 800 migrants lost their lives, Italy opened two investigations dubbed *Operation Tokhla* and *Operation Glauco 2* aimed at prosecuting those responsible. More than 20 suspected smuggler ring leaders were arrested, mostly Eritrean nationals, some of whom were based in Germany and Libya and collaborating with various contacts in Sudan, Sweden and Switzerland.³⁰ In May 2016, an Eritrean national believed to be a ringleader of the migrant smuggling network operating between Sudan, Libya and across the Mediterranean to Europe, Medhane Yehdego Mered, was arrested in Sudan and extradited to Italy to face charges related to people-smuggling.³¹

Trafficking

The US Department of State's 2015 Trafficking in Persons report places Eritrea on Tier 3 for a number of reasons:

Compliance: The government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so. Eritrea has been on Tier 3 since 2009. Efforts to prevent human trafficking were compounded by authorities' lack of understanding of the crime and the conflation of transnational migration and human trafficking. The compulsory national service which runs for indefinite periods, has subjected Eritreans to forced labour within the country and increased citizens' vulnerability to trafficking abroad.

Persecution: The report notes that the Eritrean government failed to investigate, prosecute or convict trafficking offenders including government officials complicit in trafficking offenses. Existing labour laws exclude the compulsory national service or other civic obligations from the definition of forced labour whereas existing labour protections were not applicable to persons engaged in the national service.

Protection of trafficking victims: The State Department notes that the Eritrean government demonstrated negligible efforts to identify or provide protection to victims of trafficking. Eritreans deported back to Eritrea from countries abroad including trafficking victims are vulnerable to being arrested, detained, abused, forced to pay fines, recalled into national service or shot by military forces. The government has not developed procedures for identifying trafficking victims among vulnerable groups nor has it provided anti-trafficking training to the law enforcement, military or diplomatic personnel.

International and national legislation and migration policies

Eritrea has ratified the following international legislation relevant to mixed migration and protection of human rights of migrants and refugees:

- 1969 OAU Convention on the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (signed but not yet ratified)
- 1969 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
- 1976 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Reservation to para 2 of Article 35)
- 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Reservation to para 2 of Article 15)
- 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- 1987 Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (The State of Eritrea declares that the minimum age for the recruitment of persons into the armed forces is eighteen years)
- 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography

National legislations

- Eritrean Transitional Criminal Code Article 605 (Trafficking in women and young persons for sexual exploitation)
- Eritrean Transitional Criminal Code Article 565 (Slavery)
- Labour Proclamation 118/2001 (Forced labour)

¹ Eurostat (2016). Asylum Quarterly Report. Available: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report.

² GSDRC (2016). Rapid fragility and migration assessment for Eritrea (Rapid Literature Review)

³ RMMS (2014). Going West: Contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Amnesty International (2015). Just Deserters: Why indefinite national service in Eritrea has created a generation of refugees

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- ⁶ Reuters (2016) Eritrea won't shorten national service despite migration fears. Available <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eritrea-politics-insight-idUSKCN0VY0M5> [Accessed: 2 June 2016]
- ⁷ Amnesty International (2015). Just Deserters: Why indefinite national service in Eritrea has created a generation of refugees
- ⁸ RMMS (2014). Going West: Contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe
- ⁹ Ibid
- ¹⁰ Ibid
- ¹¹ Reuters (2016) Eritrea won't shorten national service despite migration fears. Available <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eritrea-politics-insight-idUSKCN0VY0M5> [Accessed: 2 June 2016]
- ¹² RMMS (2016). Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa and Yemen Monthly Summary: May 2016
- ¹³ StarAfrica (2016). At least 150 Eritreans flee their country every day – official. Available <http://en.starafrica.com/news/at-last150-eritreans-flee-their-country-every-day-official.html> [Accessed: 2 June 2016]
- ¹⁴ UNHCR (2016). Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean. Available: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>
- ¹⁵ Eurostat (2016). Asylum Quarterly Report. Available: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report. [Accessed: 2 June 2016]
- ¹⁶ RMMS (2014). Going West: Contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe
- ¹⁷ Amnesty International (2015). Just Deserters: Why indefinite national service in Eritrea has created a generation of refugees
- ¹⁸ Geeska Afrika (2016). Swiss officials find few rights improvement. Available: <http://www.geeskaafrika.com/18581/eritrea-swiss-officials-find-rights-improvements/> [Accessed 15 June 2016]
- ¹⁹ OHCHR (2016). UN Inquiry finds crimes against humanity in Eritrea. Available: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20067&LangID=E> [Accessed 21 June 2016]
- ²⁰ OHCHR (2016). Statement by Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea. Available: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17224&LangID=E> [Accessed 15 June 2016]
- ²¹ ibid
- ²² RMMS (2014). Going West: Contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya & Europe
- ²³ Sahan Foundation & IGAD (2016). Human trafficking and smuggling on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean route
- ²⁴ IRIN News (2016). EU-Africa migrant plan raises worrying questions. Available: <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2015/11/12/eu-africa-migrant-plan-raises-worrying-questions> [Accessed: 15 June 2016]
- ²⁵ IRIN News (2016). Sudan and Eritrea crackdown on migrants amid reports of EU incentives. Available: <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/25/sudan-and-eritrea-crackdown-migrants-amid-reports-eu-incentives> [Accessed 15 June 2016]
- ²⁶ Human Rights Watch (2016). Sudan: Hundreds Deported to Likely Abuse. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/30/sudan-hundreds-deported-likely-abuse> [Accessed 15 June 2016]
- ²⁷ Sahan Foundation & IGAD (2016). Human trafficking and smuggling on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean route
- ²⁸ IRIN News (2016). For Eritreans, Egypt is the new route to Europe. Available: <https://www.irinnews.org/feature/2016/06/06/eritreans-egypt-new-route-europe> [Accessed 15 June 2016]

²⁹ Sahan Foundation & IGAD (2016). Human trafficking and smuggling on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean route

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Al Jazeera (2016). Alleged people-smuggling kingpin extradited to Italy. Available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/alleged-people-smuggling-kingpin-extradited-italy-160608172524492.html> [Accessed 15 June 2016]