Eritrea is considered one of the most repressive countries in the world: Freedom House, in its annual ranking of countries based on democratic freedom, considers Eritrea “one of the worst of the worst”. Since gaining independence from Ethiopia twenty years ago, the destitute and politically isolated country is often accused by international human rights groups of unlawful executions, torture, and citizen detention. Eritreans, living under the harsh authoritarian regime of President Isaias Afewerki, are prone to undertake a dangerous and sometimes deadly migration to neighbouring countries and beyond. According to BBC, 3,000 Eritreans migrate each month often in search of asylum.

The journey is arduous at best. Eritrean refugees face fear of death as they cross the Eritrea-Sudan border as national border guards are ready to shoot to kill. Life as a refugee in destination countries is not always better; it is not guaranteed that the refugee will experience basic human rights, higher education and gainful employment. Instead of deliverance, refugees often find the same lack of opportunities that drove them to leave their homes in the first place. For many Eritreans, Israel is the ultimate destination, a promise of a better life. Refugees often hire smugglers to facilitate the trek from Sudan through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula to Tel Aviv. However, smuggling is a risk that often ends in the torture and death of Eritrean refugees as some smugglers for hire are actually Eritrean senior military officials who ransom, rather than transport, the refugees. This report examines Eritreans migration, smuggling and human trafficking and the exploitation of refugees. This report also discusses the conditions during transit and within the destination countries of Israel, Sinai and Sudan.

Eritrea and the Afewerki Regime
Eritrea became federated with Ethiopia by order of a United Nations resolution in 1952 after decades of Italian colonial rule and a subsequent British military administration resulting from Italy’s surrender in World War II. A thirty-year struggle for independence (1961 – 1991) ensued and a United Nations’ supervised referendum in 1993 granted Eritrea independence from Ethiopia. The Transitional National Assembly selected Isaias Afewerki as acting president until elections— an event which never came to fruition. Similarly, the 1994 approved constitution was not enacted. Since 1993, the authoritarian regime controlled by Afewerki and his party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, has taken a heavy toll on the country’s citizens. Beset with extreme poverty, the regime prohibits all foreign intervention, including food aid. Eritrea, a one-party state, restricts the press, speech, and movement, with citizens unable to travel outside the country freely. Furthermore, independent media does not exist. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Eritreans are subjected to torture and arbitrary detention. In 2012,
the United Nations Human Rights Council designated a special rapporteur on Eritrea, recognising the “continued widespread and systematic violation of human rights”. In June 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that Eritrea held between 5,000 and 10,000 political prisoners. In 2010, the International Crisis Group described Eritrea as a “prison state”.

A two-year conflict with Ethiopia over a border dispute cost thousands of civilian lives between 1998 and 2000. A peace treaty signed in 2000 demarcated a common border that was later breached by Ethiopia. As a result, Afwerki reportedly grew obsessed with ensuring national security through the intensive militarisation of the state, fearing an invasion by Ethiopia. With over 5 million Eritreans, the country maintains one of the largest armies on the African continent mainly composed of soldiers conscripted into indefinite national service. According to a 2009 investigation by HRW and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), conscripts face torture and illegal forced labour both justified by Afwerki to counter the threat of a renewed conflict with Ethiopia. As a result of the harsh and deadly conditions, tens of thousands of Eritreans flee their homeland each year.

**The Refugee Flow**

Catastrophic risks face those Eritreans who attempt to escape political oppression or military service. Additionally, Eritrea considers asylum-seekers, traitors, and if repatriated, could face life in prison or the death penalty, according to UNHCR. An example of a high profile defection involved the Eritrean football team. In February 2013, Sudan Tribune reported that the Ugandan government had granted refugee status to fifteen members of the national team who disappeared while visiting Uganda for a regional tournament in December 2012. According to Apollo David Kazungu, the Ugandan commissioner for refugees, the Eritrean players claimed asylum based on their fears of mandatory conscription into military service. The defection was the third time the Eritrean national football team “disappeared” while playing in an African tournament. Similar defections took place in Tanzania in 2011 involving thirteen players and in 2009 twelve team members disappeared in Kenya, all requesting asylum. During the 2012 London Olympics, four Eritrean athletes also requested political asylum. Most recently, in early April 2013, a female pilot requested asylum in Saudi Arabia after travelling to the Arab country to retrieve the Eritrean presidential jet abandoned by two Eritrean pilots seeking asylum in October 2012, according to Arab News. Meron Estefanos, a prominent Eritrean exile activist and journalist, asserts that Eritreans will seize any available opportunity to flee.

According to UNHCR, Eritreans destination options are limited. Realistic choices include Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. However, some choose to embark, with the help the smugglers, to transit through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula for an Israeli destination. According to reports, the countries maintain strict encampment policies and provide few opportunities in terms of education and livelihoods. According to HRW, Yemen is the worst option as the Yemeni government repeatedly arrests and indefinitely detains Eritrean asylum seekers as they arrive in Yemen. According to Al Jazeera, a majority of Eritrean refugees migrate toward Kassala in eastern Sudan along Eritrea’s western border. While 70,000 Eritrean refugees currently reside in Sudan, new arrivals come in daily to the Shagarab refugee camp. For many, camp life in Sudan is limited and does not provide the type of freedom and options which Eritrean’s hoped to achieve. As such, refugees often turn to Israel as another destination. Despite an arduous journey, refugees may find gainful employment and freedom of movement within Israel. To achieve an Israeli destination, refugees rely on smugglers to facilitate the transit from eastern Sudan through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula to Israel. Many smugglers do not engage in abusive practices and most refugees arrive safely in Tel Aviv. However, recent reports indicate the existence of a lucrative smuggling network which involves kidnapping, ransoms, abuse and sometimes death.

**Human Trafficking**

According to Sudan Tribune, a highly organised human trafficking ring exists from the Eritrean border to the Sudanese refugee camps and the Sinai Peninsula. In July 2012, The Guardian reported that human trafficking is a lucrative subsidiary to the arms smuggling ring which originates in Eritrea. Reports of the desperate conditions faced by Eritrean soldiers, including the rampant outbreak of disease and death, are matched only by the horrific conditions reported in the plight of human trafficking captives in the Sinai Peninsula. The Guardian wrote that the smuggling network is well-organised and extremely profitable. In 2012, UNHCR documented the disappearance and kidnapping of 551 Eritrean refugees. According to reports, most refugees are kidnapped in cooperation with the Rashaida tribe, armed gangs, and local tribesmen in Eastern Sudan. The refugees are transferred to Sinai where
they are sold for organ extraction, ransom, sexual exploitation, and forced labour. In April 2013, Amnesty International issued a statement voicing concern over number of refugees disappearing from Sudanese refugee camps. The UN has described the growth of human trafficking through the Sinai as one of the most unreported humanitarian crises in the world, according to BBC.

Many Eritrean refugees travel to the swollen refugee camps of neighbouring eastern Sudan, now home to more than 70,000 people. The UN says that seventy per cent of new arrivals at the refugee camps subsequently disappear, with many falling into the hands of human-smuggling gangs as they attempt to reach Israel. In 2012, the High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, said that a “criminal network” of smugglers and traffickers was “taking profit of the desperate situation of many Eritreans”.

According to HRW, Eritrean refugee trafficking provides a lucrative source of foreign currency. The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that senior Eritrean officials enable the escape of Eritreans as part of an elaborate network and scheme that could not occur without the collusion of government and military officials. A UN report to the Security Council in 2011 indicated that the Eritrean government, in order to fund the military regime, delivers Eritrean asylum-seekers to gangs. In turn, the gangs systematically torture, rape and murder to extort up to USD 40,000 from the Eritrean diaspora in ransom for their release. According the UN investigators, the network is led by General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”, an influential commander of Eritrea’s western military zone. The motivation is financial for Manjus and the Eritrean party and party officials. Traffickers demand approximately USD 3,000 for assisting refugees across a border and up to USD 20,000 for smuggling escapees through Sudan and Egypt. The human trafficking industry, reportedly run jointly by Eritrean officials, Sudanese and Egyptian smuggling gangs, is estimated to generate more than USD 10 million a year. The Eritrean government denies the UN report allegations.

**Destination Israel**

Israel received thousands of African asylum-seekers, mainly from Eritrea, over the past several years. The UN recently asserted that Israel violated international law through their policy of repatriating asylum seekers under false pretences and under threat of lengthy jail terms, according to The Times of Israel. However, Israeli officials counter that illegal Eritrean migrants repatriated voluntarily to their place of origin. UNHCR’s representative in Israel, William Tall, stated that the Israeli claim “does not match the reality on the ground”. Interviews with Eritrean nationals currently in custody reveal, “Agreement to return to Eritrea under an ultimatum of jail … can’t be considered voluntary by any criterion. It is explicitly not voluntary return”. Israel is signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which specifies, amongst other legal obligations towards refugees in their countries, that countries cannot return refugees or asylum-seekers to their country of origin against their will if they feel threatened. The 2011 UNHCR annual report states that while 74 per cent of Eritrean applicants for refugee status outside of Israel are approved, few are granted refugee status and most are repatriated.

In June 2012, the Ministry of the Interior’s Population and Immigration Authority determined that illegal migrants crossing into Israel would be detained for periods of up to three years rather than allowed to move into Israeli cities. According to The Times of Israel, Tall threatened UN legal action if Israel were to implement such a policy. UNHCR has labelled the Eritrean government as totalitarian and in violation of human rights. Tall stated: “The government needs to provide an Eritrean access to sanctuary. That’s not happening. We are concerned that these returns will be made under pressure…under no circumstances can return under threat of imprisonment, without any access to the asylum apparatus, be considered voluntary.”

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Source: BBC

Source: The Guardian
In late 2012, Israel completed construction of a 150-mile fence between the Sinai and Negev deserts along its shared border with Egypt, designed mainly to prevent entry of illegal immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, according to The Guardian. The fence has accomplished the desired effect, with the number of illegal migrants dropping drastically from over 2,000 in January 2012, to 36 in December. All 36 migrants were reportedly transferred immediately to a new detention facility in the Negev desert. The Ministry of the Interior Population Authority stated that three migrants entered the country in March 2013, compared to 1,732 in March 2012, informs Haaretz. According to Lieutenant Colonel Yoav Tilan of the Israeli Defence Forces, 16,000 people crossed the border illegally in 2011 via “an industry of crime”.

Under the January 2012 Anti-Infiltration law, all illegal border crossers are considered “infiltrators” to include asylum-seekers and their children. Infiltrators can be detained for up to three years. Eritreans, currently held in southern detention camps, are not informed of their right to claim asylum or given the requisite application forms. On 18 February, official records of the Israeli legislative assembly or Knesset quoted Interior Minister Eli Yishai as stating “deportations (by definition forced) were not yet taking place”. According to Yishai, more than 1,000 nationals of northern Sudan and Eritrea had departed voluntarily and more were expected to leave. “And if it won’t be voluntary leave, it will be involuntary – to their country or to a different third country, and there is still no third country to sign an agreement with, but I hope we do find other third countries that we’ll have an agreement with, and we can transfer the infiltrators from here, from the Land of Israel, to their country or to another country, whether it is done willingly or not.”

Destination Sudan
As of January 2013, UNHCR reports that 115,000 Eritrean refugees reside in neighbouring Sudan within the Shagarab refugee camp. Shagarab camp is located in south-eastern Sudan; it hosts 30,000 refugees. Since 2010, 60,000 Eritreans have arrived at the camp gates. Sudan maintains an open-door policy towards Eritrean asylum seekers with 97 per cent granted refugee status. Movement within the camp is limited and many are without gainful higher education or employment opportunities. As such, many refugees decide to risk the difficult journey to Israel. It is reported that 75 per cent of new arrivals in Sudan remain in the camp remain only a few weeks before moving on. Once refugee documentation is received, many Eritreans’ began a journey to Israel.

Amnesty International continues to receive kidnapping reports in and around the Shagarab camps. Claire Beston, Amnesty International’s Eritrea researcher, stated: “It is particularly worrying that numerous victims have alleged that the members of the Sudanese National Security Service are involved in the kidnappings near the borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Sudanese government must investigate all allegations of the involvement or complicity of Sudanese officers and where sufficient evidence is found, individuals must be arrested and prosecuted”.

UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming recently indicated that UNCHR is working with Sudanese officials and international partners to reduce the epidemic of kidnappings in Eastern Sudan, stating, “The Government of Sudan has already deployed additional police and we are supporting the authorities to improve overall security, including the construction and rehabilitation of police stations, provision of vehicles and communication equipment”. Nevertheless, Eritrean opposition groups based in Sudan claim the Sudanese government, despite being a signatory to the UN 1951 refugee convention, is looking the other way when it comes to protecting Eritreans.

Destination Sinai
The Sinai Peninsula, a strip of land connecting Egypt and Israel, is a place of suffering and death for thousands of Eritrean refugees as well as refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, Somalia and Sudan. Sinai is the holding place for many human trafficking victims, according to Spiegel Online. Criminal elements hold hostages until demands for ransom are met; however if ransom money is not forthcoming; kidnappers reportedly torture their captives to death. While difficult to govern even under the reign of former president Hosni Mubarak, the Sinai Peninsula has become even more lawless under President Mohammed Morsi. Sinai is a hotbed of criminals, terrorists and Bedouin tribe members who seek to profit from trafficking humans in an area devoid of other livelihood opportunities.
In 2012, *Africa Review* reported the number of trafficking victims has steadily increased since 2010. The report cites a worsening of abuses particularly following the 18-month old Arab Spring revolution and security and law enforcement vacuum in the region. In April 2013, Amnesty International urged Egypt and Sudan to halt the kidnapping of asylum-seekers and refugees from Sudan’s camps. Amnesty reports that over the past two years Eritreans have been kidnapped from the refugee camps and then trafficked to Sinai and held for ransom by Bedouin criminal gangs demanding exorbitant sums from their families. Furthermore, Amnesty asserts that the captives are subjected to “brutal violence” including rapes, sexual abuses, beatings, burnings and other cruel tortures. The Bedouin captors place telephone calls to captives’ families demanding up to USD 30-40,000 or more for their release. Many families are unable to pay the ransoms. As a result, many captives are killed while others die due to the cruel conditions.

The UN has described the growth of human trafficking through the Sinai as one of the most unreported humanitarian crises in the world, according to *BBC*. However, the Egyptian government appears to be unable and/or unwilling to address the situation. According to Bedouin leaders, a police presence is non-existent in an area where clans control governance and justice. While not all Bedouin clans are involved in human trafficking, they are aware of the situation. Many feel they are powerless to interfere doing so could spark a clan war. Sheikh Mohammed, a Bedouin leader explains: “I can’t free them. No one can interfere in another clan’s affairs. I can only help the Africans if they escape on their own.”

Egypt’s Law 64 defines human trafficking “as the sale or transport, of people through the use of force, or abduction, fraud or deception, or exploiting people for purposes such as forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery or servitude”. According to HRW, former President Hosni Mubarak did not officially acknowledge the victimization of sub-Saharan African migrants by criminal networks; a violation of both Egyptian and international law on trafficking. Amnesty International has presented evidence to Egyptian authorities of extortion, rape, torture and killings of Eritreans crossing the Sinai Peninsula, hoping for an investigation and prosecution of those responsible. However, an Amnesty International spokesman stated that Egypt has “done very little to protect victims of human trafficking”. Joe Stark, deputy director of the Middle East and North African office of HRW states: “Thousands of sub-Saharan asylum seekers and migrants attempting to cross the Sinai have fallen victim to abusive traffickers and other criminals. Egypt’s new government should use its increased law enforcement operations to rescue victims of trafficking and end these abuses”. He further urges President Morsi to plan law enforcement operation in Sinai to protect the rights of the victims of this trafficking. In February 2013, Eritrea sent a letter of complaint to the UN Security Council regarding Egyptian security’s shoot-to-kill policy on Eritrean refugees attempting to illegally cross Egyptian borders into Israel, according to *Ahram Online*. Ironically, President Afewerki’s letter suggests that Egyptian border policy’s “bloody approach” to border control constitutes a violation of human rights.

**Conclusion**

Human conditions within Eritrea remain punitive and deplorable. The Eritrean refugee exodus will continue so long as Afewerki remains in power. Each day Eritreans risk their lives for freedom and basic human rights only to face appalling conditions and even death. Host countries often perpetuate the suffering with detention and abuse while other refugees remain at the mercy of smugglers operating without impunity. As advocated by Amnesty International, regional cooperation in coordination with national governments and the international community is necessary to augment security, protect the refugees and investigate these crimes against humanity.