

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Israel: New testimonies show Israeli deportations putting Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers at risk in Uganda**

Israel has continued to deport Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers to Uganda until at least January 2018, Amnesty International revealed today, despite statements by the Ugandan government that no agreement had been in place with Israel to receive them. New research by the organization shows that, once in Uganda, deported asylum seekers have not received papers, are without legal protection and remain vulnerable to exploitation, despite written assurances from Israel they would be protected.

On 13 April 2018 the Ugandan government announced it was “positively considering” a request by Israel to relocate about 500 Eritrean and Sudanese “refugees”. Although the details of the agreement are unclear, the Ugandan government stated that asylum-seekers would “undergo a rigorous vetting process” before being granted asylum in the country.

Amnesty International has collected new testimonies from ten Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers deported from Israel to Uganda between February 2017 and January 2018. Seven of them are still in Uganda, while the remaining three have left for other countries in Africa.

These testimonies show uniform reception procedures upon arrival in Uganda that raise serious concerns for the rights of those deported, including the risk of forcible return to their country of origin. Asylum seekers told Amnesty International that Ugandan individuals were waiting for them at the airport when they arrived from Israel and then escorted them out of the airport via back passages, circumventing immigration and customs checks. These Ugandan individuals then took the Israeli issued travel papers from the asylum seekers, leaving them with no visa or other document to show regular entry into the country. One of the deportees was told that their papers had to be sent back to Israel. Taxis then took them to a hotel in Kampala, where rooms had been paid for in advance for two or three nights. “It’s like a kidnapping” one Eritrean asylum-seeker described the experience to Amnesty International.

Israeli officials have issued documents and given verbal assurances to deportees that they will receive a residence permit in Uganda to allow them to work and protect them from forcible return to their home country. Israel also gives them US\$3,500 upon departure. Once in Uganda, however, asylum-seekers interviewed by Amnesty international found these promises to be empty. Their irregular migration status has left them at risk of detention and forcible return to their country of origin.

One of the asylum-seekers interviewed by Amnesty International was arrested by Ugandan police shortly after arriving in the country together with five other deportees from Israel and beaten for more than three hours. “They were asking: ‘you are illegal, how did you enter the country?’ They took all the money we had from Israel” he told the organization. The group managed to pay the police to be released and left Uganda two days later.

At least four of those who remain in Uganda tried to start the process to seek asylum in Uganda

through a middleman, who asked them for money. One deportee gave US\$400 to a middleman who promised him papers and then disappeared. At least three of those interviewed by Amnesty International expressed concern that, because they were from Israel, they would be rejected if they attempted to submit an asylum claim.

One of the deportees told Amnesty International that he recently received a call from an Israeli immigration official, who asked him details about his current situation in Uganda. "I told him it's very bad: I have no job and no papers" he told Amnesty International.

Only 11 Eritrean and Sudanese nationals have been granted refugee status in Israel since 2013. According to the Israeli government, 1,749 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers were deported to Uganda between 2015 and 2018, including 630 people in 2017 and 128 people in January-March 2018.

The Ugandan government, however, has consistently denied the existence of any agreement for the reception of deportees from Israel, implicitly denying the presence of asylum-seekers arriving from Israel on their territory and refusing to acknowledge any duty towards them. On 3 April 2018 Uganda's Foreign Affairs Minister, Henry Okello Oryem, was quoted in the media saying: "We do not have a contract, any understanding, formal or informal, with Israel for them to dump their refugees here."

The Israeli High Court of Justice is currently hearing a case on the legality of the deportations of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers from Israel. The Court has requested the Israeli government to provide information in the next few days about its "updated agreement" with Uganda, allowing for "involuntary removals".

The deportations of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers from Israel are illegal under international law as they violate the prohibition of *non-refoulement*. This is the prohibition against transferring anyone to a place where they would be at real risk of persecution and other serious human rights violations, or where they would not be protected against such a transfer later.

Israel boasts one of the highest gross domestic products (GDPs) in the world, making it one of the most prosperous and wealthy countries in the Middle East. Israel's GDP per capita is more than 55 times that of Uganda, while Uganda's refugee population is more than 20 times that of Israel.

There is an onus of responsibility on the Israeli government to protect the world's refugees and accept asylum seekers in desperate need of a home. The forced – and illegal – deportation of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers is an abandonment of this responsibility. It is an example of the ill-thought-out policies that have fed the so-called global refugee crisis.

The Israeli government must immediately halt the deportations of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers to Uganda and grant them access to a fair and effective refugee status determination procedure. Meanwhile, the government of Uganda must immediately cease any co-operation with the Israeli government to carry out illegal deportations.