

CHAPTER III

ERITREA MASSIVE YOUTH MIGRATION

In this chapter, the author is going to analyze the Eritrea massive youth migration including the Eritrean youth response on indefinite national service , the routes of Eritrean migration, the tragedy faced by Eritrean migrants along the routes they took, and the European Union and UK policy on Eritrea massive youth migration. The author believes that it will help to understand the urgency of Eritrea government policy towards the problem.

A. Eritrean Youth on Indefinite National Service

The government under Isais Afwerki is known to be highly centralized and authoritarian regime. Since 1993 there was not presidential election since the National Assembly elected Isaias in 1993. There is no independent media in Eritrea and there is no local independent non-governmental organizations exist there. They are banned to the point where the citizen did not have any freedom in moving and in their belief.

The government put a covert surveillance, discrete but palpable – in Eritrea as well as in the diaspora. It is generally assumed among the citizen that there are undercover agents of national security on the streets of Asmara, in cafés and restaurants, at the University and now also in the colleges. Some people feel uncomfortable with even some members of their own family, they

afraid that their family close to the regime leadership and would report them to the government. (Bozzini, 2012)

Other well-known informers report to the local administration and the local branch of the Party. They are usually civilians and some of them are the demobilized freedom fighters. They monitor house blocks searching for the irregularity. Others agents in civil patrol in the streets, they report to some contact working for the National Security in a hidden capacity.

After Proclamation 82/1995 which obliges all Eritreans to take part in the National Service regardless of family responsibility and gender for 18 months, except the veterans of the 30 years' war of independence and the physically and mentally disabled people took effect, Eritrean began to doubt the country intention toward the national service. The proclamation of 1995 makes no provision for conscientious objection to military service.

Officially, like it was stated in the proclamation that exemptions are provided for disability (article 15), and those considered unfit for military training must serve "in any public and government organ according to their profession." But in reality, the only people who do not go to military service are those who are blind or the people who are missing their trigger fingers as they are labeled useless in military activities. (Human Rights Watch, 2009)

In Eritrea larger town, the report by Human Rights Watch (2009) also said that the police or military also try to capture evaders or deserters

through ad hoc round-ups. Round-ups of the population in Eritrea usually done in towns and villages, it is known as *giffa* in Tigrinya— common and constitute a kind of modern press-ganging. Anyone of age of national service who were found without the relevant documents that stated their exemption from national service is taken to the military camps of Sawa and Wi'a for training. In some cases, people claimed that when leaders of military require new domestic workers, the certain round ups will target young women.

The policies really affect the young people in Eritrea as they are the main target for the national service. They were feeling trapped in their own country because they cannot express themselves on the things they like, instead they are forced to do what the government told them in the national service. Like Birhane, a young 25 years old man demonstrated how the national service hinders Eritrean young from being able to exercise choice over the way they may spend a large part of their working life,

“My preference is music. I studied the guitar and I wanted to follow those studies and spend my life creatively, but you cannot do that in Eritrea. I was assigned to construction work.” (Birhane, 2015)

In another case, the government allows the conscripts to work based on their previous job as part of the national service but the payment is much lower than what it was supposed to value. Like a professional footballer who was interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2008, at first he was told to report for national service. When he finished six months of military training he was assigned to play football again, but as part of his national service.

Before military training he had earned 3,600 Nakfa a month (\$220). Afterwards, as part of national service, he was paid an allowance of 400 Nakfa a month (\$24). He said, “I kept playing because if I didn’t I would have been taken to the military again.”

If they are caught deserting the national service, the government will hands down brutal punishments. But if they stay, they are resigned to a life earning a monthly wage of 500 nakfa, which is not enough to live on for a month. Aklilu, 33 years, explained his reasons for fleeing this system,

“I was seven years in the military, but it was impossible to live. I have my mother, my three children and my wife all dependent on me, and I could not afford to feed any of them.” (Aklilu, 2015)

Moreover, if they are the children who were born from EPFL fighters during the independence war, these children are called “red flowers” or *keyahti embaba* in Tigrinya, they are not only expected to participate in national service, but are also forced to join the military in their parents’ footsteps. They were given no choice with the logic of if their parents are also soldier then the children must also be soldier.

Enforced indefinite national service is an increasingly important element of Eritrea’s human rights crisis and has gained the international attention. Basically, conscripts who undergo military training, itself is not illegal. However in Eritrea, they are subjected to cruel military punishments and torture. Many even may be deployed in what constitutes illegal forced

labor.

Furthermore, when the government failed to fulfill its promise to demobilize 200,000 conscripts and instead prolong the national service, many people started to flee the country in spite of many obstacles and threat from the government. Those who try and evade national service are treated cruelly. Evaders are detained in terrible conditions, and heavy penalties are imposed on the families of those who evade service or flee the country.

The UN commission of inquiry (2015) found that national service in Eritrea often entails arbitrary detention, torture, sexual torture, forced labor, absence of leave, and the ludicrous pay, calling it “an institution where slavery-like practices are routine.”

For many, leaving the hell called national service is only possible by deserting the military and fleeing the country, just like Eyob (23 years old) and Binyam (20 years old) who fled the country to desert the national service in search for a better life.

“I have two brothers and they are both in service. One brother has been conscripted for ten years, one for four years. I also have another older brother. He was in the army, but he spent eight years in prison and then he ran from the country. I did not want to go to National Service because I did not want to go to prison.” (Eyob, 2015)

Almost all of the young people interviewed by Amnesty International in 2015 said they had fled the country to avoid or desert from National Service, due to the indefinite nature of service, the harsh conditions,

the destruction of family life, the inability to live on a conscript's wage and other reasons laid out above.

“My father has been in military conscription since before I was even born, and he is paid 450 Nakfa [USD43] per month which is not even enough to buy oil. My older sister was in conscription for three years and then escaped to Ethiopia. I left just before I was conscripted to avoid it. It is useless. I have learnt that from my father and my sister. We might see my father every six months for one or two weeks, but if he overstayed, his division would come and take him back. I do not want to have children who see me once every six months, I want to see my children every day.” (Binyam, 2015)

Therefore the Eritrea's national service program has been introduced as the most common factor that caused Eritrean youth to leave their country. In the early 2015, UN refugee agency, UNCHR stated that there were 5000 people fleeing to Red Sea state to reach Europe in every month, or 60,000 each year. By the end of 2015 UNHCR in its Mid-Year Trends (2015) it was also estimated that more than 411,000 Eritreans were living as refugees or in a refugee-like situation outside the country, this number was showing an increase of 159,000 from the end of 2011.

In 2010 according to the World Bank, Eritrean migration was estimated around 1 million in total, meanwhile the total population of Eritrea was estimated at 6 million in 2016. There is no reliable census data available as Eritrean government is not open to the share of information regarding their national condition (World Bank, 2011).

B. The Migration Routes

Almost quarter million Eritrean migrants and asylum seekers mainly settled in refugee camps and cities in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan. Generally, once they have fled their country, it is assumed that most Eritreans initially apply for refugee status in Ethiopia and Sudan refugee camps. However, as Human Rights Watch noted in 2016, the Eritrean camp population generally remains more or less stable. This means that the numbers leaving Eritrea and those leaving the camps and engaging in onward migration are approximately the same.

Eritrean law requires Eritreans leaving the country to hold an exit permit which the authorities only issue selectively, severely punishing those caught trying to leave without one. During the flight from Eritrea, some desperate migrants hired smugglers or “pilots” to bring them to the border of Eritrea-Ethiopia. Others, especially those who lived close to the border, fled only by foot while trying to avoid Eritrean military and others reported catching buses all the way to the border. While crossing the border sometimes they have to face Ethiopian militia and then brought to Endabaguna reception center. Some were going to Sudan first and then to Ethiopia via Humera or Metema towns (towns border on Sudan). For those who were using smugglers, they had to pay in the range between 1,167 to 6,200 USD to the smugglers for bringing them to the Ethiopian border (Danish Refugee Council, 2016).

The Danish Refugee Council report also stated that some Eritreans does not register themselves in camps but settled in Eritrean communities in cities such as Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Kampala, Khartoum, Cairo and Tripoli. Some Eritrean would stay as undocumented and unofficial migrants, others as urban refugees (either registered in that city or previously in a refugee camp in the same country or in another country). It was estimated that around 15,000 Eritrean reside in Addis Ababa. It could be assumed there are many more who are not registered. According to UNHCR (2016), over 81,000 Eritrean refugees previously registered as living in the camps are believed to have spontaneously settled in Ethiopia.

A study by the Migration Policy Institute (2016) recently concluded that Eritreans are particularly reluctant to live in refugee camps and frequently use smugglers to move to the next destination within the migration route. Shortage of services and few educational and employment opportunities there, as well as protracted and seemingly indefinite stays in refugee camps, cause some to take the risky journey to Europe.

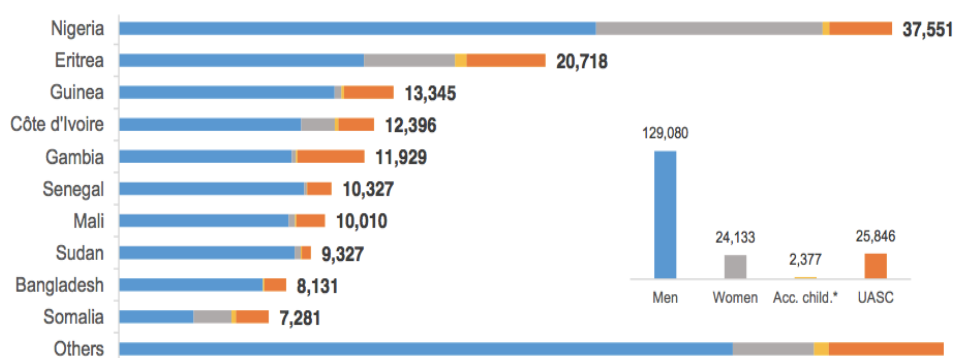
In a recent study by Danish Refugee Council on onward movement by refugees in Ethiopia (2016), almost 40 per cent of Eritreans left the refugees camps in Ethiopia within the first 3 months of arrival, and 80 per cent left within the first year.

Majority of the Eritreans were fleeing to Europe through Mediterranean route, which spans from North Africa to Italy. The route chosen by a person will depend on his or her income, social status and

diaspora connections; those with the least alternatives generally choose the most dangerous journeys. They often board an unseaworthy vessel in their journey to Europe.

Upon their end of the North Africa portion of the journey at the north east town of Ajdabiya, Libya, those who are using smuggler will be held in warehouses, often for several months in poor conditions, until their smuggling and Mediterranean boat fares have been paid.

Graph 3.1. Top 10 Nationalities of Sea Arrivals to Italy by Gender and Age



Source: data.unhcr.org/Mediterranean (2016)

In 2016 Eritrean comprise a total of 11 percent of all migrants entering Europe and represent Europe's second largest immigrant group by sea arrival. According to Georgetown Journal this number is considered stunning when Eritrea is not currently embroiled in war. In those numbers Eritrean migrants are disproportionately young men around 18-27 years old and are increasingly unaccompanied children.

Table 3.1. Eritreans Arrivals in Italy by Sea

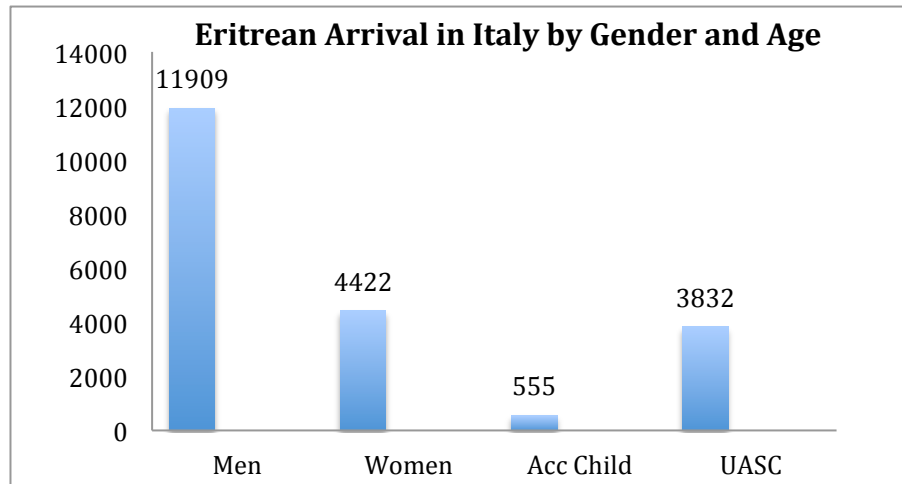
Year	Numbers of Eritreans arriving in Italy by sea
2016	20,718
2015	39,534
2014	34,329
2013	9,834

Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> (2016)

The UNHCR reported 11,564 Eritrean arrivals in Italy in the first seven months of 2016, representing 12 percent of arrivals there—second to Nigeria. (In 2015, a full quarter of arrivals in Italy were Eritrean.) By the end of 2016 it was reported that Eritrean arrival by sea in Italy had reached 20,718. Even though it was comparatively decreasing with the total arrival of 39,534 in 2015, the number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) that reached the number of 3832 in 2016 was depressing (UNHCR, 2016).

Eritrean UASC account for 18% of all Eritrean sea arrivals, up from last year's 8%. Many children are brought up without their fathers because their fathers are tied up in conscription for life. Mostly all the unaccompanied children left because they don't want to have a miserable life like their fathers and brothers.

Graph 3.2 Eritrean Arrival in Italy by Gender and Age



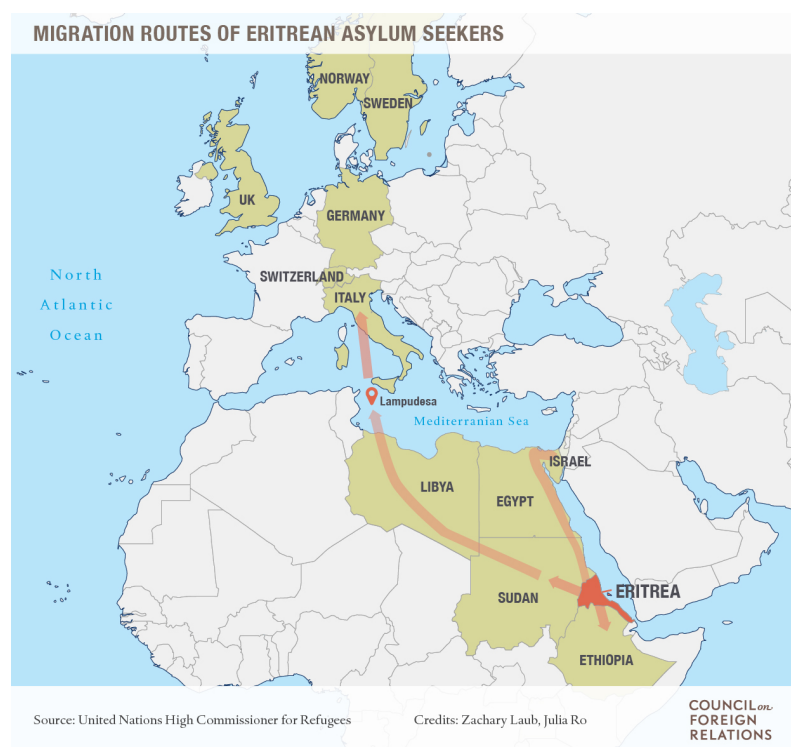
Source: data.unhcr.org/Mediterranean (2016)

During that period, according to Eurostat (2016), EU countries, including Italy, fielded 25,250 asylum applications from Eritrean nationals. In 2015, the top recipients of asylum applications from Eritrean nationals were Germany (10,990), Switzerland (9,965), the Netherlands (7,455), and Sweden (7,230). (in 2015 EU countries granted asylum to more than 90 percent of Eritrean asylum seekers, and there had been reports of Ethiopian migrants in Europe claiming to be Eritrean in order to receive asylum). In 2016 Germany also became the main destination for Eritrean seeking asylum, followed by Italy as the second destination.

Another often-traveled route goes through Egypt to Israel. According to Meron Estefanos, a human rights activist and director of the

Stockholm-based Eritrean Initiative on Refugee Rights, the increasing dangers in Libya are pushing more Eritreans to try the Egypt route instead. For example in 2015, there were several incidents in which the Islamic State (ISIS) militants kidnapped groups of Eritrean migrants from their smugglers and then shot or beheaded those they determined were non-Muslim (Haddon, 2016).

Picture 3.1. Eritrean Migration Route



Source: <http://www.cfr.org/eritrea/authoritarianism-eritrea-migrant-crisis/p37239> (2016)

This route goes from Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and then later to Israel. Eritreans often stay in Cairo for years to collect money to pay for smugglers to send them to Israel. In 2011, according to Feinstein

International Center, Bedouin smugglers were paid between 2700-7000 USD for guidance across the Egyptian Sinai to the Israel border (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011).

But Eritreans journey through Egypt is also not completely safe for them to cross. In the Sinai Peninsula, Eritreans often face torture, extortion, and rape at the hands of smugglers. From Sinai, they then cross into Israel, where some thirty-three thousand Eritreans reside, the country's interior ministry said in August 2015. But according to Sigal Rozen of the Israel-based aid and advocacy group Hotline for Refugee and Migrants, Israel does not recognize Eritrea indefinite national service as a legitimate reason for seeking asylum. Rather, the predominantly young men who constitute most of the arrivals are seen as "work infiltrators" and initially face detention (Laub, 2016).

In an effort to stem the migration flows to Europe, there have been increasing reports throughout 2016 about Eritreans being intercepted, detained and sometimes deported back to Eritrea by Sudanese and Egyptian security forces.

Not all of Eritrean who gone through Egypt route continued their journey crossing Israel. According to UNHCR figures (2016), there were 6,079 registered refugees from Eritrea in Egypt, while 662 Eritreans were reported to be detained by Egyptian authorities. Although precise numbers are unknown, it could be assumed that a substantial number of Eritreans

leaving their country in 2016 had settled in urban center along the migration routes within and out of the region.

C. The Eritrea Migration Tragedy

A long-standing policy to shoot people crossing the border remains in place on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border and several of the interviewees referred to this (often known as the “shoot to kill”) policy. Soldiers stationed on the border - many of whom are conscripts - are instructed to shoot anyone sighted crossing the border, though arrest is the first option. The policy was issued by Eritrea Ministry of Defense and has been on the effect since April 2007. Petros, who left Eritrea around April 2015, told Amnesty International he had spent seven years in National Service as a soldier on the border with Ethiopia. He said,

“We let people cross when we could but if our commanders found out that we were letting people, we would have serious trouble, we might even be killed. So sometimes we had to arrest people who were crossing so that it looked like we were trying. If we saw people escape, sometimes we had to obey the order and shoot them, so we would fire in the air, in the wrong direction, then we would have trouble with our commanders. Nine in my group were accused of collaborating with border crossings. We did not see them again, I think they were killed.” (Amnesty International, 2015)

Even though they had to sacrifice so much and even pay so much money to be smuggled outside the country, not all migrants who left Eritrea made it to their destination. In 2014 an estimated of 3,379 migrants died

attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea and in 2015 a reported 3,771 died at the sea. This trend continued in 2016, a tragic record number of 5,079 migrant deaths occurred on the Mediterranean, including a large number of Eritreans victims. It was mostly caused by overcapacity of people boarding the unseaworthy vessel causing the shipwrecking once it hit the waves (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

Picture 3.2. Unseaworthy vessel of migrants in Mediterranean



Source: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/28/why-do-people-risk-their-lives-cross-mediterranean> (2016)

Not only faced by the cruelty of Mediterranean, even getting to Sudan is hazardous for Eritreans. Dangers faced en route in Sudan vary but generally they were suffer from kidnapping by bandits or the Rashaida for ransom by torture or being sold to the Bedouin and then torture for ransom by the Bedouin. Migrants are also reportedly robbed and extorted by criminals near the border, as well as by the Sudanese police. According to Human

Right Watch (2009), several migrants who passed through Sudan on their way to Italy said that they had been imprisoned upon arrival in Sudan and forced to pay bribes to be released.

In the context of ‘Sinai trafficking’ in Egypt route, it was estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 victims died at the hands of human traffickers in Egypt between 2009 and 2013, the victims were mostly Eritreans (van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2013).

Since the end of 2013, trafficking and abuse in the Sinai has been rerouted along the Northern Route to Europe, through Libya primarily due to the construction of the Israel-Egypt wall. It was also because of the increasing presence of Egyptian military in Sinai. Many of the Eritrean who detained in Egypt received horrendous abuses, later usually they were brought to the Ethiopia rather than repatriated back to Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Between 2011 and 2013 and the month of June 2014, according to *the Study on the Onward Movement of Refugees and Asylum-seeker from Ethiopia* (2016) there were 2,317 Eritrean victims of trafficking came to Ethiopia from Egypt, the majority being between the ages of 18 and 30 years of age.

In an interview with The Guardian one of Eritrean refugee named Sofia who resides in Cairo said despite the risks of deportation, she does not want to risk travelling to Europe by sea. She does, however, understand what drives her compatriots to climb aboard the crowded and unseaworthy dangerous vessels that deliver them between Libya and the coast of Europe.

Many of her friends cannot afford to wait for the resettlement with UNHCR which usually taken time up to 2 years. She said that those people only have two choices – one was to die, the other was to live.

“If they die at sea, it will not be a problem – at least they will not be tortured. Here you don’t have a destiny – you don’t have education, no work, you can’t help your family. Every day you’re just asking for help. But if you go to Europe at least at some point in the future, you will have a nationality and you will be a human.”
(Jones, Kingsley, & Anderson, 2015)

Although it was assumed that the whole migration tragedy phenomena is no longer as significant as it once was, RMMS Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) data as well as anecdotal reports from migrants in Libya and Italy, found indications that migrants from the Horn of Africa in 2016 are still being trafficked, tortured, held for ransom and sometimes disappear and are never heard of again en route to the Mediterranean in Sudan, Egypt and Libya. Even though there is no conclusive evidence that the scale of trafficking, deaths and disappearances became much worse in 2016, it could be become one of the reasons of the drop of arrival in 2016.

D. European Union and UK Policy on Eritrea Massive Youth Migration

1. The Khartoum Process

In December 2014, Eritrea, along with Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, Egypt and Tunisia, was one of the signatories of the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative, now

known as “Khartoum Process”.

The Khartoum Process is a platform for political cooperation amongst the countries along the migration route between the Horn of Africa and Europe. The inter-continental consultation framework aims at:

- Establishing a continuous dialogue for enhanced cooperation on migration and mobility
- Identifying and implementing concrete projects to address trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants
- Giving a new impetus to the regional collaboration between countries of origin, transit and destination regarding the migration route between the Horn of Africa and Europe (EU/ICMPD, 2016).

2. EU-Turkey Migration Deal

The EU-Turkey migration deal was sealed on 18 March 2016 and took into effect on 20 March 2016. Under the deal, Eritreans – and other non-Syrians – arriving in Greece are now expected to be sent back to Turkey, where the government have begun negotiations to readmit refugees and migrants with a host of countries, including Eritrea, if they do not apply for asylum or their claim is rejected.

Critics have said the deal could force migrants determined to reach Europe to start using other and potentially more dangerous routes, such as the journey between North Africa and Italy. Human rights groups have strong criticism about the deal, with Amnesty International accusing the

EU of turning "its back on a global refugee crisis. (BBC, 2016)

3. UK New Guidelines on Eritrea Massive Youth Migration

In March 2015, the UK government has changed its code guidance regarding Eritrea. UK was known as the main destination for Eritrean migrants these past years. In the past 95% of Eritreans had their asylum applications accepted, but now it is down to 28%. The UK Home Office issued two documents, *Country Information and Guidance Eritrea: Illegal Exit* and *Country Information and Guidance Eritrea: National (incl. Military) Service*. Those new guidelines stated that conscription would no longer be automatic grounds for granting asylum, since national service would no longer continue indefinitely. (Plaut, 2015)

Those new guidelines were based on a high-level meeting in December 2014, between senior Eritrean government officials and a UK delegation led by James Sharp, the Foreign Office's director of migration, and Rob Jones, the Home Office's head of asylum and family policy, that took place in Asmara. The meeting was held to discuss the effort on reducing Eritrean massive youth migration and sought to find evidence on human rights violations. (Taylor, 2016)

The guidelines received many critics from activist who said that UK government downplayed the risk of human rights abuses in Eritrea in an attempt to reduce asylum-seeker numbers from African immigration, especially Eritrea.