

Shifting protection experiences of displaced Eritreans

MMC Research Report, May 2025



Front cover photo credit:

© Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas.

A man walks at the Three-Country Point between Sudan,
Eritrea and Ethiopia. Hamdayete, Sudan, 22 June 2021.

Acknowledgements

Authors: Georgia Cole, Milena Belloni, Aron Tesfai

Additional research support: Temesgen Gebrehiwet

Reviewers: Ayla Bonfiglio, Jim van Moorsel, Bram Frouws

Editing: Anthony Morland, Ayla Bonfiglio

Layout and design: Ren Oving

Suggested citation: MMC. (2025). *Shifting protection experiences of displaced Eritreans*. Available at: mixedmigration.org

Information about report and sponsors: The information and views set out in this report are those of the authors and the MMC and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), implementing research partners, or any of the donors supporting the work of MMC or this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with the MMC.

About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

For more information visit: www.mixedmigration.org and and subscribe to the [MMC newsletter](#).

Follow us on Bluesky [@mixedmigration.org](#), X [@Mixed_Migration](#) and LinkedIn [@mixedmigration-centre](#).



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Acronyms.....	5
Summary and key findings	6
Introduction.....	8
Methodology	9
Limitations.....	9
Ethics.....	9
Intersecting sources of vulnerability	10
Political drivers of vulnerability	10
Gender	11
Age.....	12
Disability	12
Ethnicity and religion.....	12
Administrative gaps and unfinished processes.....	13
A lack of documents and the inability to register for asylum	13
Moving to restore ‘processes’	14
The implications of administrative disruptions	14
The role of local and transnational networks	16
Local solidarity networks	16
The ongoing relevance of transnational networks	18
Networks under strain.....	19
Conclusions and recommendations	21
Annex I: Table of Eritrean respondents.....	24

List of Figures

Figure 1. Eritreans' responses to: 'Who provided you with assistance?'	16
Figure 2. Eritreans' responses to: 'What were the main influences on your decision to migrate?'	18

Acronyms

COR	Commissioner for Refugees (Sudan)
KII	Key informant interviewee
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Summary and key findings

This summary refers to the key trends described across the two reports on the situation of Eritreans on the move. The first report – ‘[Where to next?](#)’ – details the country-level changes in policy that have affected Eritrean mobility dynamics over the past decade, while this report – ‘Shifting protection experiences of displaced Eritreans’ – analyses the key trends in how Eritreans have experienced and responded to these changes and provides recommendations based on findings from across the two. Together these reports examine how political, security, and policy changes across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe have systematically reduced Eritreans’ access to safe refuge, despite their continued displacement in significant numbers, while also undermining existing support systems.

They respond to the notion that **though Eritreans were among the largest groups reaching Europe via the Central Mediterranean route in the mid-2010s, by 2024, Eritrean arrivals had dropped by almost 90%.¹** This was the case even though departures from Eritrea had not massively decreased.² Through interviews with displaced Eritreans and key informants (KIs), this research seeks to understand how the dynamics of Eritrean mobility have adjusted to externalisation policies, shrinking spaces of refuge and compounding regional crises. **It analyses the shifting conditions surrounding protection and access to livelihoods of Eritreans in different countries, the heightened risks of (im) mobility that result from this and suggests ways in which this population might be better supported.** The key findings include:

- Shrinking spaces of refuge for displaced Eritreans have heightened this population’s vulnerability, for example, by **impeding their access to identity and travel documentation and to registration procedures** and through **destroying their livelihoods and local support networks.**
- **Shifting alliances in the region have affected Eritrean refugees,** particularly by disrupting their abilities to access asylum and safety in neighbouring countries and by heightening the risk of deportations back to Eritrea.
- **Protection needs in refugee camps are extremely high** throughout the Horn of Africa. Camps are increasingly sites of violence where international and national assistance are insufficient. Camps across Ethiopia and Sudan are characterised by limited access to health care, education, food, water and sanitation, and legal assistance. **The situation is poised to deteriorate further due to the drastic reductions in aid sector funding.**
- **Cities are increasingly the only sites where Eritreans may be able to access basic levels of safety, services, and legal support,** despite the risks of increasing deportations and arbitrary detentions. Project respondents attest to the growing importance of key cities across Africa (primarily Cairo, Kampala, and Addis Ababa and less so Juba, Port Sudan, and Nairobi) in the journeys of displaced Eritreans, as reflected in the growing numbers moving to these metropolitan areas.
- Outbreaks or escalations of violence across the Horn of Africa and North Africa, combined with stricter border policies, have **disrupted established migration routes and smuggling networks,³** leading to more predatory business models and undermining ‘service delivery’ in some areas.
- Despite the ongoing role of transnational networks to support Eritreans, the accumulated crises that Eritreans have faced across North, East and the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, and the lack of improvements in living conditions in Eritrea, are **straining systems of community support.**

1 It is important to note that, as of 2025, this appears to be shifting. From January – March 2025, Eritreans represented 6% (or fifth-most common nationality) of all arrivals in Italy, up from 3% (or ninth-most common nationality) over the same period in 2024. Moreover, as of April 30, 2025, 1,748 Eritreans have arrived in Italy since the start of the year, increasing to the second-most common nationality to arrive, after Bangladeshis (5,849). See UNHCR (2025, May 19) [Italy weekly snapshot](#) and UNHCR (2025) [Operational Data Portal: Italy](#).

2 With no reliable estimates of how many Eritreans are leaving the country, evidence suggests that fewer are departing from Eritrea due to insecurity in Ethiopia and Sudan. In November 2024, UNHCR noted that 20,000 Eritreans had entered Ethiopia so far that year (UNHCR (2024) UNHCR calls for the need for protection of Eritrean asylum seekers in Ethiopia) and that 6,704 Eritreans had entered Sudan (UNHCR (2024) [Sudan: Eritrean Refugees Overview in Sudan \(as of 30 June 2024\)](#)). That would be about 50% of the estimated 4,000-5,000 Eritreans said to be leaving their country on a monthly basis around 2012-16. Living conditions in Eritrea appear to have become harder due to the long-term economic effects of the strict COVID-19 lockdown in Eritrea and the involvement of the Eritrean government in surrounding conflicts.

3 This report uses, we use the terms smuggling and trafficking in line with the definitions established by the Palermo Protocol of 2000.

- **Resettlement opportunities, particularly to Canada, have been a key factor behind Eritreans 'staying put'** in certain spaces, and not embarking on more dangerous and expensive irregular, onward movements. Canada's decision to suspend new registrations for private resettlement for at least 2024-2025 may affect Eritreans' decision-making about what routes to take, as well as their livelihoods and living conditions in the places where they are currently waiting for this process.
- **Several factors led to the sharp drop in Eritreans crossing Mediterranean Sea** to Europe from 2018–2024, including: a reduction in the number of Eritreans leaving their country; the extreme risks that Eritreans – perhaps even more than other nationalities – face in Libya, including due to inhumane detention practices, kidnapping and trafficking; a disruption of the smuggling networks – primarily those in Libya – that used to facilitate Eritrean onward movement; the high risks along previously used migration routes through Ethiopia and Sudan due to conflict; the opportunities offered by emerging places of refuge in the region, despite their significant challenges too; and the hope to access resettlement to a third country from those places, instead of embarking on costly and dangerous journeys. **This drop, however, is not likely to be permanent, as the root causes of Eritrean migration remain unchanged** and there are signs that the situation for Eritreans in key cities in the East, Horn and North Africa is deteriorating, with barriers in access to asylum present in some, while numbers are increasing and the opportunities for safe, legal onward migration remain very limited. Indeed, between January and April 2025, a sharp increase in the arrivals of Eritreans in Italy has been observed.⁴

Photo credit:

© Sara Creta (2021).



⁴ UNHCR (2025, May 19) [Italy weekly snapshot](#) and UNHCR (2025) [Operational Data Portal: Italy](#).

Introduction

Amidst the continuously shifting and precarious geopolitical and protection conditions in countries of initial settlement, re-displacement and refuge for Eritreans outlined in the first [‘Where to Next?’](#) report, this research highlights several key trends that cut across the experiences of all respondents and that should be considered by policy makers and humanitarian operators in the field.

First, the **report analyses the multiple sources of vulnerability faced by displaced Eritreans. These include political shifts in the region, which expose Eritreans to discriminatory migration and non-migration policies, and individual and group characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, access to socio-economic resources, etc.).** Given that mobility is a key survival strategy in the region, the report shows how different factors affect the possibility of Eritreans finding safety away from conflict areas.

Second the report **documents the challenges related to registration, documentation and access to basic protection and assistance across all the locations to which Eritreans move.** Reasons for these challenges include: refugee policies limiting assistance and registration to remote and unsafe camps; key bureaucratic procedures being suspended or ended due to outbreaks of conflict; extortion and corruption within these processes based on an assumption that Eritreans have access to transnational financial networks; overwhelmed humanitarian systems due to overlapping and worsening crises in the region; and Eritreans’ inability and unwillingness to approach the Eritrean government for documentation. Documentation is key for respondents to access any kind of local assistance, protection, and livelihood opportunity, and to engage in legal mobility outside the region. Without it, respondents reported being either rendered immobile or feeling compelled to continue moving to access basic documents.

Finally, the report details the important role played by transnational and local networks in sustaining livelihoods and allowing displaced Eritreans to reach safer places. In response to accumulated distrust in international organisations and national governments, linked to corruption and gaps in protection, displaced **Eritreans have turned to local communities, fellow refugees, grassroots organisations, and transnational networks for assistance.** These networks have been pivotal for supporting Eritreans to flee violence when local resources could not be accessed. They continue to be of paramount importance to support the daily lives of displaced populations in increasingly expensive cities where there is limited recourse to international assistance. They are nonetheless increasingly stretched due to supporting families and contacts in Eritrea, new refugees and people who used to have some economic independence but who are now on the move again due to the various situations outlined in the first report in this series.

Photo credit:

© Morgane Wirtz/Hans Lucas.

The city of Kassala, at the foot of the mountains. Kassala, Sudan, June 2021.



Methodology

Research conducted for this study consisted of:

- A desk review of recent literature on Eritrean displacement and mobility.
- Interviews with 37 Eritreans who left Eritrea, including seven who left in the wake of its 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia,⁵ and then experienced extended (often would-be permanent) stays in Sudan and Ethiopia⁶ before re-migrating either internally in these countries or to third countries (see Annex for details).
- Interviews with 18 key informants—researchers; employees of humanitarian, human rights, United Nations (UN), and non-governmental organisations; and representatives of Eritrean community groups based in the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa, and Europe.
- Analysis of historical data from MMC's 4Mi survey responses.⁷

All interviews were conducted online between July and November 2024. Interviews focused on socio-economic and demographic data, reasons for leaving Eritrea, pre-departure decision-making, experiences and means of support on route, locations of initial destinations, and the role played by transnational connections in mobility and daily survival. Eritrean interviewees were primarily identified through the researchers' personal networks and a conventional 'snowballing' approach. Some interviewees were asked to connect researchers with compatriots with whom they had lived in previous locations and who had re-migrated using different routes for part or all of their journey. This strategy facilitated the exploration of the variation in mobility experiences and the complexity and contingency within various trajectories.

The research focused on Eritreans who had reached a relatively safe city such as Cairo, Addis Ababa, and Kampala, as common destinations for former residents of camps across the region where insecurity and a lack of assistance frequently prompt renewed displacement.⁸ While no current residents of camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, or people in areas affected by armed conflict, were among the interviewees, respondents provided details about the living conditions and challenges (e.g., violence, kidnapping, and robbery) in such locations.

Limitations

While the researchers ensured that interviewees reflected a cross-section of displaced Eritreans in terms of gender, education level, age, marital/family status, and ethnicity, the sample cannot be considered representative. The experiences of the elderly and certain ethnic groups, such as the Afar,⁹ could not be fully explored. Additionally, the researchers' need to conduct interviews remotely, owing to time and resource constraints, restricted the pool of respondents to those living in cities with access to internet and who were likely to be better off than their compatriots in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia or in conflict zones.

Ethics

All participants were provided with oral and/or written information about the project before their consent was sought to be interviewed. Researchers explained to participants the purpose of the project, how the interviews would be stored and used, how their anonymity would be protected, and how they could withdraw from the project or express concerns at any time.¹⁰ Eritrean interviewees were given reimbursements for their time and offered details about support organisations and services in their locations.

5 In 2018, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki signed a peace agreement that included an end to hostilities and a commitment to restoring trade and diplomatic ties (Otieno, D. (2019) [After making peace, Ethiopia and Eritrea now focus on development](#).)

6 Interviewees had spent 1- 42 years in locations of primary displacement and did not regard these as places of transit. In many cases they had put down roots by purchasing property, enrolling in education, establishing a business, bringing family members to join them, and acquiring a legal status. Some had pursued pathways to refugee resettlement.

7 4Mi is MMC's flagship quantitative data collection project. 4Mi surveys cover why people leave places of origin, the alternatives they explored, destination options, influences on decision-making, and other topics.

8 According to KILs with UNHCR in North and East Africa, 80,000 Eritreans were living in Addis Ababa at the time, while 11,000 arrived in Kampala in the first six months of 2024. Another 8,000 had registered in Cairo in the first ten months of 2024. These figures are likely underestimates given the challenges Eritreans have faced in registration.

9 A 2023 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) highlighted the worsening situation of 57,000 Eritrean Afar refugees in Asayita camp in the Afar Region of Ethiopia who were being denied access to asylum (UNGA (2023) [Situation of human rights in Eritrea: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Bobiker](#).)

10 The project was granted ethical approval from the School of Social and Political Sciences' Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

Intersecting sources of vulnerability

Secondary displaced Eritreans in the region are variously affected by regional shifts in geopolitical alliances and changes in immigration and asylum scenarios, as highlighted in the first report in this series. Alongside these structural factors, individual sources of vulnerability exist connected with gender, age, disabilities, and ethnic and religious backgrounds. While these sources of vulnerability are normally taken into account by UNHCR, less attention has been given to the role of socio-economic resources that are mobilised through transnational networks. These are key as they mediate the effects of individual factors affecting vulnerability. Given their importance, the final section of this report is dedicated to transnational networks. All these sources of vulnerability influence the ability of Eritreans to move from unsafe areas, to resettle in other safer places in the region, and to avoid or minimise risks on route. It is important here to note that mobility continues to be a key survival strategy for Eritreans. Respondents shared numerous stories of why and how people became 'stuck' or trapped in various locations with very limited prospects for escaping, while their situation ultimately worsened. The following sources of vulnerability are relevant not only for Eritreans on the move, but also for those who are trapped and cannot escape.

Political drivers of vulnerability

The situation and treatment of Eritrean refugees at a local level is intimately linked to national and international conflict dynamics as well as the Eritrean government's foreign policy. This is pronounced in the context of Ethiopia. As discussed in ['Where to Next?'](#), the thawing of relations between the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments in 2018 resulted in Eritreans no longer being recognised as refugees on a prima facie basis within the country, and a suspension in their ability to register for asylum. Prime Minister Abiy's desire to maintain amicable relations with his Eritrean counterpart translated into a shift in refugee policy that downplayed the existence and severity of persecution within Eritrea. With relations between the two countries worsening as of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022, and most recently in early 2025,¹¹ Ethiopia's calculated approach towards Eritrean refugees may nonetheless shift again.

In addition, the Eritrean government's relationship to different warring factions in Ethiopia has affected the security of Eritreans. This includes in ways that have worked in favour of Eritrean refugees. For instance, Eritrean refugees who are anti-People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in Tigray were supported by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) under the adage that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend.' Several respondents had intentionally based themselves in refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia because of their desire to oppose the Eritrean government from a site 'close to home'. They had had no intentions of leaving until instability broke out and the Eritrean Defence Forces gained access to the Eritreans in the camps.

On the other hand, Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans in Ethiopia have been at risk of being confused for Ethiopian Tigrayans, or at least as sympathetic to them, which has led to them being targeted by Ethiopian security forces and police and the Amhara.¹² Eritreans fleeing Sudan and Tigray shared their concerns about transiting through the Amhara region lest they face mistreatment or abuse:

"From Metema to Gonder is maybe a six-hour drive, but there were up to 14 checkpoints. The smuggler provided us with fake Ethiopian IDs with Amhara names to pass those points. He also warned us that we should not speak in Tigrinya because Eritreans were not allowed to pass by. Because the Amhara were in war with the Tigrayans, if we speak Tigrinya, they could also consider us as Tigrayans".

Dawit (24, Kampala)

In Sudan, respondents point to similar dynamics. Eritrean refugees have been accused of being Rapid Support Forces (RSF) sympathisers by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and SAF sympathisers by RSF forces.¹³ There are concerns that if the RSF comes closer to the east of the country, Eritrean refugees may be exposed to further violence and extortion.

11 International Crisis Group (2025). [Crisis Watch](#)

12 BBC (2024, November 29) [Eritrean refugees describe police crackdown in Ethiopia](#)

13 On April 15, 2023, war broke out in Sudan between the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, led by Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo. Tensions had been escalating between the two leaders since they joined forces during the 2019 coup against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, centring on the RSF's refusal to integrate into the army and its ramp-up of power. See [Bonfiglio, A., Frouws, B. and R. Forin \(2023\) Mixed Migration Consequences of Sudan's Conflict](#)

Violence committed by the RSF has nonetheless felt indiscriminate at times, and for some Eritreans caused them to stay longer in Khartoum to avoid the dangers of being caught while 'on the move'. One KII who is researching how unfolding conflict dynamics are impacting Eritrean displacement stated their concern that if the Eritrean government were to become more invested in either the RSF or SAF, this could make Eritreans more vulnerable, albeit in unclear ways. Eritrean refugees opposed to the PFDJ have been both embraced in the region for their opposition to a common enemy and attacked as complicit in their own government's military endeavours.

A humanitarian worker in Sudan highlighted that if Eritreans are assumed to be affiliated with one of the warring parties, this could lead to exclusion or other concerns during the asylum registration process. Rumours of Eritreans fighting for one side or another not only expose Eritreans to retribution for these imputed political affiliations but also should be challenged to avoid any long-term implications for Eritreans' asylum claims in the region. As Sudan has long played a critical part in hosting Eritrean refugees in the region, any substantive shift towards denying Eritreans access to asylum and protection would undoubtedly translate into a worsening of their situation in the region and possibly trigger onward movement.

Geopolitical disruptions have also had less obvious, but nevertheless key impacts on the lives of Eritreans. One Khartoum-based KII researching Eritrean displacement maintained that since relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia again soured, opportunities for people to move across the border for celebrations, marriages, job and trading opportunities, medical attention, and to look after family members have stopped. Another KII directing an international organisation operating in the Horn of Africa stated that, **for those both inside and outside of Eritrea, "a lifeline for many Eritreans was the re-opening of flights between Addis and Asmara and that has now been cut off"**.

Several KIIs stressed the importance of considering intra-regional tensions when thinking about how – and where – to rebuild refugee reception and hosting facilities in the aftermath of conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan. The (re)establishment of large refugee settlements for Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans in the Afar or Amhara regions of Ethiopia exposes these refugees to the risk of being seen by local populations as part of attempts by other Ethiopian ethnic groups to dilute the Afar and Amhara's claims to majority ownership of those territories. **It is vital that refugees do not become pawns in the wider politics of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, and that their relocation to new and future camps in the country are not seen in this light.**

The Eritrean government has seemed to play an ambivalent role when it comes to shifting attitudes towards Eritreans in the region and the deportations of its nationals. While the Eritrean government has at times refused to accept Eritrean deportees (see section on Israel in ['Where to Next?'](#)), there have been reports of the Eritrean government's involvement in forcing people back to Eritrea (see section on Sudan in ['Where to Next?'](#)). This has not only affected political opponents, who have been systematically targeted by the PFDJ, but the general refugee population.

Gender

In camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, women amount to about 50 percent of the refugee population. Given their roles as caretakers and mothers, women are often more exposed to the "risk of staying" in insecure conditions.¹⁴ Respondents shared stories of female relatives or wives who stayed behind caring for children and elderly individuals while male family members sought opportunities outside camps and through further migration. Given the insecurity, hunger, and lack of care experienced by refugees in camps, respondents reported cases of women who had died due to unsafe deliveries or who had been victims of violence.

In cities too, and particularly Kampala, large numbers of single parent, female-headed households exist. Some receive remittances from their husbands who have travelled to more dangerous places in search of work (e.g. Juba) or remained in labour markets where it had become impossible for families to live (e.g. Saudi Arabia), but there is also a sizeable population who had lost contact with their partners. They thus struggle to get by in financially precarious situations. While female respondents in Kampala who were single parents faced stigmatisation from certain members of the Eritrean community, many were also supported by donations from Eritrean churches and benefactors. Few women in this position have plans to improve their situation long-term when all their energy goes into day-to-day survival.¹⁵

14 Hyndman, J. & Giles, W. (2011) [Waiting for what? The feminization of asylum in protracted situations.](#)

15 Cole, G. (2021) Op Cit.

Age

Unsurprisingly, the few elderly people interviewed for this research suffered from declining health and were on the move to access health care. Some of their stories included the decision to return to Eritrea to seek some safety and basic assistance, with their advanced age providing a perverse form of protection. At particular ages and life stages (including when women have a family), Eritreans are demobilised from the national service programme, which enables them to more easily access a passport and exit visa to leave Eritrea. This means that the elderly population may be more able to leave Eritrea to visit family overseas, to import and export goods, and to access medical care without necessarily having to leave the country through dangerous routes and then to regularise their status through asylum. This also means that the risks associated with their returning to Eritrea are partially reduced because: 1) they are generally not signed back up to the national service programme, though they may be signed up to the people's militia instead, and 2) their return to Eritrea does not preclude them from leaving it again because they retain the right to possess a passport and to access exit visas. For the elderly who do not need specialist medical care, and who have family outside to support them, Eritrea appeared to be a feasible option, if not the only one available.

Disability

Respondents revealed how disability-related factors had critically curtailed their mobility and opportunities to access safety. Armando (26, Addis Ababa) reported that when the war broke out in Tigray, his mother was torn between leaving the increasingly dangerous refugee camp where they had stayed or remaining there to look after his disabled uncle. The mother finally decided to escape to Addis Ababa and managed to bring a grandmother who was also in poor health, but she had to leave the uncle behind in Shiraro. They had since lost contact with him. Alongside the trauma of feeling compelled to leave him, the family were also contending with the fact that the uncle had been the main applicant for the whole family's resettlement case. With him now uncontactable, their file and case had lapsed. It took another disabled participant, Tesfom (37, Cairo), eight months to find a way out of Khartoum once the fighting broke out in the city. When other people were running to safety, he was left behind because he requires crutches to move.

Ethnicity and religion

Eritrean refugees recounted different experiences based on their own ethnic and religious backgrounds. Different ethnic groups have different histories of mobility within and outside the region, which has meant that some groups may have better access to solidarity networks of co-ethnic contacts who have been living outside Eritrea for decades or are recognised citizens of other countries. Others may have better access to resources from the diaspora which allows them to support themselves in expensive cities and to move to safer zones. This is also how ethnic belonging intersects with stratified socio-economic conditions.¹⁶

Because of their Islamic faith, Afar and Nara report having suffered widespread and worsening discrimination in Christian parts of Ethiopia and so have relocated to places within Oromia and Afar and further afield. One KII with long-term experience working with refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt spoke of how Eritrean Muslims arriving in Cairo from Ethiopia were often met with disbelief by Eritreans already in the city. They were surprised that these new arrivals had decided to move there given the challenging conditions and the dangers of travelling to Egypt through conflict zones in Sudan. **The newly arrived Muslim Eritreans would apparently respond by highlighting the challenges that living in Ethiopia posed for Muslims.** In particular, one respondent stated, "Ethiopia is like hell for us...to be a Muslim in Ethiopia is completely impossible".

The Eritrean Kunamas have disproportionately suffered from involuntary immobility because of less support and fewer transnational diaspora networks to draw on to move out. The same KII suggested that groups like the Kunama, Afar, and Nara are also routinely overlooked for support both by international organisations, because they are deemed less of an onward 'flight risk' to places like Libya and then Europe, and by national governments in the region because there is less political opportunism in supporting these groups compared to the potentially more politically 'useful' Tigrinya refugees.¹⁷

In Sudan, while some of the long-term Eritrean Muslim population has been able to access Sudanese passports (and thus take advantage of schemes to support Sudanese nationals arriving in Ethiopia and Egypt), several respondents alluded to the Orthodox Christian population not being able to obtain them. This has hindered their ability to move on to other locations in the Middle East and North Africa on a legal passport as opposed to through smuggler networks. Anecdotally, respondents spoke of more Christian Eritreans feeling compelled to return to Eritrea as the war spreads across Sudan than Muslim Eritreans.

¹⁶ Adujna, F., Rudolf, M., & Getachew, M. Op Cit.

¹⁷ KII researching Eritrean displacement along the Northern Route from Eritrea through Ethiopia and Sudan to Egypt.

Administrative gaps and unfinished processes

A lack of documents and the inability to register for asylum

Secondarily displaced Eritreans face the challenge of registering again in a new country or location, or in renewing their documentation there. This includes registering to confirm that they had refugee status or residency in their previous location, registering births and death, or once again claiming asylum. Official documentation is required to access protection and assistance at a local level, and to engage in resettlement, family reunification, and other opportunities for complementary pathways. This proof of registration is often issued by UNHCR or national authorities in camps.

In Sudan, respondents who were registered as camp refugees have been unable to move to urban areas because their registration documents have never allowed them to live in cities. This has persisted despite the camps being increasingly overcrowded, under-resourced, and insecure. UNHCR has supported the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees (COR) to ensure that refugees registered in Khartoum have been able to legally transfer to cities such as Port Sudan and Kassala, but there appears to have been no loosening of the requirement that Eritreans registered in camps such as Shagarab must not transfer to urban areas in Sudan. Eritrean refugees' ability to cross internal borders to flee the country are reported to have been curtailed by their documents specifying that they are only legally allowed to reside in one location.¹⁸

When people are in theory allowed to register outside camps in cities, such as in Cairo or Kampala, Eritreans still face challenges to access relevant bureaus amidst abuse and corruption (see '[Where to Next?](#)'). In Cairo, respondents and KIIs working within the system reported that UNHCR offices, where the first registration takes place before the Egyptian government can provide a national registration card,¹⁹ are difficult to access and may be vulnerable to illicit activity.²⁰

While for many Eritrean refugees, the issue is being able to 'register again' or to renew their documentation, others had never had papers in the first place. Many Eritreans had entered Ethiopia when the border opened in 2018 and had since lived in places like Shire, Axum, and Mekelle without documentation. Given the changes in refugee policies, COVID-19, and conflict, many have not been able to regularise their stay.

Besides missing documentation, displaced Eritreans face difficulties related to the transfer of information between different administrative offices and organisations, including between different UNHCR offices and between different government bureaus. The situation of an Eritrean family now struggling in Nairobi exemplifies this broader administrative precarity. According to an advocate interviewed in Kenya who had been supporting this family, they had been granted their refugee status two years after arriving in Kenya. They nonetheless could not get the accompanying identification documents to prove it without their file in Ethiopia, where they had previously been living, being first closed. This process required UNHCR to locate the file and then de-activate it in Ethiopia, which took UNHCR three months and only began once the family had guaranteed status in Kenya. Due to Kenya's default encampment policy, their refugee IDs resulted in them only being able to live in Kakuma camp where they had initially registered, but which they felt unable to do for protection reasons. At the time of our interview, this family had been in Kenya for several years and unable to establish themselves because of continuing restrictions on their rights to reside legally in Nairobi.

18 The Eritrean Embassy in Sudan stopped issuing identification documents when the conflict there broke out. This is said to have fuelled smuggling as with almost no opportunities for Eritreans to regularise or change their statuses within Sudan now (either through the Eritrean Embassy or international organisations), they have no options left but to move irregularly without any valid IDs.

19 Egypt's new asylum law, which was signed into law by the Egyptian president in December 2024, plans for the eventual transfer of control over the RSD process to the Egyptian government. In '[Where to Next?](#)', the report argues this may lead to reduced protection for Eritreans given the Egyptian government's scepticism towards asylum claims on the grounds of national service-based persecution. In March 2025, the Egyptian government announced increased capacity for registration for the residency permit, suggesting the government is taking steps to reduce backlogs at an administrative level. See MMC (2025) [Between Pledges and Practices: Egypt's complex mixed migration policy landscape](#).

20 One Eritrean respondent in Cairo described his challenges with the waiting period for registering for asylum and witnessing Habesha Eritreans and Ethiopians getting robbed outside the offices.

Moving to restore ‘processes’

For people in this situation, their priority was to move to places where they could restore administrative links with relevant offices to ideally re-activate, or at worst to restart, their “processes” to get a legal way out of the region. The problem was that they were facing overwhelmed humanitarian systems across the region and a kind of administrative void because their files had been lost, or they could not officially register their presence in the new country. Winta told us:

“The reason I left Addis Ababa was because they don’t provide the documents needed to go abroad and yet my cousin who is in the UK wanted to start a process for me to go there, so that’s why I left and came to Kampala to get those documents”.

Winta (23, Kampala).

Many people decided to move to cities, like Kampala, for these reasons. However, several respondents had diverted to existing and new camps hoping that they could access key documentation there or reactivate their processes for resettlement, only to then wait in vain for months. Michaele, a 35-year-old refugee displaced from Khartoum, had had this experience upon fleeing to Ethiopia where he had stayed for six months in a temporary refugee camp established by UNHCR under the impression that his private resettlement process to Canada could continue from there. After six months, Michaele lost hope in being able to follow up his process in the camp and decided to temporarily move to Addis Ababa, only to find that documentation was not available there. He finally ended up in Kampala. The cost to displaced populations in terms of time and money spent on wasted journeys or stays in camps that are unlikely to provide them with services, particularly in emergency situations, can lead to shouldering greater risks in the next stages of their journeys.

The implications of administrative disruptions

Lack of access to registration processes and key documentation has heightened the risk of Eritreans being arbitrarily detained and deported in many countries. As a KII working with an international organisation in Ethiopia relayed, over 1,300 Eritreans were detained in Ethiopia in 2023, mainly because of a lack of documentation. Likewise, secondary displaced Eritreans in Cairo have struggled to register their cases and transfer their files and are hence exposed to increased risks of deportations. Eritreans who are not regularly registered also cannot access basic services, such as schools, hospitals, sim cards, and bank accounts.

Displacement and related administrative disruptions meant that several respondents had lost opportunities to move abroad. While living long-term as a refugee in Khartoum, Ruta, a 31-year-old doctor, had been accepted onto a programme at a university in Germany, and offered a prestigious scholarship to fund her studies. Her uncle had offered to support her move to Europe, but she reported the impact that the outbreak of war had on this process:

“In order to go to Germany, I needed a passport. I had two options: to obtain an Eritrean passport, which would take at least a year, or to get a refugee document. I chose to get my refugee documents from the Commissioner for Refugees in Khartoum. Although they typically don’t issue these documents in the capital, after reviewing my case and considering what happened to me when crossing the border from Eritrea to Sudan, they took pity on me and allowed it. After receiving the refugee documents, the only thing left was to get travel documents. I presented my university offer to the immigration office and even had an interview. While waiting for my travel documents, the war broke out. The university was constantly messaging me, but we had electricity and internet problems, so I couldn’t contact anyone—neither the university, my uncle, nor my family in Eritrea. When I finally got the chance, I informed the university that I was in a very dangerous situation, and they advised me to contact them once I was safe. After leaving Sudan, I went to Metemma Camp in Ethiopia, where there was no internet for the entire year I stayed there. After coming to Addis Ababa, it’s been over a year, and my scholarship has expired. This means I would have to start the process all over again”.

Ruta (31, Addis Ababa)

For others, it was the process of family reunification and resettlement that had been suspended or severed by the indeterminate closure of diplomatic bureaus and other administrative offices in Sudan and Ethiopia. Family members overseas had submitted the relevant paperwork to begin these processes, while Eritreans in camps or in Addis Ababa and Khartoum had been compiling the required paperwork or waiting for last minute medical checks or permits before

they could board flights to leave. **When these processes were suspended or shut down, people took massive financial and emotional hits as many of the resources already invested in trying to action these plans were lost.**

One respondent, for example, had been waiting with her child for family reunification with the father, who had been living in Italy since 2018. After being displaced from Mekelle in 2020, she and her son had been unable to access a birth certificate and refugee registration papers in Addis Ababa, thus blocking the process started by the father in Europe and leaving the family in a state of despair.

Another KII providing legal aid and advocacy support to Eritreans across the Horn of Africa, who also has family links to Eritrea, railed against the risks that these disrupted processes had foisted upon her extended connections. Like many others, she spoke of family members in Khartoum who were suddenly stuck because, though they had family reunification options ready for them to travel to the UK, the Embassies had closed, and it became almost impossible to take up these opportunities. **As the KII explained, they knew of many cases of people in Sudan who had had a legal route out of the country who were suddenly forced to undertake dangerous and irregularly journeys to move across the continent to try again legally and that “nobody came through with a rescue plan for people who were just about to get their papers to go”.** As they explained in connection to why this understandably pushed people towards using smugglers:

“We are talking about people...who are actually trying to do the right thing and that is to do the legal thing but if you are stuck in a warzone and there’s nobody to get you out then, you know, how you are getting yourself out? You have to find whatever means possible to get yourself out... It’s a whole lot of shades of grey”.

Finally, if Eritreans cannot access documentation to prove their requests for asylum or refugee status, there is a serious risk that they will be pushed towards approaching the Eritrean government for urgently needed IDs.²¹ As the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea has noted, ‘requiring Eritreans to obtain documentation from their diplomatic presence exposes them to harassment and coercion [including the requirement to pay the 2 percent diaspora tax], placing an unreasonable burden on individuals.’ It also risks jeopardising their asylum claims, as host governments misconstrue this as indicative of Eritrean refugees’ voluntarily re-availing themselves of the Eritrean government’s protection.²² In reality, however, it is driven by necessity if host governments require them to present an Eritrean passport if they wish to apply for family reunification or another opportunity overseas before they have been able to access a Convention Travel Document, or if the private sector requires them to present some form of ID to access housing, healthcare, banking services, or employment before they have been able to regularise their status through another route. One respondent, Tewolde (29, Mokopane), spoke of waiting for an extended period in Juba to access an Eritrean passport because he realised that it was his only real option of getting out of South Sudan to Europe or South Africa.

Respondents also highlighted that a risk of regularising one’s status via a passport and visa rather than through asylum was that this required individuals to pay ongoing fees to renew these documents or to risk being charged with huge overstay costs by host governments. This was reported to be the case among Eritreans in Ethiopia, and previous research has highlighted this debilitating dynamic in Saudi Arabia where Eritreans have been unable to keep up with payments to renew their residence permits. This has left them unable to access a legal exit visa from the country and facing detention and deportation to Eritrea if they are caught irregularly in Saudi Arabia.²³

21 UNGA (2024) [Situation of human rights in Eritrea: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker](#).

22 Cole, G. & Belloni, M. Op Cit.

23 Cole, G. (2020) Op Cit.

The role of local and transnational networks

Contacts among the local communities or long-resident refugee and co-ethnic communities were important sources of support, together with resources sent by diaspora communities in the US, Europe, and the Middle East. This does not mean that respondents were not themselves economically active. In lots of cases, the opposite was true. Most respondents had worked before being secondarily displaced, which contributed to their ability and desire to 'stay put' in these locations rather than to quickly move on. They had been tutors, doctors, small business owners, and farmers, to name a few of their occupations.

In many cases, their assets were lost, seized, exhausted, or necessarily abandoned in the context of rapid shifts in policies and outbreaks of violence. As the number of welcoming locations to seek asylum in the region has shrunk, many displaced Eritreans have also increasingly found themselves in over-crowded and, as a result, increasingly competitive environments like Cairo and Kampala where there are fewer available jobs and inflated prices. Even those who have been able to find work in these places are struggling because of the gap between take home wages and living expenses. Recurrent experiences of crisis and insecurity are among the reasons why local and transnational networks have retained, and in many cases grown in their importance for the survival of displaced Eritreans, as shown in Kisanet's story.

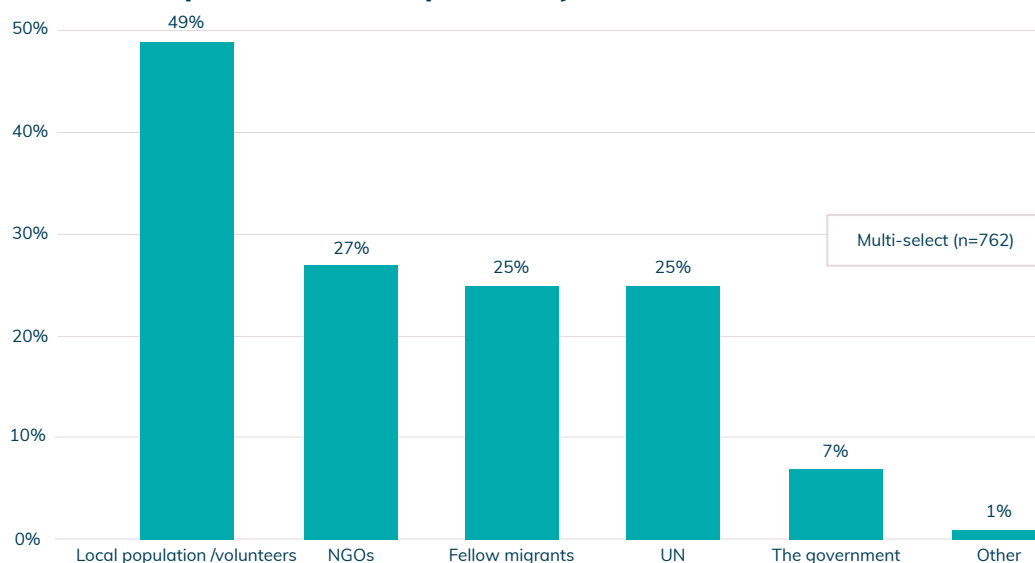
Kisanet was born and spent the first 27 years of her life in Khartoum with her parents and siblings. Her family had moved there in the early 1980s. When the war broke out in Khartoum, they had fled first to Kassala, from where they felt they had little option but to cross over into Eritrea. Though they had family in Asmara, they found them relatively unwelcoming and so stayed with them for only two weeks before making their way to Kampala. Since leaving Khartoum, they had depended on money sent by a brother who had moved to Canada a year before the conflict started. Kisanet spoke of feeling like a burden to her brother, even though the support that he offered was not sufficient to cover their needs. It was necessary because the jobs that Kisanet and her sisters had been able to secure in Kampala were underpaid so even with them all technically working, they were unable to support themselves without the remittances.

Kisanet (27, Kampala)

Local solidarity networks

Despite the considerable violence and deceit experienced by respondents during their journeys, most stories contained instances of solidarity and support provided by other displaced people and local populations. This is also in line with the data from MMC's 4Mi survey among Eritreans in Ethiopia and in Sudan. This data shows the important role of local populations and NGOs over UN agencies in providing assistance.

Figure 1. Eritreans' responses to: 'Who provided you with assistance?'



Source: [MMC 4Mi data \(2021-2024\)](#)

The turning point of many stories was an act of kindness received from an old friend that somebody had managed to connect with or run into by chance, or a relative stranger. As evidenced in MMC's 4Mi data, 20 percent of Eritreans financed part of their journeys through money borrowed from other migrants.²⁴ Eritreans experiencing secondary displacement frequently received shelter, food, and support from other displaced Eritreans, and the sharing of resources has been key to the survival of individuals and communities. This was particularly notable in the stories of those who had been stuck in the refugee camps in northern Ethiopia during the conflict in Tigray, but also those who were moved or spontaneously resettled to Dabat camp, where co-ethnic support was crucial:

"Even the UNHCR couldn't distribute food on time [in Dabat]. For three months, four months, five months, we didn't get any food distributions from the UNHCR. We could survive only by helping each other. I appreciate the Eritrean community, because we are supporting each other. The ones who 'have' support the ones who don't. Like a family. And not only within ethnic groups".

Fraj (40, Addis Ababa)

Solidarity was also, and has long been, key for survival for those in urban areas who had limited access to remittances and no support from international organisations and the government.²⁵ One refugee KII working as a community representative for displaced Kunama in Ethiopia spoke of how the Kunama in Addis Ababa had become accustomed to accommodating over ten people in a small apartment. A very small percentage of the Kunama there had family members who had been resettled to the US, which had occurred mostly through a group scheme in 2008. Remittances were shared with extended families and friends from Eritrea. Similar experiences have been observed among Eritreans who were long-term residents of Port Sudan and who hosted a huge number of co-nationals displaced by the conflict in Khartoum. According to a KII from an international organisation in Port Sudan, 4,000 secondary displaced refugees allegedly arrived in Port Sudan shortly after the war broke out. They maintained that most of the Eritrean refugees in this population were absorbed by the existing Eritrean community.

Moving to (new) cities often required a local connection based there who could provide initial accommodation and some other basic support. With increasing numbers of Eritreans in cities such as Addis Ababa, Kampala, and Cairo, it appears to be increasingly easy for most people to find some sort of existing personal connection who can help facilitate their arrival. Churches and faith-based groups appeared to be important institutions of support for the least connected and often most vulnerable populations. In Kampala, for example, our previous research has shown that the Eritrean churches (both Pentecostal and Orthodox) distribute large donations from wealthy Eritreans who are based in the city (but often have transnational businesses and assumed connections back to the political establishment in Eritrea) as well as providing a physical location where the most destitute can stay as they figure out next steps. Through church communities, people expanded their networks and gained access to important knowledge on possible job opportunities, safe and cheaper places to rent, how to navigate the asylum system, etc.

Respondents also detailed that several grassroots refugee organisations had recently emerged in urban areas to support particularly vulnerable groups, which appeared to have a high degree of knowledge about local and frequently changing needs. This included a Kunama-based organisation in Addis Ababa collaborating with UNHCR to coordinate responses for vulnerable Kunama refugees living in the city. The organisation had lobbied for more security in the refugee camp in Dabat, and in mid-2024 was in the middle of a counting exercise that would allow its members to better monitor the situation of the Kunama community in Addis Ababa. The organisation operated without any funding, but did channel charitable donations from religious organisations and other sources towards Kunama identified as in need.

Another example revealed in the interviews was an Eritrean student association in Addis Ababa that was mostly composed of Eritreans who had accessed higher education while in Ethiopia but who had subsequently relocated to other countries thanks to scholarships and other schemes. They had since used the association to channel funds from the diaspora to refugees stuck in Tigray during the war, and to provide information about higher education programmes and scholarships to Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa. Their actions have been limited by a lack of institutional recognition, and the inability to find any "legal site" that would host their association amidst heightened security concerns about any sorts of mobilisation in Ethiopia.

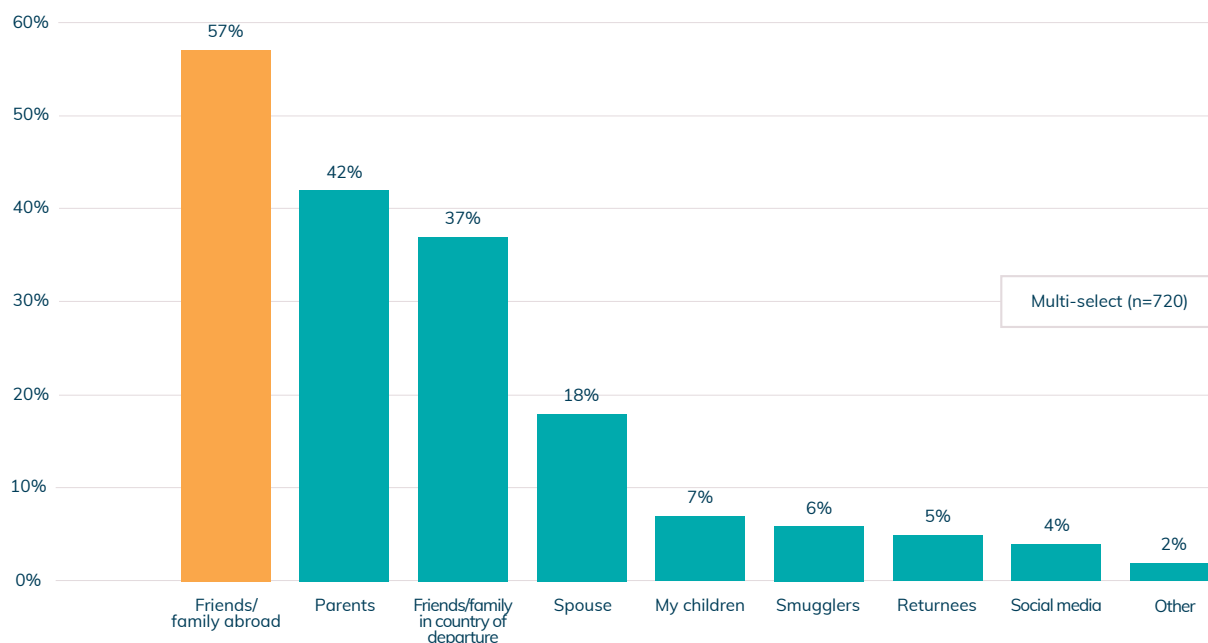
²⁴ MMC 4Mi data on Eritreans collected from 2021-2024 across Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, and Italy. Full data available at: [4Mi Interactive](#).

²⁵ UNHCR (2013) [A web of love and solidarity keeps Eritrean refugees afloat in Kampala](#); Cole, G. (2017) [Uganda's unsung heroes of refugee protection](#).

The ongoing relevance of transnational networks

All respondents cited the importance of transnational family and home-based networks for supporting the geographic mobility and livelihoods of Eritreans in times of crisis. This is in line with data collected in the 4Mi survey. Among Eritrean respondents interviewed in Libya, Ethiopia, and Sudan, 57 percent mentioned that their decision to leave the country was influenced by friends and family abroad. 60 percent, moreover, told the enumerators that they financed their journeys thanks to family and friends who sent them money while they were on the move.²⁶ **Consequently, those who can count on fewer family members and friends in Europe, Israel, the US, and Canada tended to be stuck in unsafe situations for longer.**

Figure 2. Eritreans' responses to: 'What were the main influences on your decision to migrate?'



Source: [MMC 4Mi data \(2021-2024\)](#)

Alongside family members who have been living in the diaspora for decades, several respondents counted on weaker ties with friends who used to be in exile with them but who were quickly resettled or had managed to reach other, safer destinations. Here, the intensity of bonds forged during even short periods of moving together came to constitute key transnational connections.²⁷ For others, leaving Eritrea provided the ability to connect through ICT and social media with new contacts or contacts they have previously struggled to engage. Michael, for instance, a 35-year-old refugee who spent seven years in Khartoum before escaping to Ethiopia and then Uganda, said an aunt had supported him to first leave Eritrea in 2017. Once he was out of the country the internet enabled him to connect with and call upon a broader network of family and acquaintances for support.

It appeared that the diaspora had mixed effects on displaced Eritreans' initial decision to leave Eritrea.²⁸ Respondents detailed both cases in which decisions to leave the country were collectively negotiated and often involved moving to join a family member established in a city in the region, and others, usually more common, in which decisions to leave were taken autonomously. These decisions often occurred because somebody found themselves in a conducive place at the right moment to escape; they had been deployed near the border for national service; or they met a smuggler who offered them an affordable deal. Some authors have described how individuals decide to migrate from Eritrea secretly to "protect" family from the Eritrean government blaming them for why this person had left and from the feeling of being co-responsible if the journey leads to harm or death.²⁹ **In an environment like Eritrea where migration out of the country is an omnipresent phenomenon, no decision to leave, however, comes entirely out of the blue.**

26 MMC 4Mi data on Eritreans collected from 2021-2024 across Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, and Italy. Full data available at: [4Mi Interactive](#).

27 Schapendonk, J. (2015) *What if networks move? Dynamic social networking in the context of African migration to Europe*.

28 Belloni, M. (2020) *Family project or individual choice? Exploring agency in young Eritreans' migration*; Belloni, M. (2016) *'My uncle cannot say: no' if I reach Libya': Unpacking the social dynamics of border-crossing among Eritreans heading to Europe*.

29 Belloni, M. (2020) Op Cit.

Across the interviews, two divergent trends were identified in terms of the impacts of long-term residence in the country from which people were now experiencing secondary displacement on their ability to mobilise transnational networks of support. On the one hand were instances when families who had lived outside Eritrea for multiple generations maintained strong links with family members back in Eritrea as well as with an extensive network of people in the diaspora. Living in exile had indeed enabled them to foster connections with diasporic contacts who had been instrumental in brokering their onward movements and resettlement.

Beraki's (67) story shows the richness of connections that he maintained despite living for 42 years in Khartoum. He had never wanted to leave the city, having raised children and grandchildren there, but the war shattered his stable life, and he was pushed to enter Eritrea from Kassala. He had a large network of family to stay with in Asmara but only stayed for five months because he was unhappy with the challenging conditions, and because he was worried about family still in Khartoum. The family thus reconvened in Khartoum, but all their belongings had been sold, looted, or destroyed so they had no way to pay for onward movement. Beraki had to rely on his sister-in-law in Egypt to cover the costs of their transport to Cairo and then to host the family. Now in Cairo, they are relying on extended family members in Australia to support a family resettlement process. Since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in March 2023, Beraki's security has thus depended on the ability to activate support networks spanning Eritrea, Egypt, and Australia.

Beraki (67, Cairo)

On the other hand, long-term residence in regional locations had resulted in cases of families becoming less connected to members of the diaspora. One KII researching Eritrean displacement suggested that long-staying families in Addis Ababa and Khartoum may not necessarily have developed or maintained strong transnational links because they had built local communities with Ethiopian and Sudanese neighbours, although this research did not collect any material to confirm this point. Now they either do not have networks to activate overseas, or those networks do not understand their predicament, often because of assumptions that they would have savings to draw upon from living in exile for so long.

Interviews with families who had been forced to leave Saudi Arabia after decades living there did regularly touch upon these dynamics as many Eritreans felt like they had belonged to a relatively autonomous diaspora. This made it harder to know how to activate resources when they needed them, and to slot into diasporic communities in places like Kampala and Cairo once they did arrive. They spoke of how most of their friends were either stuck in Saudi Arabia or had managed to leave but were now similarly struggling to adjust in their new country of refuge. This was particularly the case for families who had left Eritrea or Sudan thirty or forty years earlier, had only visited Eritrea on a few occasions since, and whose whole lives had been relatively contained within the Eritrean population in Saudi Arabia. Those who did have family and friends in the diaspora spoke of struggling to get these contacts to empathise with their situation because for so long they had been seen as living the 'good life' in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, although it is true that most financial support to refugees and displaced people comes from relatives and friends in the diaspora, it is important not to overlook the flow of money from Eritrea to displaced individuals.

Some respondents spoke about the critical support provided by their families in Eritrea as they navigated violence and conflict. These included families of peasants and pastoralists who sold animals and properties to help loved ones affected by war.

Networks under strain

There has been a prevalent sense among organisations working with Eritreans, and among KIIs for this project, that Eritreans seek out, and ultimately require, less humanitarian support because of the strength, resilience, and wealth of their diaspora networks. **This general perception has resulted in community-wide exposure to exploitation that paradoxically makes them more in need of certain forms of protection.**

Time and time again, Eritrean respondents described feeling as if they had become a 'commodity' or 'cash cow'. The Sinai trafficking has become infamous for the targeting and kidnapping of Eritreans who were then tortured to extort huge ransoms from families.³⁰ Similar instances are now happening in Ethiopia and Libya. **There were stories of government officials and police across all the countries that Eritrean respondents had passed through demanding**

30 Van Reisen, M. E. H., Estefanos, M., & Rijken, C. Op Cit.

money of them on spurious grounds, even if they possessed documentation that allowed them to live there legally.

In Uganda, every single Eritrean respondent noted that the asylum system is riddled with corruption with Eritreans encouraged and often pressured to pay significant sums to access documentation.³¹ In Kenya, immigration authorities and police unfairly detained Eritreans only to release them once they had received payouts transferred to them via Eritrean brokers.

Along their journeys, respondents recalled encountering inflated prices for basic goods and services. In South Sudan, refugees reported experiencing the equivalent of ‘surge pricing’ at local hotels once they started to arrive in more significant numbers from Sudan. In many of these cases both the victims and perpetrators of this exploitation were Eritreans. Rents and other goods for Eritreans in Kampala are multiple times higher than for their Ugandan counterparts. One interlocutor said that monthly rents that were roughly 80 USD in 2022 were now 325 USD. Landlords capitalised on the fact that Eritreans had access to remittances and their desires to live in particular parts of the city, such as those close to Eritrean Orthodox and Pentecostal Churches, and in Eritrean-only compounds. Food and water costs in Eritrean-majority areas were said to be at least double the prices in other parts of the city. As such, the general cost of living for Eritreans in Kampala is thought to have risen nearly five-fold since before COVID-19.³²

Eritrean diaspora networks may indeed have more capacity – or willingness – to support displaced Eritreans than those that other displaced populations with fewer historical connections to the diaspora are often able to access. There is nonetheless an increasing concern that they are (over)stretched by having to support more people spread over more locations amid the rising costs of living across the Horn of Africa. As families and cohabitation arrangements have broken up due to displacement, the costs of supporting the same individuals split over multiple locations (with multiple sets of rent and a reduced ability to pool resources for living costs) have risen. Moreover, **secondary displacement from Sudan and Ethiopia have added a whole new population that was previously quite autonomous but is now in dire need of transnational help.**

Once respondents had reached destinations perceived as safe and suitable for long-term settlement, they felt responsible for sending money to people ‘left behind’ in Eritrea as well as their relatives who had escaped the country and were still moving in unstable and frequently violent circumstances. One KII, originally from Eritrea, who has lived now for almost a decade in Europe explained the omnipresent guilt and strain that this nonetheless puts the diaspora under. It affects their livelihoods and ability to invest in the countries where they find themselves, while placing them under ongoing and huge emotional distress:

“I have to pay hundreds of pounds every month for people who are being trafficked somewhere, so how can I make my life here? 5-600 pounds a month to support these people, and though I’m better off than many, how can still I get by or build my life here? We are hearing of our family members being trafficked, so we have to support them, beg other friends to pay that money. Mainly in the diaspora, that is our lives... Our greatest challenge is the open wounds that we live with every day trying to rescue people, trying to pay money to people. Sometimes once or twice a day you’re deciding to save money to protect people during a war”.

(KII, Europe)

31 Cole, G. (2018) Op Cit.

32 KII living and working in Uganda as a human rights activist supporting displaced Eritreans.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has highlighted the challenges that displaced Eritreans currently face across North, East, and the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, which have affected both their ability to move and their security at various waypoints and destinations.

First, the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees and their ability to move is affected by the intersection of structural factors, such as geopolitical crises, shifting alliances of the Eritrean government, and migration and asylum policies in the region, including access to territory and registration as well as right to legal stay; and **individual factors**, including specific ethnic, socio-economic, religious, and gendered characteristics.

Second, respondents repeatedly described a generalised frustration with the rigid and unreachable bureaucratic practices necessitated by both national actors and international organisations. These practices are experienced by displaced people as a form of violence that leaves them feeling neglected and disillusioned, and that – much like physical violence – pushes them to move again, often through or to insecure areas, to access registration procedures and relevant documentation.

Third, local and transnational networks play key roles in sustaining the survival mobility and livelihoods, of displaced Eritreans. These networks have nonetheless been reported to be under increasing strain due to the amount of assistance still needed by families in Eritrea, where living conditions are unchanged, and the resources needed to support those who have been newly displaced by the wars in Sudan war and Tigray. It is key for international actors to both support these networks, and to build on their experiences and knowledge to administer assistance to displaced Eritreans.

The following recommendations are based on the scenarios and experiences of displaced Eritreans detailed across this report and [‘Where to Next?’](#):

For regional governments

Access to asylum must be reestablished for Eritreans in nearby countries and the capacity of RSD procedures must be strengthened to avoid lengthy delays in accessing status.

- To ensure Eritreans are able to access international protection, governments need to ensure that Eritreans are able to access territory and asylum and be registered, including to protect from forced return.
- To address systems of corruption there should be greater investment in clearing the backlogs of claims and creating expedited RSD procedures (as was previously the case in Egypt) so that people do not spend either years or thousands of dollars obtaining a status that should be free.
- Contingency plans should ensure that even in situations of severe disruption to administrative services in a country, there is a route for displaced populations to access humanitarian protection and a legal right to reside in that country.³³ This may include a plan to immediately delegate asylum processing and RSD to UNHCR if an emergency situation is declared in countries of asylum.
- The recommencement of registration facilities is particularly important for ensuring that refugees can access protection in the context of war and its aftermath, particularly given the increased risks to refugees of being detained and deported, and these should be provided in multiple locations with anyone country to avoid Eritreans undertaking risky journeys to access them.

Approaches to encampment across the region need to be reconsidered in light of further evidence of the dangers that displaced population are exposed to in these spaces. Appropriate response systems should be in place in urban areas to enable refugees to settle and register in cities and towns without forfeiting access to humanitarian protection and other rights.

- Given reductions to the humanitarian funds needed to sustain camps in humane and safe ways, regional governments should find alternatives to camps since they are not likely to be sustainable in the future.
- With significant growth in displaced populations in urban areas across Africa, regional governments should seek

³³ These findings echo those in a February 2023 report from the University of Nottingham’s Human Rights Lab on the mounting crises around smuggling and extortion of refugees and migrants in Ethiopia and Sudan (University of Nottingham Rights Lab, Op Cit.).

to capitalise on opportunities to work with the UN and other humanitarian organisations to invest in development and livelihood initiatives that benefit the entire urban population. Coordinating efforts to support local and displaced populations will be important for mitigating xenophobia.

- Refugee populations must be offered protection in sites that do not expose them to new risks of violence resulting from their presence inflaming conflict dynamics or their being co-opted into wartime economies of extortion and trafficking.

Governments should expand and operationalise legal commitments to refugees and other displaced populations, such as Ethiopia's new refugee law in 2019 that on paper expanded access to health, education, and work opportunities for refugees.

- As part of this, governments should extend universal primary and secondary education to refugee children so that new arrivals in places such as Egypt and Uganda are able to access a free education system. This may prevent further movement in search of these opportunities, and the ongoing disruption to Eritrean children's basic right to access education.
- Opportunities for refugees in urban economies should be expanded to allow them to set up private businesses (which are now mostly happening in the informal market), which can have a positive effect on national economies through investment, taxes and service provision.

For Governments of countries of resettlement and destination in Europe, North America and Australia

There should be a greater commitment to, and investment in, expanding legal pathways to Europe, North America, and Australia. Investments in externalising and policing borders in the absence of safe and legal routes for migration create a further market for abusive smuggling and trafficking and force displaced people to undertake dangerous and expensive journeys.

Governments should institutionalise private resettlement schemes (PRS) based on previous Canadian and US models.

- Implementing such schemes in Europe could leverage existing networks within refugee communities, who often express a willingness to assist co-nationals. Channelling this support into PRS initiatives could boost legal migration, reduce dependency on dangerous migration routes, and alleviate economic strains on asylum systems. Such a shift could also relieve pressure on limited public resettlement programs, by enabling private communities to support and integrate new arrivals.

For Humanitarian Organisations

Humanitarian organisations (and national governments and UNHCR) should invest more in anticipating Eritrean displacements through investing in asylum procedures, including registration and RSD, emergency accommodation, and routes-based support for Eritreans travelling to key countries of refuge, including Egypt, Sudan, and Uganda.

The perceived wealth of Eritreans must not be used as a pretext to not invest in mechanisms to support their access to relevant documentation and services.

- While Eritreans have more generally been able to rely on better transnational connections, these networks are under increasing strain. Moreover, Eritreans' perceived ability to access resources paradoxically makes them more likely targets of trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Humanitarian organisations should invest in improving service provision to displaced Eritreans and in trust-building activities like community dialogues.

- Eritreans' tendency to self-organise reflects systemic gaps in protection to date and a lack of trust in international humanitarian organisations, which arises from displaced Eritreans' experiences of extortion, corruption, and chronic under-delivery of services. This appears to have reduced the likelihood of Eritreans approaching international organisations for support.

Lobbying and advocacy from humanitarian organisations remains critical in situations of secondary displacement and mobility where the status of those on the move might appear less clear.

- This may be because of barriers to them (re)registering for asylum, or if they are mistaken for economic migrants having arrived from states like Israel and Saudi Arabia where people are unable to access refugee status. Eritreans in this situation are at an increased risk of deportation despite new and continuing protection concerns.
- Alongside routes-based approaches to collecting data with populations on the move, additional tools should be developed to provide more reliable statistics of dispersed and non-linear movements within and across countries of Eritrean displacement, to produce evidence that supports advocacy activities as well as service provision.

Efforts should be undertaken to support not just the displaced but also involuntarily immobile Eritreans.

- This includes larger families, elderly, and disabled individuals trapped in insecure camps; those without permits to for inter-state travel; and those who cannot afford to pay the fines to leave Saudi Arabia or cannot access travel documents who remain in increasingly precarious situations across the Middle East and Africa.

Efforts should be made to ensure protection-sensitive approaches to managing the labour migration of Eritreans in countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, so that immigration infractions do not result in these individuals being deported to Eritrea.

Coordination across UNHCR offices must be enhanced to ensure that refugees do not lose their protection status or legal opportunities for resettlement and onward mobility because of further displacement. This will also ensure that people are not undertaking further dangerous journeys to access much-needed identification documents.

UNHCR should exercise its protection mandate to encourage the governments in Sudan and Ethiopia to re-open and maintain all opportunities for Eritreans to be able to apply for asylum within these countries. Amidst increasing deportations and arbitrary detention of Eritreans in the region and beyond, UNHCR plays a vital role in lobbying for the reinstatement of minimum protection standards.

UNHCR should work with governments to ensure that in emergency situations they are given authority to provide displaced populations with appropriate documentation that is respected by local authorities.

UNHCR should work together with international non-government organisations to register Eritrean grassroots organisations in host countries and increase funding partnerships with them to reach populations in the most acute humanitarian need.

For donor governments, funding institutions, and other philanthropic organisations

Further invest in collaborating with grassroots refugee organisations that often have up-to-date and on-the-ground knowledge of Eritreans' experiences in displacement, which would help to adapt service delivery to the evolving needs of this population.

Strategies to support Eritreans should focus on supporting Eritreans who are outside of the country to regularise their statuses, access key services, and support and pursue legal onward pathways, on the assumption that the status quo within Eritrea will remain the same.

Annex I: Table of Eritrean respondents

No	Gender	Age	Ethnic background	Location of Interviewee	Location of previous residence	Full displacement history after leaving Eritrea	Year they left Eritrea	Current legal status
1	M	33	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa	2015	Registered
2	M	40	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Tigray - Amhara - Addis-Ababa	2018	Unregistered
3	F	58	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Shimelba - Shiraro - Adi Harush - Dabat	2015	Unregistered
4	M	32	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Sudan - Dabat	2013	Unregistered
5	F	23	Afar	Addis Ababa	Mai Aini, Tigray	Tigray - May Aini- Dabat- Afar camps	2009	Unregistered
6	M	26	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Shimelba - Sudan - Dabat	2000	Unregistered
7	M	35	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Ethiopia - Uganda	2017	Resettled Canada
8	F	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia -Uganda		Unregistered
9	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - South Sudan - Uganda		Registered
10	M	40	Saho	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia	2015	Working for a community-based organisation
11	F	30	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia	2021	Unregistered
12	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Juba, Khartoum	Sudan - South Sudan - Uganda		Registered
13	F	31	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia		Registered
14	M	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
15	F	31	Tigre	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Egypt	2021	Registered
16	M	38	Tigre	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Eritrea - Egypt	2017	Registered
17	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
18	F	23	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia - Uganda	2018	Registered
19	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Sudan - Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
20	M	49	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Engurgur - Egypt	2009	Registered asylum-seeker
21	M	24	Tigrinya	Kampala	Shire, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Uganda	2017	Registered asylum-seeker
22	M	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Juba - Uganda	2016	Registered asylum-seeker
23	M	24	Bilen	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Madani - Metemma - Addis Ababa- Uganda	2021	Registered asylum-seeker

No	Gender	Age	Ethnic background	Location of Interviewee	Location of previous residence	Full displacement history after leaving Eritrea	Year they left Eritrea	Current legal status
24	M	27	Tigrinya	Pretoria	Mekelle, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Juba -South Africa	2017	Undocumented
25	M	21	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan- Juba - Uganda	2022	With Police, not UNHCR
26	F	23	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Metemma - Addis Ababa - Uganda	2018	Registered
27	M	20	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Shire, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa	2019	Documented but inactive
28	M	29	Tigrinya	Mokopane	Humora, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Juba - South Africa	2018	Undocumented
29	F	27	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Eritrea - Uganda	Born in Sudan	Refugee status
30	F	30	Bilen	Oslo	Khartoum (not secondary displaced)	Sudan - Norway	2007	Citizenship
31	F	24	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Egypt	2022	Undocumented
32	M	67	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Eritrea - Khartoum - Egypt	1982	Refugee
33	M	37	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Egypt	2014	Refugee
34	M	23	Tigrinya	Camp (Switzerland)	Khartoum	Khartoum - Libya -Switzerland	2022	Asylum-seeker
35	M	23	Bilen	Camp (Luxembourg)	Tigray/Khartoum	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Shagarab - Khartoum - Libya - Luxembourg	2019	Asylum-seeker
36	M	27	Tigrinya	Mokopane	Khartoum	Khartoum - Juba - South Sudan - South Africa	2021	Undocumented
37	F	22	Tigrinya	Tripoli	Khartoum	Khartoum - Libya	2022	Undocumented



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

For more information visit www.mixedmigration.org

Follow us on Bluesky [@mixedmigration.org](https://bsky.app/profile/mixedmigration.org)

X [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration) LinkedIn [@mixedmigration-centre](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mixedmigration-centre)
and [subscribe to our newsletter](#).

