



ERITREANS ON THE STREETS OF TEL AVIV

Refugees from Eritrea and Sudan are bringing the world's attention to new, oppressive measures that the Israeli government is taking against them.

On Saturday 4 January, 30,000 women and men, from Eritrea, Sudan and other African countries, staged a massive demonstration on the streets of Tel Aviv. The next day, up to 15,000 protested outside the US and various European embassies, and the offices of the UN High Commission for Refugees. Tens of thousands in low-paid jobs have been on strike since Sunday. Over 100 refugees in detention are on hunger strike.

These protests are a response to the 'anti-infiltration' law rushed through the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, on 10 December. This permits the government to detain refugees and migrants without trial for up to a year. The law was forced through after the Israeli High Court overturned a previous, similar law in September. A purpose-built detention centre in the Negev desert is intended to house up to 9,000 refugees at a time. The government states that its aim is to encourage 'voluntary' return to the countries from which these refugees have fled. Israeli officials have also confirmed that a deal has been reached, whereby Israel would deport African refugees to Uganda, and provide the country with per capita payments and increased aid in return¹.

Meanwhile the Israeli government is recruiting thousands of workers from South-East Asia into low-paid work. Critics say that African refugees already in the country could be offered these jobs.

Background

Thousands of young people flee every week from the dictatorial regime in Eritrea, and pay people-smugglers large sums to bring them to relative safety. The journey from Eritrea to Israel is fraught with danger. Very many of these would-be migrants have been kidnapped by Bedouin tribesmen in Sinai, and held for ransom, or even killed for

¹ Source: ReliefWeb, 8 September 2013



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the horrific trade in human organs. Those who have managed to enter Israel have been working, some for many years, in menial jobs, which at least allow them to subsist and to send remittances to their families at home.

What makes someone take such a risk? Young people in Eritrea are conscripted for military service, in the incessant wars and threats of war perpetuated by the dictatorship; their term of service is indefinite, lasting in some cases up to twenty years. Opponents of the regime are subject to imprisonment without trial, torture and summary execution. Democratic and human rights are non-existent. People fleeing other oppressive African regimes have similar stories. According to international law, these individuals all have a strong case for acceptance as refugees, since they meet the criterion of a *well-founded fear of persecution*. Official figures show that none of the 1,800 applications for asylum by Eritreans and Sudanese has been granted; in Europe around 70% of such applications are successful.

Support within and beyond Israel

While prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu calls refugees ‘infiltrators’ and says that they ‘threaten the Jewish character of Israel,’ other prominent Israelis are appalled at the new law. The author and human rights activist David Grossman told protesters outside parliament, ‘I feel ashamed that we have reached this situation... You are not criminals: you are normal, ordinary people who are trapped in a very extreme situation.’ Grossman emphasized that ‘the idea of Israel contains the idea of refugees.’

Outside of the country, Amnesty International has stated that the indefinite detention of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants is ‘a flagrant violation of international human rights law.’

How you can help

It is vitally important for the Israeli government to experience sustained international pressure on this issue; and for the migrants themselves to know that they have the solidarity of Africans and others outside Israel. We ask you to:

- Organize demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy in your country
- Write to the Secretary General of the United Nations, the UN Commissioner for

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Human Rights, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, asking them to exert their influence and push Israel to abide by UN Conventions

- Write to your local parliamentary representative asking her/him to raise the issue in parliament
- Work with the Eritrean National Council for Democratic Change so that it becomes an effective voice for the rights of all Eritreans, in Eritrea and in the diaspora

The Eritrean National Council for Democratic Change

The ENCDC is an umbrella organisation for the Eritrean diaspora, working towards a democratic solution in Eritrea and for the rights of Eritreans in exile. The ENCDC is encouraging its members and member organisations to take action on this issue. It is also continuing to campaign by lobbying the UN, EU, AU, the Pope, international Human Rights Organisations and other NGOs.

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