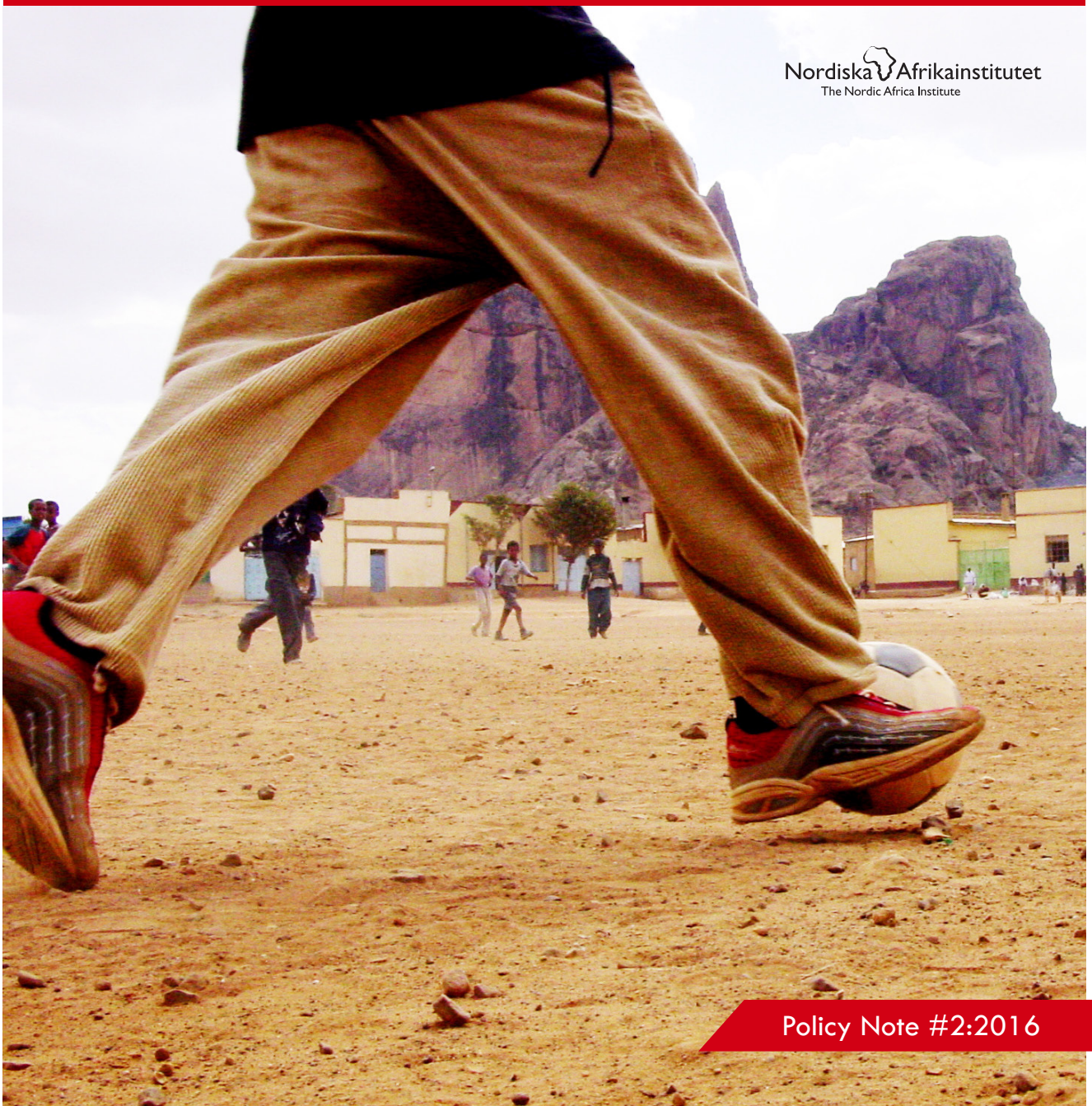


ERITREA'S REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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COVER PHOTO: Refugee camp Tzorona, Eritrea. Photo by Roberto Maldeno, Creative Commons License 2.0

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ERITREA'S REFUGEE CRISIS

AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Five thousand refugees leave Eritrea each month according to UNHCR, making it one of the world's fastest-emptying countries. In this policy note, Redie Bereketeab, researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, analyses the role and responsibility of the international community in the Eritrean migration crisis.

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In 1991, following 30 years of armed struggle, Eritrea gained its de facto independence, with de jure independence following two years later. Expectations were high that the successful liberation movement would also prove successful at post-liberation democratic state-building. But even though a referendum was held and a new constitution

drafted, democratisation stalled. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and its successor the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) were the only parties legally allowed to function. The EPLF/PFDJ government subscribed to a model of guided democracy involving popular participation, rather than a liberal multiparty system. At the same time, promising pro-



Bar in refugee camp, Eritrea. Photo by Samout3, Creative Commons License 2.0

gress was made in areas such as education, health, road reconstruction and telecommunications, and annual economic growth reached 5-6 per cent.

Effects of the Ethiopian war

In 1998, a second war broke out with Ethiopia, lasting until 2000. During its course, one-third of the country's territory was occupied by the Ethiopian army. This war proved to be a turning point: not only did it interrupt the positive developments, it plunged the emergent state into a spiralling crisis. Deprived of the necessary labour and investments, the economy fell into deep recession, with immense human and social consequences. More and more Eritreans were forced to look beyond the borders for better conditions.

The period of mandatory national service, which prior to the war was 18 months, was extended indefinitely. According to the government, this was necessary because of the constant threat of war and the need to rehabilitate the war-torn nation. To bolster postwar rehabilitation, in 2002 the government also introduced the Warsay-Yekealo development programme, in which virtually every able-bodied person is required to serve. The effects of this initiative on education, family life, earnings and meaningful private activities have been drastic. Indeed, in some cases people have been unable to pursue any of these objectives.

No war – no peace

Today there is a state of no war and no peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In Eritrea freedom of speech is suppressed, there is no independent media, human rights violations are common and national service draftees are still forced to provide involuntary labour. Moreover, the country is at odds with the international community, in particular the big Western powers, and is under UN sanctions. People are risking their lives to flee the country *en masse*. The driving factors are complex and multifaceted and include:

- No war no peace situation, constant threat of war
- Indefinite national service
- Harsh political environment
- Economic hardship
- Unemployment
- Blanket asylum provision by host communities
- Sanctions
- Youth hopelessness, looking for alternative future

After the war ended, the Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC), a body established by the UN

in accordance with the Algiers peace agreement of December 2000, established that Badime, the border town at the heart of the dispute, belongs to Eritrea. Representatives of the international community, specifically the UN, AU, EU and US, were mandated as witnesses and guarantors to ensure implementation of the ruling. However, when Ethiopia rejected it, they abdicated their responsibility, and Ethiopia continues to occupy the town.

Instability aggravates exodus

Ethiopia's rejection of the ruling, its constant threats to overthrow the Eritrean government and its concerted efforts to isolate Eritrea heightened the country's state of insecurity and stoked constant fears of war. This in turn led to tight control of citizens, intolerance of deviant views, closing of private media, etc. The divisions within the leadership in 2001 were also harshly dealt with. Everything was geared towards safeguarding the nation. Under the circumstance, the youth have chosen to leave the country in growing numbers.

The government's recourse to coercion to achieve security and to give effect to its nation-building vision further widened the gap between the liberation generation and the ensuing national service generation. For the former, sacrifice is simply part of the national destiny, and the national service generation must shoulder its share of the burden. The greater the threats, the greater the sacrifices will be. In response to the threats, basic human, political and civil rights have been further curtailed. The failure of the international community to address the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict has severely affected Eritrea. Moreover, sanctions have also been imposed on Eritrea, which many perceive as adding insult to the injury of not standing behind the boundary arbitration. Severance of relations with the international community has exacerbated the political, economic, social, diplomatic and security instability, and intensified the mass exodus. The international community has been remarkably complacent about the refugee crisis. Indeed, if the Eritrean government is violating the individual rights of Eritreans, the international community has violated their collective rights.

Stemming the flow

In December 2015, the EU decided to re-engage with the Eritrean government and provide 200 million euro in development aid for a period of five years. The EU is interested in stemming the flow of Eritrean refugees. However, this can only be achieved by comprehensively



Refugee camp in Tzorona, a war-torn town on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border. Photos by Roberto Maldeno.

addressing the complex drivers, including the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict.

The EU is in a unique position to exert pressure on Ethiopia to implement the Algiers agreement, which imposed on both parties a permanent end to hostilities and a commitment to refrain from the threat or use of force.

The Eritrean government also needs to make profound policy changes. Recent positive developments in education, health, child and maternal mortality reported by UNDP should be maintained. Success in these areas could promote economic development, which in turn would help stem the flow of refugees to Europe. The international community and Eritrean government will need to work together in many areas if migration is to be stemmed.

Unjustified sanctions

UN resolutions from 2009 and 2011 imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its alleged support to the Al-Shabaab terrorist organisation and for its failure to resolve the dispute with neighbouring Djibouti. The accusations were later expanded to include Eritrea's support for Ethiopian opposition groups. These resolutions have elicited moral outrage among many Eritreans, chiefly for two reasons. One is what they see as UN double standards: if sanctions are to be imposed for supporting factions in the Somali conflict, they should apply to all the countries doing so. Second, they deny that there is any credible, objective and valid evidence of Eritrean support for Al-Shabaab. Certainly, so far no objective academic research has verified such support.

The evidence of support for Al-Shabaab is based on dubious methodology. First, the sources of information are shrouded in secrecy, so there is no reasonable

way of establishing their reliability. Secondly, several accusations have emanated from parties with axes to grind with the Eritrean government. Consequently, it has never been proven beyond doubt that has Eritrea armed or trained Al-Shabaab. Later, the UN's own Somali-Eritrea Monitoring Group found no proof of such support, yet the sanctions continue.

Attempts to isolate Eritrea

The Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict is at the epicentre of the crisis, but international and particularly US geostrategic interests have dictated that Ethiopia be appeased, including as regards the EEBC decision. Ethiopia is an important ally in the global War on Terror. Although the Algiers agreement was binding, the US administration actively sought to reopen it for negotiation in order to address Ethiopia's concerns. According to John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, Jandayi Frazer, assistant secretary of state under George W. Bush instructed him to reopen the 2002 EEBC decision. Frazer went to the extent of suggesting that, in contravention of the Algiers agreement, the residents of Badime should hold a referendum to decide the future of the village. When these attempts failed, US officials resorted to blackmail by accusing Eritrea of supporting terrorism and of jeopardising international security and stability. Frazer even threatened to place Eritrea on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism and tried to push for regime change there.

Frazer's successor, Susan Rice, appointed by the Obama administration, continued the attempts to isolate Eritrea, and eventually succeeded in persuading the Security Council to impose sanctions on Eritrea. According to US Ambassador Herman Cohen, 14 Security Council members wanted to lift the sanctions

in 2014, but the US vetoed the move. Furthermore, Ambassador Cohen believes the difficulties in current relations between the US and Eritrea are of a personal nature, involving President Isaias Afwerki and Ambassador Rice.

Accusations as geo-political tool

Sanctions failed to achieve the intended political outcomes. Perhaps it is this failure that is behind the latest drive to produce material evidence of human rights violations in Eritrea. The Special Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI) was established by the UN in June 2014 to investigate such violations. In its report to the UN Human Rights Commission, it claimed the Eritrean government might have committed human rights violations amounting to crimes against humanity. The mandate of COI was subsequently extended for another year.

COI's research methodology is deficient. It depends on information from disgruntled government opponents, asylum seekers and neighbouring countries with serious disagreements with Eritrea. All informants are anonymous, making it impossible to verify their information. Accusations of this kind should be open and transparent. The known witnesses should provide sworn testimony in a court of law. The methodological shortcomings suggest that the three man commission, and/or its informants, may be politically motivated. This situation by no means exonerates the Eritrean government of human rights violations in Eritrea. However, Western diplomats there reject the charges and believe that Eritrea is no worse than many of its neighbours. Moreover, it must be said that the international community is as responsible as the Eritrean government for violations of human rights.

This raises the issue of how big powers use accusations of human rights violations as a political instrument to serve their geostrategic interests. They thereby risk eroding the credibility and integrity of human rights organisations, and of the UN itself. Ultimately also the concerted efforts to isolate and punish Eritrea do not serve to improve the human rights situation, particularly as they are not based on substantiated evidence.

Collective versus neo-liberal rights

Following the end of the Cold War, neoliberalism became the dominant discourse, the yardstick by which societies were measured. Neoliberal ideology, with its emphasis on individual rights and its Western-centred

straightjacket values, was inevitably on a collision course with the values and norms of developing societies.

Eritreans have sacrificed their individual rights in order to preserve their collective national rights, which the liberation struggle was fought to ensure. They realised that they could only achieve their collective rights if they voluntarily suspended their individual rights, at least temporarily. Collectivity became the foundation of their values and norms and has been expressed in their daily life and their defence against external forces, especially during the second war with Ethiopia. This historical foundation of the Eritrean nation, still strongly cherished by the liberation struggle generation, is, of course, increasingly at odds with the values and aspirations of the post-liberation generation. This generation takes a more individualistic view of rights, and this difference in perception is decisively reflected in the current refugee crisis.

Double benchmark

As the Western neoliberal human rights drive against the Eritrean government gained momentum, it raised eyebrows among many Eritreans. How could a body that ignored, even denied, people's collective rights, at the same time stand up for individual rights? Isn't collective security a basic human right? If collective national rights – sovereignty, territorial integrity, national boundaries – were ignored, individual rights would be hollow shells. This double benchmark created a moral dilemma even for those who oppose the Eritrean government.

Western liberal critics simply ignore the no war-no peace situation as underpinning the overall political situation in Eritrea, and particularly the mass flight. They claim this dilemma is used by the Eritrean government as a pretext for grave human right abuses. Ethiopia's frequent military actions against Eritrea, for example in Dankalia in 2012 or near Badime the following year; its concerted diplomatic campaigns to isolate Eritrea; or its repeated threats to overthrow the Eritrean government are glossed over by liberal critics.

Neoliberal scholars and human rights activists adopt sensational images such as 'the North Korea of Africa' or 'garrison state' in promoting their narratives. Many diplomats based in Eritrea describe this imagery as highly exaggerated. Such neoliberal activists, scholars and media outlets, which cite one another, without really verifying and validating their sources, produce tainted knowledge that will in no way serve to solve the problem. Indeed, neoliberal nostrums for peace-buil-

ding, state-building and regime-change may well prove hazardous, because they ignore social realities and concerns on the ground.

Lessons to be drawn

Neoliberal humanitarian interventions for state-building, peace-building and regime-change have wrought havoc in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia. Interventions are frequently preceded by the now familiar pattern of commission of inquiry reports, followed by sanctions and military intervention. They are also accompanied by systematic information, or rather disinformation, campaigns. A common element in the neoliberal agenda is the creation of a local partner in the target society willing to legitimise intervention and regime-change attempts. The invocation of R2P, the responsibility to protect, by those who are intervening is another familiar device. Willing local partners are then brought in from outside and placed in power with the support of intervening forces, with

no regard for the opinion of the general population. We have seen this in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Most of these are fragile societies, already suffering multiple problems. It is now clear that neoliberal intervention produces failed and even more fragile states, with devastating human, economic, political and security consequences for common people.

The recent drive to isolate and punish Eritrea through sanctions and accusations of crimes against humanity should be seen in this light. So far, this drive has succeeded in mobilising a section of the diaspora, which has become highly polarised and destabilised. If the drive persists, it could also polarise and destabilise the society inside the country, which under circumstance of external intervention, could explode, with unimaginable consequences. In a region already beset with festering conflicts, wars, instability, poverty, extremism, droughts and migration, would adding one more explosive element to the mix be in the interests of the international community?

Recommendations | to policy-makers

The Eritrean Government should:

- Implement constitution
- Reform the political system
- Time-limit the mandatory national service
- Reform the salary system, make life affordable
- Respect basic human, civil and political rights
- Restructure the economy, allow economic plurality.

The International Community should:

- Address the International Court of Arbitration verdict regarding the boundaries
- Stop using unsubstantiated, non-verifiable, dubious data gathering methods (Somali-Eritrea Monitoring Group, Human Rights Commission of Inquiry)
- Stop using sanctions as a political instrument
- Prevent the geostrategic interests of big powers from dictating the destiny of small nations
- Build trust with the Eritrean government, engage and encourage, and stop isolating and demonising.
- Treat with balance and objectivity the states in the region, including Eritrea.

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Billboard warning of mines around the Tsorona refugee camp, Eritrea.



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About the Author



NAI POLICY NOTES is a series of short briefs on policy issues relevant to Africa today, intended for policy and decision makers in aid agencies, ministries of foreign affairs, development organisations, NGOs and the media. They aim to inform public debate and to generate input into the sphere of policymaking.

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