

UNHCR: Eritreans by far largest refugee group in Israel

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10/03/2010 03:39

90% of Eritrean asylum-seekers are men, many of whom fled indefinite compulsory military duty. Eritreans constitute by far the largest population of asylum-seekers in Israel, according to the United Nations high commissioner for refugees.

Sharon Harel, assistant protection officer for the UNHCR in Tel Aviv, said Monday there were around 8,500 Eritrean refugees in the country, as opposed to some 5,000 to 6,000 from Sudan.

Harel said large numbers of Eritreans entering Israel had first been noticed in 2007, when hundreds arrived between January and April of that year. Before that, there were fewer than a few hundred.

Harel said it was unclear why they had begun arriving at that time, but surmised that it could be linked to waves of Sudanese refugees fleeing to Israel at the same time, and the subsequent opening of new smuggling routes and human trafficking in the area.

According to Harel, over 90 percent of Eritreans here are men, mainly between the ages of 22 and 40, as well as many unaccompanied male minors. She said many of these were believed to have fled compulsory military conscription in Eritrea, which can be extended indefinitely by the government. The government often deals harshly with deserters.

The refugees face a harrowing journey on their way to Israel. In addition to physical ailments, punishing heat and exhaustion, they are often subject to physical and sexual abuse from smugglers, who demand payment of between \$2,000 and \$2,500 each to take the refugees from Sudan to Cairo and then on to Israel. Harel said the smugglers would often hold them for ransom in Sinai, subjecting them to abuse until they received further money from their families.

Harel said one of the main battles her organization faced was making sure refugees were listed as asylum-seekers and not foreign laborers infiltrating the country for work. She added that often, when they arrived in Israel, refugees told soldiers they were looking for work, either out of fear or an inability to express themselves.

Harel stressed the importance of ensuring that refugees are given the legal right to work, as well as access to health care – the lack of which, she said, could cause a public health issue in Israel.

In addition, she said, the state must ensure “they are given protection and are not returned to the country they came from.”

Eritrea, a small country in the Horn of Africa that is home to just over five-and-a-half million people, is largely unknown to Westerners. In addition, its humanitarian and political challenges have long been overshadowed by those in neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia.

An Amnesty International report for 2009 paints a grim picture of Eritrea, saying that in addition to staggering poverty and undernourishment that affects half the population, the country's government is known for "the jailing of thousands of political prisoners and army dissenters, and the regular use of torture against prisoners." The country suffers from "a government prohibition on independent journalism, opposition parties, unregistered religious organizations, and virtually all civil society activity."

In addition, Eritrea fought a 30-year war of independence against Ethiopia between 1961 and 1991 that left hundreds of thousands dead on both sides and wrecked infrastructure in both countries. Between 1998 and 2001, the two countries fought an additional war that killed some 70,000 in both countries.

The plight of Eritrean refugees in Israel is dealt with on a daily basis by British-Israeli Nic Schlagman, who manages the two shelters operated by the African Refugee Development Center in Tel Aviv.

According to Schlagman, the ARDC provides tutoring in English and Hebrew, legal assistance with visa applications and asylum-seekers' rights, counseling and shelter for some 44 Eritreans, mainly single mothers, children and pregnant women.

He explained that Eritreans come from "a very totalitarian regime with a very overbearing government, which makes them very suspicious of authority figures and communal leaders." He added that such conditions were among the reasons they had the highest approval rating for asylum-seekers in the world.

Like Harel, Schlagman said the refugees and the relief agency workers "aren't asking for much. We want them to have the right to work and not be returned to Eritrea, and they'll look after themselves."

Schlagman was busy Monday preparing for the center's third annual Pessah Seder for refugees and their families in South Tel Aviv's Shapira Park. The Seder, he said, would incorporate the refugees' stories into that of the ancient Hebrews who fled slavery in Egypt.

Schlagman denied that there was widespread tension between the refugees and their Jewish neighbors in Tel Aviv, saying, "It's something I've not seen."

He added that while the government was slow to respond to the rise in asylum-seekers, the issue of being refugees in a strange land should raise sympathy among all Jews:

“This issue speaks to Israelis, and they get it. It speaks to core parts of our identity as Jews.”