

East Sudan, a first step for Eritrea's Europe-bound migrants

By Guillaume Lavallee (AFP) – 19 hours ago

SHEGERAB, Sudan — Fleeing a military regime, thousands of young Eritreans stream into neighbouring east Sudan, the first stage of their long migration to Europe, Israel -- or even Khartoum.

For four decades refugees from Eritrea have flowed into eastern Sudan, a dirt-poor region enriched only by golden, sun-beaten plains that unfurl until they hit the rocky, majestic peaks of the Taka mountains.

In the past few years a new wave of refugees has been arriving here, the "jediddine" or newcomers in Arabic. They are young, educated Eritreans as well as Ethiopians and Somalis who make Sudan their launching pad toward to a new life.

"I was a student, but the government wanted to force me into the army, which I did not want to do. I wanted to study," said Mukhtar, his bright eyes shining through stylish glasses.

Eritrean men and women are forced to serve a minimum 18 months of military service, after which they can be conscripted indefinitely -- a draconian measure that has pushed many young to flee.

"I had fake ID papers. I took a bus from (capital) Asmara to the border, then I walked," said Mukhtar, speaking from the Shegerab refugee camp, a 'little Eritrea' that sits at the end of an unpaved road in eastern Sudan.

Between 400 and 500 Eritreans arrive every week at the odd enclave with its diner and its "CinemaRoma" -- a large tent with plastic tables and chairs where music videos blare through a small television screen.

There are two groups of refugees in east Sudan, said Mohamed Dualeh, head of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) in Kassala, in east Sudan.

The first lot, who number around 66,000, came about 30 to 40 years ago and most are Muslim who speak Arabic and have family ties to local tribes.

The second group "is completely different. They come from Asmara and the highlands (of Eritrea). They are less integrated because they don't speak Arabic and they are Christians," he said.

Around 19,000 of those registered with the UNHCR in 2008. Some 23,000 registered last year and today there are only 7,000 in the camps.

"The ones we see are not the total number", they are only "the tip of the iceberg", said Dualeh.

Rather than risk the dangers of the Red Sea or cross the border into neighbouring Ethiopia, these young migrants traverse into eastern Sudan in the hope of reaching Europe, Israel or simply Khartoum.

"The east is becoming the transitory route to Europe. They go through Egypt or through Libya," Dualeh said.

Refugees pay smugglers 650 Sudanese pounds (270 dollars) to get to Khartoum, or 3,000 Sudanese pounds (1,250 dollars) for Israel, a Sudanese official said.

In the capital Khartoum, thousands of Eritreans are packed into the popular neighbourhoods of Deim, Gerif and Sahafa.

They do odd jobs and many of the young women make a living cleaning houses.

Bilal, an Eritrean in his 30s, went back to Khartoum after failing to make it past Libya, where several others attempted the journey to Malta or Italy on small rafts.

"I had paid 1,000 dollars to get into Libya. In Tripoli, there were many Somalians, Eritreans and Ethiopians who did odd jobs, but life there was difficult," said the small mustachioed man.

"After five months in Tripoli, I had no more money and I went back to Khartoum," he said.

While some Eritreans seek a better life in Israel or Europe, others remain in the camps in the hope of obtaining the coveted refugee status first.

"I hope to be taken in by Canada," said Abdelaziz, two months after arriving in Shegerab.