

Eritrean teenagers commit suicide in UK while awaiting permission to stay

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Three refugee Eritrean teenagers have killed themselves in the last six months while waiting for permission to stay in the UK.

Alexander Tekle and Filmon Yemane were both 18 and a third individual identified as N was 19 when they each took their own lives. A fourth Eritrean, whose name and age have not been revealed but who is known to have been young, also killed himself late last year.

Their deaths are further proof of the Home Office's brutal attitude towards vulnerable people seeking safe homes in which to study and work. They also demonstrate how deeply the UK is implicated in the systematic persecution and mistreatment of migrants organised across the European Union (EU).

Publicly the British government has thus far stood aside from the noxious discussions between the European powers over the enforcing of draconian measures against migrants. But as the recent Windrush scandal and the employment of anti-immigrant propaganda by both the Remain and Leave camps in the 2016 Brexit referendum show, this has nothing to do with a more tolerant sentiment on the part of Britain's rulers. They already benefit greatly from the existing networks of camps, border guards and barbed wire across the continent enforced by the EU and welcome the further strengthening of Fortress Europe.

The suicides of these young men, who struggled through the whole barbaric system, tragically demonstrate the cruelties on which such "border security" rests.

Eritrea's refugees are fleeing crippling poverty, indefinite national service and numerous human rights violations under a totalitarian one-party right-wing dictatorship.

This is the outcome of imperialist power struggles in the Horn of Africa and was substantially worsened by

US and United Nations sanctions imposed on the country for several years beginning in 2008.

By mid-2014, there were nearly 360,000 Eritreans registered as refugees worldwide by the UN, out of a population of just 6.3 million. Tekle, Yemane and N were part of this forced migration.

Each of these children travelled thousands of miles across Africa and Europe without their parents or any adult carers. According to a volunteer who worked with Tekle in France, he endured particularly traumatic events whilst in Libya, waiting for a crossing to Europe.

Since the "regime-change" NATO war in Libya in 2011, a key aspect of the EU's migrant policy—codified in the February 2017 Malta Declaration—has been the funding of Libyan coast and border guards and a network of detention centres to halt the flow of refugees into Europe.

Run, for the most part, by local criminal militias, beatings, starvation, trafficking, sexual assault, torture and murder are endemic in the Libyan detention centres. Eritrea was Africa's largest contributing nation of active asylum seekers in Libya as of last year.

Stories from other Eritrean migrants give a sense of what Tekle, and others, experienced.

The UN Refugee Agency reported the story of a young man, Asmorom, earlier this year. Having been deported from temporary asylum in Israel to Rwanda and then travelling to Uganda and Sudan, he was kidnapped crossing the Sahara Desert into Libya. His captors demanded \$1,800 for transport to Tripoli, and then an additional \$5,500 when he arrived. When Asmorom could not pay, he was thrown in a warehouse room with 1,500 other refugees. Two of his friends died in captivity due to the appalling sanitary conditions and lack of food. Asmorom was finally able to make a

crossing to Italy on a small wooden boat containing 800 people, who were rescued by an NGO ship.

Not all are so “lucky.” *Al Jazeera* carried out secret interviews with two young Eritrean men, aged 18 and 24, who had been held in captivity, sold and resold, extorted and abused during their time in Libya and remain trapped there. They describe being passed from captor to captor, exploited as cash cows and tortured. They were beaten with sticks, waterboarded and electrocuted, while their families listened in on a phone to pressure them to send money for their release.

Tekle himself made it across Europe to Calais, France, where Filmon Yemane and N are also known to have spent time. There 15-year-old Tekle lived in a tent for over a year and was subject to abuse.

At one point holding 4,000 or so refugees, the so-called “Jungle” camp in northern France was notorious for its squalid and unsafe conditions, perpetuated by the violence and abuse of the French state. Earlier this year, riot police moved in and burned the camp to the ground, leaving some 800 migrants scattered across the area in just the same, if not worse, conditions.

Successive British governments have relied on the French authorities to keep migrants away from Britain, at whatever cost.

In 2015, David Cameron’s Conservative government spent at least £19 million on stepping up security on the French side of the Channel Tunnel. Labour played its part by calling for swifter assessment and deportation of the migrants seeking passage to the UK. Both parties support making the journey across the Channel as difficult as possible.

Tekle, Yemane and N were some of the few able to make the dangerous crossing, smuggled in lorries and trains. However, arrival in Britain did not end their nightmare.

Minors who arrive in the UK are given temporary leave to remain, but those who are not granted refugee status are required to make preparations to leave the country once they reach 17 and a half years of age. At that age, many are left in limbo, with no official status, not allowed to work or study and at risk of suddenly being sent to a detention centre and deported. There is next to no communication from the Home Office about the status of migrants’ applications.

This uncertainty has its own serious effects on migrants’ mental health—especially the young. Having

risked their lives and often spent much of their families’ limited resources to make the journey, they then have the threat of being returned with nothing—and a fate perhaps of imprisonment or worse—hung over their heads.

A mutual friend told the *Guardian* how Tekle “was stressing about Home Office things—we all were. I tried to tell him not to worry too much, but he was thinking about it all the time. He was saying: once you have your papers, you can start your life. ...” Meanwhile, N “was worried about Home Office and being sent back to his country”.

Ultimately, the tragedy of their young lives became too much for the three teenagers to bear. Psychiatric support, in fact any support at all, is negligible to non-existent for those in their position.

Inquests into the deaths have and will produce no fundamental change. Refugees, one of the most vulnerable sections of the global working class, are being forced into pariah status by governments across the world, and their conditions are worsening.

Only this week, as Europe’s governments argued over who, if any, would admit starving migrants stranded in the Mediterranean, the demand of Italy’s right-wing government for the building of more concentration camps in Libya looks set to receive EU endorsement.



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