

IDEAS

'If the Egyptian government or its army wanted to end Sinai trafficking, they could easily seal their border and this nightmare would be over in 24 hours.'



ASHRAF SHAZLY / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

A young Eritrean girl carries plastic jugs at the Shegerab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. Thousands of Eritreans seeking to flee oppression at home have been captured by slave gangs operating in poorly patrolled border areas.

The border regions of Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea are home to a flourishing market of tens of thousands of kidnapped, terrorized human beings

The slaves of Sinai

GEOFFREY CLARFIELD

On Monday, April 14, Jews around the world will invite their family and friends to join them for the feast of Passover, a holiday that celebrates the Biblical story of the Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt under Pharaoh, and who fled from their cruel Egyptian masters across the Sinai desert to gain their freedom in the land of Israel. As celebrants drink wine and eat the unleavened bread that was once prepared in the desert, they sing an ancient song, "We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, but now we are free."

As a young anthropologist, I was so enamored by the story of Passover that I spent a year among the nomadic Bedouin Arabs of the Sinai Peninsula to get a taste of that ancient wandering way of life that must have been temporarily adopted by the Children of Israel during their sojourn in that "terrible wilderness" on their way to freedom in the Promised Land. One day, to my shock and surprise, I came across a settlement of Africans who told me that they were the descendants of the slaves that the Bedouin used to keep until the British outlawed slavery in the Sinai after the First World War. I got to know them rather well (as one of them was a fine musician). When I asked an elder what slavery was like, he told me, "Horrible. You worked all day, every day and you had no freedom."

These former slaves were the northernmost expression of a slave trade that was as old as the Islamic conquest of Egypt and the land of Israel in the 7th century AD, and which reached its zenith during the 19th century. When European travellers and adventurers began to explore Ethiopia, the Sudan and Egypt during the 19th century, they described an active Nile valley and Red Sea slave trade dominated by Sudanese and Egyptian Muslim

traders, facilitated by Bedouin tribes who still range from the borders of Ethiopia to the Mediterranean Sea. In the traders' eyes, the ideal slaves were Christian and Pagan Ethiopians who were snatched from their homes in what is now Ethiopia and highland Eritrea.

These slave traders were not 19th century utilitarians. The Red Sea slave trade was characterized by extreme cruelty and deprivation that included, castration, rape, torture, murder and abandonment of the weak in the wilderness. By the 1830s, 10,000 to 12,000 of these slaves were traded annually up the Nile and Red Sea coast through the Sudan into Egypt. Although the British eventually made slavery illegal in Egypt and the Sudan during their occupation of these two countries, as late as the 1920s, Sudanese religious and political leaders were petitioning the British to allow them to keep their slaves. Clearly, the practice of slavery in this part of the world had not disappeared.

During the last few years, a new version of this slave trade has re-emerged in the area. The persecutors and the victims are almost the same, but the style of the trade has changed. In some ways it has become even more brutal than its 19th century forerunner. Researchers for the UN, the U.S. government and various NGOs who study this tragedy call it "Sinai trafficking," a euphemism describing a revived Red Sea slave trade.

Between 2009-2013, it is estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 people were victims of Sinai trafficking and that they and their relatives overseas have paid ransoms to their Sinai Bedouin captors of at least \$622-million. Of those who were kidnapped, anywhere from 25-50% of those captured die in captivity, usually from torture. The majority of the victims are Eritreans and almost all of them are Christians.

In 1993, after many decades of a heroically disciplined resistance struggle

that was the envy of all Africans, a newly liberated Eritrea voted to secede from Ethiopia and finally became an independent state, recognized by countries around the world. After a short democratic honeymoon and a pointless border war with Ethiopia, instead of developing their war-torn society, Eritrea's new leaders have turned the country into a totalitarian nightmare. The constitution has never been implemented, the government has put the head of the Eritrean Orthodox church under house arrest and it has drafted all teenagers into the army for indefinite service. The state then forces them to labour without pay on state farms, like bonded medieval serfs. In today's Eritrea, arbitrary arrest is common, and thousands languish in prison

know that there are corrupt members of the Eritrean Border Surveillance Unit who have close ties with businessmen on the Sudanese side of the border. Desperate Eritreans often pay these middlemen up to \$3,000 to be smuggled across the border to refugee camps such as Shagarab in the Sudan, with the help of Rashaida Bedouin traffickers who live on both sides of the border. If the refugees are lucky, they languish in camps like Shagarab, where the UN can almost protect them (many are kidnapped by traffickers from within the camp itself).

If they are unlucky, as so many are, they are directly and forcibly transferred to warehouses under armed guard by Rashaida Bedouin tribesmen. They are then smuggled across the Egyptian border with as-

relatives and arrange for ransoms of up to \$50,000 per person which will then be sent to middle men in Egypt, or until recently, extorted from the many thousands of traumatized Eritrean refugees who the Bedouin already tortured and smuggled into Israel, before the Israelis finally tightened their border security with Egypt. In the meantime they wait.

But while they wait, their Sinai Bedouin captors torture them, regularly. Captives are beaten with whips and sticks, often four to five times a day. Men, women and children are regularly beaten with iron bars and hammers, often breaking limbs. Pregnant women are kicked and jumped upon, people are hung upside down for days, electrocuted and burnt, held in chains and assaulted sexually. Children are raped in front of their parents and women in front of their husbands. Young men are also raped. They are given little food and water and suffer from disease. Captives are specifically tortured when they are on the phone with overseas relatives, so that their screams will motivate them to send money to their Bedouin captors

without legal representation. Citizens do not have an automatic right to a passport and will be shot on sight if they try and cross the border to the Sudan or Ethiopia.

And so, there has arisen a black market that offers to smuggle Eritreans to the Sudan where they can find temporary refuge in UN-run refugee camps. This is where the trouble begins, as the demand to escape Eritrea is huge. The UN estimates that 5,000 people try to leave every month. In revenge, the Eritrean government has been illegally taxing its émigrés in Europe and the West 2% of their annual incomes. In 2013 a high level Eritrean minister fled the country. The government then arrested his 85-year father and 15-year-old daughter in retaliation.

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Those captives who survive are often held for up to 18 months before they are ransomed and dropped off in Cairo. Having turned a complete blind eye to what their own citizens did to them in Sinai, the Egyptian authorities then arrest them and arrange for their eventual deportation. On one occasion a group of Eritrean captives overpowered their captors, escaped and reported their persecutor's whereabouts to the Egyptian police in the Sinai. The police jailed the escapees and allowed the torturers to go free.

The one Egyptian journalist who reported from the Sinai, Ahmad Abu Draa, was arrested by the government and put in solitary confinement for writing about the slave trade. The Egyptian government has done nothing to stop this new Bedouin slave trade, and deport most of those refugees who make it to Cairo to Ethiopia, which is marginally better than Eritrea, where they can be shot or imprisoned for having left "illegally."

Many of those who make it to Egypt try to get smuggled to Libya in the hope that they can enter Europe by sea. In Libya they are often captured, put in prison and sometimes tortured. As one survivor pointed out, "There is much to be afraid of given our skin colour and religion ... over 400 Eritreans are here, the women held in a separate location. The Muslims of other countries are taken care of, but we Eritreans do not get such an option."

The Egypt and Sudan are leading members of the Arab League. If the Egyptian government or its military wanted to end Sinai trafficking tomorrow, they could easily seal their border with Sudan and this slave trade would be over in 24 hours. But they are far too busy weaving conspiracy theories about how Israel and the West are responsible for the recent social, political and economic implosion of their own failed state. The UN and the European Union also seem remarkably uninterested in this major human rights disaster unfolding in the southern Mediterranean.

Highland Eritreans are the bearers of an ancient, sophisticated cultural tradition. As they trace their descent from the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, they deserve a far better fate than that which now awaits so many of them in the Sinai desert. The Egyptian and Sudanese governments clearly take their cue from Pharaoh.

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