



ARTISTS IN MOTION

Illustrations of perilous journeys

Art for change by Eritrean refugees

Artists in exile take you on a journey of displacement



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Eastern Africa
accompany • serve • advocate



Refugees in Mai Aini refugee camp view paintings at an exhibition

Creating Conversations



Between two mountain ranges in northern Ethiopia, dozens of young Eritrean refugees are splattered in paint. They spend their days expressing their longing for lost loved ones, traumatic memories of persecution and stories of family and friends who have taken perilous journeys across deserts and seas in symbolic artwork.

Mebrahtu, their 45-year-old teacher, provokes them to create art that inspires social change.

“Painting keeps history alive, transmits information from one generation to another, and expresses ideas and feelings. These paintings raise awareness and can prevent others from tragedy. There is nothing better than creating conversation,” he said.

At home in Eritrea, many of the painters fled grave human rights abuses, ranging from torture to forced military conscription. Upon fleeing to Ethiopia they have been given one option: settle in camps for an indefinite amount of time. They are provided with basic education, healthcare and housing, but opportunities beyond camp life are slim to none.

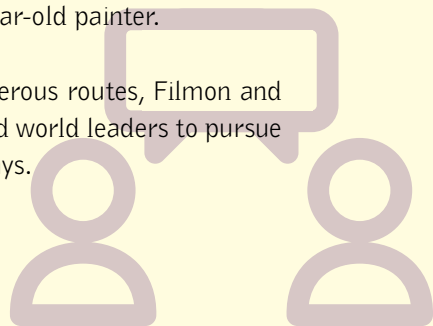
With restrictions on employment and limited higher education opportunities, many feel they have a bleak future ahead of them and decide to take the most precarious migration route in the world. They traverse the Sahara or Sinai deserts and the Mediterranean Sea to reach European or Middle Eastern countries. Other Eritreans bypass the Ethiopian camps altogether, moving north through Sudan immediately after escape.

They all hope the slight chance for a new life will validate the inevitable risks of torture, trafficking and death along the way. For those who reach their destination, the future they hoped for is far from reality. Restrictive policies across Europe exclude many refugees from contributing their skills to society.

Those left behind in Ethiopia’s camps spend their time chatting with loved ones who made it on social media or mourning the lives of those who did not. These painters illustrate their stories on behalf of the people they cherish with the hope that their art will lead to concrete change.

“Many people have learned from my paintings. Some cry when they see them and understand the difficulties that come on the journey. These can save them by creating an understanding that the risk is not worth it,” said Filmon, a 16-year-old painter.

In addition to preventing their fellow refugees from taking dangerous routes, Filmon and the other artists hope their work will also inspire policymakers and world leaders to pursue policies that allow refugees to live and move in more dignified ways.





Love

As human beings, we are at the mercy of nature, at the mercy of governments, at the mercy of leaders, at the mercy of war. We are at the mercy of forces beyond our control. These forces have caused an unprecedented 65 million people to flee their homes - taking trucks, rafts, footpaths and trains; taking children, blankets, clothing and, most often, taking nothing except the hope that they and those they love will be welcomed. Eighty six percent of these forced migrants are living in the Global South, seeking refuge, security and opportunities to grow. 700,000 have settled in Ethiopia, the largest refugee hosting country in Africa.



Mother's Love

The love a mother has for her children is everything for them. She is there when he cries and when her child needs her. Mothers can never resist their children's needs. All mothers can love their kids during peaceful times, but it becomes more difficult in times of conflict. This is a mother remembering a time of peace. She feeds her child to keep her safe as a refugee. If there were peace at home we could be happy with our parents, but we can't go home until there is freedom in Eritrea. We all wait for that day.

- Mebrahtu, 45, art teacher



Love and Pain

This world we all live in has two elements which every person feels: love and pain. We don't observe these things, we feel them. Sometimes we search for satisfaction in the wrong places, though. These birds are looking for love when it is right in front of them. Humans do this too. They look too far for love when it is right in front of them. Anyone who misses their opportunity to love others misses out on the joy of life.

- Mefin, 24



Painful Separation

Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1991 and has since become one of the world's harshest dictatorships, with scant respect for the human rights of its citizens. Over the last 25 years, the Eritrean government has forcibly conscribed upwards of 400,000 Eritreans into the military for an indefinite amount of time. In 2015, the United Nations cited "torture, extrajudicial executions, disappearances, forced labour and sexual violence" in Eritrea "on a scope and scale seldom witnessed anywhere else in the world."



Unfinished Mourning

This painting represents the emotions of the Eritrean people. Since independence, Eritreans have not had any peace or security. They often die in the Sahara or in the sea. The mourning left over from the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia continues. This flag drapes over the face of Eritrea, with her tears flowing since the war. She is crying away her freedom, even though she has independence. People are dying and suffering; separated from those they love. This woman represents our country and the mourning of its entire people.

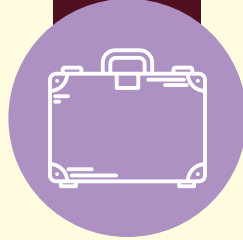
- **Filmon, 17**



Leaving Life Behind

Deciding to flee your home is the most difficult decision a person can make. These people are sneaking across the border in total silence so the military patrolling the border will not find and kill them. When they finally cross, they know they have left their lives and the rest of their families behind. They will worry about these people for the rest of their lives, even after they are safe.

- Abel, 19



Passages

Eritreans often decide to cross the border in total secrecy, aware that those who know their whereabouts may be killed or tortured. Thousands of parents send their children alone to preemptively save them from a life of forced military conscription or government-induced enslavement. Only those who avoid military personnel and their 'shoot to kill' policy at the border make it to safety in Ethiopia.



We Migrate

We migrate because of war, insecurity, and natural disasters. We escape our homes where peace and human rights do not exist. We carry all our belongings in just a few bags to find another place, another life. We have no choice but to move until our rights are restored. We are always moving.

- Mohammed, 26



Crossing Borders

When crossing the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, many of our people died. Here a mother has been left behind in Eritrea with three sons after one of them drowned in the river at the border. The rest of them made it across. They are very sick, but at least they are alive and will eventually reach a camp where they will be safe. Other people who I know did not make it this far – they were eaten by wild animals or killed by the military. This is still happening today.

- Mebrahtu, 45, art teacher



Waiting in Limbo

Each day, 150 refugees arrive to one of the four northern Ethiopian camps. They are provided with crucial services – healthcare, basic education, food and housing. However, opportunities for dignified, durable solutions – resettlement, return home or integration within Ethiopia – are impossible for most. Each week, hundreds of other refugees leave the camps to travel north to try their luck at a better life abroad.



Expectations

This teenager is waiting for the life he expects. He sits in a jerry that children use to collect water or play games in the camp, but he is no longer a boy, he's too big for the jerry can. He has become too old while waiting for a new life, for a new solution. Refugees are always waiting – waiting for rations, waiting for help from agencies, waiting for documents, waiting for resettlement. He is a refugee with nothing behind him. All he has is what is in front of him.

- Mebrahtu, 45, art teacher



Fruitless Movement

This shows the entire journey of a refugee trying to reach Europe. Refugees leave the UN camps in Ethiopia feeling frustrated that they have no long-term solution and decide to cross the desert to reach Europe on their own.

When they cross the desert they find many enemies: smugglers, who are represented with the mobile phone because they force them to call their relatives to send ransom money, as well as fundamentalists, who are represented by the snake because they murder refugees.

If they make it to the sea, they must try to reach Europe where they believe they can make money to help their family in Eritrea, but many die in the sea and are eaten by sea creatures.

The bird represents their vision but the leaf the bird carries is fruitless, just like their dreams, because even when they reach Europe they cannot work and are not accepted.

- Mebrahtu, 45, art teacher



Dangers across the desert

When refugees put their trust in the hands of smugglers they lose control over their lives. Some pay high sums upfront for the costly journey. Others, especially unaccompanied children, leave paying nothing only to be tortured and exploited for ransom in the desert by smugglers, militia groups or state security forces. Refugees have reported that those who cannot pay disappear, falling victim to indefinite detention or organ, sex and human trafficking. Nevertheless, foreign governments continue to fund North African governments to curb migration and, ultimately, inflict such human rights abuses.



Pain

Eritrean refugees often try to escape their situation, but when traveling through the Sinai desert many are kidnapped, imprisoned and tortured. They are stripped naked, branded with fire and beaten with whips. The kidnappers chain their legs and hands releasing them once their relatives send high ransoms. If they cannot pay, traffickers will remove their organs from their bodies to sell them on the black market.

I'll never forget when some refugees who miraculously escaped a Sinai prison returned to this camp and showed us the scars on their back from being flogged. There are times where videos and pictures are posted on Facebook and we see people we know beaten up, hung upside down or even slaughtered like sheep. There are parents here who have been receiving calls for two years from their tortured sons begging them to pay the ransom, but they have nothing here.

I want to stop this punishment against people who are only trying to save their lives. I want to show the victims' loved ones that they have not been forgotten. I want to persuade people that these dangerous routes are not worth the risk. I really want to show the international community that this is happening to real people.



Punishment

This represents all refugees in the world who are trapped in prisons. These refugees have been chained behind bars by militias in the Sinai desert who will murder anyone who cannot pay their ransom. I want to show the suffering they experience before death.

My brother was kidnapped in Sudan while traveling to Europe. He was taken to a prison by armed men and eventually got out after our friends and family came up with 10,000 USD for his release. This is for him and my other friends who are still in these prisons.

- Mefin, 24



Dangers across the sea

Those who escape this web of exploitation and arrive to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea must risk their lives once again in a desperate attempt to reach safety in Europe. They enter unseaworthy boats – sometimes by force – with no way of turning back. Eritreans are the largest group of refugees taking boats across the sea to reach Italy. An estimated 20 percent of those who cross are unaccompanied minors. Thousands perish in the sea. Images of drowning refugees have shocked the world in recent years, but especially the families left behind.



Internal Wound

These refugees made it through the desert to Libya and they are risking everything one last time to reach Italy via the Mediterranean. The smugglers stayed on the shore, sending them off without a captain. The person driving the boat is a refugee himself who doesn't know how to drive a boat. They have no guarantee of survival. The smugglers just collect money and do not care if they arrive dead or alive.

We never look at the lives of those who die, of those we lose. Instead, we only consider the people who have made it and succeeded in their new places. What about the people who have died at sea? Refugees have to take these dangerous boat rides because they can't go anywhere legally. They live in this camp under so much stress without any opportunity. They hear from their friends who have made it and become successful and they decide to move on their own. They forget those who have faced problems or died.

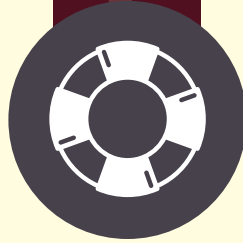
- Mefin, 24



Cost of Movement

This young boy sails on a skull through a very dangerous route. The skull represents the flimsy boats refugees travel on to reach safety. When you travel with irregular means, you are traveling with your eyes closed. You must be blind to convince yourself to go. This boy is traveling toward an island where he can just rest, but he will become a prisoner of that island. The sea moves him by force and he can't control his destination. He is helpless, stuck between a place of danger and a place of safety.

- Mebrahtu, 45, art teacher



Matter of life and death

Halfway through 2016, nearly 3,000 people are known to have died in the Mediterranean, but tens of thousands more have been saved by search and rescue missions run by humanitarian agencies and governments. Most family members of those left behind do not know whether their loved ones are dead or alive.



Unaccompanied Parents

These parents fled without their children. They have been moving from place to place and finally reached the shores of Libya. They left their children in Eritrea and are under pressure to make a better life for them in Europe. They are waiting to board boats to Europe, but they know they might not make it. We must increase our tolerance for other people. We need to have patience for ourselves and compassion for others. We also need to raise awareness in our community, because people are travelling on dangerous routes without the right information.

- Aaron, 13, an unaccompanied minor whose parents' whereabouts are unknown



The Saved

These people were sinking in the sea, but human rights volunteers have helped to save the ones they can reach. The black surrounding the painting represents the death and darkness that comes for those who don't make it across the sea. I want others to know that so many people are dying in the sea. They need more people to protect and save them while they journey to safety.

- Teodoros, 19



Mercy that welcomes

While many countries have responded to refugees with compassion and solidarity, governments around the world have begun to employ detention, deportation and bureaucratic restrictions on integration as standard asylum policy. Such practices fail to mirror compassionate public opinion on acceptance of refugees. Amnesty International found that nearly 80 percent of people in 27 countries said they accept people fleeing war or persecution in their country. Millions of refugees wait for the day when borders and doors are truly open.



Mercy

Every religion says you should love all people and that you should never treat others poorly. Religious texts say that if we follow God's order and love one another, then we will be granted Mercy. We, as refugees, need the world's Mercy.

- Mefin, 24



Will We Be Welcomed?

These are scared people who are taking a courageous act to leave their homes behind. They have become prey for the animals and even their own people, the soldiers will kill them if they find them. While they walk they are wondering about one thing: will they reach an open door or a closed door? Will we be welcomed in or shut out? If they reach a closed door, they will be stressed and continue to face problems, but if they reach an open door, their situation will improve a little bit and maybe they will also improve the lives of those who let them in.

- Abel, 19



Homesick

This is my dear friend who lives in this camp. She is so homesick for her family in Eritrea. She remembers her home and her brothers and sisters, who are represented with flowers. She is doubting her decision to leave and she suffers whenever she thinks of home.

-Tesfalem, 24, painted this in 2015 but has since disappeared. His friends claim he left for Europe via Sudan. They have not heard from him in months and miss him dearly.

Recommendations

As a service and advocacy organisation, JRS hopes the messages of these paintings resonate with all who view them, but especially with policy makers who are entrusted with the responsibility to protect refugees. JRS urges:

- the Ethiopian government to continue its reputable open-door policy and to extend integration opportunities – such as higher education, right to work and freedom of movement – to all refugees;
- donor governments to offer further support to Ethiopia in order to improve the quality of food and water delivery, medical care, education, sanitation and housing for refugees;
- all agencies and security personnel in camps to protect all refugees, especially children, from falling victim to smuggling, trafficking and exploitation;
- the international community to allow safe passages for more refugees – through resettlement, family reunification and issuance of humanitarian visas;
- the international community to focus on enhancing search and rescue missions in the desert and sea instead of funding governments with poor human rights records to stem migration; and
- second countries of asylum to grant each asylum seeker the chance to a fair and effective asylum hearing, regardless of nationality.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS programmes are found in 50 countries, providing assistance to: refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, and those held in detention centres. The main areas of work are in the field of education, emergency assistance, healthcare, livelihood activities and social services.

In northern Ethiopia, JRS provides Eritrean refugee youth with opportunities to learn and express themselves by providing a library, sports facility, and classes in painting, dance, music, and drama. The painters in this publication are students of the JRS fine arts course.

In southern Ethiopia, JRS offers vocational training, recreational activities and psychosocial counselling to Somali refugees. In Addis Ababa, the JRS Refugee Community Centre provides space for urban refugees to learn English, play sports, study in a library and computer café, and access other services.

Globally, JRS advocates for a more dignified refugee response – calling for integration, alternatives to camp life, safe humanitarian passages, and additional resources for countries in the Global South, like Ethiopia, to adequately respond to the needs of the vast majority of forced migrants.





Note: Some names have been changed for security reasons.

JRS also offers classes and hosts talent shows in the camp that allow refugee youth to express themselves with music, dance and drama.





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If you are **interested in buying or exhibiting** these paintings, please contact the JRS Eastern Africa Communications Officer at easternafrika.communications@jrs.net.



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