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... Without losing face

The Ethiopia and Eritrea policy of the Swiss migration authorities has failed. Despite increased promises of financial assistance in case of a voluntary return, e.g. in the canton of Bern (February 2020), rejected Eritrean asylum seekers do not return to their home country, even though the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) and the Federal Administrative court (FAC) consider that such a return is “possible, reasonable and admissible”. And despite a readmission agreement concluded by the EU and Switzerland with Ethiopia, only a handful of people have been forcibly returned to that country since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018.

The fear of the arbitrary rule of Eritrea’s dictator Afewerki and his unlimited military service, or of the unpredictable situation in Ethiopia, a multi-ethnic state already described by analysts as the future Yugoslavia, appears to be stronger than the despair at the idea of having to vegetate under the emergency aid system in Switzerland for an unpredictable number of years or to live under unimaginable conditions in a neighboring country in hopes for a passage to the United Kingdom.

While the human rights situation in Eritrea remained unchangedly dire despite the peace agreement with Ethiopia, even the sweeping reforms in the latter, Eritrea's large neighbor, did not bring about what the SEM and the FAC had hoped for. War is now raging in the north of the country – temporarily limited and strictly targeted though, according to Prime Minister Abiy – but is led with the involvement of the dictator from Asmara, who carries out attacks against the renegade Tigray militias from the north. These attacks are led by Eritrean youths, some of them only 14 or 15 years old, having been hastily rounded up and loaded on trucks in nationwide raids and who are now being driven towards the border as cannon fodder in front of the Ethiopian troops or mixed with Ethiopian soldiers.

Because of this ill-fated pact with Eritrea, Prime Minister Abiy’s assertions of a quick and clean war have lost all credibility. On the one hand, the Tigray militias will most likely retreat to the surrounding mountains after the capture of the provincial capital Mekele, in order to wage guerrilla warfare from there, possibly for months or years; on the other hand, an estimated number of 100,000 Eritrean refugees are now being trapped between the fronts. Initial reports about abductions from the UNHCR refugee camps in the Tigray area by Eritrean soldiers have already been published.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} Moreover, this institution has had no news of these refugees since the beginning of the Ethiopian offensive and

¹ Martin Plaut, Journalist, specialist in the Horn of Africa and in Southern Africa: martinplaut.com/2020/11/28/situation-report-eeepa-horn-no-10-28-november/

² martinplaut.com/2020/11/29/situation-report-eeepa-horn-no-11-29-november/

³ martinplaut.com/2020/11/30/situation-report-eeepa-horn-no-12-30-november/

⁴ Siehe *Europe External Programme with Africa*, www.eepa.be/?p=4352

⁵ *L'Érythrée expulse ses compatriotes des camps de réfugiés éthiopiens*, Organisation Suisse d'aide aux réfugiés, 11 décembre 2020 (www.osar.ch/publications/news-et-recits/lerythree-expulse-ses-compatriotes-des-camps-de-refugies-ethiopiens)

has not been able to supply them. The United Nations still does not have access to Tigray, despite an agreement reached with Ethiopia in early December.⁶

What will Prime Minister Abiy do with these refugees? He has already banned all Eritrean opposition groups from Ethiopia, as dictator Isaias Afewerki has demanded. In a further step, will Abiy now go so far to hand him the Eritrean refugees over at his disposal – maybe as a gesture of gratitude for his cooperation against the Tigray troops? How does the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize intend to get out of this dilemma? And how will the other ethnic groups position themselves in the multi-ethnic state of Ethiopia? Have their demands for autonomy and self-determination fallen silent now that their leaders are imprisoned or under house arrest for the sake of unity? Or will Prime Minister Abiy, in a not distant future, become dependent on Isaias' half-starved troops, in order for instance, to bring Oromo insurgents under control in the south of the country?

And how does Switzerland position itself in this opaque game for power and influence at the Horn of Africa?

Its migration authorities, including the FAC, act as if nothing has happened. Still, asylum complaints of Ethiopian Oromos – even if they assert their political persecution with strong evidence – are dismissed as not credible. Hardship applications by Eritreans are informally written off without further justification despite promises of employment. And for the many rejected asylum seekers, who are living in the woods around Calais and Dunkerque and are regularly shelled with tear gas by the French police special task forces (CRS), no one wouldn't want to take on any responsibility.

How much longer does Switzerland intend to hide its head in the sand and thereby ruin the future of countless young and healthy people? Wouldn't it be now the time to finally regularise the residence status of these people who had come to Switzerland from Ethiopia and Eritrea during 2014 to 2016 and reconsidering their case, admitting that a return to their country is currently not reasonable? Now is the time to act before they get completely ruined mentally and physically!

The stabilisation of the "steam pan" Ethiopia, with its dozens of ethnic groups, forcibly held together under emperors and military regimes, will take a long time – if it succeeds at all. The human rights' situation and disastrous living conditions in Eritrea will not improve as long as dictator Afewerki remains in power. Switzerland may continue to wait and see, while those affected remain trapped in the emergency aid system under inhumane conditions. Or it can face the facts and finally act proactively, admitting that democratisation takes time – time which is irreversibly slipping through the fingers of those rejected and caught in the humiliating trap of the Swiss emergency aid system. Now is the time to legalise their status, without the SEM and the Federal Administrative Court losing face! The escalation of violence in northern Ethiopia has become completely unpredictable, which is an absolutely convincing argument for such a step. Hardly anyone would bother to come up with sources that might seriously challenge this assessment.

No. No one needs to lose face if, in an act of humanity, countless young people are finally given the chance to complete their vocational trainings and build their futures in Switzerland, all by means of a reality-based legal adjustment of practice. For a change, we Swiss Citizens could be again rightly proud of our much-praised humanitarian tradition, which has been lately set aside!

⁶ *La revanche de l'Érythrée sur le Tigré*, Simon Petite, Le Temps, 10 Décembre 2020, www.letemps.ch/monde/revanche-lerythree-tigre

Co-signing organisations and experts

Aktionsgruppe Nothilfe

Alternative Liste Zürich

Association «Alle Menschen / tous les êtres humains» Biel/Bienne

Association Be a Robin

Association Dachstock

Association Kontakt- und Beratungsstelle für Sans-Papiers Luzern

Association Miteinander Valzeina

Association Netzwerk Asyl Aargau

Association Suisse Erythréenne Pour l'Entraide (ASEPE)

Association voCHabular

Barbara Durrer, teacher, Berne

Barbara Feichtinger, theologian, St. Gallen

Bistro Interculturel Nidwalden

Comité de soutien aux érythréen.ne.s

CPRSI - Commission protestante romande Suisses-Immigrés

Demokratische Jurist_innen der Schweiz DJS

Denise Plattner, supporter of various NGO

Derya Dursun, trade unionist at Unia Neuchâtel Region/IG Migrants

Deutsch zentral - free German courses for migrants

Dr. Chika Uzor, refugee and chaplain, St. Gallen

Dr. Nicole Hirt, political scientist and Horn of Africa expert

Droit de Rester Neuchâtel

Eritreischer Medienbund Schweiz

ExilAktion

Fachstelle Migration der Reformierten Kirchen Bern-Jura-Solothurn

Give a Hand.ch

HelloWelcome, Luzern

Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRCE)

Ines Buhofer, theologian, Lucerne

Jesuit refugee service Switzerland

Jürg R. Schweri, voluntary support for many refugees, Zollikofen

L'AMAR

Luzerner Asylnetz

Maria Ocaña, parish employee, Bellmund

MAXIM Theater

Network migrationscharta.ch

Raphael Strauss, specialist for asylum social assistance, Bern

Riggi-Asyl

Roman Rieger, theologian and city chaplaincy director, Mörschwil

Samson Yemane, student of political science, collaborator of the Swiss Refugee Council, Eritrea
human rights activist

Sans-Papiers Anlaufstelle Zürich SPAZ

Solidaritätsnetz Ostschweiz

Solidarité Tattes, Geneva

Solinetz Zürich

solinetze.ch

Swiss Peace Council, Zürich

Women for Peace Switzerland