

# Deporting refugees to their deaths

“Increased removal” is how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at the weekly cabinet meeting Sunday, called the new policy in which asylum seekers will be required to choose between leaving Israel for Rwanda and being jailed indefinitely.

Until now, deportations of asylum seekers from Israel were conducted within the framework of “voluntary” departure. Now the government wants to deport them involuntarily through an agreement recently signed with Rwanda, a country that Israel repeatedly calls “safe” and “neutral.”

But dozens of statements we gathered in Europe over the past few months from people who left Israel “voluntarily” in recent years for Rwanda and Uganda strengthen what previous reports on the matter found: What the deportees expect to face in Rwanda is the beginning of a journey of human trafficking, torture and in many cases death.

The statements, which I collected Shahar Shoham and Liat Boltzman for research being done in Europe, present an identical picture: In Rwanda, deportees have the transit documents they received in Israel taken away from them. These are the only identity documents they have. A local contact person locks them up in a hotel room and warns that they must

leave the country within a few days.

Sometimes they are threatened and all their money stolen from them upon landing. They are transferred to smugglers who, in return for hundreds or sometimes thousands of dollars, send them to Uganda. From there they are transferred in similar fashion to South Sudan, to Sudan and on to Libya, from which they try to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. Without identity documents they are often subject to imprisonment by the authorities in various countries, and to theft. Based on dozens of testimonies and other research, we estimate that hundreds have died in the torture camps in Libya or drowned at sea.

“The boat left Libya at 4 A.M., we went out to sea and after two hours the motor broke down,” says Tsafai (a pseudonym), whom we met last summer in the small town in western Germany where he now lives. He left Israel in December 2015 after working for a few years as a housekeeper in a hotel in Eilat. “We were 500 people, and maybe 100 remained alive. There were 10 on the boat who came from Israel and only three came out alive. Seven people died: Why, what for? Aren’t we people?”

We heard a similar story from Dwait (not his real name), whom we met in Berlin. He lived in Israel for five and a half years and worked in a restaurant in Tel Aviv.

Like Tsafai, he too is in his mid-twenties. Dwait was pleased to speak Hebrew. After almost a year in Europe, he says he is afraid he will forget the language and misses Israel, even though life was difficult without residency status.

He too left “voluntarily” for Rwanda almost two years ago. A few months earlier, when he came to renew his temporary residency permit at the Interior Ministry, he was sent to the Holot detention facility in the western Negev. Great pressure was put on him there to leave Israel, partly from officials of the Population, Immigration and Border Authority. “There was one worker, who spoke to us in our language,” he said. “He told us that it is impossible to know how many years we will be in jail, and it is better for us to leave. We thought he wanted to help us.”

In Rwanda, the population authority promised Dwait and his friends, they could get residency and work. So he too got on the plane. What happened from that point on repeats itself in the dozens of other statements we heard: a path paved with danger and death.

Among those who died was Dwait’s wife, who was in her second month of pregnancy. In Libya, the smugglers put the asylum seekers on two different boats, and her boat, packed with hundreds of others, sank. When Dwait tells about it, his voice quivers and his forehead becomes cov-

ered with sweat. “When I got here I went crazy,” he says.

“I wanted to kill myself. I felt I had nothing left in the world. So they sent me to a doctor and gave me pills,” he says. “In Sinai, on the way to Israel, six friends died by my side. My wife died at sea. I remember every one of them, it won’t let go of me.”

The survivors of Israeli policy whom we met in Europe are among the lucky ones who managed physically to survive the journey, but it is doubtful whether their psychological scars will ever heal. In Germany, where Tsafai and Dwait managed to reach, 99 percent of the Eritreans receive residency status. Eighty-one percent of them received full refugee status in 2016.

In other countries too, the percentage of those people from Eritrea recognized as refugees is very high. Despite the status they received in Germany, which includes social benefits, Tsafai and Dwait beg their friends in Israel not to leave for Rwanda – as long as they are not involuntarily deported.

Their statements leave no room for doubt: “Increased removal” is another step in the abusive jailing and deportation of asylum seekers in Israel. For many of those deported it is a death sentence.

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