

POSTSCRIPT

I went back to Eritrea in October 2018. Many things had changed since my last visit. Many others had not. In July, the newly established Ethiopian president, Abiy Mohammed, had extended his hand to President Isaias Afwerqi. After twenty years of conflict and diplomatic silence, their peace agreement has led to what seems to be a new era of cooperation between the two countries. Now merchandise and people freely move across the border. Separated families have managed to see each other again after decades apart. Markets were flooded with cheap products produced by the booming Ethiopian economy. The cost of living went down—even if only for a few months—and local salaries increased just enough for families to breathe a sigh of relief. In December, the United Nations finally suspended sanctions that had contributed to isolating Eritrea and made the everyday lives of its people even more complicated.

Revolution came to the market, but the political atmosphere remained unchanged. Political and religious prisoners were still detained, and there was no sign of democratic evolution. Some people argued that change takes time, but others believed that no real change can come while the current ruling class is in power. National service was still obligatory. In December, young people eagerly watched a televised interview of the president looking for some hint of a possible change, but in vain. Many did not wait to hear what President Afwerqi had to say: they already knew Eritrea was not for them. Between July and December, it is estimated, over ten thousand Eritreans, mostly young people, crossed into Ethiopia seeking asylum.¹

Most of my friends in Asmara left, and their families continually struggle with separation and worry about the few prospects for their children in Ethiopia and

in Sudan, in a time of extreme instability for both countries. Ethiopia is struggling with a revived ethnic conflict across the country, and the Sudanese dictatorship of Omar Al-Bashir has ended, leaving the place to a transitional military council. These political scenarios, unravelling as we speak, open a wide range of questions not only for the citizens of these countries, but for the security and long-term prospects of their numerous refugee populations. Meanwhile, the European Union has made deals and established border enforcement measures that block aspiring asylum seekers in Libya or even prevent rescue ships from reaching Italian coasts. Many reports denounce systematic abuses and torture in detention centers in Libya,² but European national governments boast of their successes in curbing migrants' invasion.

Notwithstanding all these shifting geopolitical events, the fact remains, now as at the beginning of my research, that most Eritreans are trapped in protracted displacement, as 78 percent of the total refugee population—who now number twenty-six million. Not only is it impossible for them to return home, but it is also extremely difficult for them to migrate in a regular fashion from their first place of refuge, where they usually have little prospect of long-term integration. For those who can move on in irregular ways along the Libyan corridor, the risks remain huge, if not higher than before.

These unchanged structural conditions demonstrate how wrong it is to talk about these phenomena as “crises” and “emergencies,” words that have been continually repeated by politicians, humanitarian actors, and the media over the past five years (the phrase “European refugee crisis” is the key example here). The normalized aspect of migration, even in its most tragic implications, points to the importance of inscribing migrants' histories in political and institutional contexts that reproduce the stratification of rights and the conditions for mobility and immobility. It is my hope that *The Big Gamble* will contribute to orient the public debate in this direction.