

The Politics Behind Eritrea's Ranking in the TIP "Scorecard"

Written by Metkel Sewra

Saturday, 26 August 2017 08:15 - Last Updated Saturday, 26 August 2017 08:18

News may have reached you that Eritrea remained in Tier 3 for the umpteenth year in the US State Department's annual "trafficking in persons" (TIP) report for 2017.

Well, if you actually have a minute or two to skim the section on Eritrea you would be amused to find much copied and pasted sections from previous years pointing at the very source of the problem with this report.

Hard and verifiable data collected by an impartial third party who would actually be accountable for the fantastic statistics?

None.

Regurgitated and oversimplified "analysis" of Eritrea's national policies such as the National Service and 12th grade education in Sawa?

Plenty.

Objective analysis of the effect of the deliberate isolation strategy forced on Eritrea since 2000 coupled with the effect of the sanctions imposed on it without any shred of evidence to support the allegations they are based on?

No again.

Pompous dismissal of Eritrea's authorities' definition and understanding of human trafficking?

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Yes, in the very first paragraph.

In short, you would be hard-pressed to find a sincere will to work with Eritrea to solve this crime, and you will most certainly not find a word about the country's proven claim that it has been a victim of human trafficking through the well-orchestrated and heavily funded actions of entities known to – and very openly supported by – the United States.

In fact, do you remember that time when Barack Obama so callously admitted this support in a speech given during the Clinton Global Initiative?

Yes. He actually said: 'I recently renewed sanctions on some of the worst abusers, including North Korea and Eritrea. We're partnering with groups that help women and children escape from the grip of their abusers.'

Obama's admission of "partnering" with smugglers should have raised red flags given the US State Department's own definition of smuggling: "the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation or illegal entry of a person or persons across an international border, in violation of one or more countries' laws."

But no.

This "altruistic" scorecard shifts the blame for this heinous crime back to the victims themselves – the people and the Government of Eritrea – and it does so without any accountability for the debilitating consequence that such false accusations produce in terms of the country's status in the world and its ability to pull itself out – on its own terms – of the shackles imposed on it for ulterior geopolitical motives.

Now to the crux of the matter.

The fact that country ranking in the TIP report is deliberately and highly politicized with a

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specific geopolitical objective in mind is really not lost on anyone who takes the time to critically examine this subject.

This follows that demanding an impartial, nuanced, context-based analysis from the authors of the TIP report is about as logical as waiting for Godot was in Samuel Becket's play. Godot will never come.

Similarly, logic in the TIP's data collection methodology, lack of bias in its assumptions about countries, cultures and peoples, and actual consistency even in its most basic units of measurement of lexes such as "slavery" and "rights", will never come.

In fact, a critical engagement with the shock-inducing claims annually repeated in these reports shows that a country's yearly ranking, and the preposterous way in which these rankings are justified, is very much attuned to, and dictated by, its level of "openness" to US pressures and manipulations.

It really is that simple and the joke remains, unfortunately, on those who ignorantly hang their understanding of world politics on these half-baked, misleading indices.

So why is it that year after year the US State Department sees no issue in its duplicitous role of "guardian angel" of millions of people who suffer this transgression as a result of the political and economic dragnet policies of previous US Administrations?

Why is it that a complex and multi-layered global issue such as human trafficking is allowed to be dumbed down in hundreds of pages of fluff – but paper-thin in terms of real substance – without a demand for an investigation of the role played by entities known to, and funded by countries such as the US, that are in reality exacerbating – if not causing – the trafficking crisis?

Lastly and most importantly, why is it that the rest of the world, namely the Global South, continues to endure the wrath of this sham "scorecard" as if it really holds the key to solving a crisis that affects millions of its own people in much more direct ways than it affects the citizens of countries where these reports are generated?

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In case you are not aware, Eritrea, with its limited resources, has developed, enacted, and enforced strict laws within its current system that deal with the issue of trafficking in humans.

1) Article 605-607 of the TPCE criminalizes any form of trafficking; illegal restraint (Art 557); abduction (Arts 558-561); political abduction (Art 564); enslavement and slave trading (Arts 565-567); all of which are considered criminal offences carrying severe and unforgiving penalties.

2) The new Penal Code of Eritrea, put into effect in May 2015, lists kidnapping, abduction, illegal restraint (Arts 288-290); coercion enslavement and abetting (Arts 295- 297), as serious offences.

3) In compliance with the Trafficking In Persons Protocol, which calls for the criminalization of human trafficking, Arts 315-318 of the new Penal Code of Eritrea criminalizes all forms of trafficking in women, infants, young persons, and any type of organized trafficking,

4) As required by Art 5 of the TIP Protocol, the 2015 Penal Code of Eritrea does not limit itself to criminalizing some offences; the whole concept and act of human trafficking itself is criminalized.

5) The General Part of the Penal Code of Eritrea also extends the criminalization to any person who intentionally solicits, encourages, abets, helps, advises, or incites another or others to commit and/ or participate in the act of human trafficking.

In fact, US Chargé d'Affaires, Matthew D. Smith, in a leaked diplomatic cable from Asmara back in December 2008, entitled "How to Escape from Eritrea", confessed that "the GSE [Government of the State of Eritrea] is very keen to break these human smuggling rings and dispatches agents to pose as potential customers. Other agents pose as facilitators, making all of the supposed smuggling arrangements prior to having the unsuspecting person arrested."

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Smith's cable highlights the nature of the official Eritrean state response to the criminal enterprise.

All of this would be lost on you if you base your understanding of the issue as it relates to Eritrea on the TIP report's country narrative.

Another fact – again, something the TIP report's authors will not tell you – is that the Government of Eritrea has consistently said that all efforts to put an end to human trafficking will not succeed simply by introducing stringent regulations if destination countries – most notably, the United States and certain European countries – do not alter their automatic asylum policies specifically and deliberately targeted at Eritreans, and cooperate, in good faith, on all levels with the Government of Eritrea to put an end to this crime.

In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that destination countries, especially the United States, through its Embassy in Asmara, has, for years, encouraged and facilitated this transgression. Wikileaks has exposed many of these ploys.

In a May 5, 2009 leaked US embassy cable sent from Asmara, entitled "Promoting Educational Opportunity for Anti-Regime Eritrean Youth," the then US Ambassador to Eritrea, Ronald K. McMullen explained that "Post plans to restart visa services (completely suspended in 2007) for student visa applicants; we intend to give opportunities to study in the United States to those who oppose the regime.... Post intends to begin adjudicating student visa applications, regardless of whether the regime is willing to issue the applicant an Eritrean passport and exit visa. If an applicant is otherwise found eligible for a student visa, Post will issue it in a Form DS-232...With an Eritrean passport and an F1 visa in a Form DS-232, the lucky young person is off to America. For those visa recipients who manage to leave the country and receive UNHCR refugee status, a UN-authorized travel document might allow the young person to travel to America with his or her F1 in the DS-232....Due to the Isaias regime's ongoing restrictions on Embassy Asmara, Post does not contemplate a resumption of full visa services in the near future. However, giving young Eritreans hope, the chance for an education, and the skills with which to rebuild their impoverished country in the post- Isaias period is one of the strongest signals we can send to the Eritrean people that the United States has not abandoned them. Were we to begin processing student visa applications and require a regime-issued passport, we would be seen as strengthening the dictatorship's hand. Thus, the limited category-specific exemption outlined above is key."

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Hand in the cookie jar, right? Yes.

Yet, year after year the TIP report continues to turn a blind eye to what all of this really means: just as forceful as Eritrea's stand is against terrorism in this region and just as proven is its track record since independence in 1991 to fight it – something US generals have admitted time and again – so is its stand against any other type of crime perpetrated against its citizens, including the trafficking in persons, in all its forms, and what follows is just a very short sample of the Government of Eritrea's actions and calls over the past years to protest and seek remedies to this transgression:

In 2004, the GOE sent demarches to the UNHCR and a number of European countries who were instigating the mass migration of the members of the Kunama ethnic group under the false pretext that they represented a suppressed minority group. The GOE has likewise sent letters to Libya, Egypt, Israel and the Sudan to protest and expose the network of intelligence agencies mired in this deplorable act.

President Isaias sent a letter to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon requesting the UN to launch a comprehensive investigation of the act through an independent, neutral and transparent body. In the letter, President Isaias states: "Eritrea has remained to be a target of malicious and concerted practices of "human trafficking". This despicable ploy was unleashed in tandem with the decision to block the implementation of the "final and binding" arbitration decision of the border dispute, and, is part and parcel of the war declared against the country. This crime, which is unparalleled in its magnitude, complex organization as well as immense suffering that it inculcates on its victims, continues to increase from bad to worse. The architects of this scourge have further resorted to various schemes, under suitable labels to conceal and disguise the crime as well as their real identity. Indeed, the latter machinations are not less – in intensity and impact – than the original crime."

At the Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly held in October 2013, Eritrea called on the AUC to study the root causes of the problem, and investigate the criminal networks in order to take collective action at the continental level. In its conclusion, the Eritrean message reads as follows: "The transnational nature of human trafficking and smuggling makes it imperative for states - origin, transit and host - to cooperate in the investigation of the criminal activities and in the prosecution of the criminals. Regional and international organizations, such as the AU and UN also have the responsibility to utilize their wide presence to collect information and undertake serious investigations into the crimes. With this in mind, the GOE regrets that to-date there has not been any noticeable activity either by AU or UN in way of undertaking the investigations requested by Eritrea."

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All of this very clearly points at Eritrea's consistent desire to work with any international body or country willing to sift through unverified assumptions and multiple, critical errors of fact and logic, in order to reach a lasting solution that would put an end to this highly-funded and organized crime and bring the real criminals to justice.