



Landmark court case against Eritrean human traffickers Walid and Kidane ¹

Overview:

Tewelde Goitom, known as Walid/Welid, and Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, known as Kidane, are notorious Eritrean human traffickers implicated in severe human rights abuses, including rape, ransoming, and torture of victims in Libya. Reports indicate that they operated warehouses in various locations, notably Bani Walid, where they held thousands of individuals, primarily Eritreans refugees, under inhumane conditions. Walid is currently on trial in Zwolle, The Netherlands, and the Dutch Public Prosecutor has requested extradition of Kidane to be tried alongside him.

Background:

The prosecution of Walid and Kidane is part of an international investigation by The Netherlands, Italy, the International Criminal Court, Interpol and Europol, which is currently still ongoing.

Kidane was arrested in February 2020, after being recognized by a former victim. Walid, and two of his accomplices, were arrested in Ethiopia in March 2020. Walid was tried in Ethiopia and received a prison sentence, but Kidane escaped and was tried in absentia. Kidane was added to the Netherlands' most wanted list in October 2021.

Under the concept of universal jurisdiction, Dutch law allows cases to be brought against foreign nationals for crimes committed abroad if victims are in the Netherlands. On this principle, in October 2022, the Ethiopian government agreed to extradite Walid to the Netherlands so that he could once again stand trial. The preliminary

Executive Summary

Tewelde Goitom (Walid) and Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam (Kidane) are notorious Eritrean traffickers accused of severe human rights abuses against Eritrean refugees in Libya. They operated warehouses in Bani Walid, where thousands were held in inhumane conditions. Walid is currently on trial in the Netherlands, and Kidane faces extradition after being recaptured. The case is part of an international investigation, with survivors reporting extreme abuse and ransom demands of \$3,000 to \$6,000.

¹ The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Smits, K. (2023). "You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 451-520. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240627_You_are_the_Ball_-_They_are_the_Players_The_Human_Traffickers_of_Eritreans_in_Libya

Additional external sources are listed below

hearings in his case have been going on since January 2023. The proceedings are still ongoing, with a verdict not expected until next year at the earliest.

Kidane was recaptured in January 2023 by Sudanese police in coordination with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) authorities. He was sentenced to eight months for money laundering there. The UAE has responded positively to an extradition request by the Netherlands in order to combine the trials of Walid and Kidane.

The trial has now been ongoing for almost two years. Walid is facing additional charges for attempting to influence witnesses from prison and to obtain a false ID. The Eritrean community in the Netherlands is closely following the case, and organized a peaceful protest in July 2024 calling for protection for the victims of human trafficking.

Key research findings:

- **Abuse and torture:** Survivors of Walid and Kidane reported extreme physical abuse, including beatings with iron sticks and electric wires, and sexual violence, with Walid personally involved in rapes. Ransom demands ranged from USD 3,000 to 6,000, with severe consequences for those unable to pay. They were often resold after paying.
- **Locations:** Both Walid and Kidane were reported to operate warehouses in multiple locations, with the town of Bani Walid being the location where most severe abuses were reported.
- **Operational network:** Walid and Kidane are connected to other traffickers, including Abduselam, facilitating a broader trafficking network across Libya and beyond. In addition, they cooperate with other actors, including Libyan militia and police. Their operations reflect a similar modus operandi to trafficking for ransom in the Sinai desert of Egypt.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

1. **Strengthen legal frameworks:** Enhance laws related to human trafficking, ensuring they align with international standards. This includes provisions for universal jurisdiction to prosecute traffickers regardless of where the crime occurred.
2. **Continue the investigation into Eritrean trafficking networks:** The investigation into Eritrean trafficking networks should continue and be expanded, including investigation of the connection between the networks and Eritrean authorities.
3. **Support victims:** Develop and fund comprehensive support programs for survivors of human trafficking, including legal assistance, psychological support, and rehabilitation services. Explicitly include victims in efforts to secure justice and reparations.
4. **Promote safe migration pathways:** Work towards creating safe and legal migration pathways for individuals fleeing conflict or persecution. This can help reduce the reliance on traffickers and decrease the number of people vulnerable to exploitation.

Recommendations for NGOs:

1. **Engage the Eritrean community:** Collaborate with the Eritrean community in the Netherlands and other countries to raise awareness about trafficking and support for victims. Empower community members to take an active role in prevention and support efforts, without risking their or their families' safety.
2. **Advocate for policy change:** Engage in advocacy efforts to influence policymakers to focus on top-level traffickers and not on criminalization of refugees.
3. **Document and share survivor stories:** Collect and document the experiences of survivors to raise awareness and inform policy discussions. Sharing these stories can help humanize the issue and highlight the urgent need for action.

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