

**Annex A: information in scope of the request****Informal report of UK visit to Eritrea, 9-11 December 2014**

A joint Home Office/Foreign & Commonwealth Office delegation visited Asmara, Eritrea, on 9-11 December 2014 to hold discussions on migration with senior members of the Eritrean Government and other representatives. This followed a meeting between UK Minister for Immigration and Security James Brokenshire and Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh in the margins of the Khartoum Process Ministerial Conference in Rome at the end of November.

The delegation held discussions with Foreign Minister Saleh, Head of Political Affairs of the ruling party, Yemane Gebreab, and Director of the President's Office, Yemane Ghebremeskel. We also spoke to Eritrean immigration officials, members of the legal profession, young professionals in Asmara and representatives of the international community in Asmara.

The discussions were positive and constructive and were largely consistent with the findings of the recent Danish mission to Eritrea. If Government representatives are to be believed the risk of persecution or mistreatment in Eritrea is far lower than our current country guidance suggests. But independent verification of their description of the situation in Eritrea is difficult to find and there were views expressed by non-government representatives that suggested a continued element of arbitrary and sometimes harsh treatment of returnees, although again unsubstantiated. So while encouraging on balance (and it has to be said that Asmara did not *feel* like the capital of a country generating asylum applications with a 85% grant rate) further evidence is likely to be required before a significant reduction in that rate can be supported.

Key areas of discussion are summarised below:

**Top Eritrean priorities**

Interlocutors all agreed that tackling the flow of irregular migration, with help from the international community, from Eritrea was an important task, combined with pressing ahead with economic development. They had a 3-5 year plan for recovery, which included an initial focus on infrastructure and agriculture (we were told that food imports to Eritrea were likely to be reduced from 80% down to 20%-30% this year due to a good harvest), and a number of other sectors including mining, tourism and fishing.

**Conditions in Eritrea**

We asked about the conditions of national service, and the penalty for illegal exit and evasion of national service. We were advised that an 18 month time limit has now been imposed on national service duties, and that this was starting with the next intake of young people. We also understood that national service was to be restricted to military service. There were no plans to announce these changes via a formal, public statement by the Government – it was being communicated in local

public meetings to new recruits and their families. There had been no decision on how to treat those who had already completed several years of national service – these individuals were often doing civilian jobs in government and state-owned industry, and the government could not yet afford to replace them at market salaries. The delegation expressed interest in the penalties for illegal exit and evasion of national service. Both Government and legal interlocutors confirmed that the legislation provided for the detention of returnees, with a maximum of five years in prison. Government representatives advised that in reality those returning would simply be required to complete their national service requirements – there was no mention of the need to write a letter of apology or pay a 'diaspora tax'. However, we were also told by a non-Government interlocutor that many of those who avoided National Service were treated informally by local security chiefs, though the penalties in practice varied over about the same range as those provided for in law.

### Returns

The delegation sought confirmation of the Eritrean Government's position on Eritreans with no right to be in the UK returning to their home country. Government representatives confirmed that they were not in favour of enforced returns, but would accept the possibility of limited enforced removals as a signal to other illegal migrants if it was part of a wider programme that reduced grants of asylum and was designed to support voluntary returns. They would be willing to consider a Memorandum of Understanding confirming how those returned would be treated, and this was confirmed by the Foreign Minister as long as we could verify identity and nationality.

### Identification and redocumentation

All interlocutors emphasised the risk that Ethiopians and others would claim they were Eritrean in order to increase their likelihood of being granted asylum in the UK. Immigration and Nationality Department officials confirmed that a new biometric identity card system was now being introduced, with roll out due for completion in three years, so that Eritrean nationals could be identified using a central database. In the meantime, they said they would be happy to check the identity of any illegal migrants claiming to be Eritrean, via the Embassy in London, on the basis of biographic information. They also confirmed that the IND could require the Embassy to issue identity documents to enable travel once an individual's identity was confirmed.

### Communications

We consider communications activity to be a key tool in dissuading migrants from making the journey to Europe. The delegation's visit provided a better understanding of the media landscape and the types of messages that might have the most impact. There were limited commercial advertising opportunities, but we understood there to be widespread access to the internet, significant use of smart phones, and access to satellite TV. In terms of effective messaging, we learnt that most Eritreans are aware of the costs and risks involved in illegal migration, but were willing to take the risk for what they thought would be a better life, and would send positive messages about life in Europe back home even if the reality was very

different. We judged that if we could credibly point to the increased risk both of asylum refusal, and also return, that might be a more effective message.

### **Working with the international community**

Government representatives, including Foreign Minister Saleh, agreed that the Khartoum Process was an important initiative, and that work was now needed to turn the statement agreed in Rome into concrete action. We did not, during the course of our meetings, establish where their specific areas of focus might be as the discussions were wide ranging.

### **Next steps**

We are focusing on a number of next steps, which include:

- Reviewing the opportunities and benefits of investing in development programmes in Eritrea to address 'push factors'.
- Agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Eritrean Government on working together to clarify the conditions those returning will face, particularly with regards to the penalties for illegal exit and evading national service and increase returns (voluntary and enforced).
- Using the information gathered alongside other evidence to evaluate whether we should amend our country guidance for asylum decision makers.
- Building the results of our visit into our developing communications plan to discourage irregular migration from Eritrea.
- Exploring whether there is further assistance we can provide, including through the new Khartoum Process – we are joining Eritrea and other Horn of Africa countries in the 'core group' steering the process, ensuring momentum on concrete projects.

Home Office  
February 2015