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**Sent:** 17 December 2014 17:45  
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**Subject:** Eritrea visit readout

Mike

In addition to David Ward's egram setting out the main discussion points (attached), below is a more detailed readout from last week's visit to Eritrea.

**Overall impressions:** Our visit was clearly seen by Eritrean Govt officials across the board as a positive step in developing our bilateral relationship; as David's egram says, there was both recognition of the migration problem that Eritrea was facing, and also a strong desire across the board to tackle it – with help from the wider international community. Throughout our meetings, Eritrea's current situation was attributed in large part to the border conflict with Ethiopia; it had used up important reserves in the past, resulting in the current low level of economic development, and remained an ongoing threat that had to be addressed by national service. According to the Peacebuilding Centre for the Horn of Africa (PCHA), resolving this conflict was the key to unlocking all other conflicts in the region.

Nonetheless, Asmara seemed to be a calm, safe environment. We met a number of young people who had stayed in Eritrea to complete national service and now mostly worked in Govt ministries over dinner on the last evening. There was a clear sense of pride in being Eritrean, and not leaving permanently. Although many had gone overseas for further education, or had ambitions to do so (Geneva, the US and Holland were all mentioned), there was definitely a feeling that returning to Eritrea was key to the country's long term success. In particular, they were concerned that the UK was offering "preferential treatment" to Eritrean asylum seekers. So although we were only there for a short time, the situation did not seem to be as difficult as we might have previously thought. It's worth bearing in mind however that the young people were not necessarily representative of the wider young population, having been gathered together from various ministries and other Govt organisations at very short notice by Yemane Gebreab, the President's Adviser and therefore probably more "on message" than others may have been.

In terms of **next steps**, we plan to focus on the following workstreams as part of an action plan which we'll pull together early in the New Year. The game changer will be some sort of MOU/exchange of letters on national service and returns – discussed further below – which we'll prioritise.

**Operational guidance for decision makers:** We were given assurances by Yemane Gebreab that the original legislation fixing the required period of national service to 18 months was now being enforced for new entrants with immediate effect, and this was being communicated in some way to young people and their families (rather than a more formal Presidential proclamation, which they didn't seem keen on). The story on the penalties for those returning to Eritrea for evading national service or illegal exit was less clear, with Govt officials maintaining that returnees were in reality not at risk of detention (rather they would just have to fulfil their national service obligations) but non-Govt interlocutors acknowledging the possibility of extra-judicial detention on an arbitrary basis, albeit on the basis of little concrete evidence. The Country Policy and Information Team are already looking at revising

our operational guidance in light of the recent Danish fact finding mission, to shift the balance of decision making, and will consider whether we can use the information from our own visit in addition. We also floated the idea of the Eritreans providing a more formal, written explanation of the consequences for those returning (MOU or exchange of letters), which they seemed happy to provide, so we will follow up and add into the mix as additional evidence that may persuade the courts of a higher grant threshold.

**Returns:** As others had been told previously, Eritrea welcomed voluntary but not enforced returns (Yemane Gebreab said it affected “the nation’s dignity”). There was however agreement to at least consider the idea of a few token enforced returns, in a way that was designed to support voluntary returns, and for the provision of reintegration assistance (we currently don’t have a delivery partner in Eritrea for AVR reintegration, but there may be other ways). We need to work with the Eritreans to come up with a plan to make that happen. We should also assess whether the Eritreans can provide us with any assistance in confirming an individual’s identity in order for them to return home. The move to biometric ID cards is welcome, and should in the long term help us confirm an individual’s identity using fingerprints (roll out is expected to take 3+ years). In the meantime, we need to explore whether we can work with the Immigration Service in Asmara and the Embassy in London on identification and redocumentation – immigration officials said that even if returnees have lost their passport and ID card, Embassies could forward their details to the Immigration Service, who could check identity via a national database (which contained photos) and tell the Embassy to issue passports/ETDs – particularly if we’re to secure a few enforced returns for presentational reasons. We also briefly raised the possibility of an Eritrean team coming to the UK to help with nationality testing, which wasn’t rejected outright.

**Communications:** It was clear from walking around that many houses have a satellite dish, with access to international media channels, and Qatar Airways were advertising their new service to Asmara on street banners. Otherwise there was no signs of any other advertising in Asmara. Whilst most houses have internet access, the connection is very slow but young people all used social media websites. Young people at dinner on Wednesday evening also said there were popular blogs and other media outlets which could be useful for carrying our messages, but these are most likely to be government controlled. Football was also very big in Eritrea (Arsenal being the team of choice for many) and this could be a potential vehicle for disseminating messages, although it’s not clear yet in what format. As we start getting the results of the focus groups currently running in Asmara and the UK with the Eritrean diaspora, we need to identify the most effective narrative and develop a plan for how best to convey the key messages. We were told that young people looking to leave Eritrea were fully aware of the risks/costs involved, but chose to leave anyway, and would often paint a positive picture of their new lives in Europe even if the reality was very different.

**x-HMG approach to Eritrea:** The Eritreans repeatedly pointed to the need for economic development in order to reduce push factors. They had a 3-5 year plan for recovery, which included an initial focus on infrastructure and agriculture (Yemane Gebreab said food imports to Eritrea were likely to be reduced from 80% down to 20%-30% this year due to a good harvest), and then a number of other sectors including mining, tourism, infrastructure and fishing. By 2017-18, they expected to have moved from one operational mine to having 4 or 5, with an expected revenue of \$500m p.a.

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