

# Captured, raped, ransomed: the kidnappers preying on Eritrean refugees

When Ella and her cousin reached a refugee camp in Sudan, it seemed to herald safety. Instead, it was the start of an all too familiar ordeal. It was right at the moment Ella thought she was safe that she was kidnapped.

The 17-year-old had just entered eastern Sudan's Wad Sherife refugee camp with her teenage cousin. The girls had been walking for days, in a desperate bid to escape compulsory, indefinite military service in their birth country Eritrea, which begins as soon as school ends.

Now, Ella was about to come face to face with another danger: the Rashaida, a feared tribe found on eastern Sudan's border. The Rashaida have been accused of thousands of refugee kidnappings over the past decade.

When a man approached the pair on a motorcycle, saying he was security and could take them to camp reception, they believed him. He was nicely dressed, Ella remembers, in a shirt and trousers.

Instead, he locked them inside a room on site, before bringing more men to force the pair into a van and transporting them far from the camp.

For six weeks, Ella was locked in a room in her captor's family home, a "nice house, with electricity and lights". Both girls were raped. The ransom set was half a million Eritrean nakfa, or more than \$33,000 (£23,852).

"I thought they would kill me," says Ella. Each day, men would beat and assault her with a plastic stick. They would also press a phone to her ear, so her family could hear her pain. She'd try not to cry or whimper, which made the men hit her harder.

Kidnapping is big business along the Eritrean border, and Ella is one of tens of thousands of victims who have netted local traffickers hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past decade, experts say. The problem is spreading, with Eritreans held for ransom in Chad, Libya, Somalia and even Latin America. Some are kidnapped two, three, even four times, as they continue north or east trying to find a safe place.

"It's getting worse. It's being copied all over," says Meron Estefanos, director of the Eritrean Initiative on Refugee Rights, who has been helping victims for more than a decade.

"It has become like an everyday thing that we don't report on any more. For those that go to Sudan, it's almost impossible to arrive safely without being kidnapped."

Estefanos says the blame does not lie only with the Rashaida tribe. "I'm sure there are some Eritreans working with them as well. It's also the smugglers that are involved in the kidnapping."

She believes Sudanese security guards are complicit, claiming her cousin was sold by border guards to kidnappers.

For those captured, sexual abuse is almost a given. Many Eritreans are victims of rape or gang-rape, carried out with their families on the phone, with the aim of pressuring them into ransom payments. The price of release – like the cost of smugglers for female Eritreans – is usually higher.

In 2014 a Human Rights Watch report documented eight cases of Sudanese security handing Eritrean refugees over to traffickers, who would sell them on to gangs in Egypt's Sinai peninsula. However, Eritreans say those captured are increasingly being held inside Sudan itself.

Mariam, 24, who has worked as a cleaner in Khartoum for two years, says she faces constant harassment. She has focused on saving the \$4,000 necessary to continue towards Europe, where she'd like to train as a doctor.

Three weeks before we met, her 18-year-old sister was abducted trying to cross the Eritrean border after her. Mariam received a call from a man on a Sudanese number, who spoke Arabic rather than the Eritrean language Tigrinya. He demanded a \$5,000 ransom, threatening to kill Mariam's sister and sell her organs. "How can I pay? I have no capability, no money," she said.

Mariam is wary of the Sudanese police, who prey on refugees, extorting, abusing and sometimes deporting them. "If I tell the police it will be dangerous for both our lives," Mariam said. "There is a connection between police and traffickers."

Also seen as complicit in this widespread trade of people is the EU, currently giving millions of euros to Sudan and other African countries in a bid to stem the flow of migration to Europe. Critics say this money exacerbates the mistreatment of refugees, because the focus is on stopping movement rather than protecting the vulnerable.

In Ella's case, her mother managed to raise the ransom with loans from friends and acquaintances. Her captors promised to drop her in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, where the risk of being kidnapped again is slightly lower. There, she could get a contraceptive injection to protect against the next likely rape as she makes her way towards Europe.

Instead, she was abandoned in farmland in Sudan's east. Ella asked goatherds for directions, and they pointed her towards Shagarab, another border refugee camp.

Sudanese officials deny kidnappings occur within camps. They say Eritreans put their own lives at risk by making deals with smugglers outside. But security at Shagarab camp, home to 90,000 Eritrean refugees, admitted the perimeters are unguarded and anyone can walk in.

"What needs to be done is for a government to take it seriously – Sudan, Libya or others. They can stop it. I know they can," said Estefanos.

"Rape is in our culture a taboo. It's not discussed, it's always a woman's fault. If you've been raped, no one wants to marry you. That's what women think."