

Ethiopia

Europe's Favorite Country

by Simone Schlindwein

Ethiopia is both a country of origin and of transit for refugees and migrants. This makes Ethiopia an important cooperation partner for the European Union (EU).

In October 2019, the Nobel Prize Committee announced surprising news: it honored the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his peace policy towards the previously hostile neighboring country Eritrea.

When the newly elected politician Abiy came to power in April 2018, many had expected the existing authoritarian policies to change. But hardly anyone could have foreseen the extent of reforms the new prime minister was aiming for in a short period of time. The multiethnic state had been authoritarian for decades: freedom of the press and freedom of speech were restricted, and a state of emergency had been ongoing since 2016. Politically and economically, only one ethnic group was in power. All of this changed rapidly in the following year and a half.

Abiy, descended from the Oromo minority and once a secret service officer, had the state of emergency resolved within a few months after taking office. He cleared the enormous security and intelligence apparatus that had been in control up until then, released thousands of political prisoners from the detention centers, and initiated the democratization process and the liberalization of Ethiopia's economy. He reached a milestone in summer 2018 when he signed a peace treaty with Eritrea's President Isayas Afwerki. After almost two decades, Abiy was the first Ethiopian head of state to visit the neighboring country Eritrea. When the closely guarded border between the two countries opened in September 2018, thousands of Eritreans migrated across the border by foot. There were touching scenes reminiscent of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Strangers were lying in each other's arms crying tears of joy. Telephone and flight connections between the two countries were quickly reinstated. Experts are certain that this

decisive step in the foreign policy of the two hostile states will have an impact on the entire region. But in both countries, these changes are also criticized. In June 2018, a grenade was thrown at the prime minister at a support event in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, and numerous further attempts of assassination were thwarted. The prime minister also made enemies because of his peace policy.

Important Country of Origin and Transit

The rapid political changes led to strong migratory movements within and beyond the Ethiopian borders. According to the United Nations Coordination Office (OCHA), around 3.2 million people were displaced within the country in April 2019.

Due to extreme droughts in the desert-like regions of the south as well as ethnic conflicts and border disputes, there have always been many Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia. Most of the IDPs live in camps and the numbers are increasing. In 2016, before the regime change and the liberalization, there were around 800,000 IDPs. Human rights organizations reported on the violent displacement of ethnic minorities under the old government. This displacement was concentrated in the south, where vast areas are being developed for agriculture or dams to increase food production developments that are considered critical in the hunger-stricken country.

After an attempted coup in the Amhara region in July 2019 and the resulting uncertainty in the western regions of Gambella and in the southwest of the Oromia region along the border to South Sudan, the government introduced a return program for IDPs. According to its own information, the government helped around 1.8 million people to return to their home areas between May and July. However, reports are accumulating that tensions are increasing in these regions, including tensions over land conflicts due to the large number of returnees.

Alongside Uganda, Ethiopia has taken in most of the continent's refugees, around 900,000 (as of 2018), most of whom come from the neighboring countries Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan. After the peace agreement with Eritrea in summer 2018 and the opening of the border shortly thereafter, tens of thousands of Eritreans crossed the border in a short period of time. Most of them could not be

registered by local authorities or the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in such a short time; many were looking for relatives and were housed privately. Many also left the country again soon after. In September 2019, around 146,000 Eritreans were registered in Ethiopia; a significant decrease when compared to the 174,000 Eritreans who lived in Ethiopia in 2018. The Eritrean refugee and human rights organization Africa Monitors, based in Uganda, estimates that around 250,000 Eritreans have fled to Uganda through Ethiopia since Eritrea's border opened in September 2018. There are two reasons why Eritreans are fleeing to Uganda, said Zecarias Gerrima, Vice Director of Africa Monitors: one is that the migration routes to Europe via Sudan are closed, leading refugees to move south to Uganda. The other: the camps in Ethiopia are overwhelmed by the rush. Those who are currently arriving in Uganda can be divided into two groups, says Gerrima: "One group has just fled Eritrea and decides not to take refuge in Ethiopia because the camps there are overcrowded and they fear that they will soon be deported again," said Gerrima. "The other group had been living in Ethiopia for a long time as refugees," he explains. "They are now fleeing because they do not trust the peace that is currently being celebrated there between Ethiopia and Eritrea". In order to stop the exodus from Eritrea, the border with Ethiopia was temporarily closed again in April 2019.

According to Ethiopian law, refugees have to live in one of the 24 refugee camps that are managed by the Refugee Agency (ARRA) together with the UNHCR. The two largest camps are in the south of the country: the Nguenyiel camp in Gembella houses around 74,000 refugees from South Sudan and the Dollo Ado camp, close to the border with Somalia, houses around 145,000 refugees who are mostly of Somali origin. The Shire camp, in the north, at the Eritrean border, is home to more than 100,000 refugees. In 2015, only around 7,000 refugees received a special permit due to security or health problems to settle in cities like Addis Ababa.

Ethiopia is a transit country for refugees from South Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea, but also for African migrant workers on their way to the Arabian Peninsula. At the same time, the hitherto repressive regime itself generated more and more refugees: over a million of the approximately 90 million Ethiopians have sought protection in exile. Many traveled south, especially to Kenya. Some moved to Tanzania and even all the way to South Africa. But recently, refugees in those countries have been threatened with arrests due to missing work permits.

Most migrant workers, around 80%, have so far moved eastwards to the Arabian Peninsula, especially to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, where African men toil on construction sites and women are hired as domestic workers. In 2013, the Ethiopian government banned all recruitment attempts from the Arab region in Ethiopia. So far, it has only been possible to assume how large the labor migration of Ethiopians to the Arabian Peninsula really is. After Saudi Arabia announced in 2014 that it wanted to deport Ethiopians, regional analysts expected around 20,000 returnees, recalls Bram Frouws from the RMMS regional think tank, which systematically collects migration data from the Gulf of Aden. Between May 2017 and August 2019, around 300,000 Ethiopians were deported. Around 37% of them reported that they had been unemployed in Saudi Arabia. In addition, most returnees disclosed that they have been abused in Saudi Arabia. According to NGOs, 95% of those who have returned need psychological support.

The same applies to Ethiopian returnees from Yemen, a transit and destination country for many Ethiopians. After the war broke out in Yemen in 2015, the number of refugees increased steadily, around 85% of whom were Ethiopians. Among them, there was a notable increase in the proportion of Oromo people, which had left the country following the brutal suppression of protests in the Oromo region in October 2016. In November 2016, 98% of Ethiopians arriving in Yemen were from the Oromo ethnic group. The route they took to Yemen by boat via Djibouti across the Gulf of Aden is risky: in July 2019, a refugee boat sank again in the Gulf of Aden on the way to Yemen, at least 15 Ethiopians were among the dead.

As part of a voluntary return initiative, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is rescuing migrants stranded in Yemen from the chaos of war, most of whom are Ethiopians. In 2016, IOM evacuated over 600 back to Djibouti, mostly Ethiopians. From April to July 2019 alone, the IOM organized safe home flights to Addis Ababa for over 2,100 Ethiopians from Yemen. Most of these returnees had previously been detained in Yemen. In spring 2019, the stadium in Yemen's capital Aden was full of migrants and even after the return initiative, the IOM suspected another 2,000 refugees to be in the stadium. In October 2016, over a thousand Ethiopians escaped from a detention center in southern Yemen with the help of a prison guard.

The escape routes beyond the Ethiopian border are becoming increasingly dangerous. The news about the massacre of the Islamic State against 30

Ethiopian migrants in Libya in 2015 spread rapidly. The migrants had left their home via the northern border post of Metema, a gathering point for human traffickers. In response to the news, the government in Addis closed the border and arrested around 200 suspected smugglers. Surveys by the RMMS think tank on the migration routes show how “quickly the traffickers and smugglers react to changes in the migration routes and how well equipped they are, mostly with satellite phones,” Since the border authorities in the transit country of Sudan are increasingly taking action against migrants, due to their cooperation with the EU, the routes have shifted significantly, making smugglers and smuggling networks adapt to the situation. Numerous human traffickers previously stationed in Khartoum and Libya have relocated to Ethiopia and Uganda to guide the Eritrean refugees to Uganda, from where they are flown to South America and Asia by plane.

In 2018, around 23,000 Ethiopians fled their country, mostly to neighboring countries. The proportion that arrives in Europe is relatively small. According to the EU, around 3,500 Ethiopians had entered Europe irregularly in 2015. This means an increase of 175% compared to the previous year. Around 6,000 applied for asylum in the EU member states in 2015, of which around half were granted. The UNHCR estimates that around half of Somalis and Eritreans who receive asylum in Europe are actually Ethiopians. They provide false identities in order to not be deported. In Germany, exactly 1,116 Ethiopians applied for asylum in 2018 with a recognition rate of around 16%.

After the change of government and the introduction of reforms in Ethiopia, the EU asked its member states to take the political changes into account in their asylum policies. Specifically, the issue was that the new Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Abiy released thousands of political prisoners and removed three opposition groups from the terror list in order for them to participate in the democratization process. At the same time, the army and secret service had been cleansed of individuals from the previous regime, which earned him many enemies. Experts and NGOs assume that these security organs will now increasingly persecute the released opposition figures, who will also seek protection abroad. EU member states should take this into account when processing asylum applications.

So far, Ethiopia has not been particularly cooperative regarding the return of rejected asylum seekers. The EU strategy paper on negotiating a return

agreement from 2016 cites a rate of only 16% of implemented returns. In other countries, it is 40%. In December 2017, the EU and Ethiopia signed an agreement to return rejected asylum seekers. Subsequently, the government sent intelligence officers and immigration officials to Europe to support the embassies in verifying the identities of those to be deported. “It is planned that Member States will first provide the names of the Ethiopians to be identified and then we will issue the travel documents and then the return process can begin,” said Teshome Toga, Ethiopia’s ambassador, to the EU. The agreement also stipulates that the EU will bear the cost of repatriation and reintegration programs.

Charm Offensive from the EU

Ethiopia is the EU’s most important partner country for migration management in Africa alongside Nigeria. In November 2015, the EU and Ethiopia signed a joint declaration on the implementation of the Common Agenda for Migration and Mobility (CAMM) at the EU-Africa Migration Summit in Valletta, Malta. As a goal, it states: “The EU will help to prevent human trafficking and illegal migration and invest aid money in combating the causes of flight.”

The EU agrees to support regional training programs for Ethiopian border units, to train law enforcement agencies to combat human trafficking and smuggling, to upgrade the biometric data storage for passports, and to develop devices to detect counterfeit travel documents. According to the EU Commission’s strategy paper on the negotiations of the return agreements, cooperation is particularly important in these areas in order to identify those asylum seekers who mistakenly pretend to be Somalis or Eritreans to obtain asylum in the EU. To do this, cooperation with the Ethiopian authorities is essential; only they can clearly identify them. Three months later, 57 persons were returned to Addis Ababa.

In the future, there will be an annual meeting in Brussels or Addis Ababa to evaluate the progress in the “Dialogue on Migration and Mobility”, according to the agreement. Ethiopia is committed to speeding up the return process. Frontex, Europol, and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) are explicitly mentioned as institutions supporting the EU by implementing the policy.

Economic Power of the Diaspora

On the other hand, the EU wants to make concessions to Ethiopia – such as facilitating visa applications, enhancing economic partnerships, and improving economic growth. A business event is to be held in Brussels to encourage investment in Ethiopia. During his visit to Brussels, Ethiopia's foreign minister also explicitly asked to make the remittances of exiled Ethiopians from other European countries more cost-effective. Ethiopia's gross national product and foreign exchange reserves are hugely dependent on these transfers of money to families at home. In order to take full advantage of this, the government in Addis Ababa launched the so-called diaspora policy in 2013, which encouraged Ethiopians in exile to invest at home with a strong foreign currency.

In 2015, Ethiopia signed the dialogue with the EU on migration and development, the so-called Cotonou Agreement. This is intended to implement measures to prevent human trafficking and smuggling. Ethiopia is one of the main beneficiaries of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). Targeted measures against smuggling in Ethiopia had already been decided at 2015 summit in Valletta. 253 million euros were used for this. In April 2016, a further 117 million euros were pledged to support refugees, internally displaced persons, and their host communities. Ethiopia received 30 million euros from this pledge.

In July 2016, the EU signed two further agreements with Ethiopia, which are to be financed by the EU Trust Fund. Italy's development agency is responsible for the implementation of the projects. Around 20 million euros are to be invested in vocational schools and training programs for young people and women, especially in the regions of the country that are particularly affected by irregular migration. The aim is to reduce the emigration of young people. Another 47 million euros are intended to combat the causes of flight in five regions that are home to neglected ethnic minorities. Here, too, the main focus is on vocational training and better school and health care as well as food security. The EU's action plan assumes that young people migrate or emigrate less if they find better living conditions locally. In the agreements, however, it was omitted that the former central government itself created reasons for flight through its repressive policy towards minorities and enormous land grants to foreign investors such as Saudi Arabia.

A key focus of the EU's humanitarian commitment is on the issue of food security.

Droughts continue to plague Ethiopia, as in the 1980s, when the EU took in hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who were on the verge of starvation. The foreseen drought periods for the coming years in the Horn of Africa can cause further displacement and increase migratory movements, not only among Ethiopians, but also among the refugees in the camps, which are fed through international aid organizations. The EU is investing 51 million euros in food and measures to prevent starvation.

Combating Smuggling

As part of the so-called Khartoum process, Ethiopia is entitled to funds of EUR 45 million euros from the EUTF under the heading of “Better Migration Management” (BMM). The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) has rented additional offices in Addis Ababa and is continuing to expand its work. Ethiopia’s law enforcement agencies are to be empowered to act against traffickers. Regional training programs for border authorities are implemented in order to establish joint border patrols between neighboring countries and to strengthen the cooperation.

Ethiopia was one of the first countries to set up an agency to combat human trafficking in 2012, the so-called National Council Against Human Trafficking (NCHF). This agency emerged from a task force that was founded in 1993 to prevent the mass exodus to South Africa after Eritrea’s loss in the War of Independence. Prime Minister Desalegn was once the Chairman of the NCHF; today it is headed by Vice Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen. The governing body of the agency is made up of representatives from central but also local governments and the secret service, as well as representatives from various ministries and youth organizations.

In 2015, a law to prevent and suppress human trafficking and smuggling was passed, which provides for sentences of up to 25 years in prison and fines, including helpers of smugglers and counterfeiters. In the case of serious crimes in which the death of migrants was willfully accepted by smugglers, the death penalty can also be imposed.

The NCHF authority is involved, among other things, with educational campaigns in places where many migrants live. It receives more and more information from

the population and from refugees themselves and has had some successful investigations in recent years. The NCHF reported more than 200 arrests in 2015, according to a report by the regional Sanah research institute based in Kenya. Ethiopian NCHF agents, in collaboration with Sudanese and Kenyan border authorities, have carried out cross-border investigations of smuggling networks of migrants to South Africa.