



Annual report 2019

www.ife-ch.org



DEFENDING OUR VALUES



Annual report 2019

Dear Friends,

Despite the peace deal signed with Ethiopia, repression and military service in Eritrea continue to force Eritreans to flee their homes to seek safe haven in neighbouring countries or in the West. The migration route taken by Eritrean refugees to reach the European coasts remains volatile and dangerous. In Libya, thousands of Eritreans are in the hands of human traffickers who exploit, mistreat and illegally detain them.

While the international community is missing in action to immediately evacuate them from this conflict zone and provide protection, the discontent connected to the movement of people grows in many European countries.

In Switzerland, this discontent has recently been materialized with the tightening of the asylum policies towards Eritreans, which is the harshest in Europe. Indeed, Switzerland is the only country to demand that Eritrean asylum seekers to return to Eritrea despite (1) the risk of persecution upon their arrival and (2) the absence of a readmission agreement between Switzerland and Eritrea.

IFE observes a serious degradation of the mental health of many young Eritrean women and men in Switzerland who often talk about suicide.

The psychological and physical violence that Eritrean young women and men are subject to is immeasurable. IFE will continue to stand for the respect of their basic human rights and will continue to promote a better understanding of the challenges.

As we reflect on 2019, we extend our gratitude to our dynamic team and our partners who supported us throughout this year in amplifying the voices of Eritrean refugees.

Thank you for joining us to promote respect of human rights.

Veronica Almedom
Co-founder and Co-director

Throughout the year...

Continuous awareness raising of the Swiss Parliament on the Eritrean political developments

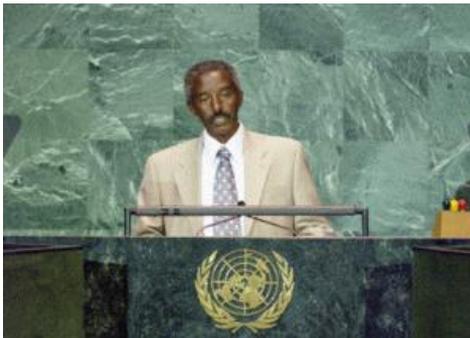
One of the principal missions of IFE (International Forum for Eritrea) is to disseminate verified information to the Swiss population in order to better their understanding of the political situation in Eritrea. To this regard, and in especially during serious events, IFE specifically targets the members of the Federal parliament by providing them with continuous information

Raising awareness in this way thus serves as an alternative to the *ad hoc* information on Eritrea which is generally provided to them through long reports from UN agencies, the European Union or the applicable departments of the Confederation, for example.

The permanent stream of information on certain events and facts thus allows those concerned to gain a better overview of the situation and subsequently improve their ability to take appropriate decisions.

March 2019

Intervention at the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations (country analysed: Eritrea)



In March 2019, Veronica Almedom and her colleagues pleaded in favour of victims of enforced disappearances in Eritrea. They especially highlighted the case of the former minister of Finances, Mr. Abrehe Berhane (fig 1)

In early autumn 2018, Berhane published *Eritrea, My Country*, in which he criticises Eritrean politics and urgently calls for elections to be organized to replace incumbent President Issayas Afeworki.

Mr. Berhane knew the risks he was running. A few days after his public appeal, he was arrested by Eritrean security forces and locked somewhere still held secret.

In the recommendations made by the UN committee to the state of Eritrea outline:

“[...] in particular, the State should promptly disclose informations on the conditions of [...] the former Minister of Finance, Berhane Abrehe and his wife, Almaz Habtemariam. Detained since the 17th September 2018 and January 2018 respectively” (28, let. g).

Despite these recommendations, no independent investigation has been carried out into the legality of the former minister’s detention. Furthermore, no information regarding their place of detention has been given to the family of Mr Berhane, nor to his wife’s, Almaz Habtemariam, family. To this day, the couple have had no access to legal representation and have never appeared in court.

In its report, the Humans Rights Committee expresses “deep concern about widespread arbitrary arrests and detentions”. (p.6 para. 27).

Meeting in Bern between Shewit T., an unaccompanied minor, and members of parliament

Shewit T. is 22 years old. Undefeated by the trying migratory journey as an unaccompanied minor a few years before, she was able to integrate various social circles

Shewit has always dreamt of becoming a dental assistant. In addition to the endless hours of class she took in order to increase her chances of finding a job, she resolutely embarked on learning french. In early 2019, however, the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) ordered her to leave Switzerland and return to Eritrea. Like everyone else in the same situation, this decision led her to go into hiding

All her dreams were shattered in an instant. She has since been living on CHF 10.- a day and has not been able to continue the professional training she had started

But Shewit did not give up.

Huda-Sara, president of IFE, facilitated Shewit’s access to the Federal Parliament, allowing her to join her in Bern with Veronica Almedom and to eloquently recount her story to several parliamentarians. Everyone was very touched by her testimony and also amazed by her strength and courage. Among them, Damian Müller paid particular attention.

Another elected official, did not just listen to Shewit’s story, he made an appointment with SEM collaborators and advisors to Federal Councillor Katrin Keller-Sutter in order to secure Shewit and all young people who arrived in the country as unaccompanied minors, continuing studies and vocational training instead of being forced underground.



¹ ¹ Final observations on Eritrea, absence of an initial report: [file:///gew12fs021/redir_folder\\$/almev/Desktop/Priv%C3%A9/I/G1912308.pdf](file:///gew12fs021/redir_folder$/almev/Desktop/Priv%C3%A9/I/G1912308.pdf)

Encouraged by an excellent lawyer from the Centre Social Protestant (CSP) and by a woman who became a mother figure to her, Shewit spared no efforts to come out of hiding and lead a dignified life.

Intervention with Shewit at the Human Rights Committee



After her trip to Bern, Shewit T. went to the Palais Wilson in Geneva to once again draw attention to delicate situation in which she finds herself. Veronica Almedom and Shewit T. described the degradation of the situation of Eritrean refugees in Switzerland since the entry into force of the 18.3409 motion entitled «Mener une politique équitable envers les demandeurs d'asile érythréens²» (“To conduct a fair policy towards Eritrean asylum seekers”). Veronica Almedom first spoke about the overall situation and Shewit T. went on to explain what it means in practice to live with emergency aid (CHF 10.-/day) and poignantly expressed her firm determination to continue her professional training, whilst pointing out that she has to face up to the institutional closed door to achieve this.

A few days after this meeting, Léa Winter, coordinator of the meeting with the Human Rights Committee, published this article in the daily national *Le Temps* (figure 3.)

The Human Rights Committee then recommended that Switzerland take the necessary measures to³:

- a. *Ensure that refugee children and asylum-seeking children in federal reception centres are integrated into the mainstream education system in all cantons and are given access to quality education that is culturally appropriate and adapted to their language needs, and continue its efforts to ensure that migrant children have access to higher education and vocational training.*
- b. *Eliminate existing barriers that prevent unsuccessful and provisionally admitted young asylum seekers from continuing their learning and to facilitate their access to higher education.*

The steps taken by IFE in order to facilitate the participation of Shewit T. in this meeting and power of speech of the latter enable the Human Rights Committee to understand of the situation of young Eritrean refugees affected by these measures better. The Committee's recommendations to Switzerland reflect the grievances expressed by Shewit T. and therefore stress the need for the Swiss authorities to continue caring for young asylum seekers.

² <https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaef?AffairId=20183409>

³ Final Observations regarding Switzerland 4^e periodical report:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=E%2fc.12%2fCHE%2fCO%2f4&Lang=en

To date, Switzerland has not signed any readmission agreement with Eritrea. These young people are therefore stranded in Switzerland, "they can neither be sent back, nor return home"⁴.

May 2019

Speech by Huda-Sara Bakhet

As part of a training course for the Lausanne police and organised by the Lausanne Office for Immigrants Huda-Sara Bakhet gave a presentation on the recent history of Eritrea and led a discussion on reasons why Eritreans leave their country and seek asylum in Switzerland.

The first objective of this exchange was to share insight into Eritrean culture in order to improve exchanges between the Lausanne police and Eritreans. The second objective was to explain the fragile relationship that Eritreans maintain regarding the police force as a result of the many abuses they have suffered in their country of origin.

IFE recommends this type of exchange and hopes that other Swiss cities will follow the initiative of the City of Lausanne.

July 2019

“Generation global”, portrait of Veronica Almedom from RTS/SRF/RSI

In the context of the federal elections, the three channels of the Swiss Radio Television followed ten young Swiss people who were actively engaging with a social campaign.

The journalists of the SRF filmed Veronica Almedom for a week throughout her activities. They accompanied her to Brussels where she met young Eritreans who had left Switzerland for fear of being forcibly returned to Eritrea. In Brussels, the European Development Days were also held in which Veronica Almedom was to participate to meet colleagues.



This report follows the journey of Veronica Almedom from the arrival of her family in Switzerland to her humanitarian commitment, particularly towards Eritrean refugees. The film has been viewed

⁴ https://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/asile_bloqu%C3%A9s-en-suisse/44772002

nearly 400,000 times on social networks and YouTube; it has also been shared over 500 times on Facebook.

For IFE, this film represents an extraordinary opportunity to inform a wide audience about the political situation in Eritrea and the violence suffered by the population to the point of fleeing the country. It also helped to humanise those condemned to go underground by the recent hardening of the asylum policy in Switzerland. The disastrous effects that this ban has on their living conditions, their health, their morale and their personal development were thus highlighted in these images.

October 2019

Setting up a support funds raised by the President

Huda Bakhet and Veronica Almedom have decided to launch a solidarity fund for Eritreans recently arrived in Geneva. The purpose of this fund is to support Eritrean refugees on a case-by-case basis for ad hoc situations where the IFE Support Fund can make a positive difference.

Public debate on “Nouvo”



The federal elections were conducive to a public debate. One such opportunity was set up by the RTS⁵ show Nouvo, who brought together several young people dedicated to different causes to talk about the challenges they faced in their respective fields.

A valuable dialogue was also able to take place with candidates standing for federal elections.

Shewit T. once again presented her situation with remarkable eloquence. She explained her journey, including leaving the family home alone at the age of 14. Veronica Almedom then gave an outline of the general situation of Eritrean refugees and highlighted the disastrous consequences of the last measure entered into force for young people, now forced to live in hiding while they are in full school or in vocational training.

Nouvo filmed report on the Negash family

⁵ Citizens debate: <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/nouvo-news/video/bienvenue-chez-nouvo--le-debat-complet?id=10760200>



In October 2019, RTS magazine “Nouvo” produced a portrait of Veronica Almedom. In it, she explained her journey and the reasons that encouraged her to become an activist for refugee rights.

In this report, Nouvo recounts the experiences of the family of Abraham Negash through agonising years. The father and the child (a year and a half

years old at the time of the facts) arrive alone in Switzerland. The mother who had started the migratory journey with them, was kidnapped en route by traffickers. She will live alone in Sudan in dangerous and precarious conditions and will be found later. In Switzerland, the life of the father and the child faces a very difficult start. Through thick and thin and with the support of an entire network of associations, the mother finally arrives in Geneva. This report by Marc Gagliardone has moved thousands of people on the web. Over 300'000 views and 320 shares to date.

"Rebuilding together" in collaboration with swisspeace

In October 2019, Mussie Calmerfalk-Ephrem (Board member and current President of IFE) and Veronica Almedom contacted swisspeace with in view to launch a project archiving the memory of Eritrea.

They have in fact come across a scheme capable of enabling Eritrean society to document parts of its history, to archive them and then to launch a societal debate capable of overcoming the problems of the past. This program has proven effective in many countries that have experienced violence similar to that in Eritrea.

To this end, Mussie and Veronica have decided to entrust most of this work to a group of expert members of IFE, called the Scientific Committee, made up of specialists in various fields. It will work hand in hand with the Foundation's experts.

This research will focus on the period between 1961 and 1991. As stories of the veterans of the Eritrean War of Independence have never been documented and independently compiled, IFE will work to collect their testimonies and experiences.

This documentation and archiving process will above all play an **educational role** because, as mentioned above, the combatants' stories have never been freely collected and grouped together. The generations which followed that of the veterans are therefore unaware of most of the history of their elders. This break in the intergenerational link is a considerable obstacle to the restoration of dialogue. This program will therefore undoubtedly contribute to the **pacification of the intergenerational bond**.

This process will also contribute to the **institutionalization of the country's national history**. Most of the veterans are between 65 and 85 years old, many of them have already passed away and their stories have unfortunately been lost. There is therefore an urgent need to document their memory.

December 2019

«Refugee Workshop Geneva» at PwC



In December 2019, audit and consulting firm PwC organised a workshop for refugees who live in Geneva and have a good level of French.

The workshop aimed to teach them tools to better position themselves on the job market. The PwC Geneva human resources team helped them rework their resumes, prepare for interviews and answer trick questions with confidence.

One aim of the workshop was to select a candidate for a three-month internship. This year, a young woman got this job.

Veronica Almedom set off the day with an address that aimed to inspire and motivate the participants. She retraced her professional career, which in fact began at PwC. She then briefly spoke about her family's journey, which in many ways resembles that of the participants. Her intervention touched all those present in the room, both the beneficiaries of this workshop and the PwC professionals.

* * *

2020 Future Outlook

Over the course of 2020 to 2021, IFE plans to launch its project of documenting and archiving of the memory of Eritrean veterans, relying on its scientific committee and on the experts of the Swiss Foundation for Peace.

Simultaneously, IFE will launch a photography project which will portray Eritrean war veterans and will culminate in an exhibition of the portraits. Paying particular attention to female veterans who played a crucial role in the independence of the country, who were indeed soldiers, but also women, wives and mothers. IFE will present and highlight this interweaving of roles that are at the same time powerful, violent but also soft and vulnerable.