



MEDIA RELEASE

WORKING WITH
VICTORIA'S AFRICAN COMMUNITY
www.att.org.au

E: berhanahmed@iprimus.com.au

African Think Tank Inc.

ATT Media Release 10 February 2014

Rejected asylum seeker drowns himself in Maribyrnong River

Last Wednesday a talented, compassionate asylum seeking young man drowned himself in the Maribyrnong river rather than be returned to probable torture and execution in his home country of Eritrea.

Mr Rezene Mebrahtu Engeda, like most of the young men in Eritrea, was conscripted into a military-run 'development' program at an early age.* These programs are pointless work and virtual slave labour; the objective of them is simply to ensure that there can be no rebellion against the government. Conscripts are ragged and half-starved, paying for food and clothing from bare subsistence wages. Like many of these young men, Rezene escaped, choosing to brave a dangerous and difficult journey across Ethiopia to Kenya, where he lived for about a year in the most marginal of conditions as a part of the refugee community in Nairobi, Kenya.

Five years ago, Rezene gained a spouse visa to enter Australia. The relationship lasted for two years but was unsuccessful. Rezene moved out with friends and applied for refugee acceptance.

The application process lasted for a tortuous three years. With no permission to work, and no government benefits, Rezene was supported by the generosity of his friends in the African-Australian community and by odd jobs. He was a talented builder who did good-quality work on fences and small construction jobs.

During the week ending the second of February, Rezene received his latest letter from DIMA. Puzzling with his friends over complex bureaucratic language that even postgraduate English speakers find it hard to unravel, he understood that he was called to attend a meeting with DIMA on Wednesday the 5th of February. Even to someone who understands the process and language, such a letter can come as a thunderbolt. It seems certain that at that meeting, his application would finally be refused and he would be given a short-term deadline to return to Eritrea.

Rezene never made that meeting. On the morning of the 5th, he told his friends he was going to it. Instead, he drowned himself in the Maribyrnong River. Rezene Engeda had run out of options.

What options did Rezene have? As a refugee, he could not obtain a visa or passport to return to Sudan. Eritrea was the only country that would accept him. Until recently, the official policy of Eritrea was that army deserters are to be executed out of hand. Although this has softened slightly, people that have fled Eritrea still face, on their return, at the least, imprisonment and torture. For this reason, UNHCR, the International Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch have all issued advisories that refugees are not to be returned to Eritrea. 118 refugees driven onto planes with rifle-butts by the Egyptian government and returned to Eritrea in 2011 vanished without trace on their return. Similar fates have befallen refugees forcibly returned by Libya, Israel

and Mali, with the International Red Cross in most cases unable to find out what happened to them. A very few have been located alive in atrocious conditions in prisons in remote areas or in the notorious Saba military camp.

Over 120 distressed members of the Eritrean communities met at Flemington on Sunday to grieve for a man who was well-known among them as courageous, gentle, and compassionate. In Rezene's Orthodox Christian community, it is the custom to bury people in the same ground as their families, as was Nelson Mandela, and the meeting raised a substantial amount towards this. The communities also spoke of how five or six members have suicided in the Maribyrnong in the past two years, and remembered the drowning of Michael Atakelt in 2012, with the long fight for answers which many of the community still feel to be unsatisfactory.

"He asked me to join him for a beer last Sunday," said one of his friends. I told him I was too busy at the time. I didn't know how much he needed to talk. Now that is like a dagger in my heart."

ATT chair Dr Berhan Ahmed said today, "We understand the difficulty for DIMA in having a spouse migrant apply for refugee status. But the process is unnecessarily long and complicated. Australia has to accept the international advisories from many sources that people who have fled Eritrea, and some similar countries, must not be returned to those countries. This promising young man ran out of choices. He was the victim of an inhumane policy that amounts to little else than sending people to their deaths."

1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, article 33:

'1. No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.'

Rezene Mebrahtu Engeda was, according to Australia, not a refugee. But the result was the same.

* Some biographical details are still being verified by the Australian-African communities.