



ERITREANS SEEK REFORM

Walking to help homeland

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Solomon Sengal's journey began in the early 1980s. His trek took him from what was then Ethiopia to the former U.S.S.R. and West Germany.

In 1989, the electrical engineer then crossed an ocean, landed in Somerset, raised a family and nurtured a career. But, he said, he never forgot.

On Thursday, Sengal, accompanied by nine others, began another voyage of sorts. This one has a more public purpose.

He and his companions are marching from New York to Washington, D.C., to draw attention to what they say is one of the world's foremost human-rights travesties, in Eritrea, just north of the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea, which borders the Red Sea and is east of Sudan, is the continent's newest nation-state, having been birthed from Ethiopia, which lies to its south, in 1991 after a 30-year war.

The 10-strong contingent stopped in New Brunswick yesterday, for cups of water, coffee and hot chocolate — and to rest their already weary feet.

"We have a worse situation than under the previous administration when we were part of Ethiopia," Sengal said.

According to the group, 60,000 are being held, many in shipping containers with no windows.

"They are always locked up, like goods or animals," Sengal said. "The night is very cold, the day is very hot."

After their long-hoped independence, Eritreans held high hopes for the future. But promised democratic reforms never took shape. Eritrea is ruled by President Isaias Afwerki's tightened iron fist, ostensibly along Marxist lines. The totalitarian regime permits no opposition or a free press in the country of 4.8 million people.

Sengal, 46, and the others, including Hiwet Ghebremichael, 49, who came to the United States as a refugee by way of Sudan, say the United States can prevent disaster on a mass scale without sending soldiers.

On Thursday, the group brought a letter of appeal to the United Nations, addressed to Secretary General Kofi Annan, urging it and the United States to act.

"He's put the whole country in prison," Ghebremichael said, alluding to Afwerki. "He's a dictator, worse than Saddam Hussein."

American involvement in the region is nearly nil, Sengal said.

"We're just turning our eyes so we don't see," he said.

Dania Avallone came from Naples, Italy, with her two sons to join the march.

An Italian, Avallone was working as a marine biologist in Eritrea in the early 1990s, eager to see what could come of the nascent eastern African nation full of promise.

When the mass imprisonment began, she asked questions. She was summarily jailed.

Although she was released after two weeks, the jailings and torture continued all around her, Avallone, 49, said.

ASPER

In Defense of the Human Rights
of the Eritrean People



“If you express an opinion in Eritrea, you go straight to jail,” she said. “How can you forget this story? . . . Even if we are a few people, we will not stop this struggle.”

The 265-mile trip, including visits to historical sites in Philadelphia and Washington, is projected to take 12 days. The marchers were to be in Trenton, Pa., this evening. Tomorrow, they will walk 34 miles to Philadelphia. From there, they will trek to Wilmington, Del.; Newark, Del.; Aberdeen, Md.; Baltimore; and Laurel, Md.

“It’s going to be a long trip. . . . But I’m ready to do it,” Sengal said. “The cause is important.”

For more information on the march, go to www.asper-eritrea.com, and click on the English version.

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