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Pietro Lombardi

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Selfies from the cellphone of a man arrested in Sudan and on trial in Italy, accused of being a notorious people smuggler



WORLD

A Migrant Smuggling Kingpin Is on Trial—What If He’s the Wrong Man?

The African man held in Sicily is actually a poor migrant from Eritrea, say a host of people—including, it appears, the target himself

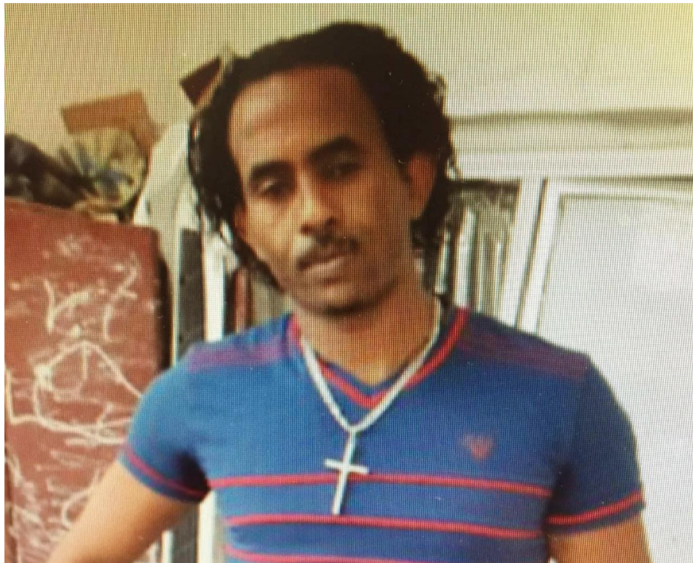
By Drew Hinshaw, Matina Stevis and Pietro Lombardi

June 30, 2017 11:09 a.m. ET

For several years, as Europe’s migration crisis grew, investigators pursued one of the world’s most wanted people smugglers, a fugitive known as “the general” for the efficiency of his network.

Police from five nations tracked Medhanie Yedhego Mered as he crisscrossed the Sahara ferrying compatriots from Eritrea, his home country on the Horn of Africa, to Europe. In May of last year they finally zeroed in on him, drinking an afternoon chai in a Khartoum tea room as Sudanese police barged in to make the arrest.

A year on, a growing stack of evidence suggests that one of the biggest trafficking manhunts in Europe got the wrong guy.



A photo of accused people smuggler Medhanie Yedhego Mered, according to the U.K.’s National Crime Agency, which provided the photo. PHOTO: BRITISH NATIONAL CRIME AGENCY/EUROPEAN PRESS PHOTO AGENCY

The baby-faced man currently on trial in Sicily is not the 36-year-old smuggling kingpin, according to dozens of witnesses, digital records and Eritrea's government. Instead, indications are he is an Eritrean milk deliveryman named Medhanie Berhe Tesfamariam who was slowly trying to make his way to Europe when he was grabbed.

There is one other source who calls the person on trial innocent: a man who says he is Mr. Mered, the real smuggler. "I thought they were going to release him in no time—they know that he is not the right Medhanie," he said. The Wall Street Journal contacted the man via chat messages to what is listed in court documents as Mr. Mered's verified Facebook page.

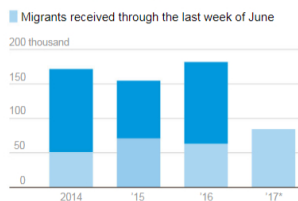
Yes, he was in the people-smuggling business, this man said, but he no longer is. As for the one on trial in Sicily, "May God help him."

Political pressure is heavy in Europe to score a victory against [the booming and brutal business of people smuggling](#). Just this week [rescuers](#) pulled more than 10,000 migrants from boats, including overloaded inflatable dinghies, off Libya's coast and recovered 24 bodies.

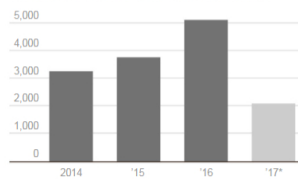
Perilous Passage

Libya-to-Italy is a primary and sometimes deadly route for migrants trying to get to Europe.

Arrivals in Italy from Libya



People who died trying to cross from Libya



*As of June 23
Sources: Frontex (2014-2016 arrivals); IOM (2017 arrivals, deaths)

It is estimated that 14,000 people have perished in Libya-based smuggling operations since 2013, fueling authorities' determination to capture operators such as Mr. Mered, for whom they long ago issued an arrest warrant.

Born poor in rural Eritrea, Mr. Mered fled the isolated land across the Red Sea from the Arabian peninsula, as have countless other young men facing a future of forced military service. For cash, according to Italian prosecutors, he began helping his countrymen make their way to Israel through Sinai, a route bedeviled by bandits and kidnappers.

In 2013, Israel sealed off that route just as another, more lucrative path had opened up. The post-Arab Spring collapse of law and order in Libya created rich opportunities to smuggle people, guns, drugs and contraband.



Migrants sleep in the open on a rescue ship after being found on a smuggler's boat off Libya in November. PHOTO: CAROLYN COLE/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

Moving to Libya around 2013, Mr. Mered seized on the surge of African migrants trying to get to Europe. He set up shop in the Libyan port of Zuwara, turning a three-story building into a smuggling depot, according to Italian court documents.

By 2015, with migrants paying up to \$2,000 apiece to sail from Libya to Italy, Mr. Mered was grossing \$1 million in a good week, according to the Italian state's evidence. His network of contacts stretched to Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

Italian authorities say they have confirmed Mr. Mered's operation smuggled 7,000 people to Italy between 2013 and 2015, and they suspect it was far more. One state's witness in Italy described Mr. Mered as "a king ... the only man who could walk around Libya wearing a crucifix."

The man who calls himself the real Mr. Mered said he was "in the business between August

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2013 and 2015.” Besides being contacted by the Journal through a Facebook page listed in court documents, he was reached via Facebook by an old friend in Canada, who then spoke to him by phone and confirmed it was Mr. Mered’s voice. The Journal also sent a message on WhatsApp to the man via a number listed in court documents, which was shown as having been read.

On wiretapped phone calls dating from the period when Mr. Mered was in the smuggling business, he voiced the anxieties of an overstretched crime boss: rivals breaking into his business and fears that the police were closing in.

“I am really scared, my friend,” Mr. Mered is heard telling an associate on one call.

“Do you know when one starts to fear? It is when he has made money that he starts to fear.”



A migrant woman cries after losing her baby in the water as she sits in a rescue boat off the Italian island of Lampedusa in May. PHOTO: CHRIS MCGRATH/GETTY IMAGES

In October 2013, the death of more than 360 Eritrean migrants in a shipwreck off the small Italian island of Lampedusa trained the world’s attention on Europe’s burgeoning migration problem. [The calamity](#) also moved Calogero Ferrara, a veteran mafia prosecutor in Sicily, to action. He decided to apply his techniques to a smuggling trade that had begun to rival drug trafficking.

“I was the first to investigate it in this way,” the cigar-smoking prosecutor said in his office in Palermo packed with awards and “Wanted” posters of men he has gone after. “Basically, we’re using the tools of a typical mafia investigation...wiretapping, intercepts, checking Facebook.”

He soon ran into the obstacles that have made people smuggling one of the toughest crimes to pursue. While Italian police routinely nabbed the helmsmen of the boats, these were the small fish, often migrants who were steering the vessels under coercion. The masterminds stayed in African countries that provided little cooperation.

By sweeping tens of thousands of calls, and with support from investigators in Sweden, the Netherlands and elsewhere, Mr. Ferrara assembled a rough map of Libya-based smuggling networks. By 2014, he was homing in on one in particular, Mr. Mered’s.

Mr. Mered, however, soon fled Libya, afraid of its rampaging militias, for Sudan. There, in one of the most closed dictatorships on earth, European law-enforcement officials last year finally saw their chance to nab him.

As the refugee crisis expanded, Sudan offered to help Europe in hopes of loosening decades of Western sanctions imposed for human-rights abuses and harboring terrorists. The U.K., Sudan’s onetime colonial master, sent an agent from Britain’s newly formed National Crime Agency to establish a rapport with the Sudanese state. The NCA declined to comment.





Eritrean migrants who arrived at a crossing into Sudan in early May were sent back to their homeland. PHOTO: ASHRAF SHAZLY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

In July 2015, according to an account filed in the Italian court, the NCA informed Italy it had located Mr. Mered in Sudan. Italian prosecutors and NCA agents laid out a strategy to capture him, with the British lining up help from Sudan, according to an NCA memo.

British agents supplied Mr. Ferrara's prosecution team with a cellphone number they said belonged to Mr. Mered.

On three occasions in May 2016, investigators intercepted calls on the phone. In one, they heard a discussion of helping a man emigrate, according to court documents.

"Medhanie, please help me," the first man said, in the Eritrean language of Tigrinya.

"When you have the money, the situation will change," replied the second man.

In another intercepted call, the person discussed missing payments for people who had crossed the Sahara.

A few hours later, the Sudanese pinpointed the location of the phone, placing the caller in Khartoum's Asmera Corner Café, a hangout popular with migrants.

Sudanese police encircled the cafe and arrested the suspect while he was inside having tea. In his pockets, according to court documents, were a few scraps of paper and a cellphone containing the numbers of known smugglers—men who, in 2014 wiretaps, had been heard discussing people smuggling with Mr. Mered.

The Sudanese handed over the man to Italian police, who loaded their quarry on an Italian government plane and flew him to Rome. There, news footage showed a stunned-looking young man in a reddish shirt walking off a plane, handcuffed and flanked by police.



The man arrested last year in Sudan, who is on trial in Sicily as the notorious people smuggler Medhanie Yehdego Mered but who others say is a migrant named Medhanie Berhe Tesfamariam. PHOTO: ROPI/ZUMA PRESS

The NCA celebrated its victory in a statement that day, saying it had captured "one of the world's most wanted people smugglers."

Almost immediately doubts arose about the identity of the arrested man. He bore little resemblance to the photo on Mr. Mered's Facebook page, said several people—including Mr. Mered's wife, who lives in Sweden.

A number of Eritreans, some identifying themselves as relatives and others as friends of the arrested man, said he wasn't Mr. Mered. Instead, they said, he was a then-29-year-old Eritrean, Mr. Tesfamariam.

They described a man unlike the entrepreneurial smuggler at the center of an international manhunt.

One of seven children, Mr. Tesfamariam, quiet and reserved, had shown almost no ambition while growing up in the Eritrean capital of Asmara, they said. He loved cycling and dreamed of studying in China, said his half sister, Hiwet Tesfamariam, yet he didn't even know where China was. He drifted from one menial job to another, among them delivering milk door to door.

In late 2014, facing a life of forced army service, Mr. Tesfamariam became part of the mass emigration that has marked Eritrea for the past decade. He joined a sister in next-door Sudan, where he hoped to find a smuggler to take him to Europe.

His lack of drive and money left Mr. Tesfamariam stuck in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, said his sister and friends there, spending his days playing videogames in a hotel he shared with four other migrants.

never be mixed with real court migrants.

The man arrested by the Sudanese police in May 2016 had a battered Samsung i9105 phone containing pictures of himself hanging out in shabby clothes or sleeping on a bedraggled mattress. In Italy, he gave the police his Facebook password.

In the months after the arrest, reasons to think it was a mistake piled up.

Eritreans who said they had been smuggled by Mr. Mered said that he wasn't this man. Eritrea's government wrote to Rome saying the same, and providing a copy of Mr. Tesfamariam's identity papers. The defense said voice-recognition analysis showed the voice of the man in custody didn't match Mr. Mered's.

The defense offered a benign explanation of a wiretapped call on the cellphone found with the suspect, saying Mr. Tesfamariam was helping a friend whose family was trying to send him money to migrate.



A cellphone photo of the man arrested in Sudan. The defense identifies him as an Eritrean migrant named Tesfamariam; Italian prosecutors say he is a smuggler named Mered.

An Italian lawmaker launched a parliamentary inquiry into the case, requesting information about the procedures followed to identify the man on trial. A couple of European governments, at the behest of their diplomats in East Africa, have asked the Italians to release the man in prison in Sicily.

Mr. Ferrara, the Sicilian prosecutor, is undeterred. In an interview, he cast doubt on evidence provided by Eritrea's government and by the supposed family members of the suspect, saying people in small communities might be looking out for one another.

"It's the same guy, at least according to our experts, but a judge will see," Mr. Ferrara said. "The problem we have ...in these cases, we don't know exactly the names of these people. We have thousands of conversations of people who say they are Medhanie...it's a very difficult situation."

The trial, which began last fall, is expected to continue for months.

The half sister of Mr. Tesfamariam said her brother, sitting in a Sicilian jail, is "very desperate."

Far away, the man who says he is Mr. Mered has become a transient. "I have no permanent residence, I move from one country to another," he told the Journal. Facebook data this year put him in Uganda.

He said he had retired, having grown disillusioned with the smuggling business.

"If I am a bad person," he said, "I will be met with bad things."

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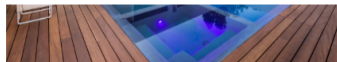
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