
WITNESS STATEMENT OF MORRIS SLESHI TEWELDE

I, Morris Sleshi Tewelde, brother of Niyat Ferede Yeshiwendim, of

Personal Data

Personal Data will say as follows:

1. I am the brother of one of the victims of the November 2021 tragedy, Niyat Ferede Yeshiwendim ("**Niyat**"). I am a designated full participant to the Cranston Inquiry.
2. I make this statement in order to provide relevant information, based on my knowledge and understanding of the circumstances leading up to and during the events under scrutiny. My statement should be read together with the statements of my mother, Freweyni Hailemariam Gitet ("**Freweyni** ") and father, Ferede Yeshiwendim Nadew ("**Ferede**"). I have read and agree with the contents of those statements and will not repeat any of that here. In this statement, I will focus specifically on the period of time after Niyat left Tigray and her journey from Addis Ababa to France.
3. The matters set out in this statement are within my knowledge unless otherwise stated. I acknowledge that the information that I received from my sister during her journey may not always have been complete and/or accurate. It has been a long time and I may not recall all of the details accurately. The pain of losing my sister may have impacted my ability to recall specific times and dates.
4. This statement was prepared with the assistance of my legal representatives at Duncan Lewis solicitors. I have prepared this statement in English. I have prepared a previous statement with my legal representative on 21 March 2022 for the purposes of requesting an Inquiry into the incident of 23/24 November 2021 [MT2; EX1-INQ000071]. This statement corrects two minor inconsistencies in my previous statement, and can be read alongside this statement.

Background

5. I am an Ethiopian national, born in on **Personal Data** in Mekelle in the northern Tigray Region. I was granted asylum on August 2022 in France, and now live in **PD**
6. I graduated as an architect from Mekelle University in 2017. Before leaving Ethiopia I was working as an architect. I am currently working temporary jobs at constructions sites in Le Havre.

7. I am the second oldest brother of Niyat. Ferede is not my biological father, he is technically my stepfather, but I have always considered him my dad. I am my mother's son from her previous marriage. She later divorced my biological father and remarried to Ferede when I was four years old. My brother Amanuel Ferede ("**Amanuel**") is Ferede's son from his previous marriage. He is the eldest of the four children. Niyat and my little brother Yeshiwendim Ferede ("**Yeshiwendim**") were born after my mother and Ferede married. We grew up as a family with Ferede as our father and Freweyni as our mother, and I have always considered Amanuel, Niyat and Yeshiwendim as my full siblings. I will therefore refer to Ferede as my father and Niyat as my sister throughout this statement.
8. Before the war broke out in Tigray in November 2020, I was based in Mekelle with my wife Name and our son Name who was born on PD. However I used to travel to different project sites in Tigray (mainly Humera) for work. My mother, father, Niyat and Yeshiwendim all lived together in Mekelle. My brother Amanuel left home 2010 and was living with his wife at the time the conflict started.
9. Niyat was a typical 22-year-old woman. She was physically fit and well, slim to average build, and around 168-170cm tall. As far as I was aware, Niyat did not suffer from any physical health problems and had never been formally diagnosed with a mental health conditions. However, as I will outline below, Niyat had fled a war zone so like the rest of our family she was very traumatised by the things we had witnessed.
10. Both my mother and father have described in their statements what the situation was like in Tigray after the war started in November 2020 and how I fled with them to Kola Tembien so I will not repeat that here. After we came back from Kola Tembien in January 2021, my wife and I did not think it would be safe to stay in Mekelle due to the war. Niyat left by bus to Addis as soon as the roads reopened. A bit later in January 2021 I joined her in Addis alongside my wife and son. We stayed there with our uncle and later rented an apartment where we lived together until the day she left Ethiopia for good. I returned once to Mekelle to retrieve my car. This was very dangerous but I needed the car in Addis Ababa.

Niyat's Escape from Ethiopia

11. Addis Ababa was not safe for Tigrayans either. After the Tigrayan Forces re-took Mekelle in June 2021, Tigrayans were hunted down everywhere in the country. People were being arrested and detained simply for being from Tigray or having Tigrayan connections. My sister experienced this; she was arrested when she arrived in Addis Ababa, and detained for one week in Katalit Prison. This is why me and her decided that she should leave Ethiopia.

12. [Sensitive & Irrelevant] There were checkpoints all over the city, [Sensitive & Irrelevant]
[Sensitive & Irrelevant]
[S&I] whereas I had to go out for work.

13. I helped Niyat to escape Ethiopia. I drove her to the airport in Addis Ababa on 3 October 2021, and from there she flew to Hungary. I paid for her airfare, to make sure that she could travel to Europe in the safest possible way. Many people from Ethiopia travel overland via Libya and across the Mediterranean, which is a very dangerous route. I was trying my best to avoid her having to make a dangerous journey.

14. The Hungarian visa had been arranged by a broker (a smuggler/agent). Niyat was told to leave Hungary and move on to another European country as quickly as possible after she arrived, so she only stayed for a few days. The broker who arranged the visa gave her clear instructions to travel to Hungary on the visa but not to try and apply for asylum there. Niyat obeyed the instructions. We had heard terrible things about the asylum system in Hungary and did not believe that she would get asylum even if she had applied, and she was terrified she would be sent back to Ethiopia. If we thought she would have been safe in Hungary then that would have been all we wanted.

My escape from Ethiopia

15. [Sensitive & Irrelevant] As soon as Niyat left Ethiopia, I immediately started to make arrangements to get out of Ethiopia. I went to Dubai. My former boss had a business firm in Dubai, and I had been there for work before, so I had some connections. My former boss helped me a lot during this time. It is relatively easy to get a visa for Dubai to visit, but you can only stay for a limited period. Dubai is also a difficult place to live if you cannot work, because it is very expensive and there is no possibility of seeking asylum there. For those reasons Niyat would not have been able to follow me there. I had to leave [Name] and [Name] in Addis Ababa, as [Name] did not have a passport, and also because we did not know how long it would be before I could return to Ethiopia. [Sensitive & Irrelevant]
[Sensitive & Irrelevant] I did not want to take that chance. We would not have been able to afford to stay there for long. [Sensitive & Irrelevant]
[Sensitive & Irrelevant]

16. I flew to Dubai first week of November, about a month after Niyat had left Ethiopia. I did not have a long-term plan at this point, I just had to get out of Ethiopia as quickly as possible. I had started temporary jobs in Dubai when I received the news of Niyat's death.

Niyat's Journey

17. Niyat travelled with a group of people from Ethiopia to Hungary, and from there to Belgium by train. The group was organised by the agent. Niyat only told me about one other person from the group, her name was Meron Hailu Gebrehiwet ("Meron"), and she was also a victim of the tragedy on 23/24 November 2021. Niyat told me that Meron was from Adigrat in Tigray. Her and Niyat became friends and stayed together until the night they died.
18. I have helped Niyat in every possible way I could before she left Ethiopia. I kept reminding her that this would all pass and one day things would go back to normal, so that she did not feel depressed in a country that was not home. We spoke almost every other day after she left.
19. When Niyat arrived in Belgium on 10 October 2021 she stayed in a hotel for a few days to begin with. After that she was accommodated at a Red Cross Shelter for women. This was a temporary solution, like a homeless shelter. I know that she found a Tigrayan community whilst she was in Belgium, and that she joined demonstrations to protest the treatment of Tigrayans in Ethiopia.
20. We talked about her claiming asylum in Belgium when we spoke on the phone. I strongly advised her to stay in Belgium. She told me she was planning to travel to Calais with the group she travelled to Europe with from Addis. I told her not to go, but to wait for me to figure out an alternative. I was trying my best for her, and at the same time trying to get my wife and son out of Ethiopia and get them somewhere safe. It was a very difficult time.
21. I spoke to many friends about her situation, both in Belgium and other places such as Norway and Sweden. There is a large Ethiopian diaspora community in Europe and it is easy to get in contact with lots of people (some of them fled the war in Ethiopia like us), so I was having many conversations trying to find a solution. That is how we learned about Dublin procedure. I was also trying to find a lawyer that could help her. Niyat was scared that because of the Dublin regulations she would be sent back to Hungary if she claimed asylum in Belgium or another European country, and that from there she would be deported to Ethiopia. Being sent back to Ethiopia was Niyat's worst fear. I think to her mind, because of Brexit, she believed she would only really be safe once she was in the UK, because she then could not be sent back to Hungary (and in turn, back to Ethiopia).
22. Niyat told me during a video call in the first week of November that she had gone to northern France for a day and come back to Belgium. She had visited Calais, I think she went there to try and figure out her options for crossing the Channel. She told me she had seen that there were a lot of people trying to cross the Channel to reach the UK. We have a saying in Tigrinya which roughly translates as *"when trouble is facing you as a crowd (to a lot of people) then it is not*

trouble anymore". She thought that the fact that a big community was trying to cross, must mean that it was safe.

23. Niyat told me she was very surprised about what she had seen in northern France; people living in tents and in terrible conditions. She was surprised by how refugees were treated, and that this sort of thing could even happen in Europe. This might have been a factor in her decision to attempt the crossing. I think she always assumed it would be fairly easy to get to England; most people from Ethiopia cross the Mediterranean to get to Europe, so crossing the Channel is seen as an easy journey.
24. After her visit to Calais I told her that crossing by boat was not an option at all and told her again to stay put. We kept contact (calls and video calls) until five or six days before she died. I did not know she was going to try to cross the Channel on 23 November. To be honest I did not think she would take the risk of getting on a small boat.
25. I do not know how much Niyat paid or agreed to pay to make the crossing, or how it was organised.

Aftermath of the events

26. I first heard that a boat had sunk in the Channel two or three days after it happened. I was very worried because I had not heard from Niyat for several days and she was not answering my calls. I found a number for someone called [Name] [Name] from Care4Calais through a social media post, and I called her from Dubai. [Name] told me to send anything that might identify Niyat, such as photos, passport, and a copy of her visa. After a few days I was put in touch with the French investigation team [Name] also put me in touch someone called [Name] from the Red Cross. My statement dated 21 March 2022 says that I contacted the Red Cross, this is not quite accurate - it was Care4Calais who introduced me to someone at the Red Cross. I was also contacting people I knew in asylum seeker hotels in UK to see if anyone had any news, for example of someone had seen her in Calais.
27. I did not have any contact with Niyat or anyone else on the boat the night of 23/24 November 2021. Later, through mutual friends that Niyat was in contact with during her journey, I learned that Meron had called a friend as they were leaving France, and told them that they were travelling with a big group of Kurdish people, and that there were a lot of people on the boat. After I learned that a boat had sunk I was calling mutual friends, to see if they had any news.
28. I have learnt after Niyat's death that in Dunkirk most of the 'main smugglers' are Iraqi. I also know from others that there are Ethiopians in the camps who work as 'handlers', which means

they will facilitate contact between the main smugglers and the people trying to cross. I did not know anything about the arrangements Niyat made with the smugglers in France.

29. It was through Care4Calais and [Name] that I got in contact with the French Investigation team at that time. As most of our family was cut off from communications at this time, we could have been in a situation where we would never have known what happened to her.

30. [Name] from the Red Cross helped me to apply for a tourist visas for my father and I to come to France for the burial. My father was in Sudan at the time, and I was in Dubai. My 21 March 2022 statement says I flew 2 -3 weeks later, this was an error. My father arrived in France on 23 December 2021, and I arrived on 26 or 27 December 2021. The Red Cross covered the costs of travelling and accommodation.

31. Niyat was buried with Meron in Lille on 29 December 2021. The Red Cross told us that they could assist with her being buried in either Addis Ababa or France. Because of the war she could not be repatriated to Mekelle where our family was. We chose France, because neither of my parents nor Niyat's other siblings would have been able to attend her burial in Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa is also not home and is a long way from our family. A lot of people from the Tigray community in France and Belgium came to the funeral. Meron's aunt was there from America. The Mayor of Tourcoing came too. I have been told that the grave may only be temporary, which is worrying for my family.

32. I have not left France since I came to identify Niyat's body. As I could not seek asylum and stay safe in Dubai I could not return there. I would not have been able to claim asylum in Dubai as they are not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, and I was too distraught to return to work. [Sensitive & Irrelevant]

[Sensitive & Irrelevant] As I could not return to Tigray because of the war, I claimed asylum in France. Since this time, I have been through the asylum process here, and now have refugee status. [Sensitive & Irrelevant]

[Sensitive & Irrelevant]

33. My mother visited Niyat's grave in March 2023, when I helped her to apply for a tourist visa for France. These were exceptional circumstances as she was travelling to see her daughter's grave, and the Red Cross in France and Ethiopia both assisted with the application and gave us a supportive letter. She has applied for a visa to come back for the third anniversary in November this year (2024), but was refused. She was told this time that visiting her daughter's grave was not an adequate reason. I do not know why they granted it the first time around, but not the second. We are trying to find someone to help us apply for her again.

34. I am aware that there is an investigation into the events of 23/24 November 2021 in France. I am represented by a French law firm but have not yet been told if or when the Judge will ask me any questions. I have never been asked for any information by the French authorities.
35. Niyat was so loved, and was an incredibly special person. Losing my little sister has been devastating for me, and for the rest of my family. Our family has been through so much, and all we wanted was for Niyat to be safe. I am older than Niyat and I felt it was my responsibility to keep her safe. I did everything I could, but it was not enough. I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt for not being able to protect her. I just wished I had been a bit faster at finding a solution before she decided to take that route. Niyat had never even seen the sea before she came to Europe. It must have been so terrifying for her.
36. Niyat would never have left Ethiopia if war had not broken out; none of us would. We had good lives in Mekelle before the war; much better than what life is like now – including for me in France. Things are still not stable in Ethiopia. Although there is no active conflict in Tigray we fear that this may not last. There are a lot of problems in other parts of the country. I want to return home as soon as it is safe for me to do so. I want to be with my family, in our country.
37. As a family we need to understand what happened and why Niyat was not rescued. I carry so much guilt for not being able to protect my little sister. We need to grieve as a family and find some sort of closure, which we cannot do until we know the truth. We hope that the Inquiry will be able to establish that truth, and help to ensure that no other family will have to go through what we have gone through.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings for contempt of court may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

NAME: Morris Sleshi Tewelde

SIGNED: **Personal Data**

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