

REPAIR PROJECT

# UNITED KINGDOM

## FATIMAH & TESFA'S STORY



***Fatimah and Tesfa\* grew up together in Eritrea. A year after they were married, Tesfa was forced to flee the country, claiming asylum in the UK and receiving refugee status in 2020. The couple are desperate to be reunited and have applied for Family Reunification.***

### **Fatimah explains:**

"Tesfa and I grew up together in the same neighbourhood in Eritrea. We were dating for a year before we got married. When his family came to my parents to ask for my hand in marriage, I was so happy.

When we got married, we went to the church with our families and friends. I wore a traditional yellow dress with a cross design and Tesfa wore a white gown. Our families had a big celebration.

After the wedding, we lived with Tesfa's parents, at their house. My parents lived next door, and we became like one big family.

*\*names have been changed.*

We had a very happy life, and planned to have children, but in 2017 Tesfa was forced to flee the country. When he left, it broke my heart. I wanted to go with him, but he was scared the journey would be too dangerous."

### **Tesfa continues the story:**

"We'd been married for almost a year when I had to leave the country. Fatimah wanted to come with me, but I knew the journey would be dangerous and I did not want to put her at risk. I promised I would bring her to be with me once I reached safety.

I left Eritrea in 2017, travelling on foot to Ethiopia, which took five days of walking. I stayed there for 5 months, before moving on to Sudan and then Libya. From Libya, I travelled through Europe – in May 2018 I bought a phone and a calling card and I was able to contact Fatimah for the first time since I left Eritrea. I gave her my number and we were able to keep in touch quite regularly after that. I came to the UK in May 2019 and applied for asylum immediately.

It took until December 2020 for my refugee status to be confirmed. I wanted to apply for family reunification for my wife to join me in the UK as soon as possible. At the time, she was still in Eritrea, but in Eritrea it was not possible for her to make an application for family reunification because there is no Visa Application Centre there."



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**BritishRedCross**

To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

And Fatmah's own search for sanctuary was about to begin:

"In August 2022, I received a call up for military service from the Eritrean government. I did not want to join the military and the war, so I decided to flee Eritrea.

Crossing into Sudan can be very dangerous because of the soldiers along the border. I tried to cross several times, but each time I failed. Finally, I travelled to Teseney, about 25 km (15 miles) from the Sudan border. From there I continued on foot and this time successfully crossed into Sudan. But once I was there, I did not feel safe. I felt like I was at constant risk of being detained. I heard stories of people being arrested and given £1,000 fines because they did not have a valid ID. I spent most of my time in hiding.

Tesfa was very worried about me. He told me he wanted to come and see me in Khartoum, and after five years apart he flew there and we were finally able to see each other again. He was only able to stay for one month, but we had a very happy time. He went back to the UK in March 2023, and left some cash to help with living expenses. But in April 2023, the war flared up in Sudan, and we lost contact.

The rest of my time in Sudan, I lived in constant fear. The war was raging, and there was no access to the

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**I miss my husband dearly. All I want is for us to be reunited, to be happy and secure together.**

internet or phone connections, I thought I might never see Tesfa again. I finally managed to flee Sudan a couple of months later, a few days after I had managed to regain contact with Tesfa. I travelled to Juba, South Sudan, and from there, to Kampala, Uganda. I arrived in Uganda feeling utterly exhausted, it had been such a long and challenging journey from Sudan. Five days after arriving in Kampala, I applied for asylum, but I still don't feel safe here in Uganda.

I feel vulnerable and alone and without any friends or family. Tesfa sends money to cover essentials like food, but that is the only financial support I get. I miss my husband dearly. All I want is for us to be reunited, to be happy and secure together."

Tesfa and Fatimah's application for family reunification was successful and they were reunited in the UK in June 2024.

*Images are for illustration only*