

REPAIR PROJECT

UNITED KINGDOM

MESFIN & LIYA'S STORY



Mesfin and Liya* met, married and had two children together in Ethiopia. But despite having lived in the country for years, Mesfin – originally from Eritrea – was detained and forced to flee the country. After more than four years apart the family are seeking to be reunited in the UK where Mesfin has refugee status.

Mesfin:

"I was born in Eritrea, but I have lived most of my life in Ethiopia. I first travelled there with my family when I was a child and we often visited. When I was young my father was imprisoned in Eritrea and my mother and I moved to Ethiopia. A few years later, my mother died and I returned to Eritrea, but when I arrived I found out that my father was also dead.

In Eritrea, I was detained by the authorities for six months because of my religion. My aunt was able to free me but told me to leave the country as it wasn't safe.

**names have been changed.*

So, when I was 24, I fled Eritrea and went back to Ethiopia again. I found a job at a restaurant, and that was where I met Liya."

Liya:

"I would go to the restaurant to hang out with friends and Mesfin caught my eye. I thought he looked handsome, we started chatting and I asked for his phone number.

We had been dating for around three years when I found out I was pregnant with our first child. After that we decided to get married.

The wedding was at my parents' house – a traditional ceremony conducted by community elders where we made promises to one another and exchanged rings. We were extremely happy.

After the wedding, we rented a house together. I stopped working when our daughter was born and Mesfin took an additional job to earn more.

Soon, our second child, a son, arrived. We were so happy, but he has serious health problems. He has to take medicine but needs an operation which isn't available in Ethiopia.

Mesfin worked every single day of the week to support us, he was a great father."



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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

Photo: © Suki Dhamda

Mesfin:

“We were very happy with our growing family. My wife was getting support from her mother who helped look after the kids, and I was working to support our family. It was hard work, but as a family we were very happy.

Unfortunately, although I had been living there for years, my status in Ethiopia was still irregular. Somebody opposed to our relationship because I am not Ethiopian reported me. I was detained by the police, terrified that I would be deported back to Eritrea.”

Liya:

“After Mesfin was bailed we spoke about his safety. Because of the risks from the authorities, it was safest for him to leave the country. It was a really hard decision, our children were just two and three years old and because I was looking after them full-time I wasn’t able to work, but I wanted my husband to be safe.

He left Ethiopia and we lost contact. I had kept his mobile phone, hoping we could stay in touch, but for four years after he left, we heard nothing. It was very painful, being a single mum of two, without a job. I missed my husband very much and our children asked for their father every day.”

Mesfin:

“It was such a difficult decision, and I was so sad to have to leave my wife and children. I first travelled to Sudan and after Sudan, to France. I wanted to call my family, but I had no access to a phone.

Two years later I arrived in the UK and tried to call the phone I had left with Liya, but I couldn’t get through. I tried multiple times, but the line was not working. I was very upset, I wanted to speak to my wife and make sure she was ok. Finally, two years after arriving in the UK, a friend travelled to Ethiopia and I asked him to help find my family.

He managed to find Liya, gave her a phone, and we have been in touch ever since. I had not spoken to my wife or children in four years and I was so happy to hear their voices again.”



All we want is to live as a family again, in safety, and to look after our children together.

Liya:

“When we spoke to each other again on the phone, I was so happy. I could not believe that I was talking to Mesfin again after so many years.

Now we talk every day on the IMO app. We video call too so Mesfin and the children can see each other. The children really enjoy the video calls and always ask when he is coming back and whether he can come and see them for their birthdays. They get upset that I cannot tell them when they can see their father again. It is very hard for us all without him.

The current situation here is quite dangerous. We are close enough to hear the fighting in Tigray, which is very frightening. I worry so much for my children’s safety. We all miss my husband very much. The children really want to see their father again, and I want to see him too.”

Mesfin:

“I really want my family to be together again. Our children were just two and three when I left, now they are six and seven.

Our son is unwell and they are living on the edge of a war zone – there are missiles landing nearby and they often hear the sound of gunfire. It is very difficult for all of us.

It has been a very long time without them and I hope we can be reunited. All we want is to live as a family again, in safety, and to look after our children together.”

After almost six years apart, Mesfin, Liya and their two children were reunited in the UK in 2024.

Images are for illustration only

