

ABBA MUSSIE ZERAI NOMINATED FOR UNHCR PRIZE

UNHCR-Italy submitted Abba Mussie's name for the most ambitious recognition by the New York based Organization. When Father was informed, he sent the following reply to the Organization:

Dear All,

I would like to thank UNHCR- Italy for nominating me for the Nansen Prize. The motivation is an encouragement to my ministry in favour of refugees in the Horn of Africa. Grateful for the confidence and moral support that the UNHCR - Italy operators are showing me, to all of them I express my thanks. In case that my name is selected among the winners of this award, it is my intention to start a foundation to provide scholarships to Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, which will enable them to complete their university or technical studies that will open to them a brighter future.

Abba Mussie is an Eritrean R.C. Priest that started and still runs the HABESHIA Agency for Cooperation and Development. It supports schools and other projects in refugees camps in Ethiopia and Sudan to help the beneficiaries promote their educational and human background while waiting for their paper process. Likewise, he also does pastoral ministry among the Eritrean Communities in Switzerland. But his main activity is advocacy for the plight of Eritrean, Ethiopian, Sudanese and Somali refugees in North Africa and the Middle East. Among the achievements of Abba Mussie is the tragic moment when he received a call in the middle of the night from a dingy boat in danger of sinking in the Mediterranean. Father immediately alerted the Italian Navy of the situation and gave them the coordinates of the position of the boat. The Italian Navy launched immediately a SOS message to the ships in the area. Unfortunately, no ship responded to the appeal, but quite a few passed by without offering any help. Only 9 people survived the tragedy driven by the waves to the Libyan shores, from where they had departed few days earlier. One of the nine, in fact, died of exhaustion, almost immediately on the beach before they could get help by the Libyan Navy. The others were taken directly to the prisons, and some to the hospital. Abba Mussie was able to reach them in prison and there collect their testimony incriminating a Nato helicopter ship and a ship that hovered over them, took pictures, threw a few bottled bottle of water and loaves of bread, and abandoned them to their fate. When reported in the Italian papers, NATO denied its complicity in the death of the 64 people in the boat for abandoning the wreckage to its fate. They firmly and repeatedly stated that none of their ships was in the vicinity of the boat at the time. Two years later a Swiss TV station did a painstaking research, by tracing the survivors, collecting testimonies from Abba Mussie, the Italian Navy, demanding information from Nato about the routes of its ships and their schedules. And finally confronted the NATO high brass about its response to the SOS appeal. Confronted with the documentation provided by the journalist, the spokesperson finally admitted that indeed a NATO ship was 22 miles away from the dingy boat but they did not act on the appeal. I hope that the chapter does not close with the simple acknowledgement, but that justice can be allowed to run its full course. The blood of those African victims demands justice and dignity as much as any other life.

But Abba Mussie advocacy mission responds also to calls from the hidden dunes of the Sinai desert by desperate captives of the reckless bedouins. He echo the cry for help from refugees in Lybia, Tunisia, Djibouti, yemen, Syria. He bridges and connects them with the highest ranks of the UNHCR officials in Egypt, Italy, New york, he pleads for them with Ambassadors of Egypt at the Vatican, with Italian Ministers, the Vatican Curia, the Council of Churches in Geneva, the Europear Court, the European Union, GOs, NGOs,. Any place, any time, anyone who can be of any kind of help, and he can reach, he will try. How effective is his mission? Well, if nothng else he has alerted the whole world, starting from the UNHCR of the human traficking and organ cropping for profit in the Sudan refugee camps, the Sinai Peninsula, etc. He has tracked down the responsibility beyond the material bedouin executioner to Government officials or the mafia web in various countries. Which is not a small achievement. But, once more, like most of the uncomfortable witnesses, like John the Baptist, his is a voice in the desert, that the wind takes away before it even reaches to the ears of those who could do something more efficient to solve the problem. A voice however who want relent until justice to the homeless refugee is done, peace is achieved, and his ministry will be redundant.