

Ethio-Lebanese corpse disposal Inc: *A bilateral effort to cover-up Ethiopian deaths in Lebanon*



Ethio-Lebanese corpse disposal Inc:

A bilateral effort to cover-up Ethiopian deaths in Lebanon

By Zecharias Zelalem

Translations and additional reporting:

Bileh Jelan

“She loved life and she loved her family,” Tigist Tafesse says while fighting back tears when asked to describe her late sister Desta. “All she wanted to do was earn enough money to cover her younger brother’s schooling expenses. She didn’t deserve this. Nobody deserves this.”

Tigist’s younger sister Desta, 26, had left her native Ethiopia in search of employment as a domestic worker in Lebanon. It’s a route that many young Ethiopian women take in search of income that could potentially revamp the livelihoods of impoverished families back home. Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians have flocked to the Middle East over the past decade, with choice destinations being Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. And while some do manage to earn a living and send valuable remittances to loved ones in Ethiopia, an increasing number of them are instead entrapped in a cycle of isolation, endless unpaid toiling, food deprivation, horrific abuse and all too often, death.

It was the tragic fate of Desta, who had spent over a year at the home of a Lebanese couple in the city of Byblos, some 30 kilometers north of Beirut. Over the course of the last one year, Tigist says her sister was never allowed to leave the premises and was subjected to ghastly abuse.

“They burnt her, beat her and kept her as a slave all this time,” Tigist laments. “I tried everything I could to rescue her.” Tigist contacted nearby friends in a desperate attempt to hatch an escape plot. She had initially attempted to solicit the aid of a worker’s rights organization in Lebanon, but Desta had begged her not to. She feared that doing so would enrage her captors and result in brutal repercussions for her.

The Ethiopian government maintains a consulate in the capital Beirut.



Desta Tafesse Bedhane. Her ordeal just prior to her death was particularly distressing (Images: Tigist Tafesse)

Despite a mandate that would call for Ethiopia’s consular staff to keep tabs on the wellbeing of fellow citizens, they systematically ignore complaints and turn a blind eye to some of the most harrowing reports of abuse. Addis Standard has been able to include in this article several recent, documented incidents of Ethiopian consular officials doing nothing to pursue justice, even in cases where there was evidence pointing to deceased Ethiopians being victims of a variety of abuses and perhaps murder.



Ethiopian migrant workers in Beirut hold a demonstration calling for the inclusion of migrant workers in the labour law, May 2019 (Image: Social Media)

kafala

Like many Ethiopians Desta Tafesse was left to fend for herself. Her older sister Tigist, herself a domestic worker in the Middle East, was left helpless in the months preceding Desta's death. After all, she was all too aware of the limitations someone in Desta's shoes faced. Foreign domestic workers in this part of the world, like Tigist and Desta, don't enjoy the same employees' rights and freedoms guaranteed to citizens under most constitutions. In Lebanon, their protections, rights and status as domestic workers are governed by a system known as the kafala system.

The kafala system ties a foreign worker's legal status to their employers and puts the workers under the total control of the employers. Slated as a method to ensure foreign workers have local residents overseeing their status and employment, it has served to legitimize virtual slavery, as employers are given carte blanche to exploit their employee unchecked. The kafala system is what grants an employer the right to take away an employee's travel documents, withhold pay and subject them to countless hours of work with no rest. Unlike Lebanese labor laws, the kafala system has no charter guaranteeing the safety and wellbeing of domestic workers, opening the door to all sorts of horrific treatment against workers. A domestic worker is also unable to flee an abusive home. Addis Standard has been made aware of several cases where Ethiopian domestic workers, hospitalized after suffering the effects of torture and beatings, were made to return to the same home where they had been subjected to their ordeals. It is due to her extremely vulnerable status under the kafala system that Desta experienced the indignities that would later end in her untimely death on May 12, after toiling for 14 months without a pay.

It is also due to the kafala system that her death is unlikely to ever be considered worthy of a Lebanese police investigation that would likely result in her employers facing criminal charges.

The Lebanese government regularly issues half-hearted pledges to improve the situation of domestic workers, but has always rebuffed criticism of the kafala system. In an interview this year with Thomson Reuters, Lebanese Minister of Labor Georges Ayda insisted that the kafala system was essential to protecting employers. "You are putting a stranger within a family," was how he described the employment of domestic workers in Lebanese homes. "When they work in houses there has to be somebody that is responsible for them."

But human rights activists reject the notion that the law is used for anything other than a pretext to justify modern day slavery. In April of this year, rights group Amnesty International released a report titled "Their house is my prison" that highlighted not only the extent of some of the abuses, but also how the kafala system serves to keep at-risk workers pinned down with no escape. According to the report, a domestic worker needs to go through a lengthy documentation process with the employer's consent to be able to leave a job, no matter how dire the working conditions are. "The employer has to sign a release form before a public notary and the new sponsor then needs to sign a notarized pledge to assume all responsibilities and obligations toward the worker. If the worker leaves her employer without permission, she risks losing her regular migration status and facing detention and deportation."



Reports of Ethiopian domestic workers being enslaved, raped and murdered in that country have made the rounds for well over a decade now

To many, it remains a mystery exactly how Lebanon's relatively conservative society was able to normalize and institutionalize these abuses with little domestic opposition. But Alli Finn, a representative of the Beirut based Migrant Community Center and Anti-Racism Movement, points out that shortcomings in the kafala system are what have proven most problematic. The kafala system's granting of near omnipotent control over all aspects of a worker's life, combined with the narrative that the system serves to protect the worker, is what opens the doors to violations and exploitation.

"It isn't a cultural thing." Finn dismissed the notion that such abuses might be born of something embedded in Lebanese society. "The main problem is the kafala system itself and that Lebanese law excludes domestic workers. The system's proponents often claim that the enforcement of the system is to protect the migrant worker and employer. The rhetoric of "protection" is especially problematic because it is then used to justify any sort of treatment a worker could be subjected to, such as keeping a worker locked in the house, ostensibly and falsely to 'keep her safe,'" Finn said. "Employers often refer to a domestic worker as 'part of our family,' which serves to diminish both her rights as a worker and her ability to pursue justice afterwards. The reality is that this rhetoric is used to exploit migrant workers, especially women."

But Lebanese American law professor and author Khaled A Beydoun disagrees. In an op-ed penned for Al Jazeera back in 2012, he described culturally entrenched racism in Lebanese society as being what aggravates the situation. "An unsavory blend of Lebanese ethnocentrism, racial animus toward Africans, human trafficking and the debt bondage of maids upon arrival from Ethiopia, make up a recipe for contemporary enslavement," was how Beydoun put it.

There are around 300,000 foreign domestic workers employed across Lebanon, with around three quarters of them Ethiopian women. Reports of Ethiopian domestic workers being enslaved, raped and murdered in that country have made the rounds for well over a decade now. In response to the public outcry at home, the Ethiopian government banned its citizens from traveling to work in Lebanon, citing the dangers of doing so. Addis Abeba maintains that until it reaches an agreement with the government of Lebanon securing the rights and dignity of Ethiopian citizens in the country, it will not lift the ban. But thousands have defied, and continue to defy, the ban while recruitment agencies, some based in Addis Abeba, continue to operate and traffic women towards the life of uncertainty that the job search in Lebanon encompasses.

The allure remains strong, despite the risks. "There are no jobs back home," says one such woman, a 22 year old who tells Addis Standard she was 19 when she traveled to Beirut. She worked for six months without pay in the home of a family in Beirut before managing to get her passport and escape. She requested anonymity as she fears she could be caught and deported if identified. "I'm putting myself at risk just by searching for a job here, but what else can I do? My family has no other source of income and I have four younger siblings who count on me. There are no opportunities to return to in Ethiopia."

Clearly bans have not had the desired effect. With employment opportunities few and far between in Ethiopia, women continue to flock towards the Middle East, well aware of the risk they are taking. There are more Ethiopians working in Lebanon today than there were when the Ethiopian government issued the first of such bans in 2008. The futility of such bans is especially evident when one takes note of the fact that cases of abuse have skyrocketed. Deaths and suicides have also seen a steady increase.

“Two foreign nationals employed as domestic workers in Lebanon die every week in that country,” says Sara, an Ethiopian activist and case worker with the Canada based “This is Lebanon” organization, a lobbyist group for abused and enslaved domestic workers in Lebanon. Modus operandi includes contacting abusers and threatening to expose their abuses on the group’s Facebook page. The threat of being exposed is often enough to convince abusive employers to release their workers and pay up owed salaries. This Is Lebanon has managed to free a number of women using such methods whilst arranging for their former employers to pay them in full. Those who don’t, end up like the family of Eleanore Ajami, a Lebanese fashion executive and owner of the renowned Eleanore Couture brand. In 2018, after This Is Lebanon published the story of her family’s abuse of 20 year old Ethiopian Lensa Lelisa on their webpage, media outlets around the world carried the story, boycotts of Eleanore Couture were announced and the family’s image was severely tarnished. The backlash worked; Lensa was allowed to return to her family in Ethiopia.

Sara remains anonymous so as to not compromise colleagues and contacts, and reveals little about herself apart from being Ethiopian and a former domestic worker in Lebanon. The efforts of Sara and likeminded activists in the country has long provoked the ire of the establishment. The Lebanese government attempted to block This Is Lebanon’s webpage from being accessed in the country this year and members of the group operating out of Lebanon risk being jailed or worse if positively identified. But Sara maintains that she and her colleagues have no alternative to pursuing this sort of action. “We have resorted to these methods because we cannot stomach the continuous abuse and murder,” she says. “The Lebanese government deems domestic workers as being less than humans. Employers are never caught and brought to trial. The Ethiopian consulate in Beirut meanwhile doesn’t care in the slightest about its citizens, no matter how many of our women die. It is complicit in the abuse.”

It’s a serious accusation that Ethiopian embassies and consulates across the Middle East have faced for years. Diplomats posted in these countries are slammed for doing little when complaints and calls for help pile up in the form of phone calls and/or messages via social media.

To counter this narrative, the Ethiopian Consulate in Lebanon has started using its official Facebook page to post alleged incidents of consular intervention resulting in the successful rescue of maids from abusive homes or of unpaid salary being recuperated. Last month, in a Facebook posting, the Consulate claimed to have collected 5,700 US\$ in unpaid salaries on behalf of three Ethiopian workers. The claim is impossible to verify and the brief statement provides no additional details. However, a far greater number of cases remain on the Ethiopian consular back burner.

In the event of Ethiopians suffering grievous bodily harm and dying, the standard procedure appears to be collecting the body and shipping it back to relatives in Ethiopia. Even with ample evidence of criminal wrongdoing, as in the case of Desta Tafesse, Ethiopian consular officials rarely, if ever, resort to take firm legal actions in the pursuit of justice.

The tragic death of Mulu Tilaye Tekle is one of many such examples. Mulu died in April of this year, trying to escape from the home where she was imprisoned. It’s the fate of all too many a foreign domestic workers.



Copy of Mulu Tilaye’s passport

Mulu was born in the rural Amhara region's North Shewa zone. She had barely turned 20 when she arrived in Lebanon in 2017, eager to find work that would help support her family back home. Her older sister, Zenebech, had made the trip before her and had a consistent source of income based in a home in Beirut. Mulu sought to double the family's earnings and thought the presence of her sister would render the transition to life in Lebanon easier. But it wasn't to be. The two would never even meet. Mulu thought she had found legitimate employment when she moved into the home of Elie Kahwach, a 50 year old retired Lebanese Army officer and his wife Pauline Chahine, 41.

The couple and their two children live in an apartment on the 5th floor of a building located in the Lebanese coastal town of Jounieh. There, Mulu worked all week with no breaks. Pay was intermittent at best, before becoming a rarity altogether, says Mulu's brother, Wolde Tilaye.

"At first she would send me money through her employers on a regular basis. Later, I wouldn't know when she was being paid," Wolde told Addis Standard from his home in Addis Ababa. "But before her death, she had not been paid for at least three months."

If the lack of clarity surrounding her pay wasn't worrying enough, the fact that she was kept a virtual prisoner in the apartment meant that the family was unable to verify if she was being abused by her employers, an extremely common occurrence. Mulu was never allowed to either leave the premises on her own or even possess a mobile phone. The latter would have permitted her to remain in regular contact with her family in Ethiopia and her sister in Lebanon. But the only time she was ever allowed to contact her family was when Elie Kahwach allowed it. He'd set her up with a VoIP app on his own phone with which she would be allowed to speak with her brother for a few minutes. Then the line would cut and that would be it. "Caller display always showed a different number. I could never call and actually reach her," Wolde recalls. "But she always sounded fearful, frightened. She did tell me she couldn't speak openly because the man was watching her as she spoke."

Her sister was especially worried that something was happening to her. A year or so since her hiring, she had not once been permitted to meet with her sister. Whenever Kahwach or Chahine left the home, they always made sure to lock Mulu indoors so she couldn't venture out. "I was able to find out from neighbors and friends that she was being regularly abused," her sister Zenebech said. Zenebech accuses Elie Kahwach of personally meting out much of the abuse. "He used to tell her, I'm an army man. I can get away with anything."



The 10 story building Mulu Tilaye was confined in and finally died trying to escape from (Image: This is Lebanon)

On April 12th of this year, it all became too much for Mulu. Desperate to escape her circumstances, she took the plunge, jumping from the balcony of the 5th floor apartment towards the concrete ground below. The fall caused numerous bone fractures and internal bleeding that made it impossible to survive. She was 21. Instead of rushing her to the hospital, onlookers gawked and took pictures of the mortally wounded young woman.

In an interview with local media outlet Daily Star, Elie Kahwach denied ever beating or abusing her. “This is not true, it’s not accurate and it’s shameful,” he said. “We would treat her very well, we really liked her.” Despite this, he did admit that he would regularly keep Mulu locked in the house.

Through regular contact with members of the This Is Lebanon organization and a network of activists on the ground, Addis Standard has been able to obtain the Lebanese police report into Mulu’s death. According to the report, both Kahwach and his wife Pauline Chahine denied physically abusing Mulu when questioned by police, but did admit that Mulu never had access to a phone and was virtually imprisoned in the home, locked indoors with no way of getting out. They both claimed they had no idea why Mulu would resort to jumping off a 5th floor balcony to escape the home.

Through an undercover collaborator Addis Standard contacted the couple after obtaining their contact information. As Mulu’s brother had alleged that the couple owed his sister three months’ pay, Pauline was first asked to respond to claims that Mulu had worked unpaid between January and April 12th. “It was Mulu’s choice,” Chahine insisted. “She took charge of her own finances. She had asked to use Western Union to send money to her parents every three months.”

It could be true that not all of the money they paid Mulu was sent to her brother Wolde and that perhaps she had chosen on several occasions to hold onto her earnings. However, Chahine’s portrayal of Mulu being in charge of her financial destiny doesn’t hold water when one recalls that the same couple banned her from using a phone or even going outdoors. Addis Standard pressed Chahine on this latter topic.



Elie Kahwach, who owned the 5th floor apartment Mulu Tilaye worked in, is accused by Mulu’s family of physically assaulting her. Mulu ended up making a fatal jump off the apartment’s balcony in an attempt to escape the home (Image: Facebook)

Excerpts:

Addis Standard: “Why was she never even permitted to visit her own sister who had been living in Lebanon all this time?”

Pauline Chahine: “She said nothing! We never heard about a sister living here. I was shocked! She was magnificent, we loved her. But we would have let her visit her sister if we had known!”

Chahine's claim to have had no idea of Mulu having a sister in Lebanon appears to be a blatant lie. According to the same Lebanese media report cited above, Mulu's sister, Zenebech, went as far as pleading with the recruitment agency that sent Mulu to Chahine's apartment. The man who runs the agency, Nidal Hashem, told the Daily Star that he contacted Pauline and Elie, notified them about the sister's complaint and asked them to bring Mulu to his office and find another employee for them. "They refused," he said.

Pauline Chahine admitted to having confined Mulu in a locked space 24 hours a day seven days a week. Her denial of having any knowledge of Mulu having a sister in Lebanon when available evidence suggests that this isn't true, further dents her credibility. Addis Standard brought this up in the brief phone exchange with Chahine.

Addis Standard: Both you and your husband admitted that Mulu was always kept within the confines of the home at all times. Why did you not once allow her to leave? Why did you turn her into a prisoner?

At this point, Chahine became agitated and refused to answer the question, instead redirecting all inquiries to her lawyer before abruptly hanging up.

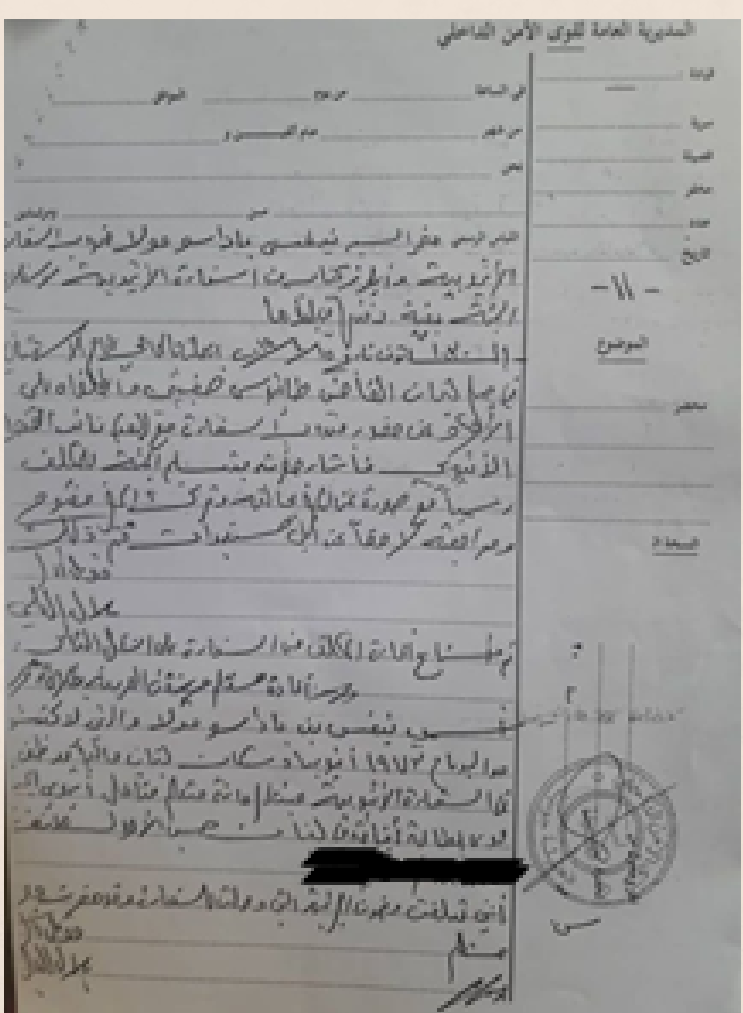
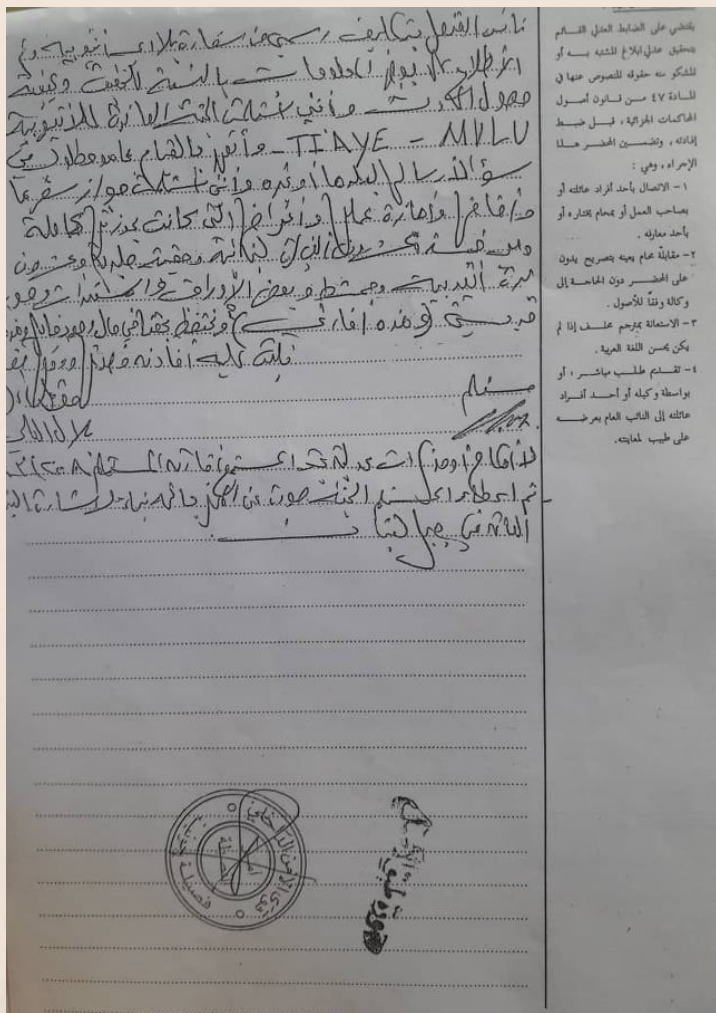


Elie Kahwach and his wife Pauline Chahine. In her conversation with Addis Standard, Chahine claimed that she had no idea that Mulu had a sister that wanted to visit her. A police report quotes her as admitting that she never allowed Mulu permission to leave the home (Image: Facebook)

There are plenty of discrepancies between the versions of the story that Elie Kahwach and Pauline Chahine told Lebanese press and investigators and what really happened. There are grounds for a criminal case being pursued here. The Ethiopian consulate's mandate would cover lobbying for justice and for the full truth to come out. After all, although proof of the family's claims of abuse might be somewhat difficult to obtain, Elie Kahwach has openly admitted to committing at least one violation of the UNHCR ratified International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers - unlawful restraint.

The police report into Mulu's death reveals that the Ethiopian consulate did indeed send an official to take charge of the case. The report identifies this official as being 46 year old Nigussie Bedaso Mola, whom Addis Standard learned has spent a sizeable part of his career posted in Beirut. The veteran diplomat met with a Lebanese police Warrant Chief Bilal El Ali days after Mulu's death.

👉👉 The police report into Mulu's death reveals that the Ethiopian consulate did indeed send an official to take charge of the case.



Pages from the Lebanese police report into Mulu Tilaye’s death. These pages identify consular official Nigussie Bedaso Mola as having met with a Lebanese police chief. The document shows that Nigussie did indicate that he’d be willing to pursue a legal case if sufficient evidence of foul play was available. They are evidence that despite his later denials, he did have a mandate that includes pursuing suspected abusers of Ethiopian citizens in Lebanese court. He is not known to have taken any subsequent action. Censored here is Nigussie’s personal contact information (Image: This is Lebanon)

Nigussie, described as being fluent in Arabic, gives a sworn statement. “I have taken necessary measures to send her remains back to Ethiopia for burial. I will also send her passport, residence permit and possessions including Lebanese and Ethiopian currency notes, as well as pictures of church saints. I’d like to confirm our legal rights to pursue justice in the case of further information emerging.”

The last sentence confirms that Nigussie does indeed have a mandate that includes exploring legal avenues in cases where he is assigned and foul play is suspected.

However, almost three months after having given this statement, Nigussie Bedaso Mola is confirmed to have done absolutely nothing of the kind. Neither Elie Kahwach nor Pauline Chahine have been charged with any crimes. It had been over two months since Mulu’s death when Addis Standard reached the couple by phone, and they appeared surprised that anyone would call regarding the young woman who had died trying to flee their home. And Nigussie Bedaso, the diplomat in charge, is yet to speak with the family let alone hire a lawyer to pursue the truth.

“Nobody,” said Mulu’s father Tilaye Tekle, when asked by Addis Standard whether anyone from the Ethiopian Consulate or government had contacted Addis Standard tried to contact the consulate office about Nigussie’s inactivity regarding Mulu’s death on several occasions. Despite the secretary at the main desk answering the phone and promising to connect the line with Nigussie’s office, the call would end moments later. He told him about his late daughter. “No we are alone as a family carrying the burden of this loss.”

Addis Standard tried to contact the consulate office about Nigussie's inactivity regarding Mulu's death on several occasions. Despite the secretary at the main desk answering the phone and promising to connect the line with Nigussie's office, the call would end moments later. Nigussie proved to be elusive when contacted via official consular phone lines. After it became clear that using the office numbers was futile, Addis Standard obtained his personal cellular phone number. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach him, he was sent a text on the popular voice call and messaging app WhatsApp asking him to explain why, despite his being tasked with overseeing post mortem procedures in the case of Mulu Tilaye and despite his confirming that he was interested in a potential legal case, he had done nothing whatsoever in the two months or so since Mulu died. His response? "What do you mean I didn't call the family? How were we able to send the remains home without contacting the family?" When asked whether he believed his responsibilities were limited to sending coffins home, he answers: "What I know is that the body has been sent home." He then replied with a picture containing private contact information of someone who appeared to be one of Mulu's siblings. "We even sent the coroner's report with the body. Besides, you shouldn't be contacting me, but the main office."

When reminded that it was him who was put in charge of the case and that any responsibilities that would see Pauline Chahine and Elie Kahwach appear in court for abuse and contributing to the death of a 21 year old Ethiopian citizen would be his, Nigussie stopped responding. From his responses, it's clear that he found it inconceivable that one would have expectations of him that go beyond sending her remains home.

His reluctance to act has resulted in Elie Kahwach joining the ranks of Lebanese employers suspected of inflicting horrendous abuse on Ethiopian domestic workers and receiving nothing more than a slap on the wrist. He is among several located in Jounieh, a place where Ethiopians appear to be dying regularly.

The death of another Ethiopian worker, Tigist Belay Tadesse preceded Mulu's by about three months. Like Mulu, Tigist also worked in the home of a family in Jounieh. She died on February 2nd of this year. Her death was said to be a suicide. She was only 19. Hailing from North Wollo zone of the Amhara regional state, Tigist left her home to follow in the paths of family members who were already in the Middle East and sending remittances home. Tragically, she would never make it home. Her family refuses to accept the official explanation for her death.



Tigist Belay was only 19 years old when she died in February of this year in Jounieh, Lebanon (Image: Amare Belay)

Her brother, Amare Belay, says that Tigist was regularly beaten and abused by her employers. He personally believes that his sister was murdered. "At first things were ok. I spoke to her regularly and she told me she was getting by," Amare explains, "but then they started withholding her pay. When she asked her employers about her salary, they would beat her." Amare says he last heard from his sister on January 31st when he says Tigist, terrified, told him she feared for her life. "She told me, 'They are going to kill me. I don't think I'll make it out of here alive.' I tried to comfort her, told her to stop saying this," Amare said between bouts of sobbing. "Three days later, I heard that she was dead."

Tigist worked in the home of 58 year old retired Lebanese Red Cross employee Elias Milad Sa'ab. Like many of her fellow nationals, she was deprived of regular contact with her relatives and was only allowed to contact family while being observed closely by an employer's daughter, Leda Sa'ab. Tigist's older sister, Emebet Belay, would reach out to Leda Sa'ab on WhatsApp when she wanted to see how her little sister was doing. Leda sometimes responded by putting her through to Tigist and the sisters would converse briefly. Then one day, hearing disturbing news and fearing the worst, Emebet Belay frantically contacted Leda for info on the wellbeing of her younger sister. But Leda replied to her with a voice message on Whatsapp that Addis Standard can confirm came from a device registered to Leda's name. In a cold, hostile tone lacking any sympathy, Leda responded to Emebet one last time.

"Don't call this number again," she begins by warning. "We cared for Tigist and treated her like family. She suddenly decided to drink a cleaning agent and kill herself. This is not our problem. Don't call us again." After sending this message, Leda blocked Emebet from responding to her on WhatsApp. But Emebet doesn't buy this explanation. She is adamant that her little sister didn't commit suicide. "They murdered her. My sister had her whole life ahead of her and family to go home to. She had no reason to want to end her life," she told Addis Standard. Emebet says that things at the Sa'ab home had initially started well for Tigist. She was paid on time and cared for Elias' ex-wife, who suffers from cancer. Sometime into her employment in the home, both Elias and his son began physically abusing Tigist, Emebet says. Tigist relayed her plight under her breath, in her native Amharic during the odd phone conversation she would be permitted to have with her siblings.



"Do not call this number again. We cared for Tigist, treated her like family. We don't know what happened to her. She suddenly decided to consume a cleaning agent and kill herself. This is not our problem. Don't contact us again."

**-Leda Sa'ab to Emebet Belay
(Whatsapp voice message 5/2/19)**

Leda Sa'ab told Emebet Belay that her younger sister had drunk poison and committed suicide, before backtracking in a recent conversation with Addis Standard and claiming she didn't know how Tigist lost her life

"She told me that the son used to kick her in the abdomen and insult her. The father was abusive too. I told her to try to find a new employer," Emebet said.

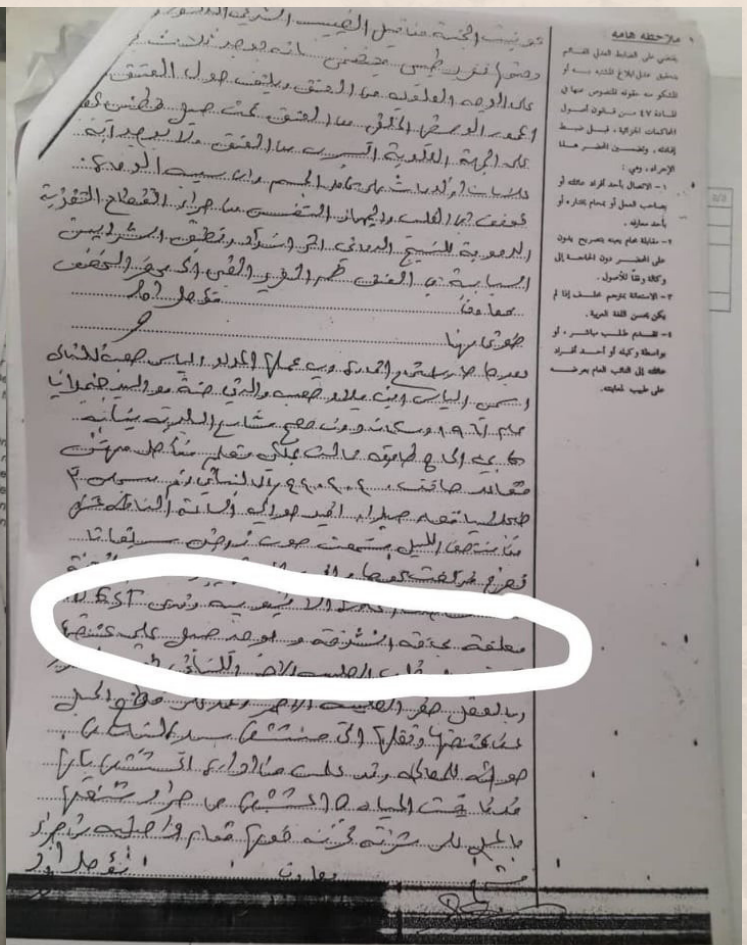
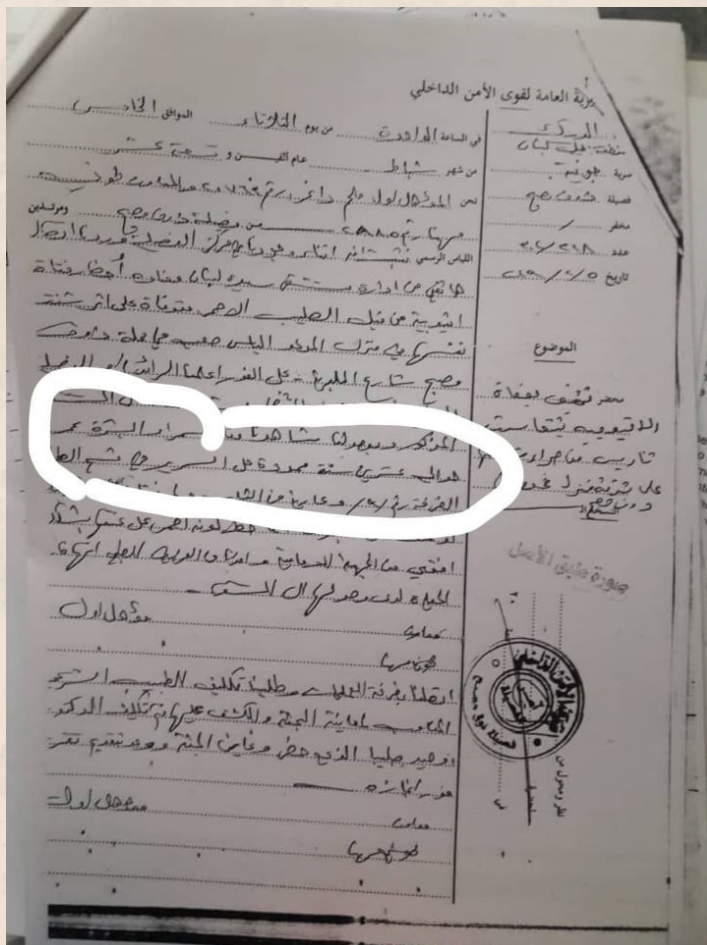
Emebet further explained that things deteriorated when one day, Tigist was given the phone to call her sister but instead called her recruitment agency to complain of abuse at the hand of the Sa'ab family. "This happened around September [2018]," Emebet recalls. "After they found that out, things worsened. We heard from her less and less. She lost her regular phone privileges. I believe the abuse got worse and worse. They also stopped paying her. Then suddenly I received the voice message saying that she had poisoned herself."

Despite working uninterrupted for the last six months of her life, Tigist didn't receive a penny in salary for the final three months. This Is Lebanon affiliated activists obtained the Lebanese police report into Tigist's death. The Arabic language report itself highlights numerous inconsistencies and Leda's father Elias Milad Sa'ab, who was interviewed by police, makes several contradictory statements.



He gave investigators a fake phone number and refused to identify his place of employment. When asked about Tigist's death, he initially told the police that the young woman had hanged herself in her bedroom. But in the same interview some time later, he states that he found Tigist hanging from the balcony. Both contradict what his daughter Leda told Tigist's family when she sent the audio message claiming Tigist had poisoned herself. This is documented proof of family members giving various contradictory versions of Tigist's death. An autopsy report later conducted at Addis Abeba's St Paul Hospital confirms that Tigist had a neck wound suggesting that she died after blood circulation was cut off to her head, but stopped short of declaring a cause of death. The autopsy report's findings could mean Tigist's death could have been a result of anything from self-inflicted wounds to strangulation at the hands of someone else.

Tigist's youthful playfulness, was such that she was especially fond of snow, something she saw for the first time in her life when she arrived in Lebanon, her sister Emebet told Addis Standard (Image: Emebet Belay)



Sections of the Lebanese police report into the death of Ethiopian citizen Tigist Belay Tadesse. These pages include statements given by Elias Milad Sa'ab during his questioning by police. Encircled in white, two separate segments of the same document showing that he made conflicting statements about where Tigist's body was found (Image: This is Lebanon)

Addis Standard contacted Leda Sa'ab to inquire as to what pushed her to send the audio recording in which she notified Emebet of her younger sister's death. Both the coroner's report and an autopsy made no mention of a poisoning, but in the recording, Leda affirmed this was the cause of Tigist's alleged suicide. Leda's allegation was made prior to her father telling Lebanese police that Tigist had actually hanged herself to death.

Leda was reached by phone, as was the case with Elie Kahwach and Pauline Chahine, via an undercover collaborator. Leda Sa'ab was briefly questioned about the Ethiopian maid who used to work in her home. She appeared startled that someone would call her about Tigist. "We don't have any Ethiopian woman working in our home," she initially spurted out.

Excerpts:

Addis Standard: Yes, I know there's no one now, but previously there had been one who passed away in February, yes?

Leda Sa'ab: Yes and what about her?

Addis Standard: We are in possession of an audio clip in which you are heard telling her sister Emebet that she died after consuming poison...

Leda Sa'ab: Yes, she is dead, but I don't know how she died. Stop talking to me now.

Leda abruptly hung up the phone at this point. Five months after telling Emebet Belay that her sister had drunk a chemical to end her life, she changed her story and told Addis Standard that she had no idea how her death occurred. Five months after her father told investigators that Tigist had hung herself, Leda feigned total ignorance about the tragedy.

Elias Milad Sa'ab wouldn't answer phone calls despite repeated attempts to reach him. Upon receiving multiple requests for an interview via the Viber VoIP calling app, he resorted to blocking phone numbers.

It is these inconsistencies that point to the Sa'ab family hiding important details that could potentially incriminate them in the 19 year old Ethiopian's death. If anything, a court case could commence based solely on the fact that Tigist had toiled endlessly for every single day between November 2018 and January 2019 and received no financial compensation for it. But Ethiopian consular officials appear unwilling to accept that probing the deaths of their own citizens is part of their job description let alone hire a lawyer to investigate the case.

Alli Finn of the Beirut based Migrant Community Center and Anti-Racism Movement explains that the consulate has considerable power, when it wields it. "Yes, due to it being a diplomatic entity it has a clout with Lebanese authorities and employers. Activists work with the consulate in Beirut and have recorded successes in some cases. However, at times it feels as though we have to really push them to solicit any sort of involvement on their behalf."



Former Lebanese Red Cross member Elias Milad Sa'ab may have saved lives as an ambulance driver, but he could not prevent the death of Tigist Belay Tadesse in the home he owned (Image: Facebook)



Samson would also not clarify exactly what exactly it was that he was tasked with and reiterated that Addis Standard take up the issue with the head of the mission. The unwillingness of Ethiopian consular officials in Beirut and the Lebanese authorities to investigate a growing number of suspicious deaths of Ethiopian workers points to a combined effort - knowingly or otherwise - to make sure that the plights of helpless Ethiopians are not widely heard.

The Lebanese government remains unflinching in its position on the kafala law and thus more of such deaths can be expected. Further emboldening the abusers and murderers of these women is the fact that Lebanese police and Beirut based Ethiopian consular staff appear fixated on one and one thing only, disposing of the body. Addis Standard has examined over a dozen cases of Ethiopian domestic workers' deaths in 2019. In most cases, Lebanese police interview employers and witnesses and obtain the coroner's report. But no one is ever arrested or brought to a trial. With the Ethiopian consulate, an appointed envoy is dispatched to ensure the remains, passport and other possessions are sent to relatives, before returning to the desk job. Ambassador Mohammed Berihu, head of the mission to Lebanon denied allegations that the embassy refuses to engage with citizens. When contacted by Addis Standard, he too appeared unhappy to have been reached via his personal number.

This document is of an official letter sent by a consular official named Samson Abebe Telila requesting assistance in returning Tigist's remains and possessions to her family in Ethiopia. Signed and stamped, it indicates that Samson Abebe Telila was the consulate's man on the case and thus responsible for any additional maneuvers including legal action. He could then provide answers for the lack of it since there is no evidence anything had been done to obtain answers.

But, like Nigussie Bedaso Mola, Samson Abebe Telila too proved very difficult to contact and unwilling to pick up phone calls.

After formal avenues for reaching him were exhausted, Addis Standard used Whatsapp to send him a lengthy inquisitive text message. When questioned as to why five months later, absolutely no action was taken to investigate the family who are likely to be implicated for Tigist's misery, Samson took offense and instead appeared irritated by the fact that his personal number was traced. "I'm a lower level employee, your questions should be directed to the head of the mission," he wrote. "You shouldn't be sending messages to private phones." This he said despite it being clarified to him that Addis Standard had attempted repeatedly to contact him through the numbers listed on the consulate's Facebook page. "There are a lot of things the family can do. They can collect recordings and other evidence, but they'd have to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not us."

But the call to the ambassador's private number was made after several calls to the consulate went unanswered.

“Our doors are open. So are our phone lines. We can be reached if contacted,” he said. But the call to the ambassador’s private number was made after several calls to the consulate went unanswered. When this was pointed out, the ambassador appeared to become agitated. “If you are in Addis Abeba, contact consular assistance there. They can get you the help you need.”

Excerpts:

Addis Standard: “What about the staff at the consulate in Beirut?”

Amb. Mohammed Berihu: “Come to the consulate during working hours. Have we ever denied anyone access to it? We have never done so.”

This appears untrue. Activists and domestic workers have shared experiences with Addis Standard of being refused entry into the consulate or being kicked out by consular staff. One activist claims she was told to “never come back here,” by a consular official.

Last week, Lebanese broadcaster LBC aired footage of what appeared to be an Ethiopian woman left on the doorstep of the consulate after repeatedly being denied entrance. The woman, in tears, was interviewed by the LBC crew and explained that she was in legal limbo, undocumented and trying to get consular assistance to return home.

When this was pointed out to the ambassador, he too hung up the phone. The Ambassador refused to discuss specific cases, nor allegations that his office provides little more than a shipping and handling service in the case of Ethiopian deaths.

From death to delivery, Ethiopian and Lebanese hands work diligently to remove the package from the crime scene and send it to the obscurity of a graveyard in rural Ethiopia, where all haunting, incriminating secrets will be buried with it. It exonerates murderers and abusers in Lebanon and leaves family members in Ethiopia devastated and reeling from the lack of closure. And the cycle continues. It’ll never be long until the bilateral corpse disposal operation is mobilized again.

“Over fifty.”

That’s the number that Sara, the activist at This Is Lebanon gives on the deaths of Ethiopian domestic worker deaths in Lebanon this year alone. “The consulate refuses to release its own body count, but we have determined that the death toll has surpassed fifty. No one has been held accountable for these deaths.”

Sara boldly claims there is a correlation between the increase in Ethiopian domestic worker fatalities and the conduct of consular officials. “They are complicit and part of the problem,” is how she described the consular officials. “Most employers know that Ethiopian women are vulnerable and diplomatically unprotected. The consulate’s refusal to stand up for its own citizens is directly contributing to an increase in cases of deaths as well as physical and sexual abuse. Their incompetence is literally killing Ethiopian women.” Addis Standard cannot share her conclusions.

Desta Tafesse Bedane

Lebanese police appear unwilling to prosecute anyone suspected of migrant worker abuse, no matter how obvious her mistreatment was.

Desta Tafesse Bedane was horribly scalded on both hands, the result of extreme torture, according to her sister Tigist. This picture of her bandaged hands was sent to her immediately afterwards. Images of her hands after the bandages were taken off were sent to Addis Standard but are deemed far too graphic to be published.

Three days later, on May 12th this year, she was declared dead. The death was reported as a suicide. Despite being left with injuries that would appear to have rendered both of her hands useless, Lebanese police decided not to question her employer’s claim that she used her incapacitated hands to make a noose out of rope and hang herself. Desta worked seven days a week and had not been paid for 14 months.



I didn't even care about her being paid anymore, I just wanted her out of there alive.

"I didn't even care about her being paid anymore, I just wanted her out of there alive," her sister Tigist Tafesse says. "I still haven't come to terms with my sister's death."

Emebet, the sister of Tigist Belay Tadesse, echoes similar sentiments. "As a family, our conscience won't rest as we know there is no way Tigist would have killed herself. I won't accept what they are telling us. I also know that God won't let my sister's murder go unpunished."

In far too many cases, it does appear that divine authority is the only kind that the relatives of victims can call upon. In the scenario where the relevant authorities of two sovereign nations appear to be working against them, there is little else to look up to. AS



This picture of Desta's bandaged hands was sent to her immediately afterwards. Images of her hands after the bandages were taken off were sent to Addis Standard but are deemed far too graphic to be published.