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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Dutch court's conviction of Walid in the 'Pearce' Case: a first step towards justice for crimes against migrants and refugees in Libya**

**27 January, 2026:** Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL), The Nuhanovic Foundation and UpRights welcome today's verdict from the District Court of Zwolle in the Netherlands convicting Eritrean national Tewelde Goitom, also known as Walid, to 20 years imprisonment. The Court recognised the jurisdiction of the Dutch courts over all charges, with the sole exception of acts relating to two witnesses, due to the absence of a sufficient territorial nexus with the Netherlands in those two specific cases.

Crucially, the Court affirmed that under Article 2 of the Dutch Penal Code, Dutch jurisdiction applies where criminal conduct is committed at least in part in the Netherlands or where the consequences of the crimes occur on Dutch territory, regardless of where the acts originated. In this case, acts of extortion were partially committed in the Netherlands, and the offence of human trafficking was completed through its effects, as many victims ultimately reached the Netherlands or became irregularly present there as a direct result of the defendant's actions.

The Court found all charges proven beyond reasonable doubt, recognised the credibility of the victims' testimonies, and confirmed Walid's leadership role.

Walid faced multiple charges under the Dutch penal code, including leading a criminal organisation, human smuggling, extortion, violent acts, and sexual offences committed primarily against vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers attempting to reach Europe between 2014 and 2018. Walid was convicted for leading a criminal network operating detention camps, mainly in Bani Walid in Libya, where people were held and tortured until families abroad paid ransoms amounting to thousands of US dollars. Walid was also convicted for arranging the illegal transport of migrants from Libya to Europe, primarily by sea. The victims were mostly Eritrean and other East African nationals.

The verdict rendered today set a critical precedent in a case which has been truly unique and remarkable in many respects. The trial that took place between the 3rd and the 26th of November 2025 in Zwolle is one of – if not the – largest human smuggling cases in Dutch history and one of the very rare cases in Europe that attempt to address crimes committed against migrants and refugees in Libya.

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For the first time, a Dutch criminal court examined in detail how abuses committed in Libya were embedded within a broader transnational migration trajectory, including events occurring in countries of origin, transit, and destination.

LFJL, The Nuhanovic Foundation, and UpRights commend the proactivity and perseverance of the Dutch Prosecutor to pursue such a complex case, as well as the measures taken by the District Court of Zwolle to ensure transparency and accessibility to affected communities and wider public, including livestreaming the proceedings and providing interpretation and broadcasts in Dutch, English, and Tigrinya.

Walid's conviction represents an important first step for migrants and refugees who are routinely subjected to serious international crimes in Libya, whose voices are rarely heard in Europe, and for whom access to justice remains unattainable. However, the Dutch prosecutors narrowed the scope of the case to human smuggling and related domestic offences, thereby failing to fully capture the exploitative, systematic and widespread nature of the crimes committed against migrants in Libya. LFJL filed a criminal **complaint** to the Dutch international crimes unit in an effort to prompt additional investigations that reflect the full gravity of the crimes committed by Walid, including details of alleged conduct that may amount to human trafficking, slave trading, and crimes against humanity. The Nuhanovic Foundation has conducted an analysis highlighting the key implications for victims' rights in cases of human smuggling versus cases of human trafficking, which can be found **here**.

The Pearce case is closely linked to proceedings against another Eritrean national named Zekarias Habtemariam Kidane. Alleged to be part of the same criminal network, Kidane was arrested in Sudan and was held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since January 2023 after escaping Ethiopian justice, where he had been convicted in absentia. He was finally transferred to the Netherlands to face charges before Dutch courts in late December 2025. His case, scheduled to be heard in April 2026, offers the Dutch prosecution and the District Court of Zwolle an opportunity to build on today's precedent and to reconsider their legal approach, with a view to addressing the full range of harms suffered by victims and ensuring accountability that reflects the true nature of the crimes committed.

## Links

- The Nuhanovic Foundation – **Litigation Tracker – Pearce Case**
- Lawyers for Justice in Libya, Cristina Orsini, Justice in Conflict, **The 'Pearce case: Is the Netherlands providing justice for crimes against migrants and refugees in Libya?', 9 December 2025**