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ERITREA CSW and HRCE welcome papal intervention on plight of refugees in Sinai Desert

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Concern-Eritrea welcome the intervention by Pope Benedict XVI on behalf of refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan who are being held hostage in the Sinai Desert by people traffickers.

During his Angelus address for the second Sunday of Advent, Pope Benedict XVI invited his listeners “to pray for all situations of violence, intolerance, suffering in the world, that the coming of Jesus may bring consolation, reconciliation and peace. I think of the many difficult situations, such as the continuous attacks that occur in Iraq against Christians and Muslims, the clashes in Egypt where there were deaths and injuries, the victims of traffickers and criminals, such as the drama of the hostages, Eritreans and of other nationalities, in the Sinai desert. Respect for the rights of all is the prerequisite for peace. Our prayer to the Lord and our solidarity can bring hope to those who are suffering.”

Hundreds of refugees from the Horn of Africa have been held for months on the outskirts of a town in the Sinai Desert in purpose-built containers, where Bedouin people traffickers are demanding payment of up to \$8,000 per person for their release, though the hostages had already paid \$2,000 for passage to Israel.

On December 1, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Human Rights Concern Eritrea, Agenzia Habeshia and EveryOne Group issued a joint appeal for urgent international intervention in the plight of the refugees, who are currently being held in degrading and inhumane conditions, bound by chains around their ankles and denied adequate food and water. The appeal details extreme methods of torture suffered by the refugees, including electric shocks, to force friends and families abroad to make the payments. The women in the group, who have been separated from the rest, are particularly vulnerable to severe abuse.

Elsa Chyrum, Director of Human Rights Concern Eritrea said “We are grateful for the Pope’s intervention. It will assure Eritrean and other refugees that their plight is not forgotten, and will hopefully spur the international community into action”.

CSW-UK’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “While we are extremely encouraged that Pope Benedict XVI is drawing attention to this appalling situation, there is still a need for urgent action on the part of the Egyptian government and the international community to ensure the freedom and safety of these refugees.”

Notes to Editors:

1. On November 28 three Eritrean men were reportedly shot dead after their families confirmed to the kidnappers that they were unable to make the ransom payment. Three more hostages were reported to have died on November 30 following a severe assault administered by the traffickers in the aftermath of an escape attempt by a group of 12 refugees.
2. The joint appeal and accompanying press release can be found on the CSW-UK website at www.csw.org.uk