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UNHCR expresses concern about refugees held hostage in Sinai Desert

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes efforts by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to liaise with the Egyptian government regarding the plight of refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan who are being held hostage in the Sinai Desert by people traffickers.

In a statement on their website, the UNCHR reports that Egypt's Ministry of Interior has assured them that "around the clock efforts are underway to locate the hostages and release them."

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

The refugees 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.

According to the online statement, the UNHCR has also been advocating with the Egyptian authorities for access to people who are detained in the course of making similar journeys across the border from Egypt into Israel, with a view to being able to determine those among them who are refugees and in need of international protection. The UNHCR notes that "while many are migrants, some originate from refugee-producing countries, including Eritrea. UNHCR's eligibility guidelines consider that most Eritreans fleeing their country should be considered as refugees."

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW welcomes the belated efforts by the Egyptian government to locate and negotiate freedom for the hostages, whose situation becomes more desperate with every passing day. We urge the Egyptian government to work positively with the UNCHR to bring the treatment of refugees within its borders in line with international norms."

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the appeal can be found [here](#) and on the CSW website at www.csw.org.uk
2. The statement by the UNHCR can be found on the UNCHR website at: <http://www.unhcr.org.uk/resources/monthly-updates/december-2010/eritrea.html>
3. For past press releases on this topic, please visit the CSW website.