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ERITREA European Parliament resolution on refugees held hostage in Sinai

The European Parliament has passed a resolution on the Eritrean refugees being held hostage by people traffickers in the Sinai Desert, urging the Egyptian authorities to take “all necessary measures” to secure their release, and to allow the UNHCR access to all refugees and asylum seekers in state custody, including those in the Sinai.

Over 250 refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia have been imprisoned for over a month in purpose-built facilities by Bedouin people traffickers in the Sinai Desert. The traffickers are demanding payment of up to US\$8,000 per person for their release despite charging them US\$2,000 for passage to Israel. The refugees have been restrained with chains around their ankles, subjected to torture including electric shocks, beatings and branding. They are denied adequate food and water, and women in the group are repeatedly raped.

The European Parliament resolution comes after Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Agenzia Habeshia, EveryOne Group and Human Rights Concern Eritrea issued a joint appeal for urgent international intervention on behalf of the refugees. The appeal, which was referenced in the text of the resolution, highlighted the degrading and inhumane conditions suffered by the refugees.

While the resolution describes the Egyptian authorities in North Sinai as “actively searching” for the refugees, several news agencies report the Egyptian Foreign Minister denying all knowledge of their plight. Although Italian NGOs Agenzia Habeshia and EveryOne Group filed a lawsuit in Cairo against named traffickers, and passed on details of the precise location of the initial detention facility, little progress has been made by the Egyptian government in apprehending the traffickers or liberating the asylum seekers.

On 10 December 100 Eritrean refugees were separated from the group and it is feared they were sold on to another gang of traffickers. Two Orthodox deacons were murdered and Agenzia Habeshia also reports that others in the group were beaten, tortured and forced to drink their own urine after being denied water.

CSW’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “CSW welcomes the resolution by the European Parliament. It not only puts the spotlight on the appalling situation in the Sinai, but also focuses on many other refugees in Egypt, some of whom are held in detention, and all of whom are not being afforded the protection to which they are entitled under international law. The resolution also highlights the existence of a well-established trafficking network in the Sinai, and that many refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa, including children, are regularly held hostage for ransom in various locations for weeks or even months. However, while we welcome the resolution, clearly the time for action is now long overdue. We therefore call for sustained international pressure on the Egyptian government to ensure that it takes decisive measures to end trafficking within its borders, that all detained refugees are set free and have access to the local branch of the UNHCR.”

Notes to Editors

1. The resolution by the European Parliament can be read here:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/plenary/ta.do?language=EN>