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ERITREA Global Human Trafficking Awareness Day: CSW calls for effective action for Eritrean hostages in Sinai

CSW is marking Global Human Trafficking Awareness Day by renewing its call for effective action to release Eritreans and other nationals who are being subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment in the Sinai desert by Bedouin people traffickers.

For over two months the refugees and asylum seekers have been held in chains in purpose built facilities south of Rafah on Egypt's border with Israel. Despite having paid US\$2000 each for transfer to Israel, traffickers are torturing them in order to obtain an additional \$8000 per person from their family and friends abroad. They are repeatedly beaten, branded like cattle, and are often deprived of food and water, forcing some to drink their own urine. Several men have been informed their organs will be harvested in lieu of payment, while women are repeatedly raped by numerous assailants. Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia reports that on Saturday, four female hostages who are still unable to meet the ransom were once again subjected to gang-rape, while a pregnant woman was so badly beaten that she is now reported to be extremely unwell.

Although the plight of the hostages has now been highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI, the European Parliament, the UNHCR and the international media, there has been no action on the part of the Egyptian government to secure their release. Instead, small groups of hostages were released and transported to Israel in batches during December as friends and family managed to meet the extortionate terms for their release.

According to the Italian NGO EveryOne Group, efforts to tackle the problem by a reluctant Egyptian government may have been hampered by limitations placed upon it by the 1978 Camp David Accords whereby its troops on this border must be armed lightly. The wealthy Bedouin, on the other hand, are heavily armed, and their encampments can only be searched. "If Egypt and Israel fail to sign a new agreement on the Sinai, trafficking in migrants, slaves, children and human organs will continue in the future."

CSW Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said: "The continuing plight of the refugees in the Sinai desert is an indictment on humanity and on the international community. Human trafficking is modern day slavery; it is an international crime that spans national borders. Tackling it is therefore the responsibility of all nations, yet despite the increasing profile of this case, there has been no effective action. International pressure must be maintained until the Egyptian government takes its responsibility for the welfare of refugees seriously, and acts to end the inexcusable suffering of these unfortunate people."