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ERITREA 11-year-old boy among minors held hostage in Sinai

An eleven-year-old Eritrean boy is one of at least three minors being held hostage for ransom by people traffickers in the Sinai Desert, according to eyewitnesses who have spoken to Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia.

The boy, known only as Abiel, is reported to be suffering from a broken arm, but is bound by chains on his hands and feet, along with 150 other refugees and asylum seekers who are powerless to help him as he cries out in pain. Two other children aged fourteen are reportedly being held in the same inhumane conditions in metal structures close to Egypt's border with Israel.

While the three minors are reported to have been abducted in Sudan, others in the group were tricked by Bedouin people traffickers after paying for safe passage to Israel. A hostage who has been held for seven months and sold on to four different gangs of traffickers reported that the metal containers in which they are being held are extremely hot during the day and very cold at night. The group is also tortured regularly, with traffickers dripping melted plastic on their backs in order to elicit exorbitant ransom payments from their family and friends abroad.

In November 2010 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) received reports of 250 Eritrean hostages held along with other nationals by traffickers near the town of Rafah who were being repeatedly beaten, branded like cattle, and deprived of food and water. Several men had been informed their organs would be harvested in lieu of payment, while women were repeatedly raped by numerous assailants. Around 140 of these hostages were freed, while eight people were killed and 100 were sold on and can no longer be located. Agenzia Habeshia was later able to make contact with 150 other hostages held by a different gang. Twenty five of these are now in Israel. However, one has disappeared, while a female hostage is still being held by her abductors.

Most of the hostages were freed after traffickers received some form of payment. However, despite the fact that the plight of these hostages has now been highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI, the European Parliament, the UNHCR and the international media, there has been no effective action on the part of the Egyptian government to secure their release. Attempts may have initially been hampered by the terms of the 1978 Camp David Accords, which stipulate that Egyptian border troops must be lightly armed, in a marked contrast to the heavily armed Bedouin. In January Israel agreed to an initial request for an increase in border troops in following the outbreak of unrest in Egypt, but is now reported to have refused a second request.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW condemns the mistreatment of the three minors and the denial of medical attention to an eleven-year-old child. The general deterioration of security in the Sinai, coupled with increasing reports that armed Bedouin are attacking the Egyptian security services, deepens our concern for the well-being of the remaining hostages. Clearly, Egypt's delay in tackling the issue of trafficking is now having unfortunate consequences on the country's internal security in this sensitive region. We therefore urge the Egyptian authorities to ensure that the additional troops are mandated to combat every source of insecurity in the Sinai area, including bringing an end to this modern form of slavery and releasing its victims".