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ERITREA Refugees stranded in Libya appeal for help

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned for the welfare of African refugees and asylum seekers caught up in the unrest in Libya.

As the security situation in Libya becomes increasingly unstable, European and other nations are rushing to facilitate the evacuation of their own nationals. However, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali and other African refugees in Libya, who are already in a vulnerable position due to societal hostility to non-Arabs, are increasingly susceptible to violent attacks.

A group of around 40 families of Eritrean refugees, including children, are currently stranded in an area close to Tripoli Airport with no means of evacuation. Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia has appealed to the Italian government and European parliament to assist these and other African refugees who have taken refuge in the Catholic Church in Tripoli.

Being non-Arab and therefore racially distinct from the local population, African refugees have regularly faced arrest, physical and verbal abuse and harassment. Worse still for Eritrean refugees, the friendship between President Muammar Ghaddafi and President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea, as well as Libya's non-signatory status with regard to the UN Refugee Convention, has meant that many of them are detained in appalling conditions where they face severe mistreatment and the possibility of forcible return to Eritrea. Those forcibly returned face imprisonment, possible torture and even death at the hands of the Eritrean regime.

The situation for African refugees deteriorated further following reports of attacks on Libyan civilians by "African mercenaries", allegedly from Niger and Chad. Although Saif al Islam, President Ghaddafi's son, claimed on state television that illegal immigrants are responsible for inciting the current unrest, refugees report that in detention centers, the government is attempting to recruit African prisoners as mercenaries, and prison guards who object are allegedly being killed. Homes where large numbers of refugees have gathered are being attacked, and they are subject to threatening phone calls and physical assault with knives and stones as angry Libyans mistake them for mercenaries.

Yesterday the UNHCR expressed particular concern "for asylum-seekers and refugees inadvertently caught up in the violence", appealing to all governments to grant asylum to people fleeing Libya.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned for the welfare of the refugees in Libya who are facing hostility on all sides and have no country looking out for their interests. We urge the international community, and European Union member states in particular, to consider granting temporary refuge to the 40 families with children in Tripoli and to other members of this vulnerable community until more permanent solutions can be formulated".