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ERITREA Fifty-seven refugees evacuated to Italy from Libya

Fifty-seven Eritrean refugees, including 21 families and 27 minors, were successfully evacuated from Tripoli to Italy on March 9.

Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia (AHCS) reports that the evacuation was coordinated and facilitated by the Italian Embassy in Tripoli, the Italian Council for Refugees (CIR), Catholic Bishop Giovanni Martinelli of Tripoli, and AHCS president, Don Mussie Zerai. The 57 Eritreans were part of a larger group of around 2000 refugees who have sought the protection of Bishop Martinelli.

Already subject to harassment, abuse and arbitrary imprisonment in Libya on account of their ethnicity, the situation for refugees and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa deteriorated further following reports of attacks on Libyan civilians by "African mercenaries", and televised claims by Saif al Islam, President Ghaddafi's son, that illegal immigrants were responsible for inciting the current unrest.

There are now increasing reports of attacks on sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers in both government-controlled and rebel-held areas. Between February 22 and 23, armed men are reported to have snatched nineteen Eritrean refugees from their homes in Tripoli, who have not been seen or heard of since. Also in Tripoli, around 1,800 Eritrean refugees were reportedly driven from their homes by hostile Libyan landlords. Refugees and migrants also report attacks on and round-ups of sub-Saharan Africans, and in detention centers African prisoners are reportedly under pressure to train to fight for the government as a condition of release.

In a briefing on the plight of African refugees and migrants in Libya released on March 8, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) calls on the international community to ensure that war crimes committed by both sides in the Libyan conflict are referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and urges the European Union (EU) to consider coordinating an international search for temporary countries of asylum for refugees with well founded fears of persecution if returned to their own countries.

CSW National Director Stuart Windsor said: "CSW is delighted to learn of this development. The Italian government is to be commended for taking action to secure protection for these vulnerable people. However, we urge the rest of the international community to follow the example of the Italian government by ensuring that this action marks the beginning of a wider movement to rescue sub-Saharan African refugees who are still trapped in Libya. These people are living under the most appalling pressure, and are facing brutal treatment from both sides of the conflict. They are in urgent need of protection and safety."