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Eritrea Refugees fleeing Libya to Egypt denied humanitarian assistance

A group of at least 200 refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, who fled to Egypt from Benghazi in Libya around three days ago, are being denied humanitarian assistance by the Egyptian authorities, who wish to repatriate them to their own countries.

In contrast with the Tunisian border, where humanitarian agencies are assisting refugees with the support of the local population, this group of refugees on the Egyptian border, which includes around 53 Eritrean adults and over 20 children aged between 6 months and ten years, are sleeping in the open with no access to tents or mattresses. Two days ago they were even denied food.

Non-Arab refugees in Libya are regularly subject to racism, abuse and arbitrary imprisonment; however, with reports of African mercenaries fighting on the side of the government, there has been a sharp rise in harassment and violent attack.

Commenting on the plight of the refugees on the Egyptian border, Elsa Chyrum, Director of Human Rights Concern-Eritrea, said, "These people are in a terrible situation. The least any humanitarian agency could do is to provide them with such basic necessities as food and shelter."

Yesterday the European Voice newspaper reported that European member states and the European Commission would meet today to discuss the issue of African refugees who have fled the violence in Libya. Following a visit to Egypt, Cecilia Malmström, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, is reported to have said that several European member states were willing to consider relocating Eritreans, Sudanese and Ethiopians who are unable to return home for fear of persecution, and that they may soon be allowed to travel to the European Union.

In a briefing on the plight of African refugees and migrants in Libya released on 8 March, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) had called on the 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's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW welcomes the EU's response to the appalling plight of these and other African refugees and hopes that a solution will soon be forthcoming. We also welcome the positive reports emerging from Tunisia, but are deeply concerned for the welfare of the vulnerable people on the Egyptian border who have fled persecution in their own countries and in Libya, and are now being denied even the most basic level of assistance. It is vital that the nations that are currently playing a primary role in ensuring the protection of Libyan citizens also use their good offices to urge the Egyptian authorities to offer humanitarian assistance to these refugees, and to permit them to access the services of the UNHCR."

Notes to Editor:

If you would like a copy of CSW's briefing on the plight of African refugees and migrants in Libya, please contact the Press Office.