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ERITREA Refugees threatened with imminent deportation

Thirty-nine Eritrean refugees held in a police station in Egypt are being threatened with forcible return to Eritrea, after two of their number were deported. The threat comes after the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) condemned the deportation of over 300 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers from Sudan.

The thirty-nine individuals in Egypt were removed from their cells in Aswan police station on the evening of October 18, in preparation for deportation. They have been stripped of all possessions including mobile phones. If forcibly returned, many of these refugees will face severe mistreatment at the hands of the Eritrean authorities as punishment for having fled the country illegally, including lengthy imprisonment, torture and even execution.

According to Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia, more than 500 Eritrean refugees, including many women and children, continue to be held hostage by human traffickers in various hidden camps in the Sinai Desert. There they face deprivations, harassment, sexual abuse and torture until such a time as their relatives can make an exorbitant payment to the captors to secure their release. Four Eritrean refugees are known to have been tortured to death in these camps within the last month.

A number of Eritrean refugees are also detained in Egyptian police stations and military camps, having been arrested by border police as they attempted to cross from the Sinai into Israel. Refugees seeking to cross this border are often shot at, and many held in Egyptian detention centers are suffering from gunshot wounds. Egypt regularly denies access to these centers to the UNHCR, consequently some of the detainees are denied the opportunity to apply for refugee status.

The continuing exodus of Eritrean citizens from their country, conservatively estimated at 1000 people per month, is testament to the on-going human rights crisis in the country. As in Egypt, those reaching other North African countries generally receive inadequate protection from state governments. For example, the mass deportation of refugees by Sudan has taken place despite an agreement between UNHCR and the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees that the Eritreans would be transferred to Khartoum for joint screening in order to identify people in the group who already had refugee status and to allow others the opportunity to lodge asylum claims.

Refugees are also facing problems in Libya, where around 100 Eritreans and Somalians are reported to be held illegally at a detention centre in the city of Kufra. Only individuals who manage to make the \$500 payment demanded by officials at the center are being allowed to travel on to the capital, Tripoli.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at the forcible repatriation of vulnerable Eritrean refugees by Sudan and Egypt, and the imminent threat of deportation of those currently in jail in Aswan. We urge the Egyptian authorities to halt these deportations, which violate the 1951 UN Refugee Convention to which Egypt is party. It is also appalling that nearly a year after the Sinai hostage camps were brought to light, these camps continue to exist. It is imperative that all states take seriously their obligation to protect vulnerable refugees, combat the human trafficking, and to ensure that perpetrators of atrocities are brought to justice."