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ERITREA Reports of abducted women highlight vulnerability of refugees in Egypt

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received disturbing reports detailing the abductions of six Eritrean women in Cairo by men purporting to be police officers, highlighting the insecurity and vulnerability of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt.

The victims, whose ages range from 20 to 32, report boarding a white taxi prior to being abducted. In each instance, the taxi was stopped by men in police uniforms, who opened the door and sprayed an unknown substance into their faces, causing them to lose consciousness. They later awoke in a strange location.

One of the women, who was abducted on her way to church and held for approximately three weeks, described to local sources how upon waking, she found herself in a small room housing the five other women. All of them had also been abducted from the streets of Cairo, and three had already been there for three months. Two had allegedly paid \$5,000 each to buy their freedom, but were not released. The women were reportedly compelled to wear burkhas and informed that they would be released upon converting to Islam.

Four of the women, although traumatized by their ordeal, eventually managed to escape by causing a commotion as their kidnappers attempted to transfer them by car to another location. The kidnappers reportedly fled the scene when members of the local community rushed over to investigate the commotion. However, two women remain unaccounted for.

The Cairo abductions appear to constitute a new and worrying development among the many challenges faced by Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt. While the kidnapping and torture of Eritreans in the Sinai Desert has been extensively documented since 2010, victims have generally been abducted in Sudan before being transported to purpose-built facilities in the area and tortured in order to extort exorbitant funds from friends and families. In addition, many are currently languishing in Egyptian jails, where they face abuse, the threat of possible forcible return and are regularly denied access to the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston said, "It is appalling that in the 21st Century, people in search of refuge from their own tyrannical government are being bought and sold like a commodity by criminal syndicates in an illegal trade centered on, but by no means limited, to the Sinai Desert. Seen in this light, the recent abductions are particularly worrying, because such abuse has never before been reported in Cairo, a development that may be fuelled in part by the impunity surrounding the abuse of Eritreans in the Sinai. We urge current and future Egyptian authorities to take effective action to end human trafficking within their borders. This crime disproportionately affects this community of refugees, and has implications for security not only within Egypt, but also beyond her borders."