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ERITREA | CSW highlights plight of refugees in Israel during world refugee week

As the world marks World Refugee Week, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is expressing concern at the plight of refugees in Israel from Eritrea and other countries in the Horn of Africa who are facing hostility and the possibility of forcible return.

On June 3, laws came into effect allowing officials to arrest and detain anyone deemed an illegal immigrant for a period of three years. The laws also carry a prison term of between five and fifteen years for any Israeli citizen who assists them. While these laws effectively criminalize refugees, the Israeli government has also refused to implement the 1952 Convention on The Status of Refugees, meaning that refugees are not afforded recourse to legal action or protection under the law.

On June 17, Israel began rounding up and forcibly returning refugees from South Sudan. There are reports that Israel will also be seeking to repatriate refugees from other African countries, including Eritrean refugees. In her opening statement at the current session of the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, accused Eritrea of wide ranging human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, torture and summary executions. A recent report on the [Eritrean website Asmarino.com](http://www.asmarino.com) alleges a series of secret meetings between the Israeli Minister of the Interior and Eritrean diplomats in which Eritrean refugees were deemed economic migrants and a decision was made to forcibly return them.

Over the course of the last two months there has been a sharp increase in anti-African protests and government rhetoric arising mainly from accusations that refugees are responsible for crime, and fears of the cultural threat posed by their increasing numbers. Miri Regev, a former Israeli Defense Force spokeswoman and member of the Knesset, referred to the growing population of African refugees in Israel as a "cancer in our body." Other politicians, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have described the African refugee population as "infiltrators", with many calling for them to be expelled.

In a particularly worrying incident, on 4 June, ten Eritreans were reportedly trapped inside an apartment block that was set on fire at 3am. Graffiti found at the scene read: "We want foreigners out." Police investigating the fire believe the attack was a racially motivated.

CSW Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston says "The challenges faced by any country absorbing a large influx of refugees cannot be underestimated; however, Israel's new laws criminalize many vulnerable people who are in need of protection. Israel is party to the UN Refugee Convention, and a nation that was itself born out of an urgent need for sanctuary. CSW urges the Israeli government to institute a refugee status determination program in conjunction with the UNHCR that will facilitate the speedy processing and resettlement of legitimate refugees, and to respect the international principle of non-refoulement, particularly with regards to Eritrea, where returned refugees face almost certain imprisonment and mistreatment."

Notes to the editor

1. [Click here](#) for the Asmarino.com article.