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LIBYA CSW welcomes Italy's intervention on behalf of Eritrean refugees in Libya

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the intervention of the Italian government in securing an agreement with the Libyan government, which was reached in time to prevent the forcible repatriation of over 200 Eritrean refugees.

According to reports, under the terms of the agreement, every Eritrean refugee who is currently detained will be set free and receive the right of residency in exchange for working in Libya. The signature of the agreement was confirmed both by Italian Minister for Relations with Parliament Elio Vito and Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Stefania Craxi.

During a Senate hearing Craxi said that the Italian government never backed away from raising awareness within Libyan authorities on the topic of human rights and added that the EU, which has been absent to date, must intervene in such cases.

Italy will also consider resettling some of the refugees and has called on other European countries to do likewise. Commenting on the agreement, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said, "It is unbelievable that Brussels did not even make a press release. We worked in silence, without proclamations, and sadly with the total and absolute absence of Europe. We asked for a compromise, mediation and the result came."

Over 400 Eritreans are held in a variety of Libyan jails. On 30 June, CSW first highlighted the plight of a group of 230 refugees who had been beaten and taken in sealed trucks from Misrata prison to a detention centre on the edge of the Sahara desert as punishment for their refusal to sign repatriation papers. Once there, the refugees were constantly assaulted, and were held in a single, dark prison with little food and water and no access to medical attention. As they were not allowed exercise or toilet breaks, they were forced to relieve themselves in their shoes, and many developed diarrhea due to the unhygienic conditions.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW commends the Italian government for engaging with the Libyan authorities to bring an end to the suffering of Eritrean refugees, who should never have been detained in the first place. However, while welcoming Libya's undertaking to find work for them in public works projects, the government must also ensure that these people are not subjected to further exploitation, and that their rights are respected. CSW also urges other countries within the European community to respond swiftly and positively to Italy's call for additional offers of sanctuary."