

Eritrea: Desperate Plight of Refugees In Sinai Exacerbated By Israeli Illegal Migrants Bill

By Dan Wooding

SINAI, ON BORDER BETWEEN EGYPT AND ISRAEL -- Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a UK-based human rights group, says that it is concerned that the desperate plight of refugees and asylum seekers in the Sinai will be exacerbated by the passage of the Illegal Migrants Bill in the Knesset last week, which allows for the arrest and imprisonment of any crossing into Israel.

CSW is reporting that on 12 January the Italian NGO Agenzia Habeshia reported that a group of 20 women, six children and 12 men from Eritrea are being held hostage in the Sinai, where they are facing starvation and violence. According to the agency, the men in the group are blindfolded and chained by their hands and feet.

The women are also shackled, and they and some of the young boys are reportedly suffering sexual violence. The group is also being subjected to electric shocks and burning with molten plastic, cigarettes or red-hot iron. Traffickers are requesting either \$30,000 USD per person or the sale of an organ to guarantee release and transfer to the Israeli border.



"The experiences endured by this group are commonplace for hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers in the Sinai seeking to escape from Bedouin people traffickers or avoid the Egyptian police, who shoot or detain migrants seeking to cross the border into Israel," said a CSW spokesperson.

Eritrean refugees are still in the hands of robbers in the Sinai, in the border area between Egypt and Israel

"The majority of those who would fall foul of the proposed Israeli legislation are from sub Saharan Africa and are fleeing brutal regimes, such as those in Eritrea and Sudan."

According to the terms of the Illegal Migrants Bill, refugees can be imprisoned without trial for up to three years, or deported back to their country of origin or a third country. Not only does the bill effectively criminalize genuine refugees, it also carries a prison sentence of between five and 15 years for Israelis who assist them in any way. Prior to the passage of the bill, refugees were subjected either to a "Hot Return" border policy or imprisonment on arrival and subsequent legal limbo, due to the absence of a system of refugee status determination (RSD) in Israel that meets international standards. The Illegal Migrants Bill will further curtail the limited protection and assistance available to them from the state or from concerned individuals and humanitarian NGOs.



Eritrean refugees protest torture, rape in Sinai

(Photo: www.alternativenews.org)

principle of non-refoulement.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW appreciates that the flow of people in search of refuge may present challenges. However, the Illegal Migrants Bill will criminalize vulnerable and traumatized people, who deserve protection, and is in clear violation of international humanitarian law. Israel is party to the UN Refugee Convention, and is a nation that was itself born out of an urgent search for sanctuary.

"We therefore urge the Israeli government to reconsider this proposed law, to institute an acceptable RSD program in conjunction with the UNHCR that allows legitimate refugees to be processed and moved on, and above all, to respect the international