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ERITREA Desperate plight of refugees in Sinai exacerbated by Israeli illegal migrants bill

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) 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.

On January 12 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 USD \$30,000 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. 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.

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 principle of non-refoulement."

Notes to Editors:

1. As was highlighted last week by the high Commissioner for Refugees, Eritrean refugees are increasingly being kidnapped from the UNHCR's Shegarab Camp in Sudan and transported to the Sinai, where they endure inhuman and degrading treatment at the hands of criminal trafficking gangs seeking to extort large sums from their friends and families abroad. Those who cannot meet these payments are either murdered, or have organs forcibly harvested for sale, and in many circumstances they are left to die once organs have been removed.

2. Where an efficient refugee RSD programme is in place, the UNHCR facilitates family reunifications for some refugees and assists the transfer of others to refugee-receiving countries.