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ERITREA Refugees in Libya face brutality and possible forced repatriation

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received credible reports that in the last two days 250 Eritrean refugees were forced into trucks “like cattle” and transported from Misrata prison in Libya to Sabha detention centre, situated on the edge of the Sahara.

CSW has spoken directly to some of the refugees, who report that prior to being relocated, the group endured beatings, electric shocks and other mistreatment administered by members of the Libyan military, who had suddenly descended on the prison.

Once the refugees were too battered and tired to resist expulsion, 250 of them were forced into the trucks and sent to Sabha. However, 20 prisoners were so badly beaten that they had to be sent to hospital, and were returned to Misrata after receiving treatment.

Around 47 Eritreans are left in Misrata, including women and children. Describing his shock at recent events, one of the refugees told CSW that in the three and a half years he had spent in Misrata he had never witnessed anything close to the events of the last two days.

There are fears that given the good relations between Eritrea and Libya, and the manner in which Libya recently cooperated to facilitate “selective returns” of escapees who are of special interest to the Eritrean regime, these refugees will be forcibly returned to Eritrea, where they will be subject to imprisonment, mistreatment, and possibly even death.

According to African refugee law, of which Libya is a signatory, states have a responsibility to find settlement elsewhere for refugees who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin. Libya is a hub in North Africa for refugees from sub-Saharan African and the Middle East. The Libyan government is not party to UN Refugee convention and recently demanded the closure of the local office of the UNHCR, but has temporarily permitted it to resume part of its work.

CSW-UK's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW is urging the international community to make urgent interventions on behalf of these refugees, and to remind Libya of its obligations under African refugee law. The Libyan government should also be encouraged to allow the UNHCR to resume its activities fully in Libya, in order to facilitate the registration and transfer of all refugees who are currently languishing in appalling conditions in prisons throughout the country. ”

Notes to editors:

1. On 8 June the UNHCR in Libya was ordered to close its office and cease its operations in the country. The UNHCR had been working in Libya since 1991, at the invitation of the government.

2. In early 2010 twelve Eritreans seeking refuge in Libya were forcibly returned to Eritrea. According to the Paris-based station Radio Erena, all twelve are former employees of various Eritrean government ministries, and at least two are former air force personnel. This indicates that the Eritrean Embassy is now able to screen detainees and arrange for selective deportations.