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ERITREA Refugees in Libya held in inhumane conditions in a single cell

Hundreds of Eritrean refugees who were transported in trucks “like cattle” from Misrata prison in Libya to Sabha detention centre, situated on the edge of the Sahara desert, are being held together in a single, dark and overcrowded cell. They have been given nothing to eat or drink since Tuesday lunch time and no toilet or exercise breaks. According to eye-witness accounts, the refugees have been forced to relieve themselves in their shoes.

In the fortnight before their sudden removal to Sabha, the refugees endured beatings, electric shocks and other mistreatment administered by members of the Libyan military. They were also forced to fill in repatriation forms given to the prison authorities by the Eritrean Embassy in Libya. Those who refused to co-operate were physically abused, with some kept in solitary confinement, while others were denied food and water.

According to Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE), soldiers threatened to deport the refugees or dump them into the sea. One refugee 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.

The refugees have endured physical and psychological abuse, while some with pre-existing medical conditions have collapsed. Few have received medical attention. Around 47 Eritreans are left in Misrata prison, including women and children.

As the refugees were forced to fill out repatriation forms prior to their incarceration in the detention centre, the prospect of repatriation to Eritrea, where they face imprisonment, mistreatment, and possibly death, is real.

CSW is urging the government of Libya to adhere to its obligations as a signatory of African refugee convention in accordance with which states have a responsibility to find settlement elsewhere for refugees who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin because they fear persecution.

HRCE Director Elsa Chyrum said, “The way Libya is treating these people is inhumane and barbaric. Even criminals in Libyan jails are fed and given water. A nation like Libya, which boasts of championing Africa and its causes, should be honoring its obligations under African refugee convention.”

CSW’s National Director Stuart Windsor said, “It is unacceptable that people fleeing repression are being treated in such a manner. CSW calls on key members of the international community to encourage the Libyan government to end this appalling mistreatment of people who merely seek a place of safety. Libya must also be urged to fulfill its obligations under African refugee law by offering refuge or the opportunity of resettlement to these refugees. In addition, it vital that the UNHCR is permitted to resume its activities fully in Libya, in order to facilitate the registration and transfer of all refugees.”

Notes to editors:

1. CSW first reported the movement of the refugees from Misrata to Sabha on 30 June. See the full release on the CSW-UK website, www.csw.org.uk

2. On June 8 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.