

June 2014

Sinai Torture Survivors in Israel

The Discovery of the Sinai Torture Camps

In 2009, activists of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants began encountering female Eritrean and Ethiopian asylum-seekers in Israeli prisons who reported being raped by smugglers who held them captive in Sinai. In early 2010, testimonies began arriving of male asylum-seekers being held and tortured in Sinai to extract ransoms from their relatives. Since 2010, the Open Clinic run by the NGO Physicians for Human Rights-Israel began documenting the testimonies of survivors of the torture camps in the Sinai desert. They have collected the testimonies of about 1,000 torture survivors. Most of them Eritreans, who came to receive medical care at the Clinic.

Conditions in the Torture Camps

Asylum-seekers testified that they were held in the desert until relatives and members of their community paid a high ransom in exchange for their release. The asylum-seekers held in the torture camps are shackled to one another with metal chains and are kept in crowded and filthy rooms, exposed to extreme heat and cold, starved, humiliated, beaten, burned with iron and electrocuted, sometimes to death. Women and girls are gang-raped, routinely, day after day. The victims are also forced to work without pay.

The asylum-seekers are told to call their family and then the kidnappers begin torturing them so that their families hear their screams and do everything and anything to raise the sum of the ransom. The ransom sums have risen steadily since 2009 and are extremely high compared to income in the asylum-seekers' countries of origin – \$30,000 and higher. Most of the hostages at the Sinai torture camps are Eritreans and the money is raised by their families in Eritrea that sell everything they own to rescue their loved-ones. The large Eritrean Diaspora (half of the Eritrean nation lives outside of Eritrea due to the dictatorial regime there and the civil war the preceded its establishment) also makes significant monetary contributions to efforts to release the victims. Often times, hostages who had their ransom fully paid are then transferred to another kidnapper who demands another ransom. This can go on for months with one hostage being traded like cattle and extorted by several smugglers. Those who do not pay the ransom on time are often murdered; the same fate awaits those who attempt to escape.

Torture Victims in Israel

Those who were released or manage to escape arrived at the Israeli border in a state of malnutrition, suffering physical injuries and mental trauma. Some of the women carried another heavy burden – a pregnancy from their rapists. At the border with Israel, the asylum-seekers were arrested and sent to the Saharonim Prison. Israeli human rights NGOs and the UNHCR estimate that about 7,000 survivors of the tortures camps live in Israel, hundreds of them in need to continue medical care due to physical injuries they've sustained.

The Torture Camps These Days

After the construction of the border fence was completed in 2012, the number of asylum-seekers entering Israel dropped drastically (43 asylum-seekers entered Israel in 2013 and additional 19 until June

2014). However, the torture camps in Sinai continue to operate thanks to kidnappings of Eritrean refugees from Sudan. The kidnappers, members of the Rashaida tribe, often transfer the hostages to the torture camps in Sinai. Upon paying the exorbitant ransom, the hostages are sometimes released in Cairo. Those who successfully escape or are released in Sinai often arrest by Egyptian authorities. Many of them are jailed in harsh and even life-threatening conditions in overcrowded jails in a police station in Sinai. After they are detained, the asylum-seekers are deported to Ethiopia and sometimes Eritrea, thus blatantly violating the Refugee Convention. The Egyptian regime does not grant human rights organizations or the UNHCR access to survivors of the torture camps.

The Approach of Israeli Authorities Re: Torture Camp Survivors

Only about 200 of the survivors of the Sinai torture camps have been recognized by the Israeli police as victims of human trafficking and slavery. According to Israeli law, only a person who was employed by the smugglers for a prolonged period of time without pay is a victim of human trafficking and enslavement. Survivors of the torture camps who were “only” tortured, but not forced to work by the kidnappers do not meet the criteria of the law. Survivors of the torture camps who are recognized as victims under Israeli law have the right for a year of recovery in the shelters for human trafficking victims and access to medical and welfare services for that one year. Those who are not recognized under Israeli law, like all other asylum-seekers, do not have access to welfare or medical services. Those who arrived after June 2013, when the 3rd amendment of the Anti-Infiltration Law came into force, and were not among those released as a result of its abrogation on September 2013, remained in detention as the 4th amendment to the Anti-Infiltration law came into force at the end of that year. The Hotline estimates that 10 Torture survivors are still detained in Holot and Saharonim prison until they agree to return home. Four of the Hotline's torture survivors clients already succumbed to the pressure and "chose" to return to Eritrea and During April 2014, and have not been heard of since.

We call the International community to:

- To act in cooperation with the relevant authorities in Egypt in order to locate and free refugees and asylum seekers who are still being held captive for ransom and to ensure that, after their release, these individuals receive comprehensive attention and protection, including safe passage to a third country
- Remind Israel and Egypt of their international obligations vis-à-vis refugees and asylum seekers
- Express grave concern regarding recent legislation and practice involving collective, indefinite *de facto* detention without trial for all asylum seekers including torture camps' victims in Israel
- Remind Israel of the legal duty to use detention as a last resort and ensure that detention conditions at *Holot* facility are in line with international standards
- Encourage the Israeli government to provide a proper support and treatment for the survivors living in Israel.