

Survivors of torture camps in Sinai struggle to survive during COVID-19 – economically, physically, and mentally

Michal Shechter, MSW, the coordinator of ASSAF's support programs for survivors of torture and trafficking, recalls:

"I have been working with Yohannes (alias) for a few years. He is 38 years old and has been living in Israel for ten years following his escape from Eritrea to Sudan where he was kidnapped and taken to Sinai. In Sinai he was held hostage and underwent severe torture for a year. After he managed to collect the ransom for his release, Yohannes was released and crossed the border into Israel. In Israel he was taken into Saharonim prison and was released only after a year.

The years that followed did not numb the pain, and through the days and the nights, Yohannes wrestled with difficult memories, physical and emotional pain, anxiety, difficulties with concentration and with forming social connections. Through a slow process, full of regressions, I managed – with the assistance of ASSAF's translators – to gain his trust, and he feels more comfortable to meet with me - sometimes to speak about what happened to him, and sometimes – without speaking – when he is overwhelmed with memories and emotions.

In February 2020, just before the pandemic broke out, we met, and Yohannes told me that he feels a little bit better. He told me that he is working, that he wants to study, that he goes out with friends and that he sleeps "fine". He told me that it is still very difficult for him because of what he went through, but he is making a lot of effort. We agreed to meet regularly, once every two weeks.

And then, the pandemic broke out and cut off the slow rehabilitation process: the anxiety and headaches increased, and Yohannes lost his place of work. His mental state deteriorated, and he shared with me that he has suicidal thoughts. Just when he was in a great need for help, we couldn't meet regularly with the translator, because of the different restrictions, and on the phone, with no translation, he felt a lot less at ease.

During the months of the pandemic, I kept in contact with him, mainly through phone calls but we also met in person when it was possible; we assisted him at ASSAF with opening a bank account so he could receive his deposit money, and we gave him food vouchers.

Yohannes couldn't find work for months, and in the end, he was forced to settle for a construction job that did not provide a proper paycheck and health insurance. In January this year (2021) he was severely wounded in an accident at work when he fell from a height of 5 meters. The employer failed to take responsibility. Yohannes was hospitalised, his condition critical, he was only partially conscious and underwent a few operations. He was hospitalised for many weeks, throughout some of them – he was ventilated and anesthetized.

He was released from the hospital only in April, in need of orthopaedic rehabilitation, but with no medical insurance he could not receive it and he was released to the small apartment where his relative lives and allows him to stay. He couldn't even afford a cane and the physiotherapy that he so desperately needed.

To the previous struggles in his life, there were now added many more economic and health difficulties that deteriorate his mental state. In one of our last conversations, he told me: "How will I survive this life? I have no hands and I'm dealing with pain [because of the accident], I have no job, I have nothing. I'm really struggling".

The lives of torture survivors from Sinai are very difficult without the effects of the pandemic. They are not eligible for any support and rehabilitation provided by the

government that could help them deal with what they experienced and with the physical injuries and the mental impacts that affect their everyday lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the survival capability of many of them to the edge and left them more vulnerable and bruised than they already were. It will take a long time for them to recover, even after the pandemic will be long gone from our lives”.