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Egypt, Sudan: Kidnap and trafficking of refugees and asylum-seekers must be stopped

Egypt and Sudan must make urgent and concerted efforts to stop asylum-seekers and refugees being kidnapped from camps in Sudan, forcibly transported to Egypt, and being severely abused in the Sinai desert, Amnesty International said in a new briefing.

For over two years, refugees and asylum-seekers have been kidnapped from in and around the Shagarab refugee camps in eastern Sudan, near the Eritrean border. The vast majority of victims are Eritrean. They are then trafficked to Egypt's Sinai desert, where they are held captive by Bedouin criminal gangs while ransom payments are demanded from their families.

Amnesty International has received repeated reports of brutal violence used against captives in Sinai, including rape and sexual abuse, beatings, burning and other violent and cruel treatment.

The captors reportedly telephone their victims' relatives while inflicting violence in order to extort money, often demanding ransoms of up to USD 30-40,000.

Some refugees and asylum-seekers are murdered when their families are unable to pay the ransom, while others die from injuries or because of the extremely harsh conditions of captivity. One teenage boy held for eight months in Sinai witnessed seven deaths among the other captives during that time.

The organization is calling on the Egyptian security forces to investigate urgently reports that refugees and asylum-seekers are being held captive in compounds in northeast Sinai.

“The Egyptian authorities have a duty to protect any individual on their soil, and must urgently take steps to free all people held captive and subjected to appalling abuses in Sinai, and provide them with immediate medical attention and access to asylum procedures and support,” said Claire Beston, Amnesty International's Eritrea researcher.

Amnesty International continues to receive fresh reports of kidnappings in and around the Shagarab camps, and is alarmed at the apparently inadequate safety and security provision there. Security measures in the camps must be urgently improved.

“It is particularly worrying that numerous victims have alleged that the members of the Sudanese National Security Service are involved in the kidnappings near the borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Sudanese government must investigate all allegations of the involvement or complicity of Sudanese officers and where sufficient evidence is found, individuals must be arrested and prosecuted,” said Claire Beston.

According to testimonies gathered by Amnesty International, captives in Sinai suffer extreme violence and cruelty, including repeated rape and other forms of sexual violence, beatings with chains, burning with heated plastic and metal, electric shocks, suspension from the ceiling, and being doused with gasoline and set on fire.

An Eritrean survivor describes what happened to one of the other captives who was ‘made an example of’ because he said his family could not pay:

“He was bleeding all over. After more beatings, they poured petrol on him and set him on fire. After he died, they left his body in the room with us until it became rotten and worms started crawling. They forced all of us in turns to hold him.”

Amnesty International urges the governments of Egypt and Sudan to make significant efforts to bring anyone involved in the crimes of kidnapping and human trafficking to justice.

Amnesty International also calls on the countries along the trafficking route – running from Eritrea through Ethiopia and Sudan into Egypt, to work together to bring an end to the kidnapping, trafficking and horrific abuses, and to increase engagement with international agencies’ initiatives to tackle these crimes.

However, it must be ensured that regional cooperation does not infringe in any way on the rights and safety of refugees and asylum seekers.

The majority of victims of abuses in Sinai who have been freed are now in Israel, while some are in Egypt and Ethiopia. Destination countries, including Israel, must put in place transparent systems to identify victims of trafficking and other abuses, and provide victims with access to medical, psycho-social and rehabilitation services and to fair asylum procedures.