



Human trafficking in the Sinai desert – A report on the origin of the crisis, the current situation and possible future solutions

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Introduction

Today there is a humanitarian crisis going on in the Sinai desert. Refugees from the Horn of Africa are being kidnapped from refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia to the Sinai desert where they are being tortured, abused and held for ransom. In this paper, I am going to present what is happening in the Sinai Peninsula, how they are brought there, why this crisis began and some possible solutions.

Human trafficking in the Sinai

Why is a majority of the hostages Eritreans?

95% of all the hostages in the Sinai are Eritreans. There are several reasons to why that is. First of all, the amount of Eritrean refugees has ever since the Eritrean–Ethiopian war (1998- 2000) been huge.[1] After September 2001, when president Isaias Afewerki officially turned Eritrea into a dictatorship, the amount of people fleeing has increased exponentially. It has been estimated that 5000 people flee Eritrea every month. [2] Some are reuniting with their families that have already left and some want to get to a country where they can get a job and provide financial support for their families back home. Since exit visas extremely rarely are handed out to Eritreans (mostly to very young children, elderly or for severe medical reasons) most Eritreans leave the country illegally. Another explanation is the huge Eritrean diaspora that has the financial possibilities to pay the ransoms. A third explanation is the involvement of some Eritrean officials.

How are they taken to Sinai?

In order to leave the country, the refugees make a payment to smugglers to get them past the Eritrean border. The first goal for many of the refugees is to reach the refugee camps at Mai Aini (Ethiopia) or Shagarab (Sudan). When they have crossed the border, they pay guides to take them to the camps. The actual abduction can be carried out in the following ways:

- When they cross borders, especially from Eritrea to Sudan, and are picked up by Rashaida who sell them to the Bedouins, who then take them to the Sinai
- From the surroundings of the refugee camps, especially from Shagarab
- While working to earn money for survival
- From within the camps, especially Shagarab
- And while in the hands of a paid guide.[3]

The refugees are almost always sold several times to different kidnapppers before they reach Sinai. Some refugees that eventually reach Sinai have been sold *four-five* times. They are not seen as human, rather as commodities.

The recruiters that have been identified are the Rashaida circles in Sudan/Eritrea, Bedouin circles in Sinai/Sudan, People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) officials/Border, Surveillance Unit in Eritrea m Police/military in Sudan, traffickers inside the refugee camps and guards working in the refugee camps.

The conditions in Sinai

The refugees are taken to basements and garages in the houses of Bedouin families. These houses are located close to the Israeli border. In order to make it harder for the hostages to flee, they are shackled and tied up

together.[4] The refugees are constantly under psychological and physical torture. The hostages are tortured on a daily basis. The main purpose with the physical torture is to pressure the relatives to pay the ransom, not to kill. One woman who has been held in Sinai explains it like this: *“These kidnappers, their objective is to keep us barely alive so we will not try to escape or give them trouble, while at the same time torturing us so we are forced to pay. [...] The kidnappers have this policy of torturing the healthy and taking care of the afflicted, because, from what we understand, they don’t care if we are alive or dead, but rather about their money. They don’t want us dying before they can get the money”*. [5]

In general, there are two to five torturers executing the torture while two people guard them, prohibiting anyone from interfering. The kind of torture that is executed is extreme to the extent that the hostage is alive, but barely. These are all examples of the kind of torture that is executed:

Beating, electrocution, burning, hanging upside down and beating, mutilation, amputation, exposure to the torture of other hostages, the giving of ‘pot’, the withholding of faith practices, rape and sexual violence.[6] [7]

Several testimonies testify about the brutal torture in the houses of the Bedouin families. One man tells human rights activist and journalist Meron Estefanos: *“At 5am, they spray us with cold water, and as we’re all chained together they connect the chains to electricity to electrocute us, and then we all cry saying we’ll pay”*. [8] Another torture technique that causes horrifying suffering, is when the torturers put petrol in the anus of the victim and then burn them.

Some torture forms have more purpose than just to pressure the relatives. The hostages are tied upside down on the roof and then the torturers beat their hands and feet.[9] The prisoner cannot walk and more importantly, not flee. Sometimes it is for sadistic reasons. One victim testifies:

They instructed us to take off our clothes and poured melted plastic on our backs... and so on; they do that in rounds. They tell us to lie down on our backs and proceed on doing the same to our torsos, while they do so, one of them steps on the head, while the other steps on our hands just so we would not resist. They did so and towards the end they said, “this is your holiday treat”. [10]

Telephones are handed out to the refugees while they are being tortured in order for them to call their relatives and let them suffer in order for them to pay the ransom money. The ransoms go up to USD 50,000. The ransom money is paid through middlemen through European and American banks.[11]

There are also “torture camps” where the refugees are exposed to several torture practices, one after another for hours.[12]

The situation for women and children

Several testimonies have proven that women held hostage have suffered sexual abuse. Between the years of 2010-2012 it has been estimated that more than 600 women have been victims of rape and other sexual abuses. Most men flee alone, but many women bring along their children. One form of psychological torture that is executed is when the women’s children are taken away from them without any warning or further information and the constant threat from the kidnappers telling the mothers that they are going to murder their children.[13]

If the proportion of children in the unknown population is the same as in the known, the amount of children are around 30% of the total population of hostages. The children are subjected to the same kind of torture as their parents.[14] The main difference is that a child’s mental strength is much weaker than that of an adult. For example, one 13-year-old boy who was held in Sinai and tortured repeatedly had become severely mentally ill and started excreting himself.[15]

In Eritrea, everyone is religious. According to the Pew Research Center, 62.9% are Christians and 36.5% are Muslims in Eritrea.[16] In both religions, one has huge respect for a dead body and values the ceremony afterwards extremely. However the kidnappers hold no respect for dead bodies. The bodies are just thrown away in the desert.

Liberation from Sinai – still not free

Those who are lucky enough to be liberated still face huge challenges. They are still not free. Israel has built a huge fence on the border with Sinai; if you manage to climb that fence you risk being shot by border control on either the Egyptian or the Israeli side. In 2011, 1500-2000 managed to cross the border every month, in 2012 Israel finished their 240 km long fence and that caused only 10 people being able to cross every month. Between 2008-2012, it has been estimated that 4000 people have died in their attempt to flee Sinai.[17] Once they reach Israel, African refugees are thanks to the “anti-infiltration law” instituted in 2008 labeled as infiltrators and are faced with huge discrimination and racism in both the everyday life and on the labor market.

Today, there are no legal ways to Europe. This was also one of the reasons that Eritreans instead started to go to Israel. Prior to when the kidnappings began, the Rashadias transported them from Sudan to Egypt and the Bedouins transported them from Egypt to Israel. However, when Israel instituted the “anti-infiltrators law” and made it impossible for the Eritreans to go there, the Eritreans stopped hiring the traffickers and the former Rashadia and Bedouin smugglers lost their business. This was the birth of the human trafficking circle.

Since living in Israel as a refugee is not optimal, many try to reach Europe. But due to the Dublin regulation, they mostly have the possibility to reach Malta, Greece and Italy where the chances of you getting a permit are quite low. The (illegal but only) roads to Europe are extremely dangerous. Every year, thousands are killed in the Mediterranean.[18] Last year, a boat sank off the coast of Lampedusa, killing 369 Eritrean refugees.

Recommendation

In order for this horrible phenomenon to end, we need to stop the traffickers. The kidnappings of refugees to the Sinai have been going on since 2006 and yet the legal consequences for the perpetrators have been very few. Even though information and evidence of the trafficking and torture has been available for the public since 2010, only one prosecution has been done and no conviction under Egypt’s criminal law.[19] Sudan has only prosecuted 14 cases involving the kidnappings. Both Egyptian officials and Sudanese officials have played a vital role in the trafficking but to date, no Egyptian official has been prosecuted and only 4 Sudanese officials have been prosecuted.

Their failure to investigate these crimes and convict the kidnappers/tortures are causing them to break their obligations “...under criminal law and international human rights law to prevent and prosecute trafficking and to guarantee the right to life and physical integrity of everyone on its territory”.[20]

These are my recommendations:

- 1) Interpol, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia need to cooperate, share information and act together in order to break down and prosecute every single person, civilian and official, responsible and involved in the human trafficking network operating in Sinai.
- 2) The first step of the human trafficking circle is the actual abduction. Most times, this takes place at the camps. UNHCR, Sudan, Ethiopia must make the camps a safe place and help gather information about the traffickers in and near the camps.
- 3) Egypt must also stop their horrible treatment of refugees including shooting them at the border and arresting and detaining victims on immigration charges. Instead they should give them witness protection that will lead to more victims daring to come forward and help provide the information needed to arrest and prosecute the traffickers and tortures.

ENDNOTES

- 1 UNCHR ‘2014 UNHCR regional operations profile – East and Horn of Africa’ (2014) <http://www.unhcr.org>
- 2 Statement by M.van Reisen and M. Estefanoes to Cecilia Malmstro#m, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs “Still, according to the CIA, 5,000 refugees leave Eritrea every month”. (December 2013) Page 1
- 3 Meron REPORT – Page 30 #
- 4 Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between Life and Death – 2012 by Prof Dr Mirjam van Reisen, Meron Estafanoes and Dr Conny Rijken.
- 5 Op cit. Human Trafficking in the Sinai
- 6 Op cit. Human Trafficking in the Sinai Page 51
- 7 ‘I wanted to lie down and die’ (February 2014) – Human Rights Watch
- 8 Op cit. Human Trafficking in the Sinai note 104
- 9 Ibid Page 52 note 108
- 10 Ibid – Interview 11
- 11 Op cit. Human Trafficking in the Sinai Page 49
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Ibid Page 55
- 14 Ibid

15 Human rights watch 28/10-2012. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/28/israel-asylum-seekers-blocked-border>

16 Pew Research Center <http://features.pewforum.org/global-christianity/total-population-percentage.php>

17 Figures provided by Alganesh Fessaha, 16 June 2012, meeting Brussels (http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/publications/Report_Human_Trafficking_in_the_Sinai_Final_Web.pdf) ###

18 Amnesty international <http://www.amnesty.org/en/refugees-and-migrants>

19 Op cit. 'I wanted to lie down and die' Note 154: Human Rights Watch interview with international organization staff, November 11, 2012 and December 12.

20 Ibid ##6