Eritrean refugees Raped, Beaten, and Burned Inside Sinai’s hostage Camps

IndepthAfrica

14 November 2012

How Bedouins are kidnapping and ransoming African refugees in Egypt’s lawless hinterland

CAIRO — Memories of torture still haunt 17 year-old Ksamet five weeks after she was released from a small, underground room where Bedouins held her captive for two months in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. She was repeatedly raped, beaten, and burned as family and friends abroad raised money for her $25,000 ransom. “They tortured us almost every day,” Ksamet, from Eritrea, said through an interpreter. “And every week, if we didn’t pay, they’d torture us even more.”

The young woman is one of hundreds of Africans who have been held against their will in the lawless region that borders Israel, often severely abused and largely ignored by the international community. Bedouin are holding over 1,000 people, and Egyptian police are detaining 500 more, according to Meron Estefanos, a Sweden-based Eritrean activist and radio presenter who has spoken to hundreds of Eritreans held hostage in the Sinai.

The steady flow of people north through the Sinai has taken place since 2006 and initially consisted mainly of Sudanese migrants paying to be smuggled to economic opportunities in Israel. In 2008, many Eritreans seeking asylum in Israel started to come, too. The vast majority were trying to escape poverty and conscription under an oppressive dictatorship where indefinite national service is mandatory for most — frequently into their 40s and 50s. Legally leaving the country is nearly impossible.

Hostages report being subjected to electrocution, burned with molten plastic, beaten with chains and rods, hung by their hair, and threatened with organ harvesting.

While many Eritreans taken hostage in the Sinai had paid smugglers to take them to Israel, more and more of those held hostage over the past three years never even had a desire to go there. Many have been kidnapped in or around refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia or on Sudan’s borders — or sold by rogue smugglers or corrupt Sudanese border guards — and brought to Sinai where Bedouin extort them for cash. “I had no intention of going to Israel,” said Ksamet, who left behind two sick parents after the military drafted her. “I wanted to go to Khartoum.”

Instead, her and her fiancé, who was also fleeing military service, made it just across the border to Kassala, a city in eastern Sudan only a dozen miles from Eritrea. But after four days there, her smugglers — whom she had paid about $3,300 — sold her to members of the Rashaida tribe of Eritrea and Sudan, notorious for trafficking people and weapons up the Red Sea coast. Ksamet’s fiancé ran free before they could get ahold of him. “I still don’t know where he is,” she said.

Hostages report being subjected to electrocution, burned with molten plastic, beaten with chains and rods, hung by their hair, and threatened with organ harvesting, among other torture methods, according to refugee-aid groups and activists. Sexual abuse ranges from rape and the burning of genitalia to sodomy with heated objects — even to children.

Eritrean villages sometimes sell off homes, livestock, and jewelry to free relatives from the kidnappers; ransoms can reach $50,000. The Bedouin put their captives on the phone with family in the diaspora, beating them so their relatives hear them scream as they plead for help.

The Bedouin hold them for months on average, and many people do not survive. Dumped corpses litter the desert, with 4,000 dead over past five years, according to a September report Estefanos co-authored
through Tilburg University, in the Netherlands, and Europe External Policy Advisors, a research center in Brussels. “The treatment has gotten to a level where they would rather die than live,” said an employee at a refugee-aid organization in Cairo.

Those raising money often pool funds to free women and children first. Ksamet was one of three women in a group of 14 that also included children. “I was the only woman left” after the other two paid their ransom, Ksamet said. “So they prioritized me.” Often even when the ransom is met, activists say, the Bedouin merely collect the money and sell their human haul on to the next group of kidnappers, ensuring more rounds of beatings and begging.

Though over 84 percent of Eritreans seeking refugee status around the world in 2011 received it (or humanitarian protection), Egypt and Israel have denied many of them the opportunity to even apply. Egypt generally views the sub-Saharan Africans as economic migrants, and the Israeli government labels them “infiltrators.”

Over 57,000 people have made it across the Sinai to Israel and currently reside there as of June 2012, the vast majority from Eritrea and Sudan, according to Israeli government figures. Most arrived in Israel in the last four years. To stem the influx of Africans, Israel has been building a fence along its border this year and enacted legislation allowing authorities to detain border-crossers for up to three years without a trial. The numbers have dropped significantly since.

Twenty to 30 percent of Eritrean asylum seekers who entered Israel before June were tortured in Sinai, according to Shahar Shoham, the director of the migrants and status-less persons department at Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, citing data from her organization (which provides medical services to the asylum seekers) and another Israeli non-governmental group, the Hotline for Migrant Workers. Since June, the Israeli military has only let through those who exhibit signs of torture, she said.

According to human-rights groups, Israel has broken international law by not letting many asylum seekers petition for refugee status. In recent months, activists say, Israel has turned back Africans at the border, sending them to Egyptian troops who shoot those approaching the border and inhumanely imprison others for months. This risk, coupled with Israel’s recent crackdown, has caused more and more hostages to insist that the Bedouin bring them to Cairo, not the Israeli border, upon their release.

One refugee-aid organization in Cairo reports an uptick in former African hostages seeking its services since March — more than 75, with all Eritrean but one. They sometimes arrive in large groups rather than the one or two who would come together previously. In the same time period, 113 people — including 40 unaccompanied children — have approached the Egypt offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) after escaping the traffickers.

The Egyptian government has struggled to control the Sinai region, where militants killed 16 soldiers in August, and traffickers ferry not just humans, but guns, ammunition, and other goods destined for the Gaza Strip. The military launched a massive security operation in the peninsula after the August attack, but central authority remains weak there. Stopping the traffickers and freeing the Eritreans continues to be a low priority for authorities, one part of the complex Sinai puzzle.

Without some degree of complicity from local authorities in the Sinai and high-level officials at the source, the trade could not persist, activists said. “The Egyptian security forces’ track record on conducting law enforcement is pretty horrific from a human-rights perspective,” Heba Morayef, a Cairo-based researcher for Human Rights Watch, said. A lack of domestic attention in Egypt, the government’s reluctance to recognize the hostages as asylum seekers rather than economic migrants, and racism toward black
Africans — plus a host of other pressing issues — have kept the Sinai torture camps open, even though activists said police could probably shut them down in just a few days.

UNHCR has sought access to sub-Saharan Africans arrested by Egyptian police on their way into the Sinai, but the government limits the agency’s access, according to Mohamed Dayri, the UNHCR’s regional representative for Egypt and the Arab League. Dayri insists that no Eritreans have been repatriated, but activists cite numerous cases where Eritreans were sent home despite risk of punishment for unlawfully leaving their country.

Many who make it to Cairo escaped from their Bedouin captors and completed their journey to the Egyptian capital with the help of a man in northern Sinai, known as Sheikh Mohamed, who has opposed human trafficking and provides support to Africans who escape, according to groups that work with refugees in Cairo. But while more torture survivors are reaching Cairo with Sheikh Mohamed’s support, human-rights activists said there is no evidence the level of trafficking has decreased. “One of the problems of researching this issue is the lack of information,” Nicholas Piachaud, a North Africa campaigner for Amnesty International, said. “Gaining access to smugglers camps is impossible.”

Ksamet is now staying with an Eritrean man in Cairo helping her recover. She has received some medical treatment from a non-governmental organization, and has an appointment with UNHCR. She would be happy to move anywhere but Eritrea — and cannot picture staying in Egypt, where she views passersby with suspicion. “I’m always afraid because I think everyone is like them — like the people who tortured us,” Ksamet said. “Every Egyptian in the street — regular people and the police. I imagine them taking me and torturing me.”

Copyright IndepthAfrica