

Tortured in the Sinai: 'I Was Hanged for Days'

From the West Coast of Africa to the deserts of Sinai, Bedouin tribes are conducting a human trafficking trade on a massive scale.

It's no secret. The trade reaps millions of dollars and deals with human misery. It could be stopped but so far no one has dared.

"By that time I had lost sense [sensation] in both my hands," an Eritrean torture victim told CBN News. "It was a result of the accumulated torture but mainly because [both] of my wrists were tied up so tightly, [and I was] hanged up from the ceiling for three days, the blood was cut off from my hands and the flesh started to literally drip from my hands."

Torture in the Sinai

This man is just one victim of this widespread modern-day slavery, kidnapping, and torture trade in the Sinai desert. There are many pictures and videos of this horrible practice on the Internet.

For this story, this Christian man from the African country of Eritrea is going by "Philip," but that's not his real name. CBN News covered his identity for his protection.

"In some cases, we were tortured simply because we were Christians," he told us, his chest trembling slightly as he spoke.

"Sinai was always a place for human smuggling, but since around two years ago—even a bit more—it started also to be a place of human torture," Shahrar Shoham, director of Physicians for Human Rights, told CBN News.

Shorham has documented more than 1,300 cases of torture in the Sinai. Those survivors, like Philip, made it to Israel. But most of the cases of torture are not documented.

“They torture them in horrible methods, like hanging upside down from the ceiling, like using electric shocks, like burning them on their bodies,” Shorham said.

Kidnapped for Ransom

This story begins in Eritrea, where many like Philip fled from its brutal dictatorship. He traveled to a United Nations refugee camp in Sudan. There he was kidnapped by a Bedouin tribe.

They transferred him—along with many others—through Sudan, Egypt, and all the way to the Sinai desert and their torture camps.

What happens next in these camps is diabolical.

“What they make you do is call your family and ask them for the money,” Philip explained. “Usually they will do the asking. They will say, ‘Either send this money or your brother will die or your father will die or your son will die.’ It depends on whoever is picking up the phone.”

“While you’re talking to your family they would pour molten plastic on your body so that you would scream and perhaps they thought that would persuade your family to pay or collect the money faster,” he said.

The tribesmen demand what for most poor Eritrean families is a king’s ransom.

“The ransom fees can go up to \$40,000 for an individual and even \$50,000, and until the ransom fees [are] paid, the people will not be released,” Shoham explained. The financial burden on the families is devastating.”

Killing a Soul

Sister Azziza is a Catholic nun from Eritrea who is based in Jerusalem. She has interviewed many of the Sinai survivors.

"People are destroyed physically [and] psychologically because of what they know they did to their family, how they are living," Sister Azziza told CBN News.

But many do not make it out alive.

"We estimate that around 4,000 people died in the Sinai, some of them from torture," Shoham said. Many who were with Philip died.

"We couldn't help them; that was the most horrible thing," he recalled. "Some you know. You have experienced some of the harshest treatment in this world and yet they're dying and you couldn't do anything to help them. That was horrible."

Hanged Like Christ

Yet the torture and the dying go on.

CBN News talked with a 35-year-old Eritrean woman named Segen. She is five month's pregnant.

Meron Estefanos, an Eritrean human rights activist living in Sweden, arranged our conversation. The kidnappers give them cell phones so they can call their family and friends.

We talked via Skype, linking Sweden, Jerusalem, and the Sinai.

It was sobering. You could hear the strain in Segen's voice.

"They are asking for money every minute and they hit us and they put us—they will make us lie down on the floor and you know their feet would be up and they would hit their feet and melt with melted plastic bags," Estefanos said.

"And so that way they cannot stand because they will torture their feet, and every day they hang them the way they hang Jesus Christ," she said.

"What does she mean when they hang them like Jesus Christ?" CBN News asked.

"They hang us the way He was hanged and they take off their clothes. While they are naked they will hang them. And they will just hit them with big bats like all day for hours," she said.

No Secret to the World

Many of the Eritreans, like Segen and Philip, are Christians. Many don't survive.

"There are around 7,000 that went through these torture camps and 4,000 that died. Those are huge numbers and I don't think that the world needs to keep quiet about that," Shoham said.

Philip miraculously survived and made it to Israel where he received life-saving medical treatment.

The location of these torture camps is no secret.

"Their location and whereabouts is known already by many high officials," human rights activist Majed El Shafie told CBN News.

"The only way out of this problem is for the international society or the international community to put pressure on the Egyptian government to release the victims, to stop these human traffickers," he said.

Shafie believes some of the American financial aid to Egypt could be used—with conditions—to help these victims.

"Every American listening to us right now—not only Americans but anybody in the world—can make a difference," he said.

"You can contact your congressman. You can contact your senator. You can show them that you care about these issues," he said. "If you send an email, or fax or make a telephone call, he can save a life."