

June 2019

Hotline for Refugees and Migrants
End of Project Report to Stiftung TuWus

Project Name: Protecting the rights of women who survived the Sinai torture camps

Project overview

Objectives:

- Identify victims of human trafficking amongst the Sinai torture survivors, and advocate for them to be recognised as such before the authorities
- Advocate for policy changes addressing the special needs of survivors of the Sinai torture camps, including the introduction of a screening and referral mechanism

Outputs:

- Conduct 20 interviews with survivors of the Sinai torture camps
- Advocate for status for at least 10 survivors
- Initiate and attend at least 5 meetings with high-level government decision makers in regards to rehabilitation rights
- Conduct principle litigation to protect all Sinai torture survivors from forced deportation from Israel.

Major developments during the project period

Attempted deportation of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees

2018 began with the terrifying announcement of forced deportation of all of Israel's 40,000 Sudanese and Eritrean refugees to third countries in Africa, including around 4,000 Sinai torture survivors. Despite the government's claim that refugees would be given status in the third countries, our research indicated otherwise. Refugees deported from Israel found themselves status-less, vulnerable to home-country deportation and once again searching for safety. As a result, some were smuggled through Libya and across the Mediterranean to Europe where they became victims of torture, trafficking, slavery, and even death. Of those who traveled along this smuggling route, some choose to do so on the hope that they would end up safe in Europe, while others were kidnapped and smuggled involuntarily. With this knowledge, the Hotline dedicated all possible resources to fighting deportation – through individual casework, litigation, and a huge public advocacy effort. The Hotline played an instrumental role in a public uprising to stop the deportation, which after four months of intensive campaigning, proved successful.

The Hotline's commitment to protecting and assisting Sinai torture survivors applied particularly during the deportation period. In addition to fighting the overall decision to carry out deportations, we submitted a principle case to the High Court of Justice asking the court to recognize the Sinai torture survivors as a uniquely vulnerable group and to protect them from deportation. This would protect approximately 4,000 individuals from deportation and, potentially, from becoming torture victims once again. (Further details regarding the legal case below.)

Once deportation orders began to be issued, the Hotline conducted intensive casework to protect individuals and vulnerable groups. We prepared written case files for pre-deportation hearings, often including medical records and other legal or humanitarian arguments for why they should not be deported. Between February 1 and April 24 we wrote 107 letters requesting delay or cancellation of deportation orders. Out of these 107, 60 people were granted a potentially life-saving exemption.

At the same time, we conducted advocacy, lobby, and media work. From January to April, we initiated 219 media items, including on Israeli primetime, in the NY Times, the Guardian, and the BBC. We also played a key role in 2 major protests in Tel Aviv, attended by 20,000 and 25,000 people. During this time, the government began backtracking on their plans. In early January, the Prime Minister claimed that he intended to remove all 40,000 refugees from Israel. By February, the Head of the Immigration Authority said that they would not deport women or children. Shortly after, they confirmed that they would not break up families, and then they quietly stated that they would not deport anyone from Darfur. Protests in Israel and around the world also urged Rwanda not to accept deportees from Israel. Rwandan officials began publically denying any agreement to accept refugees from Israel.

As the state's plan fell apart, the Prime Minister announced that he had accepted the UNHCR's offer to help Israel by resettling approximately half the community in safe countries in return for Israel granting status to the other half. However, 6 hours later he backtracked due to political pressure. Despite this, Rwanda had already pulled out of the agreement, so Israel desperately looked to Uganda. Unable to secure a written agreement with Uganda, the government had to go back on its word, and all 270 detainees were released. On April 24, as part of a new legal case brought by the Hotline and partners, the state informed the court that it had no viable option to forcibly deport refugees to any third countries. The deportation plan was abandoned, preventing the 40,000 refugees in Israel from being deported, including the Sinai torture survivors. Today, Israel's refugees are in limbo—without fear of deportation, but also without long-term status or hope.

Project results

Objective 1: Identify victims of human trafficking amongst the Sinai torture survivors, and advocate for them to be recognised as such before the authorities

Achievements in Numbers	
# of interviews conducted with female survivors of Sinai torture camps	27
# of women advocated for by the Hotline to be recognised as TIP victims	16
# of women granted status and rights of TIP victims	7
# of advocacy meetings with decision makers	5

In 2018, the Hotline interviewed 27 female survivors of the Sinai torture camps, and succeeded to have 7 of them formally recognized as survivors of human trafficking. In addition to female Sinai survivors, we interviewed 47 other individuals who we thought had strong cases, and 8 of those received official recognition. This status provides them with a place in a residential shelter, access to psychological and medical care, a one-year work permit, and other institutional support that allows them to heal and work toward self-sufficiency. An additional 16 cases, 5 of which are regarding female Sinai survivors, are pending responses. As we advocate for these survivors, our staff regularly meets and corresponds with members of the Police Task Force on Human Trafficking, as well as attending formal meetings to discuss trends in human trafficking in Israel.

The Hotline also submitted a shadow report to the 2018 [U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report](#). One of the issues discussed was the need to stop punishing survivors of human trafficking for offenses committed as a direct result of trafficking—i.e. immigration violations. The report specifically discusses the government's inadequate screening processes to identify survivors of human trafficking among immigration detainees, and one case in which a survivor was identified in Holot and PIBA did not even attempt to release him. This annual report, and our contributions to it, are instrumental in governmental advocacy for Sinai torture survivors. After the report was released, a hearing took place in the Knesset Committee for the Status of Women, where our staff advocated for necessary changes in the state's efforts to combat trafficking.

Case study – WT:

WT is an Eritrean national who became pregnant and had a son as a young teenager in Eritrea. After giving birth, she left Eritrea for Sudan, where she was kidnapped by smugglers. She managed to escape, but with a significant injury. After this, she recovered in Sudan, only to be kidnapped once again and brought to Sinai in February 2011. WT was in Sinai for two months, from February to April 2011. When she first entered Sinai, she was raped for five days straight by three men. They then sold her to Bedouin smugglers, who tortured and continued to rape her. She became pregnant in Sinai, and entered Israel 7 months pregnant on April 21, 2011. She continues to suffer physically and emotionally from her time in Sinai, and her child is also in poor health.

WT was referred to us by a social worker at another nonprofit. After hearing her story, we conducted interviews, collected documents from the Population and Prison Authorities, and advocated to the Police Task Force on Human Trafficking that she be recognized as a survivor of human trafficking, due to enduring sexual slavery. Our advocacy was successful, and as a recognized survivor of human trafficking she receives housing in a rehabilitative shelter for herself and her child, access to psychological and medical treatment, and a one-year work permit.

Case study – MZ:

MZ grew up in Eritrea, and ran away to a refugee camp in Ethiopia to escape forced slavery in the Eritrean national service. She struggled to make ends meet in Ethiopia, so she decided to move to Sudan, where she met a smuggler who asked her for \$3,500 to travel to Israel. MZ paid the fee, but was smuggled to Sinai, where she was held without access to adequate water, food, or the ability to clean herself. She was bound with iron chains and frequently beaten to the point of bleeding, especially on her feet. She witnessed a fellow prisoner beaten to death while naked. She was raped frequently by individuals and groups of men. One common tactic for her captors was to line up the prisoners and rape them one by one while hitting them. Eritrean men imprisoned with her were also forced to rape the women, and beaten when they

refused. She was asked to pay \$3,500 in ransome, but after she paid she was smuggled to another camp where she was asked to pay \$20,000. There, she was chained, beaten, forced to stay awake for days at a time, had urine poured on her, and raped repeatedly. Finally, MZ entered Israel in September 2010.

MZ was referred to us by a psychologist who is familiar with our work. After hearing her story, we conducted interviews, collected documents from the government and her doctors, and advocated to the Police Task Force on Human Trafficking that she be recognized as a survivor of human trafficking, due to enduring sexual slavery. Our advocacy was successful, and as a recognized survivor of human trafficking she receives housing in a rehabilitative shelter, access to psychological and medical treatment, and a one-year work permit. MZ has been diagnosed with co-morbid depression, complex PTSD, and suicidality; she has attempted suicide by drinking bleach. The resources she receives as a recognized survivor of human trafficking will be instrumental in allowing her to recover from the mental health conditions brought on by her torture in Sinai.

Objective 2: Advocate for policy changes addressing the special needs of survivors of the Sinai torture camps, including the introduction of a screening and referral mechanism

Protecting Victims of Sinai Torture Camps from Deportation

Our commitment to protecting survivors of the Sinai torture camps was particularly relevant during the government's attempted deportation plan in the beginning of 2018. On February 4, the Hotline's legal department issued an urgent request to the MoI, demanding it cancel its decision to deport 13 Eritrean asylum seekers – all survivors of the torture camps in the Sinai. The MoI answered the request saying that torture victims were not within the criteria of exemption from deportation.

On April 2 we submitted a principle case to the High Court requesting to exempt all torture victims from the deportation. The case was on behalf of 12 individuals, 5 of whom had already come under the deportation policy and were in indefinite detention in Saharonim. On April 5 we were very happy to receive an interim temporary injunction. A few days later we received a disappointing response from the court saying that they would not hear it as a principle issue and that we will have to take the cases individually starting at the lowest level of court. This was extremely disappointing, although the hesitation of the court to consider matters on a principle level is an obstacle we have encountered for years. All of the torture victims were subsequently released when the deportation plan was cancelled and all the detainees were released, thus removing the need to appeal against this decision to the Supreme Court.

Rehabilitation services for Sinai Torture Victims

For the last two years we have been conducting legal and advocacy work to secure state-funded rehabilitative services for survivors of the Sinai torture camps. Together with two fellow NGOs, we have been advocating that the government create a program to identify and assess the rehabilitation needs of victims of torture. The program would also provide participants with a certain grade of rehabilitative services according to their needs, ranging from health insurance for the more moderate cases all the way to residential care for the most severe cases. The model would be based on the current model for identifying and helping victims of trafficking. In 2017 the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Combatting Trafficking agreed that they would conduct a pilot program for torture victims (exactly as we had suggested). During 2018 the pilot program finally took place. The state requested that we refer the pilot participants to them for assessment, something we were extremely hesitant to do considering that the government had not

committed to any particular outcome for the participants. On the other hand, the committee seemed to be taking the program seriously and it could result in a real improvement in the situation of torture victims in Israel. We therefore provided hundreds of referral cases for the pilot together with partner organizations. The cooperation with the government staff appeared to be positive, and there were strong indicators that they respected our professional experience in working with victims of torture, as they included the vast majority of our referrals.

As of June 2019, the recommendations, which were due to be published in July 2018, were not published. We have continued advocacy work on behalf of the pilot program, meeting four times with the Pilot Committee, Ministry of Justice Inter-Ministerial Committee, and the Committee for the Status of Women to encourage lawmakers to adopt the program with our full recommendations. Due to political pressure, it now appears that the government is pursuing recommendations that we will find deeply inadequate. Furthermore, Israel is in the midst of an unprecedented political situation: after dissolving the government in November and holding elections in April, the newly elected Members of Knesset were unable to form a governing coalition and called for elections again in September. With these back to back elections bringing the government to a standstill for nearly a year, the government has not been able to, and will continue to not be able to advance a policy agenda or pass new laws. This significantly delays the potential implementation of the program. Regardless of the timeline, we are preparing to file a suit to force the government to publish or strengthen the recommendations once it is relevant.

Budget Report

Budget Item	Planned Budget (€)	Actual Expenses (€)
Senior case worker - 15% for 9 months	4,450	4,576
Advocacy	550	424
Total	5,000	5,000

Organizational Developments

We welcomed our new Executive Director, Dr. Ayelet Oz, on January 1, 2019. Dr. Oz comes to us from the Public Defender's Office within the Ministry of Justice, where she worked for many years and served as the Director of the Administrative Law Division from 2016-2018. She holds Bachelors' Degrees in law and history from Tel Aviv University and a Doctorate of Juridical Science from Harvard University.