



“I am alive, but dead inside”

Sinai torture survivors speak

Out of the 45,000 African asylum seekers currently living in Israel, it is estimated that there are between 5000 to 7000 men, women, and children who have survived torture in the Sinai desert. These people, mostly Eritreans and Sudanese, have been kidnapped and smuggled to the Sinai Peninsula, where they were held captive and tortured for months in order to pressure their families to pay ransom money to the perpetrators. The torture included being chained for days or months, starvation, beatings, burning, threats of organ harvesting, sexual assaults and rape.

Today these people, who suffered some of the most heinous abuse imaginable, bear both physical and emotional scars. They are often left in complex psycho-social situations, suffer severe trauma, and are in dire need of medical care, welfare services, as well as other forms of support. However, as asylum seekers in Israel, survivors of torture in the Sinai have no legal status and therefore have very limited access to the public health and welfare services. Moreover, Israel has no mechanism in place to identify victims of torture amongst asylum seekers, and the government does not provide medical and psychological treatments suited for their rehabilitation. We call upon Israel to establish such mechanism for the identification, evaluation, and rehabilitation of Sinai torture victims. In the absence of such mechanism, the Sinai torture survivors are often left untreated, and are in greater risk for both mental and physical deterioration.

In what follows are their own words, as documented in interviews conducted at Physicians for Human Rights–Israel: In 2012, upon their arrival to Israel, and later on, in 2015, having lived in Israel for several years. All the names have been changed to protect their privacy.





photo by Actvestills www.actvestills.org

“... We were tortured. We were beaten. We were tortured with electricity. I have wounds all over my body from the torture. The worse treatment that I got was the electric shock, we were unconscious. They forced us to sit and stand up the whole night as a way of torture.”

(Bereket, 29 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

“... They put us in the underground house and we were told to pay 30,000 [US dollars]. We were beaten, my fingers are still swollen. We were chained. I have scars around my ankles from the chains and difficulty walking. We were given only one bread a day.”

(Saba, 30 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)

“I was sexually abused in the Sinai. I could not pay. ..They forced me with a knife.... As a result of the rape I became pregnant.”

(Eden, 21 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)

“I don't feel I can work. I don't share anything with others. I sometimes think that I will be happy in the future - that things will be better - but then the devil comes and makes me think that I will be like this forever. I became useless, I am stressed out and I wish I could go somewhere to start my life. I am alone and have no one.”

(Semere, 24 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

“...I recently stopped working after my medical condition got worse ... My friends helped and supported me. When I went to the hospital they told me I need to undergo surgery but they told me to go to PHR because I have no insurance. I suffer from pain in my abdomen. I don't work, my friends help me and I am asking for help - medical help. I want to return to live life in a fuller way, to play sports like I used to and to help myself and my family.”

(Tekle, 31 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

“My desire is peaceful life. Another thing - legal status. Here I find there is a lot of racism and discrimination because of my skin color - this prevents me to have peace and tranquility.”

(Goitom, 23 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)



photo by Physicians for Human Rights

"It is extremely difficult for me to talk about what happened. The moment I start - I become very sad and shut down. I got my life back after I was tortured for 7 months."

(Birhane, 29 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

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"I cannot sleep, I live in frustration, everything comes back to my mind, my body is weak, I am in pain. I feel for those who are left behind in the Sinai and also my parents who did a lot and I cannot pay them back. In Israel I cannot work and I am dependent on others."

(Habtom, 23 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

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"When they were beating me, beating me, beating me, I vomited blood."

(Merhawit, 30 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)



photo by Activestills www.activestills.org

"... I stopped the psychiatric treatment because I have no money to pay for the bus-ride. My friends who supported me left for Canada and now I am alone, unable to take care of myself financially."

(Dehab, 32 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

"I become angry very easily, I become very sensitive and fearful. I lost all my confidence. The pressure of not having status and being insecure - all of these pressures prevent me from thinking of what my life could be - I have no rights, no passport, no status - I cannot focus on the rest of my life."

(Mesfin, 23 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

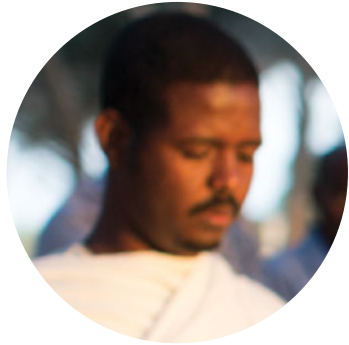
"We were crying when the others were dying. The smugglers told us that even if you die it is nothing to us, it is as if a dog dies."

(Mikael, 20 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

"They came every day to ask how much money we raised, if we did not add any money we were beaten."

(Girma, 23 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)





“...I have marks and signs from the chains in Sinai. I have strong pains in the sole of my feet and also my hands get numb especially when it is cold. This is because of the torture I underwent. I am not getting any medical help.”

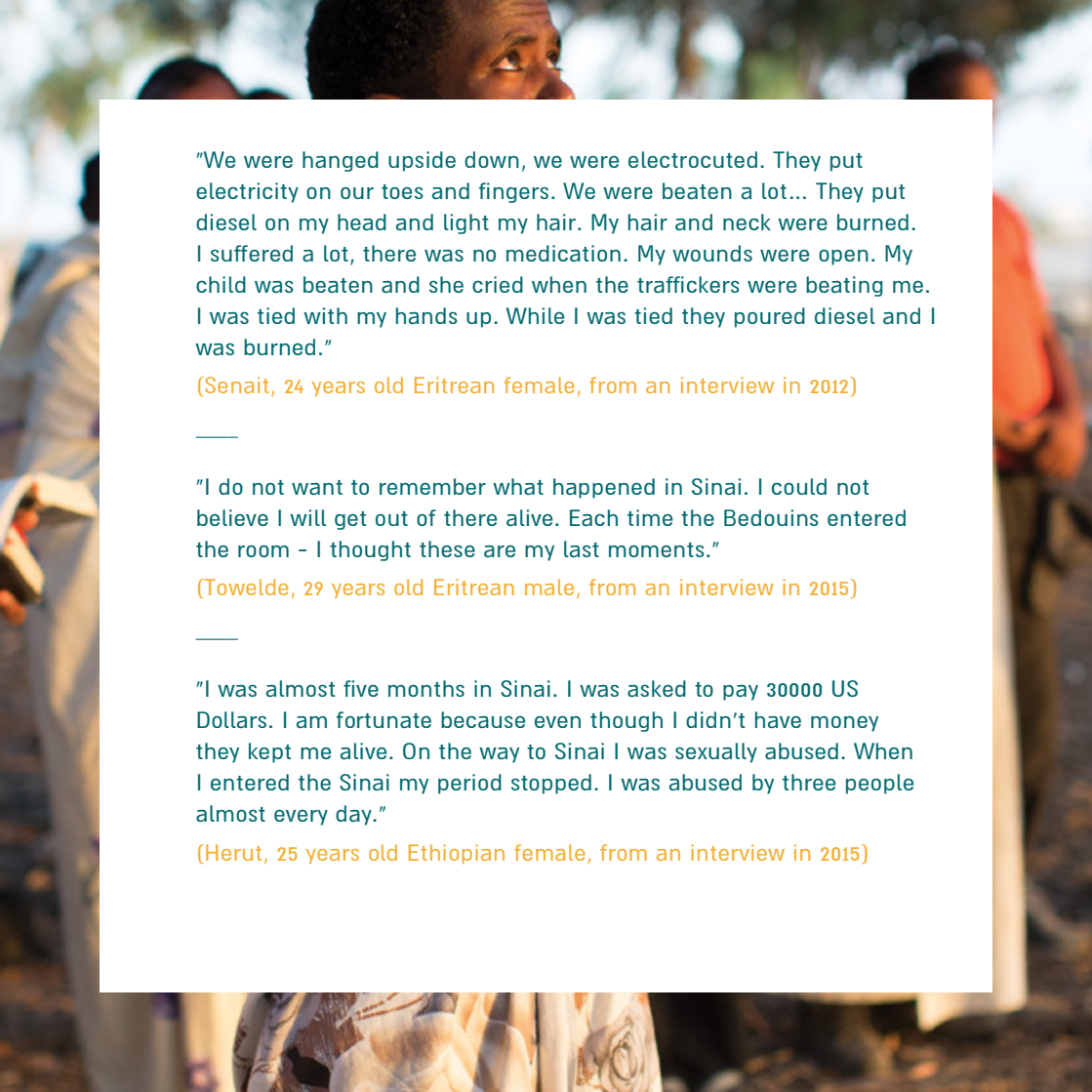
(Dawit, 21 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

“I cannot work, I cannot use my hands and I cannot sleep. I remember all, especially the people that are left behind I dream about them and all the things that happened come back to my mind.”

(Medhane, 20 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

“... I was beaten on my ears. Pus was coming from my ears. We were beaten with a piece of wood from a table. We were also tortured with electricity. They put the wire in our mouth, we had to hold it with our teeth.”

(Awet, 24 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

A background image showing a group of people outdoors. In the foreground, a man is looking to the right. Other people are visible in the background, some wearing traditional clothing. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daylight.

“We were hanged upside down, we were electrocuted. They put electricity on our toes and fingers. We were beaten a lot... They put diesel on my head and light my hair. My hair and neck were burned. I suffered a lot, there was no medication. My wounds were open. My child was beaten and she cried when the traffickers were beating me. I was tied with my hands up. While I was tied they poured diesel and I was burned.”

(Senait, 24 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)

“I do not want to remember what happened in Sinai. I could not believe I will get out of there alive. Each time the Bedouins entered the room - I thought these are my last moments.”

(Towelde, 29 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

“I was almost five months in Sinai. I was asked to pay 30000 US Dollars. I am fortunate because even though I didn't have money they kept me alive. On the way to Sinai I was sexually abused. When I entered the Sinai my period stopped. I was abused by three people almost every day.”

(Herut, 25 years old Ethiopian female, from an interview in 2015)



photo by Activestills www.activestills.org

“I have scars on my back; I was burned with plastic on my back. ... We were kept underground. The whole day we were obliged to stand, the smugglers did not allow us to sit. We suffered hunger, but the worst is thirst because they did not give us water at all... We were drinking our own urine. Sometimes we fainted.”

(Kidane, 28 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

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“For eight months I was not allowed to shower. How could I take shower, we did not even have enough water to dip our fingers. We were blindfolded for eight months in a row, as soon as they moved we opened the blindfold.”

(Tesfay, 31 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

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“I cannot imagine how my parents collected the money. Thinking about them makes me feel depressed.”

(Sheshy, 19 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

“In the Sinai desert they beat me, they burned me – they poured gasoline on my head and neck and lighted with a lighter and burned my hair and neck. I was fortunate that my face did not burn. They then threw me to the sand and put a blanket on me; They also hung me and they sexually assaulted me twice a day, once there were seven Bedouins at the same time; they threatened to kill me and I was shot by the smugglers as well as by the border patrol, and they threatened to harvest my internal organs – they used to do this a lot to me and to the entire group. My daughter who is now in sixth grade was present the entire time and had to watch how they tortured me.”

(Asmeret, 27 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“... We were blindfolded all the time, I could only hear them. We never saw the people we were blindfolded all the time. We were hungry most of the time. Because of the beatings I have swollen legs. There were only two that were allowed to go and cross the border. It was difficult for me to cross the border. They told us that they were calling the doctor to take our kidneys. There were women with children, I only heard their voices, I never saw them.”

(Yonas, 24 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

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“Even those who died, they were still asking money for them. We were informing the people that they should not send money for their brothers because they already died.”

(Kiflom, 25 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)



“They were torturing us. We were 75 people in our group. They pressured us to pay by beating us, hanging us from our armpit, and tightening a rope around our neck. [...] There were five men who were beating us constantly. We barely received any food or water, only every three days we were given little food. The smugglers shaved the head of the man. The smugglers kept threatening us, the women, that they will rape us if we don't pay. Now I have to pay back the money to my family, but I cannot find here a job. I feel stressed and traumatized, it makes me cry just to think about all the suffering I had to endure.”

(Freweini, 29 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)

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“I am a calm person, I don't get angry but when I think about the painful past events I get very upset. For me I don't have enough money to pay the rent - it is very stressful. For me - I have lost everything. I don't care anymore. But I need to take care of my son.”

(Desta, 27 years old Ethiopian female, from an interview in 2015)





“Israel for me is like a curse - I have no rights, I hardly survive. When now they told me they might deport us - I became very scared because I did not return my ransom and I am full of shame and fear. I pray a lot to get out of this country.”

(Mariam, 34 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“... These days I am very much distracted, I have no meaning to my life. I have no interest in anything anymore... I don't feel I am a full human being anymore. I am like a dead body.”

(Zewdi, 30 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“They told us: 'you will pass the door either when you are dead or when you finish paying.'”

(Osman, 27 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

“...I cry a lot and I am very sensitive. The past events come to me like a film, I play them over and over [...] I think how my life could have been different and I keep on thinking of what could have been.”

(Fiyori, 30 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“I have burn scars on my neck and also on my behind. I have scars and bruises from the beating and I used to have bruises that got infected because of lack of medical treatment.”

(Lemlem, 27 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“My main worry is the ransom I paid - 12,200 us dollars - I never paid it back and this bothers me. I am very stressed out. ... I have no family here only people I know from my village but because I am sick and weak - they stay away from me. I hate to be with people these days - I don't like to go to community gatherings.”

(Yohanna, 30 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

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“My nails are all red from the blood because of repeated beatings. They beat us with water pipes. They told us to sleep standing with our hands in the air, we were not allowed to sleep laying down. It was the worst punishment because we could not sleep.”

(Tigisti, 19 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2012)



"How can I see any future? I don't know what will happen to me tomorrow. I cannot see ten or five years ahead when the Israeli government is against me - they can throw me to jail, they didn't renew my visa in November 2014 - they can do anything. I was so upset I was lonely without any help or support. I wished a car would run me over. I felt I was nothing. Without visa I cannot eat or pay the rent or be with my friend. This went on for two months."

(Filmon, 30 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2015)

"I still have some hope for the future but I am mainly scared: I am scared of what could happen to me because what happened to me in the Sinai is something beyond my wildest imagination and when I arrived there I was so sorry because I was scared for my life and for my daughter's life. I was sure I was about to die and my daughter too. A week after we entered Israel I was hospitalized and then they brought my daughter - I was so afraid something happened to her and so happy to see she is okay. I cried of joy and was happy they took care of her and some hope has returned."

(Asmeret, 27 years old Eritrean female, from an interview in 2015)

"Even the person that would kill my brother I do not want him to pass through the journey and experience the torture that I experienced."

(Gebre, 20 years old Eritrean male, from an interview in 2012)

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