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New Call To Protect Migrants Likely, But Action Far From Certain

By Nathan Jeffay

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TEL AVIV — Judging by a flurry of recent declarations, it is likely that early 2011 will see growing demands from the international community for Egypt to take action to halt the abduction, abuse and trafficking of Africans on its territory in Sinai. But some experts strongly doubt that Egypt will pay much attention. “In general, the Egyptians are not at all responsive to outside pressure in areas like human rights,” Mark Heller, a Middle East expert at the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies, told the Forward.

There is little doubt that the abuse of Eritreans and others taking place in Sinai meets the United Nations’ definition of trafficking as adopted in a 2004 U.N. protocol. This protocol, to which Egypt is a signatory, defines trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force... for the purpose of exploitation.” Egypt is widely accused of failing to meet its obligations in Sinai under this document — and under its own anti-trafficking laws, the latest of which passed in March.

Hany Khedr, first secretary of the political department at Egypt’s Tel Aviv embassy told the Forward, “We do recognize [the abuse] and are working on eradicating the problem and combating it.”

Two days earlier, the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Refugees — an agency chaired by Egypt’s U.N. envoy, Hisham Badr — publicly called on Egypt to take action at a Geneva news briefing. UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards said then that his agency was pressing Egyptian authorities for access to detainees picked up and held by Egypt during their trek through Sinai.

Israel has also been pushing for action, including a formal request that its Defense Ministry submitted to Egypt, asking for assistance on the issue. A Defense Ministry spokesman declined to say more, citing diplomatic sensitivities. Foreign Ministry spokesman Shahar Azani said his ministry was also raising the issue with Egypt.

But some in the asylum seeker lobby think that Israel is not doing enough. The Israeli nonprofit We Refugees, which provides free legal services to asylum seekers, claimed in a December 29 letter to Egypt’s interior minister Habib Ibrahim El Adly that the current situation “creates the disturbing impression that the crimes are perceived by the Egyptian and Israeli governments as in line with their national interests,” a reference to both countries’ desire to discourage the flow of African illegals.

Emad Gad, a researcher at the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, said that Egyptian authorities fear angering the Sinai Bedouin, who expect to live free of any “law and restrictions.” Egyptian authorities, he said, believe serious moves to tighten their control at the expense of the Bedouins’ de-facto autonomy in Sinai, would lead the Bedouin to ambush patrols, causing costly damage to monitoring and defense equipment.

The Sinai is vast — 23,000 square miles — and Egypt has limited manpower, Gad said. Egypt is making efforts short of a large-scale push, “but it’s very difficult to imagine they could succeed,” he said.

Heller said that the only way Egypt would act on this issue is if its leaders thought that its alliances with partners such as the United States were on the line — a scenario he deems unlikely. “I’m not sure Israel

has all that much leverage on a matter like this,” he said.

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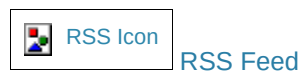
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