



21 May 2014 – Beyond the physical dangers posed by conflicts and displacement, the mental toll they exact is also severe. In Israel, thousands of refugees seeking asylum are suffering from trauma or depression. Some are fleeing from abuses in their own country, others survived torture camps and they all require improved mental health care.

"Over the past year, [Physicians for Human Rights-Israel's Open Clinic](#) has treated thousands of victims of torture who have entered Israel after surviving [captivity and torture](#)

in the Sinai desert," Shahrar Shoham, director of the organization's refugees and status-less persons department

[told IRIN News](#)

. "Out of 284 interviewed, 59 percent report being held captive in chains; 52 percent reported that they were subjected to serious violence, including punching, slapping, kicking and whipping."

A [report](#) by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in February said security forces in Sudan and Egypt either turned a blind eye to human trafficking, or in some cases colluded with the smugglers. Reported incidents of kidnapping and torture by Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai region grew markedly from 2009, with the relatives of those held captive told to pay tens of thousands of dollars in ransom money to secure release.

Until recently the only help available has come from NGOs, such as Physicians for Human Rights - Israel, whose volunteer doctors provide basic general care through an open clinic in the city of Jaffa. But in the last few months, the Israeli Ministry of Health (MoH) has opened a free clinic for trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders [PTSDs] in Jaffa after saying that they had “recognized the need”. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which is part of the joint-venture, welcomed the move saying “we hope they will be able to include them in more clinics and find more funding for these services.”

The clinic is open to all and its patients vary in age, gender and cultural backgrounds. Among the patients are an Eritrean man suffering from bursts of anger and flashbacks to the brutality he witnessed in the Sinai camps, and also an Eritrean woman in her late twenties who spent seven months in a Sinai camp and now cannot sleep without medication, cries uncontrollably and sees no meaning in her life. Yet bringing people to treatment is not easy. Dr. Ido Lurie, a psychiatrist and the head of the new government clinic tells IRIN, “It’s not easy in a close-knitted community that still stigmatizes psychological treatment.”

According to [UNHCR](#), there are 55,000 asylum seekers and refugees residing in Israel. UNHCR representative Valpurgen Englbretht told IRIN it was hard to be precise about the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers suffering mental illness, but, that they “estimate that some 7,000 of the asylum seekers suffer from PTSD due to what they have been exposed to on their way here. The situation now is also a trigger for many of them, as their [lives here become more difficult and uncertain](#)”.

Israel is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention but has one of the lowest [refugee recognition](#) rates in the world, having granted refugee status to only about 200 asylum seekers in the last 60 years.

Source: [IRIN News](#)

Video: IRIN’s “Israel’s African migrants”: <http://www.irinnews.org/film/4262/Israel-s-African-Migrants>