

## **Refugees in the Sinai: why is it so difficult to combat human trafficking?**

Milan, January 18th, 2011. Traffickers in the Sinai have freed another group of African refugees. We received the news from Don Mussiè Zerai , president of Habeshia. Thirty refugees are still in the hands of traffickers, in the fruit orchard of Rafah. "It is clear that the Egyptian authorities have no intention of entering the prison camp run by the marauding Bedouins in Rafah", say Roberto Malini, Matteo Pegoraro and Dario Picciau, co-presidents of EveryOne Group. "It is also clear that international pressure on the Egyptian government is forcing the kidnappers to release migrants beforehand". EveryOne Group recently spoke with officials from the governorate of Northern Sinai and representatives of the Bedouin tribes. The activists have conducted further investigations on smuggling on the border between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Jewish state. "After passing a law against human trafficking" continue EveryOne, "a few months ago Egypt reinforced the number of border police. Now the security forces consist of approximately 15,000 police officers. In recent weeks the Egypt border police have been fitted out with suitable equipment for the fight against the traffickers. It is a positive undertaking by the Ministry of the Interior, but still not sufficient, because the raiders are still superior in number, with past organization and experience on the ground". EveryOne's investigations have revealed some disturbing aspects of this trafficking in human beings. "Some security officials have confirmed that they are afraid to face the Bedouin gangs. This is not due merely to the obvious military inferiority, but to the aggressiveness of the traffickers. In some cases the smugglers have attacked police stations in the desert. They released their accomplices and killed all the officers in the police stations. The tribes' turnover in the trade amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars each year. These

revenues come from smuggling weapons, drugs, and human beings. Trafficking also has an affect on food and medicine supplies. The police are divided into nineteen battalions used for controlling the border. "We talked to a former member of the border patrol," says EveryOne, "who confirmed the seriousness of the problem of the Bedouin gangs. The man told us that the police in northern Sinai are very corrupt. Egypt, however, has already organized a special body, with the approval of the Israeli government. The operation, which is still covered by military secret, involves the use of tanks, helicopters and heavy artillery. "Trafficking in human beings and organs is part of the activities that finance international terrorism. The bands of Rashaida and Sawarqa don't work independently, but are integrated into the Al-Qaeda terrorist movement. We must abandon the idea of nomadic bands acting without a proper organization. The raiders of the twenty-first century are a modern paramilitary structure. The strategic center of Al-Qaeda lies in the valley of Wadi Omar, in central Sinai. The valley is mountainous, with strongholds that are difficult to conquer. The meeting of Bedouin chiefs, scheduled for Saturday, January 15th near Rafah, had to be cancelled. "The promoters of the meeting were actually traffickers themselves," EveryOne said, "and in particular those of the el-Tarabin tribe. The gangs of el-Tarabin deal with the groups of refugees who have paid the ransom. These traffickers accompany them from the prisons to the Israeli border. The leader of the smugglers in the Sinai, according to Egyptian intelligence, belongs to the Tarabin tribe. We are talking about Abu Lafi, a leading member of Al-Qaeda, responsible for relations with the Hamas leadership". There are about 600,000 Bedouins in Sinai, divided into 12 tribes. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the jihadist ideologies have been widely disseminated among young Bedouins. "The attack on the Twin Towers was greeted with euphoria in the Palestinian territories and in the Egyptian Sinai,"

*explain the activists. "For reasons of political expediency, the presence of Al-Qaeda in those hot spots in the Middle East has been underestimated. The trade has therefore grown to its current size, which is now out of control and financing Islamic terrorism."*