

# Eritrea: Newlyweds among 32 Christians arrested in fresh crackdown

World Watch Monitor (28.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2E4Beqm> – Eritrean police have arrested 32 Christians in the capital, Asmara, this month, including a newlywed couple and ten of their guests.

Twenty were arrested on Sunday, 25 March, all of whom remain in detention.

The newly married man and two of his guests are being held in a prison north of the city. The newlyweds and ten guests were arrested at the couple's home on 5 March, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

Ten friends were visiting the couple for a traditional coffee ceremony to welcome the bride when the local security officers forced their way into the house and arrested all 12 people there. They were taken to Asmara's No. 5 Police Station.

The authorities released eight of the group two days later, after they presented valid travel IDs (documents of permission to move around Eritrea). The four remaining Christians, including the newlyweds, were moved to Adi Abeito Prison, north of Asmara. According to the World Watch Monitor source, the newlywed couple was split up after the arrest and the bride was released yesterday (27 March).

Eritrea's human rights record was recently condemned at the UN Human Rights Council. Kate Gilmore, the UN's Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her opening remarks that over 100 people were arrested in Eritrea in 2017 for practising religions not officially recognised by the state.

A monitoring group for the UN, United Nations Watch, said "thousands" of Christians are also facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea". The group also asked why the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, "failed to closely assess this situation".

The UN Human Rights Council heard that the Eritrean government's claims of improvement in the human rights situation were unfounded.

Eritrea is sixth on Open Doors International's 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian. In 2002, the government introduced a law prohibiting Christian practice outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, as well as Sunni Islam.

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## **Pakistan: Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan face an existential threat: New report**

FOREF Europe (27.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2uwDWpa> – The persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan has worsened in the last several years, as Ahmadis are “violently targeted, intimidated, and harassed at all levels of society.

Impunity and incitement have created a climate of religious hysteria in which targeted communities, both Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis are losing their lives with shocking increased frequency,” according to a report published by the International Human Rights Committee and the Asian Human Rights Commission, in partnership with the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

***“A noose is tightening around the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, who face discriminatory legislation and lethal mob violence encouraged by political and governmental authorities,”*** according to Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF.

The 100-page document, which is based on interviews with hundreds of victims, experts, and journalists, details the legal discrimination faced by the Ahmadi community, relevant developments in international human rights, and social and political tendencies.

It further documents crimes, state negligence, and complicity; violations of internationally guaranteed rights and freedoms; prejudice and social exclusion; discrimination faced by women; discrimination in education; and obstacles faced by Ahmadis when professing their faith.

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## **KENYA: Poverty drives some**

# Kenyans to rent out their wives

*Poverty and unpredictable tourism industry forcing men on the east coast to send spouses into prostitution.*

By Osman Mohamed Osman

Al Jazeera (28.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2umTEda> – It's a cloudy Sunday morning in Kenya's Kwale county and Sande Ramadan just woke up to get ready for another weekend of work.

Wearing a green vest and khaki shorts, he washes his face and proceeds to the living room where his wife Janet Wambui serves him breakfast.

"Thanks for waking me up, I hate being late for my client," the dreadlocked father of three tells his wife. "She asked me to be with her until next weekend," he adds as he sips black tea.

Ramadan is a male sex worker.

Wambui, his tall dark-skinned wife, works in the same industry. She came back home two nights ago after spending 10 days with a German tourist in an expensive cottage house, a few kilometres from Maweni village where the couple resides.

Ramadan and Wambui have been married for 20 years now.

But it wasn't always like this. One day in 2006, Ramadan was hawking clothes to tourists along Diani Beach in Kwale town, 30km southwest of Mombasa, when a German tourist approached him. He wanted a lady to spend some time with until his holiday ended.

The 37-year-old, who speaks fluent German and teaches his wife the language, promised the man he would introduce him to his sister.

"My husband came home that evening and asked me if I can act as his sister and take up the offer. After a few days of deliberation, I agreed," says Wambui, 38, sitting near Ramadan while tightening her black turban.

Wambui saw how life changed for other women who entered prostitution. She was a housewife who depended on Ramadan's income, which was too little.

"Life was tough for us. My husband's unpredictable income was not enough and when he asked me to accept, I had no choice," she says.

The family can now afford three meals a day and the children's school fees.

In Kenya's coastal towns, such stories are not new, especially in poor neighbourhoods such as Maweni. Husbands agree to rent their wives to rich tourists, mostly from Europe, without them knowing the women are their spouses.

"Why would I make another woman rich while I have a wife at home?" Ramadan said. "This was an opportunity for us to make some cash to pay our bills."

### ***Tourism reliance***

The East African country received more than one million tourists in 2016, according to the Kenya Tourism Board, a government corporation. This number translated into \$100m earned in taxes, making Kenya one of the top tourism destinations in Africa.

In 2017, TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel website, ranked Kenya's Diani Beach in Kwale, where Ramadan and Wambui live, the seventh-best beach in Africa.

But all these accolades do not translate into success in the villages where locals survive solely on tourism.

Ramadan Juma, 43, has been a beach operator for more than 20 years. It's a sunny Saturday afternoon and Juma is at Diani reflecting on existence with his colleagues.

"Life is becoming difficult by the day," he said, wearing his

black sunglasses to fend off the glaring sunlight.

On a good day, he earns about \$40 by helping out tourists navigate the blue waters of Indian Ocean. But nowadays, he complains the situation has become desperate.

“We have been neglected. We depend on tourism as a source of living. Since most of us do not have a constant income, my colleagues go to the extreme and give away their wives to have a good living,” said Juma, who also chairs the Diani Beach Boys Association.

Kwale County’s chief tourism officer Anthony Mwamunga says the local government is training beach vendors and guides to gain skills to help them earn a decent living. He adds there’s not much that can be done about prostitution.

“These cases are from poor men and women who have nothing to do,” Mwamunga told Al Jazeera. “Tourists come here to have a good adventure and having a partner is part of it. This makes it hard for us to stop these cases.”

Back at the spectacular white-sand beaches on the Indian Ocean, Tobias Juma, 42, woke up one day to find his wife had packed up and left him.

In 2012, he was working for an Austrian man who asked Tobias to hook him up with a lady.



“That is how I connected my wife to the Austrian man. All I wanted is my family to have a better life. But they fell in love along the way and they agreed to move to Europe,” he said.

Before she left, Tobias’ wife was providing for him and their daughter.

“She was our family’s breadwinner. She would bring an average of \$400 every month for my daughter and me after staying with the Austrian tourist. I have been struggling since she left,” he said.

Tobias hasn’t heard from his wife since, and now takes care of his daughter on his own.

### ***Dangerous risks***

Communities along the Kenyan coast have seen a dramatic increase in HIV cases annually.

The National Aids Control Council estimates that Kenya’s coastal counties reported 5,335 new HIV/AIDS cases in 2016, surging from 325 reported in 2014.

Faith Mwende is the Kenya advocacy manager for AIDS Healthcare

Foundation, a global non-profit creating awareness about HIV prevention.

“The danger is when such women engage with more than one sexual partner, the chances of getting sexually transmitted diseases and infections are very high, especially when she doesn’t know the status of the other person,” Mwendu said.

Despite these dangers, Ramadan and Wambui are not about to give up on the sex trade. The rent for their house is about \$80 a month, and they have three children to feed and educate.

“I am doing this to have a better life. It sounds immoral, but my husband is aware and supports it. So why not?” Wambui said as she bid Ramadan goodbye.

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# **WORLD: Exploiting women for prostitution a crime against humanity says Pope Francis**

By Philip Pullella

Reuters (19.03.2018) – <https://tmsnrt.rs/2IdXxM0> – Pope Francis branded exploitation of women for prostitution a “crime against humanity” on Monday and asked forgiveness from society for Catholic men who use prostitutes.

The pope made his frank comments in a remarkable, freewheeling question-and-answer session with young people from around the world who came to Rome to prepare for a bishops’ meeting scheduled for October at the Vatican.

Blessing Okoedion, a 32-year-old Nigerian who was once a victim of human sexual trafficking, told the pope she was troubled that many clients of prostitutes on the streets of Rome were Catholic.

“I ask myself and I ask you, is it possible for a Church that is still too male chauvinist to be able to question itself truthfully about this high demand by clients?” she said.

Francis responded that in Italy it was likely that some 90 percent of male clients of prostitutes were baptised Catholics.

“I would like to take advantage of this moment to ask forgiveness from you (exploited women) and society for all the Catholics who carry out this criminal act,” he said.

“I think of the disgust these girls must feel when men make them do these things,” he added.

Prostitutes, most of them victims of human trafficking from Nigeria, other African countries and Eastern Europe, are found at night on the streets of Rome’s periphery and around parks.

At the meeting with the some 300 delegates at a university in Rome, Francis said sexual exploitation of women stemmed from a “sick mentality” embedded in many people. He added that feminism had still not be able to remove it and asked the young people to fight against it.

“(It says) women are to be exploited in one way or another. And that is what explains this ... it is a sickness of humanity, a sickness of looking at society in a certain way, a crime against humanity,” he said.

Francis rejected the idea that going to prostitutes could be considered harmless.

“Who does this is a criminal. This is not making love, this is torturing a woman. Let’s not confuse terms. This is criminal, a sick mentality,” he said.

Francis also heard some tough talk from Angela Markas, 22, of Australia. “There is a tendency in the Church to avoid matters that are not-so-easy to talk about. This includes same-sex marriage, our sexuality, and also, the role of women in the Church,” she told the pope.

Earlier this month, Catholic women led by former Irish president Mary McAleese demanded a greater decision-making role for women in the Church, urging the pope to tear down its “walls of misogyny”.

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# LEBANON: Education and Empowerment to #GiveHope to young girls



Painting by a SB OverSeas beneficiary

*As written by Zuzana, a volunteer at SB OverSeas in Lebanon. SB OverSeas is currently working to provide education in Lebanon for 1,400 refugee children. This story shows how education and empowerment is an important tool in preventing child marriage from the perspective of those in the ground in Lebanon. Find out more about the work SB OverSeas does here: <http://sboverseas.org>.*

SB Overseas (29.03.2018) – Before the war began, child marriage in Syria was on the decline. But this progress has become a mere memory during the past seven years of conflict as marriage for young girls has become for some, the only promise of protection and economic stability.

Parents who find themselves as refugees in a new country, as outsiders living in harsh and overcrowded conditions, are often more inclined towards immediate solutions, struggling to see or be persuaded by the long-term consequences of seeking or accepting marriage for their young daughters. And their children, whose lives were yesterday defined by going to school, playing, dancing and laughing with their friends, are today characterised by the load they carry—the weight of others' expectations, responsibility and punishment for circumstances out of their own control. Child brides are left as onlookers, cut off suddenly and prematurely from their own childhoods and from the world of their friends.

Grandparents once had a particularly influential position in deciding when a parent or child asked for marriage; in many cases, they argued against their granddaughter's marriage and for her right to learn and play. But the war has broken communities and separated generations, meaning that many are making decisions without the trusted voices of older family members, religious elders, and other senior authorities.

Teachers are often amongst the first to witness the drastic shift in young girls' lives when they marry. They are saddened by every empty desk, where their former students once explored their ambitions and worked towards creating their own futures.

Ahmed, himself a Syrian refugee, teaches maths, Arabic, and English in an educational center hosting students from rural Syria, where the practice of child marriage had not completely diminished even before the war. When telling his experience over the past year, he expressed disappointment at the number of students he had seen forced to trade their school days for marriage and at the lack of understanding of the costs. For these girls, getting married means isolation in small, dark rooms of an unfinished shelter: their new home.

“They are not ready for this. They are the victims,” Ahmed said. Ultimately, parents make the final decision about the proposed marriage, a decision for which the girls are not accountable, he explained.

Aisha, who is a psychologist in the same center, adds that girls marrying at a young age, often as young as thirteen, are especially vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse. They are unprepared for the traumas that may accompany marriage, she said, including miscarriage, loss of childhood and divorce. A young divorced girl may face mistreatment for the rest of her life because of the stigma associated to the latter in her community. This stigma may keep her from regaining normalcy: a childhood and an education.

Ahmed, as a father, has been able to speak with some of the students’ fathers, who are normally the family’s decision makers. From his experience, several fathers are open to discussion and reconsideration. Aisha leads awareness and empowerment sessions with young girls at the center teaching them about healthy relationships, self-worth and goals for the future. She also encourages mothers to help their daughters feel comfortable talking about their fears and dreams. One



mother in the community now takes her daughter for daily walks. During this time together they talk about anything and everything, thus breaking harmful taboos.

Only education and long-term engagement within a community that has lost critical support systems can shift today's trends in child marriage. Ahmed and Aisha's strategy to bring their community closer and building trusting relationships is a long-term one; it is careful, and it is effective. Their work has allowed lasting change for girls and their families. They hope not only to preserve the future of this generation, but to place the power of decision in their hands—hands that will one day rebuild their country.

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