

Yazidi women seek to join case against French company accused of funding Islamic State

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A group of Yazidi women kidnapped as sex slaves by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria applied on Friday to join a criminal case against French cement maker Lafarge, which is being investigated over allegations it funded the militants.

Lafarge is under formal investigation in France over charges it paid IS, also known as ISIS, to keep open a plant in northern Syria that operated between 2011 and 2014.

Lawyers said they had filed an application for the women to become civil parties to the case, which they said marked the first time a multinational company had been charged with complicity in international crimes by IS.

"It provides an opportunity to establish that ISIS, and all those who assisted them, will be held to account for their crimes, and that victims will be awarded just compensation," said Amal Clooney in a statement.

"And it sends an important message to corporations that are complicit in the commission of international crimes that they will face legal consequences for their actions," she added.

The Yazidis, a religious sect whose beliefs combine elements of ancient Middle Eastern religions, are regarded by Islamic State as devil-worshippers.

About 7,000 women and girls were captured in northwest Iraq in August 2014 and held by Islamic State in Mosul where they were tortured and raped.

Although the militants were driven out a year ago, many Yazidis still live in camps, afraid to return home, charity groups say.

Lafarge, which merged in 2015 with Swiss building supplies company Holcim, has acknowledged failures at the Syrian business.

"LafargeHolcim deeply regrets the unacceptable errors committed in Syria. The company continues to fully cooperate with the French authorities," a spokesman said in emailed comments to the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The plight of Yazidis has attracted attention in recent years, especially since high-profile Clooney began representing the minority group and became a legal counsel to Yazidi rights activist Nadia Murad, who won the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize.

A U.N. investigative team began work in August - nearly a year after being created by the Security Council - to collect and preserve evidence of acts by Islamic State in Iraq that may be war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide.