

# Police: Lions free kidnapped girl

**ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) -- Police say three lions rescued a 12-year-old girl kidnapped by men who wanted to force her into marriage, chasing off her abductors and guarding her until police and relatives tracked her down in a remote corner of Ethiopia.**

The men had held the girl for seven days, repeatedly beating her, before the lions chased them away and guarded her for half a day before her family and police found her, Sgt. Wondimu Wedajo said Tuesday by telephone from the provincial capital of Bita Genet, some 560 kilometers (348 miles) west of the capital, Addis Ababa.

"They stood guard until we found her and then they just left her like a gift and went back into the forest," Wondimu said, adding he did not know whether the lions were male or female.

News of the June 9 rescue was slow to filter out from Kefa Zone in southwestern Ethiopia.

"If the lions had not come to her rescue then it could have been much worse. Often these young girls are raped and severely beaten to force them to accept the marriage," he said.

"Everyone in thinks this is some kind of miracle, because normally the lions would attack people," Wondimu said.

Stuart Williams, a wildlife expert with the rural development ministry, said that it was likely that the young girl was saved because she was crying from the trauma of her attack.

"A young girl whimpering could be mistaken for the mewing sound from a lion cub, which in turn could explain why they (the lions) didn't eat her," Williams said. "Otherwise they probably would have done."

The girl, the youngest of four brothers and sisters, was "shocked and terrified" and had to be treated for the cuts from her beatings, Wondimu said.

He said that police had caught four of the men, but were still looking for three others.

In Ethiopia, kidnapping has long been part of the marriage custom, a tradition of sorrow and violence whose origins are murky.

The United Nations estimates that more than 70 percent of marriages in Ethiopia are by abduction, practiced in rural areas where the majority of the country's 71 million people live.

Ethiopia's lions, famous for their large black manes, are the country's national symbol and adorn statues and the local currency. Former emperor Haile Selassie kept a pride in the royal palace in Addis Ababa.

Despite their integral place in Ethiopia culture, their numbers have been falling, according to experts, as farmers encroach on bush land.

Hunters also kill the animals for their skins, which can fetch \$1,000, despite a recent crackdown against illegal animal trading across the country. Williams said that at most only 1,000 Ethiopian lions remain in the wild.

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