



Tortured and Sold: Eritrean Refugees in Libya

A historic destination for refugees and migrants, as well as a country of transit, **Libya has proved to be fertile ground for organised networks of human traffickers.** Traffickers use mobile phones to extort ransoms from the relatives of refugees while they are being tortured. **After being released or escaping the traffickers, or returned by the Libyan coastguard after failing to cross the Mediterranean Sea, many end up in Libya's detention centres, where they face disease, unsanitary conditions, lack of food, arbitrary punishment and the risk of being resold to human traffickers.** Control over information and digital technology by Libyan authorities, international organisations such as UNHCR, and human traffickers – *network gatekeepers* – plays a vital role in the repression and human trafficking of refugees in Libya. Actors such as the European Union and the United Nation Refugee Agency depend on Libyan authorities for access and migration control. These same authorities repress refugees and perpetuate their arbitrary detention. **This policy brief looks at the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya and the role of the EU in their repression.**

Slave markets in Libya

In 2017, the world was shocked by a video showing migrants being openly bought and sold in Libya. This alerted the public to a situation that had been going on for years. Since the start of the second Libyan civil war in 2014, Libya has been a major gateway to Europe. In 2019, violence flared up in Libya, which led to refugees and migrants being caught in the crossfire. Shootings and bombings in and around official and unofficial places of detention, such as the attack on Tajoura detention centre in July 2019, have led to injury and death. Efforts to stop illegal migration have also led to a blurring of the lines between human smuggling and human trafficking and the

price for ransom has risen. The militia in Libya have started to act as enforcers to stop the open smuggling of people. This has driven smugglers to depend on trafficking to extort money from people, who can now not be easily shipped off to Europe. Some of the migrants and refugees in Libya end up in detention centres after being returned by the Libyan coastguard or arrested on the mainland. UN agencies have described the scope of the abuse in these centres as including detention, abuse, sexual violence and rape, exploitation, starvation and death. Furthermore, disease, especially tuberculosis, is insufficiently treated and can lead to death.

Organisations that work on the ground in Libya, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, report on the cycle of abuse that refugees and migrants experience in Libya. Humanitarian organisations have asked the European Union to stop returning refugees and migrants to Libya and to stop funding that contributes to such returns and the inhumane situation.

Recommendations

- The fight against human trafficking in Libya requires a thorough recognition of the conditions of those held in captivity, from which an approach must be developed that focuses on the protection and treatment of victims and persecution of human traffickers at the highest levels.
- The European Union should stop cooperating with the Libyan coastguard to return refugees and migrants to Libya and the detention centres, in which they are mistreated and at risk of being resold to human traffickers.
- The European Union should increase opportunities for the resettlement of refugees and migrants from Libya, including direct humanitarian evacuations that do not rely on emergency transit mechanisms to third countries, which easily become bottlenecks where refugees can remain stuck for months or years.

Gatekeepers in Libya

The Gatekeepers in Libya – human traffickers and smugglers, Libyan authorities, and guards of detention centres, but also international organisations such as the UNHCR – maintain strict control over information. Often, refugees do not know where they are and are forbidden to have a phone or speak to one another, both in detention centres and when held by human traffickers. When fighting broke out in 2019, refugees testified that their guards would sometimes flee, leaving them trapped, listening to the shooting outside. Accessing limited information is sometimes possible with smuggled phones. Lack of information causes anxiety, stress and post-traumatic stress, depression and mistrust, including of international organisations.

Human traffickers torture the refugees to extract ransom from their families, friends and communities. Images of torture are circulated on social media. The fear of this increases the payment of ransoms. In detention, refugees have to secretly use smuggled phones. If they are caught sending images, or if they speak their mind to external visitors like the representatives of the UNHCR, it can lead to severe punishment.

In Libya, the authorities that should be protecting refugees often turn into oppressors and the smugglers and traffickers often have a relationship with them. Witnesses say that Libyan authorities sometimes even sell refugees to traffickers. International organisations like UNHCR depend on access to detention centres and have limited power to address the situation. Media personnel are only allowed access to detention centres under the strict supervision and control of Libyan authorities. In the centres, protests go unheard. Refugees express frustration with the lack of impact their testimonies have. The same authorities who, in many cases, tolerate or cooperate with the human traffickers, also cooperate with international organisations to control migration and work towards peace. This leaves the refugees in a particularly repressed and gated situation.

They give you a phone and beat you so that you cry and your family will sell things [...] to pay the ransom. If you can't pay, they kill you or sell you. (Refugee 15, interview, face-to-face, Niger, 6 July 2019)

In this place [...] there is insufficient food and water, no clothes for the winter. [...] There are many children and pregnant women. I contacted the EU and UNHCR on Twitter and by email, but they didn't respond. [...] This is a shame on the EU. (Refugee 10, interview, WhatsApp, Libya, 11 January 2019)



Detention centre in Libya

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Self-made shrine in a detention center