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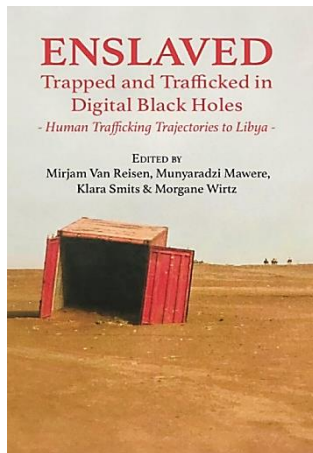
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Chapter 13

Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in Official Detention Centres in Libya¹

Morgane Wirtz & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction

Hundreds of people, sitting on blankets next to each other in huge hangars; skinny bodies glancing curiously at the lens; the faces and hands of detainees reaching through the bars of the small windows in the containers – these are the pictures brought back from ‘official detention centres’ by photojournalists and published in international media and NGO reports. Photojournalist Narciso Contreras described the following:

The conditions in official detention centres in Libya are dire – they are overcrowded, there is insufficient food and water, and detainees are beaten, raped and tortured. Many have died from starvation, disease or at the hands of the guards. If they are released or escape, they risk being arrested and sent back. The Libyan Coast Guard intercepts migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea and ‘sells’ them to human traffickers. This is fueling the smuggling and trafficking of human beings and undermines the protection of refugees.

The centres are overflowing with people. Migrants are crammed into cells; they writhe and push against each other, each one trying to carve out their own space. They shoot their hands out through the bars, stretching their fingers wide, begging, pleading to be released. Here, nothing is dignified. There is no ventilation, no basic sanitation. In the forty-degree heat, the combined stench of sweat, urine, and faeces is vomit-inducing. (Contreras, 2016, p. 8)

¹ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the first author’s PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

Videos shot in these centres are also available. The documentaries *Detained by Militias: Libya's Migrant Trade*, by Vice News (2015), and *Libya, No Escape from Hell*, by Sara Creta (2021a), are particularly illustrative of the conditions in official detention centres.

In 2020, Amnesty International presented a report on detainees in seven detention centres in Western Libya run by the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). DCIM facilities are run by the government of Libya and hold migrants and refugees.² Drawing on data from the International Organization for Migration's (IOM's) Displacement Tracking Matrix, Amnesty International found that 34% of those detained in DCIM centres were Eritrean nationals (Amnesty International, 2020).

The detention of refugees is given a legal justification in that Libyan law does not distinguish between irregular migrants and refugees. It also does not have mechanisms for the protection of refugees or asylum procedures. Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees or the 1967 Protocol that followed. Therefore, when refugees cross the border to Libya, stay or exit without proper documentation they are in contravention of the law and can be arrested (UNHCR, 2020). Once they are arrested, they end up in a so-called 'official detention centre', which is a prison that is run by forces affiliated with the Government of National Unity in Libya (previously referred to as the Government of National Accord). The forces running these centres are often arranged through the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM).

While official detention centres in Libya usually receive funding from the government, they rely for their running on mechanisms that are not just administrative (Eaton, Alageli, Badi, Eljarh & Stocker, 2020). Consequentially, the control over the way in which these facilities are run by the Ministry of Interior is limited. Its main role is to provide

² In this chapter the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

the funds for these facilities (Malakooti, 2019). There are examples of non-state armed groups in Libya opening detention centres that were subsequently given status as ‘official’ by the DCIM (Malakooti, 2019). In addition, official detention centres regularly close or change their name or status, making it difficult to keep track of. In a study by Malakooti (2019) of migrant detention in Libya, she demonstrates that there is a link between smuggling dynamics in Libya and the system of official and non-official migrant detention. Malakooti also shows that the DCIM works with the support of armed groups to operate the official detention centres (see Table 13.1). The table of detention centres in Libya published by Malakooti in 2019 is key to understanding the importance of official detention centres in Libya.

Table 13.1. Detention Centres in Libya (Malakooti, 2019)

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
DCIM						
1	Bu-Issa	Zawiya	DCIM	Abid al-Fatah Barood	Warehouse	54
2	al-Bayda	al-Bayda	DCIM	Rida Hareesh	Building (Mol)	18
3	al-Khoms	al-Khoms	DCIM	Mahmud Barfaad	Building (Mol)	216
4	al-Krarcem	Misrata	DCIM	Ismaeen Shnb	School	440
5	al-Kufra	Kufra	DCIM	Muhammed el-Fadil		149
6	al-Twisha	Ghasr Ben Ghashir	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
7	Benghazi	Benghazi	DCIM		Bersus prison	
8	Ganfunda	Benghazi	DCIM	Amhed Alarefy	Building (Mol)	45

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
9	Ghat	Ghat	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
10	Janzour	Janzour	DCIM	Siraj Ashour	Building (Mol)	100
11	Jufra	Jufra	DCIM	Ali Sokni		Not functional
12	Qatrun	Qatrun	DCIM			Not functional
13	Sebha	Sebha	DCIM		Building (Mol)	Not functional
14	Shahat	Shahat	DCIM	Ramzy Atia	Building (Mol)	42
15	Souq al-Khamis	al-Khoms	DCIM	Adil Nbaya	Building (Mol)	49
16	Tarhouna	Tarhouna	DCIM			Not functional
17	Tobruk	Tobruk	DCIM	Atia al-Abidy	Building (Mol)	24
18	Ubari	Ubari	DCIM			Not functional
19	Zintan	Zintan	DCIM	Naji al-Bajoush	Warehouse	2104
20	Zliten	Zliten	DCIM			30
DCIM and others (non-official)						
21	Abu Salim	Tripoli	DCIM, Abu Salim Battalion	Fathi al-Kikly		562
22	Ain Zara	Tripoli	DCIM, Militia 42	Tarik Baheej	Building (Mol)	0
23	Ajdabiya	Ajdabiya	Militia		Building (Mol)	13
24	al-Nasr	Zawiya	DCIM, al-Nasr Brigade	Mohamed Rhoma	Warehouse	533

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
				(DCIM) and Mohamed Kushlaw (al-Nasr Brigade)		
25	al-Sabaa	Tripoli	DCIM al-Khouja militia	Imad Dozan		0
26	Ghaser Ben Ghashir	Ghaser Ben Ghashir	DCIM, Tarhouna militia	Abid al-Bast Naas	Building (Mol)	640
27	Gharyan	Gharyan	DCIM, al-Kwasim militia	Abid al-Hameed al-Tunisy	Warehouse, containers	0
28	Kufra	Kufra	Municipal Council, Sariya al-Hudud			100
29	Tawila	Sabratha	DCIM, Sabratha Operational Room	Basim Ghrabli	Building (Mol)	0
30	Salahuddin	Tripoli	DCIM, TRB militia	Ahmed al-Warfli	Building (Mol)	0
31	Tajura	Tripoli	DCIM, al-Daman militia	Noor al-Deen al-Gritly	Building (Mol)	800-1000
32	Tarik al-Mattar	Tripoli	DCIM, 301 Brigade	Wajdey al-Montaser	Building (Mol)	400
33	Tarik al-Sikka	Tripoli	DCIM, al-Khoja militia	Naser Hazam	Warehouse, old buildings, new containers	100-650
34	Zuwara	Zuwara	DCIM & General Criminal Investigation Department of Mol	Anwar Bodeeb	Former military prison	500

No.	Name	Location	Group in charge	Head of centre	Physical structure	No. of detainees at fieldwork
Note: The information in this table was gathered by field teams and was current as at December 2018.						

Media reports state that refugees and migrants, including those intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard, are regularly brought to detention centres (Contreras, 2016; Creta, 2021b; Vice News, 2015). Although the number of detainees fluctuates, arrests – including mass arrests – continue (The Guardian, 2021). In addition, refugees and migrants are in some cases expelled from Libya after their release from detention, without due process, by being transported across the border or left in the desert (United Nations, 2021).

Libya's system of detention has been widely criticised for the inhumane treatment, and even torture, of migrants and refugees. Articles by the media, reports by non-government organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies describe the shocking conditions and human rights violations in DCIM prisons (Wintour, 2019; Urbina, 2022; The Guardian, 2021). In a note to the UN Security Council, "UNSMIL and OHCHR advocate for an immediate end to the systematic use of blanket, arbitrary and indefinite detention in respect of migrants and refugees, and for the gradual closure of all immigration detention centres in the country" (UN Security Council, 2021a). Reports also show that this system of detention is interwoven with the human trafficking networks (Contreras, 2016; Creta, 2021b).

Mehmet Enes Beşer and Fatimah Elfeitori (2018) also describe the human rights violations in official detention centres in Libya. Based on their analysis of information obtained from the reports of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations, they paint a dire picture of arbitrary detention, malnutrition, lack of hygiene, sexual abuse and torture in DCIM prisons. The authors call on the European Union (EU) to avoid encouraging and legitimising local armed groups through bilateral agreements to combat what it considers 'illegal'

migration,³ as it “contributes to the vicious cycle of abuse in the country” (Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018, p. 4).

Hayden (2022) argues that migrants and refugees are locked in official detention centres in Libya as a consequence of the EU’s migration policies. She shows that the EU is supporting the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants and force them back to Libya. They are then locked up indefinitely in detention centres, some of which are run by armed groups.

Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2021) also report abuses in detention centres, highlighting the blurring of the border between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ detention centres. They point out that: “An entire government unit has profited from the trafficking, detainment, and human rights abuse of migrants” (p. 5).

Okoli and Chukwurah (2019) examine how armed groups in Libya contribute to the migration crisis and how European migration policies bolster human trafficking by armed groups in Libya. According to these researchers, local armed groups, which have proliferated in Libya since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, are participating in the commodification of migrants and refugees in the country. Another conclusion of their research is that European policies to combat illegal migration trap migrants in Libya, where they are subjected to slavery and exploitation (Okoli & Chukwurah, 2019).

The European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL) (ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021) explain that official detention centres in Libya have been forced to function significantly beyond their capacity limits. According to one expert, the DCIM has become so overloaded that it has urged the Libyan Coast Guard to stop bringing people back to Libya. However, the Libyan Coast Guard has not honoured this request.

³ This use of this term is strongly contested as refugees are not ‘illegal’ *per se*, as they have a right to seek asylum from countries that have signed the Geneva Convention, which includes countries in Europe.

Particularly since February 2021, conditions inside detention centres have further deteriorated and tensions have been heightened, resulting in several violent incidents, including the fatal shooting of migrants and refugees (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021).

According to the head of the Libyan Coast Guard, 99% of migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres in Libya were intercepted at sea (UN Security Council, 2021b, p. 12). However, migrants and refugees are also arrested in Libya while travelling from one place to another or in urban areas (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*). In 2021 and 2022, mass arrests of migrants were conducted by Libyan authorities. On 1 October 2021, Libyan authorities conducted raids in the neighbourhood of Gargaresh, in Tripoli, in what they say was an anti-drug operation. Many migrants and refugees live in this area and an estimated 4,000 were arrested and put in detention centres. This led to protests in front of the Community Day Centre in Tripoli. For three months, around 1,000 migrants camped in front of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) building. Again, on 10 January 2022, in a violent raid, more than 600 migrants and refugees were arrested and transferred to Ain Zara detention facility (Carretero, 2022a; InfoMigrants, 2022). Doctors Without Borders treated 68 migrants who had been injured in the operation (ANSA, 2022).

Eritrean asylum-seekers are generally regarded as eligible for protection, given the political persecution and human rights abuses in Eritrea and the forced indefinite national service. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea has denounced crimes against humanity, which it says are committed “as part of a campaign to instil fear in, deter opposition from and ultimately to control the Eritrean civilian population since Eritrean authorities took control of Eritrean territory in 1991” (OHCHR, 2016). This makes the situation of the Eritrean refugees who are blocked while seeking to reach protection in Europe especially relevant for further investigation.

However, the information on the situation of Eritrean refugees held in Libya is scarce and very little systematic research has been done on their experiences and how the refugees themselves perceive their situation. Hence, the objective of this chapter is to investigate how Eritrean refugees experience and perceive the conditions of detention in official detention centres in Libya. The main research questions is: *What are the experiences of Eritrean refugees in official detention centres in Libya, as perceived by the refugees themselves?*

This is answered in three parts:

Sub-Q.1: *What happens when Eritrean refugees are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard when trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea?*

Sub-Q.2: *What are the conditions in which Eritrean refugees are held in official detention centres in Libya?*

Sub-Q.3: *What is the relationship between Eritrean refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities?*

The next section presents the methodology used to answer these questions. This is followed by the findings. Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Methodology

The study presented in this chapter is part of the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*.

The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background of this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs and other information, collected and sent to us by

resource persons in social media spaces and in personal communications, using participatory ethnographic research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017).

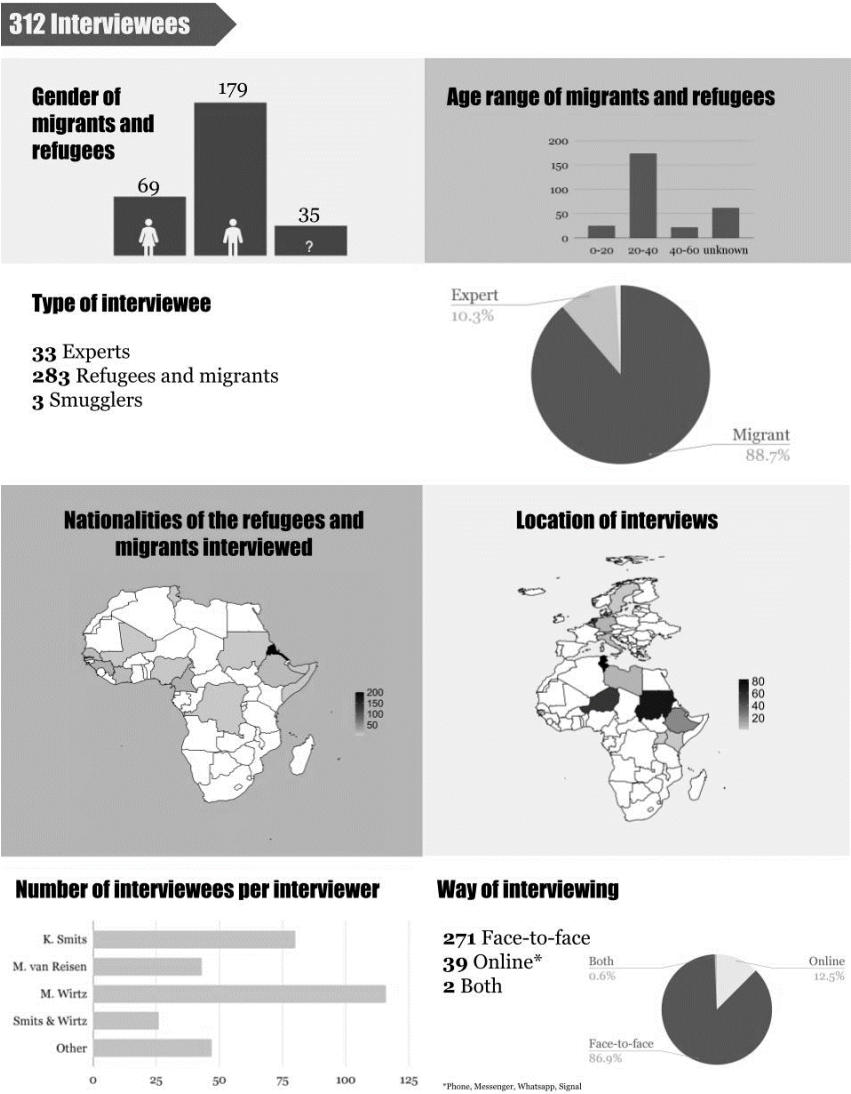
This chapter focuses on the experiences reported by Eritrean refugees, regarding the situation for them in DCIM official detention centres. Most of them reported that they were at some point in a detention facility during the period 2015 to 2020.

The large majority of the interviews analysed in this chapter were carried out between March 2019 and December 2021 by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits and Adoum Moussa. Interviews by Mirjam Van Reisen were conducted in small focus groups, and several interviews from her previous research have been re-used. The SDDI research includes 312 participants in interviews. A total of 213 interviews were held, and 12 reports based on interviews were analysed. Some of the interviews were held with more than one person at a time. This included 11 focus group interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. Of the respondents interviewed, 33 were experts/resource persons; 3 were smugglers; and 283 were refugees/migrants (89%). Of the refugees/migrants, 128 had been trafficked in Libya. Two-thirds of the refugees and migrants interviewed were aged between 20 and 40 years. The majority of the interviewees (n=203) had Eritrean nationality. Others were from: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online. The majority of interviewees were in Tunisia (n=83), Sudan (n=73), Niger (n=54) and the Netherlands (n=48).

For the purposes of this chapter, the interviews with Eritrean participants are the main focus; where experiences of other interviewees are used, this is clearly identified. Key information came from three ongoing conversations that took place on WhatsApp with three Eritrean refugees held in Zintan and Qasr bin Ghasir with Van Reisen and Smits in 2018 and 2019. These refugees were able to

access a phone and communicate on a regular basis; they also were able to send pictures from those locations.

Figure 13.1. Overview of interview statistics⁴



⁴ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

After analysis of all the interviews, the interviews of the participants who had been in official detention centres in Libya were coded and labelled according to the dates of detention, name of detention centre, description of locations, human rights abuses mentioned, sexual violence witnessed, smugglers/traffickers/chiefs of places, nationality of human trafficker, people working with human trafficker, interactions with humanitarian organisations, interactions with visitors, access to information, information produced, and feelings mentioned, among other things. This coding and labelling allowed the author to compare across testimonies.

The following sections present the findings of these interviews, in three parts: arrests by the Libyan Coast Guard, conditions in official detention centres, and relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities.

Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard

Desperate, tired, frozen – this is often the situation in which migrants find themselves after a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*). Photojournalist Narciso Contreras pictured migrants on the shore at Tajoura in Libya after having been arrested by Libyan Coast Guard (Contreras, 2016). They are dirty. Some are sleeping on the sand. Migrants and refugees in that situation know that instead of the freedom and victory they had imagined upon reaching Europe, they are now ‘back in hell’. They wait for humanitarian organisations and UN agencies to arrive to provide them with assistance, but instead of helping them, these organisations send them to official detention centres. A refugee recalled the following:

We started travelling [across the Mediterranean Sea] from Libya early in the morning, at 3:00 a.m. We travelled from there. But the Libyan Coast Guard caught us in the sea in the morning. Our zodiac got punched out [deflated] so they arrested us. We thought they were Italians, Europeans. So, we became happy, because everybody was down in the water. As we saw them from far, we did not see the flag. After they came to us, we saw the flag ... Until then, we did not believe that they were Libyans. But they were Libyans and they took us to Tripoli and after that they

divided us. They took me to the hospital, because I became sick at that time. I was shaking. I was shaking [because of the] cold. I was feeling coldness. I got hypothermia. Cold. After that they took me to the hospital, the ambulance brought me to Tajoura [detention centre]. (Interviewee 1085, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sometimes, humanitarian organisations and UN agencies, facing difficult negotiations with the Libyan authorities, have no other choice but to lead the migrants and refugees to detention centres when they ask for help. These are the only places where they can have rare access to provide them with assistance. This generates situations that are hard for the refugees to understand. An Eritrean, who was later evacuated to Niger for transit, explained:

In Misrata, we called a Swedish NGO. We knew that they help Eritreans. [...] The Swedish woman made contact with UNHCR. She got one person from Libya, to bring us to UNHCR. She gave the money to this person – 200 dinars [USD 40]. He will inform UNHCR. After that the UNHCR and the police will bring a car for us. Twenty-three people. One of us was kidnapped and sent to a store. Remaining twenty-two.

I stayed in Misrata for two days there with people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia, also from West Africa. From Misrata, they took us to Gharyan [...], 95 kilometres away. In Gharyan, they gave us to the police, militia [armed groups]. The UNHCR kept us in a prison. Before it was a prison. At that time it was also a prison. UNHCR put us in a prison. Still now UNHCR puts people in prison. But they come to see and advise the people. UNHCR has no place for us. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some migrants and refugees also go to official detention centres by choice. A former translator for an NGO working in Libya indicated:

There were children who had come alone. [Among the detainees] a small percentage had come by themselves because they thought it was better [to be in the detention centre] than to stay on the streets. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

When asked if he thought it was better for a refugee to live on the streets or in a detention centre in Libya, the social worker replied:

In the street, you can hide, find a shelter. [In detention centres] you are insecure in security ... their security. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Conditions in official detention centres

Panic and incomprehension

The first moments after arrival in a detention centre are often described as hard times. There is panic and incomprehension among the refugees. In some instances, refugees state that body searches are carried out. The refugee's possessions are stolen, as they have monetary value for the prison guards:

Some of the [refugees] are registered, others not, but they are working. So [the authorities] know they have some kind of money. So even during the arrest, they will take everything from them. Money, phones, everything. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Even after their entry and some time spent in prison, the belongings of refugees can be stolen. In the following testimonies of Eritrean and Somali refugees, the guards confiscated goods that they had authorised in the past:

I had a phone, but the Libyans took it. They took the phone of everybody because they say we are not allowed to use a phone in the detention centre. I think they don't want us to share the situation. First, they gave us permission to have a phone, but once everybody had a phone, they took it. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

They are beating people. Sometimes. We are using money, for instance, in the prison. We are buying a telephone. If they see your phone, they will take it from you. If they see the money [...], they will take it from you. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

Several interviewees also stated that the goods offered by NGOs or UN agencies to improve their conditions in detention were also stolen by the guards as soon as the humanitarian organisation or UN agency

had left the centre. An Eritrean refugee who was detained in Tariq Al Matar stated:

Sometimes in the prison they gave us clothes, shoes, blanket, soap from UNHCR. But the policemen took it. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions

Locked in big halls, prisons, old schools and even a former zoo (Stephen, 2013), the interviewees described the detention centres as overcrowded:

The people who were beaten there [Tariq Al Matar], it was because they stayed close to the window or to the door, because it is really hot and then they beat everyone. Some people were forced to go out of that place and to work for somebody else. Then a conflict started inside Tripoli. Some bullets started to fly. I don't know who was fighting. It is the city of Tripoli. We went out of the detention centre and we went to the police station. Then, they brought us to Zintan. We were in this place. It was like a store of tanks in the middle of the bush. We were in a bunker. A Libyan man was the chief of that place. It is difficult to know if he was a policeman or a smuggler, because the policemen and smugglers are working together and changing positions all the time. We were around 800 or 900 Eritreans and Somalis in that place. The beating was better there. But, as it was in the bush, we had animals like snakes and scorpions coming inside. It was also cold. I don't remember how long I stayed there. Maybe two months and three weeks. UNHCR was visiting that place. They selected some people to go to Tripoli. I went to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This excerpt, from an interview with an Eritrean who was first detained in Tariq Al Matar and then in Zintan, describes well the situation of refugees in official detention centres.

Sitting on a balcony in front of the sea in Tunis, a former translator for an NGO in Libya has difficulty talking about what he saw in the official detention centres. For him, the right term is not 'detention centre', but 'concentration camp':

[It was in the middle of] nowhere. Surrounded. A whole lot of security. We found some 500 people in the space of 20 square metres. Sometimes there are those who

push the dying back, to get some air. In turn. Men and women, in separate rooms. These are not rooms, they are containers, outside. [There is] no room... No room... And the faces were so pale that it was the same aspect repeating itself over and over again. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The lack of space in the official detention centres was pointed out in many interviews. Overcrowding and lack of water results in sanitary issues and disease. Several interviewees were detained in Tariq Al Matar detention centre and reported that there were more than 1,000 migrants in one room with just four bathrooms, which were usually clogged with dirty water. An Eritrean explained:

In Tariq Al Matar, we stayed three months. These three months, we were about 1,500, 1,600 [people]. Even sometimes 1,700. It is a big hall. For all of those 1,700, [there were] only four toilets. One was not working, leaving three. Even the three, among those 1,700. Imagine! It is not enough. After one week, maybe I can use this toilet. It is really crowded. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

A Nigerian woman who stayed in Zuwarah detention centre for seven months describes the unbearable conditions in which she was detained:

Wah! The conditions in prison are very bad! We don't eat. We don't have a good place to sleep. We sleep on the bare floor. Yes. And hum ... water, we don't bath. It took a lot of time before some journalists came and they changed that. Before that, it was a very bad place, bad odour, not good. [...] [Inside the prison there are] a lot of infections. Skin infections, vagina infections. Everybody suffers! And the men, the men, suffer a lot. A lot. For the women, it is better because we eat twice a day. But the men, if we are having one bread for one woman, then it is half for one person [man]. And it is just once a day. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Many interviewees and journalists described the lack of food in those official facilities. Talking about Abu Issa detention centre, one Somali interviewee stated:

People are so hungry there that they eat Colgate [toothpaste]. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

The way that food is served also shows the lack of respect afforded to detainees. An Eritrean who was detained in Gharyan Al Hamra shared the following:

It is really difficult in that place. You cannot see the sun. They give us the food through a small window. The water, the same. Nobody can go outside. We were in containers. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2019)

Starvation and bad hygiene can lead to the outbreak of disease. In interviews, the disease most mentioned are lice, scabies and tuberculosis. A young Eritrean man who was detained in Qasr bin Ghashir explained:

They did not do any care. The MSF [Doctors Without Borders] came only to distribute the medicine. They don't transfer to hospitals. Because some people are suffering from TB [tuberculosis]. And some people lack haemoglobin. Some people, maybe they lack teeth. Some people suffer from kidney because of no pure water. Just the suffering, you cannot list off. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

There are many Eritrean minors among those imprisoned. One minor of 15 years old said he felt desperate after being taken to many different detention centres. Eventually, he was brought to the hospital with tuberculosis (Interviewee 7024, interview with Stocker, WhatsApp, October 2019).⁵

All of the interviewees who were in official detention centres, which includes nearly all of the interviewees for this chapter, agreed that the basic living conditions in the centres are inhumane.

Treatment of women

The safety of women, particularly pregnant women, in official detention centres is not taken into account. The Nigerian woman who testified above delivered in Zuwarah. She recalled the following:

⁵ For more information on the ethics of interviewing minors, please see Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*.

They took you to the hospital and hum ... you deliver alone. Even if it is in the hospital, it is like in prison. They just keep you on a bed and remove your clothes and tell you to push. Nothing. No injection. No checking. I mean, you need to check, you need to scan. Nothing! [...] They just keep you at a distance. Because we are smelling. We don't bath! We don't take a bath! We don't brush our teeth, we don't change our clothes. We are smelling, so I don't blame them, you see. [...] After the delivery, they just clean that part, the vagina. If you want, you can take a bath. There is no soap. [...] It is just cold water. And then, you go back to the prison, in that same condition! With the baby! (Interviewee 1083, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In addition, this interviewee observed that many women in detention centres miscarried. One woman questioned the real effect of a red tea that was given to them:

You know, women, most of them have babies. They have so many miscarriages because of bad water. There is a red tea they give to us. [...] When women drink that tea, they have a miscarriage, some their baby will die. When they deliver, they deliver dead babies. You can't swallow anything. When you drink this tea, it heats your throat, you can't shout, you can't talk. It weakens all this part. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

Women also face sexual violence on a regular basis. The topic of sexual violence is discussed further in Chapter 15: *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*.

Torture and punishment

The interviewees stated that torture is carried out in various ways, for example, by depriving the refugees of food, water and sleep. Refugees are also beaten on a daily basis and subjected to electric shocks. A former translator for an NGO in Libya explained:

Imagine, a torture I heard about was putting [the detainees] in one of the cells for 13 days or more. And then put them directly under the rays of the midday sun. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The same source gave details about whom the torturers were in the detention centres he visited in Sirte, Misrata and Tobruk:

2000: *The torturers are militias [armed groups]. And I also saw some ... and that intrigues me... I also saw some torturers, but they look European. Like bluish eyes. I think they were from Eastern Europe. I also saw Iranians. That I remember. [...] [The torturers were] of all ages. I saw lots of little ones, children.*

Interviewer: *They get paid?*

2000: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Well?*

2000: *Apparently, yes.*

Interviewer: *They seemed to enjoy it?*

2000: *Yes. Above all, there are some children from 12 to 17 years old ... or even less than 12 years old too. [...]*

Interviewer: *All the guards in the prisons are men?*

2000: *Yes.* (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The detainees are beaten to impose discipline. Interviewees reported that refugees are shot or beaten if they do not stay in line in the corridor, if they make too much noise, or if they try to communicate with one another. A Nigerian woman who was in Jawazat prison shared her experience:

If the police hear that you are talking, they are coming and they are beating you. So you don't want to communicate with your wife, nothing. Because, when they come they don't only beat the one that is talking, they beat everybody. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Beatings are also inflicted on detainees because of their religion. Jewish and Christian refugees mentioned cases where expressions of their religion, such as the wearing of crosses or praying, were met with punishment. An Eritrean refugee detained in Tariq Al Matar detention centre said:

When the guards see our crosses, they beat us. (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Another Eritrean young man who was imprisoned in Gharyan explained:

They are abusing us with our religion. They said: "You are Christian," like this, this, this. Very bad words. If there are the guards at night, they come to the door, sometimes they open and get inside: "You are masihi [Christian, in Arabic], masihi, masihi", like this. Hitting. Someone catches your hand, and the other is beating. If someone is sick, if you need to take medication: "Hey! Insh'allah tamut", they are saying like this. It means: "I hope you will die". "I hope you will die all of you. You are masihi, things." This is a bad situation. It was very terrible conditions. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The nationality of the detainees is also a factor in the torture inflicted by the guards, especially in the context of civil war in Libya, with different countries involved. The translator who worked for an NGO in Libya remembers such an event:

There had been a small problem in Chad. And they felt that the Chadians had wanted... I don't know, it was a massacre or something like that ... of Libyans. In addition, it was a tribal issue. And anyone coming from Chad or whom they considered to be Chadian, they wanted to [interrogate him to] have information on what had happened. And there you go. Afterwards, the 'festivities' [the torture]. The extent of the atrocities depended on those who carried out the torture, the torturers. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

The torture applied by guards in the official detention centres is also sometimes inflicted as a punishment. The dissemination of information about the detention centres is serious misconduct in the eyes of the guards. Phones are generally confiscated and communication with the external world is controlled. However, some detainees still manage to hide and keep a phone inside the prison. An Eritrean refugee said that there was only one hidden phone in Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre where he was held:

0010: The boss didn't allow us to use a phone to speak. [...] But there was one phone they hid from the boss and all the people were using it. [...]

Interviewer: How many people were using that one phone?

0010: *Almost 200, something like this, maybe. Though, I don't know the exact number.*

Interviewer: *And how did you get money on the phone? How did you get the credit?*

0010: *The workers, the police, they entered the money, and are trying to buy the credit or some more time. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)*

Researcher Klara Smits was first contacted by this interviewee when he was in the detention centre. At that time, he managed to share with her the current situation and even pictures of inside the prison. He was also able to make calls, although the connection was often too bad to establish a line for very long. Just by owning a phone in the prison, refugees take a large risk:

Sometimes when [the guards] see some material that is not allowed by them, if they see it, extreme punishment. They are punishing [refugees by beating] at the bottom of the legs. Like this, the bottom of the feet. But already the place and the situation is punishment, because if we are locked, we do not see anything. (Interviewee 1010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Sharing about the conditions in the detention centre also puts the detainees in danger. An interviewee shared the following:

Before I escaped, I had heard rumours from other refugees. They said that people are communicating with journalists, Human Right Watch. And they are posting some news, some fake news about the military. They told someone put it, like those who are speaking English. [The guards] are asking: "Who speaks English? [...]" They know who speaks English and Arabic very well. [...] They call all the [refugees group leaders]. They punished them, they locked them. Sudanese leader. Somali leader... In the office [...]. They took them there, they locked them. They beat them on light and used electric shocks on them and, after, they said: "You have to tell me because you are responsible, you are a leader. You have to tell me who is posting on Facebook, who has a phone, who is communicating with UNHCR outside, those who are outside, in Geneva or wherever there are. No matter if it is a journalist or human rights [advocate]. We need these people." So they said: "We don't know! Someone who has a phone, he can use it. He is hiding it when he is sleeping. He is using it under his bed sheet, so we don't know." (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

An Eritrean interviewee who was detained in Gharyan explained that complaining to humanitarian workers can also lead to punishment:

Complaining about their situation to NGOs, UN agencies, journalists or officials who visit the detention centres can also lead to torture at the end of the visit. "If a foreign person comes, then you can't speak, because you will be punished".

(Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019).

The interview by Van Reisen held over a long period of time with an Eritrean refugee held in Zintan reveals a similar situations. While the refugee was able to take photos sometimes, he had to be extremely careful. And, he was worried that if it were known to those in charge of the camp that he was taking pictures and sending them he would be severely punished, including by being sent to a camp run by armed groups or human traffickers, where the conditions were perceived to be much worse. He also was fearful about attention being drawn to him, and that if he tried to speak to the authorities when they visited, he would be punished. He described experiencing a serious reprimand after having written to officials in international organisations to draw attention to the situation. Hence, this refugee found that, whatever he tried to do, the possibilities as a result of speaking out were very limited and also dangerous (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019).

Protests inside detention centres and shared by phone are also forbidden (see Chapter 17: *Active Agency and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya*). Different interviewees explained how protests and claims were suppressed through violence by guards. Attempts to ask for better living conditions and respect for human rights ended in deadly clashes between detainees and guards. An Eritrean man detained in Tariq Al Matar testified as follows:

The problem was that [the guards] took 20 people to sell them. After another day, they did it again. So if they took 20 people, after 20 people, after another time, they will take us. The UNHCR didn't care about us. We are registered with the UNHCR, but they didn't care about us. They didn't come to check on us. That is why we are angry. Everybody is angry. We decide to fight with them, to break the door and try to go out. They shoot me. You want to see a photo? This is in the

hospital. They tried to kill us with gas. They threw a gas inside a hole, three gases. The guy watching the prison tried to kill us. There is a video. Everybody shared the video. There is my photo on it. (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Death

The living conditions in official detention centres are dire and can lead to the death of detainees. As some excerpts above stated, the refugees testify that their lives do not seem to have a lot of value in the eyes of the guards. One Eritrean refugee who was stuck in Zintan detention centre testified that in less than one year, he saw 17 people die in the detention centre. Most of them died of tuberculosis, some of hunger, and one person hung herself. Over WhatsApp, the interviewee kept in touch daily, while updating about the situation in the detention centre:

Three Eritreans are dead now. [...] One lady also, Ethiopian. All by TB [tuberculosis]. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, April 2019)

He noted that the doctors who came had no experience, although eventually he stated that IOM started taking away those who were sick – presumably for treatment. Among the pictures the interviewee managed to send, which he would then immediately delete out of fear of repercussions, were pictures of bodies wrapped in sheets (see Figure 13.2).

Other refugees highlighted that people died because of disease in particular, mostly tuberculosis. An Eritrean man stated:

0011: [...] and they transferred me to Tariq al Matar. [...] Lack of food, lack of toilet, lack of water... everything. There is a lot of people dead because of TB [tuberculosis], because of any disease. We lived with 1,200 people in one hall. A big hall, 1,200 people.

Interviewer: How many people did you see die of tuberculosis?

0011: Month 3 to month 8 [March to August], I see a lot of people, over 20, I don't know. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Other interviewees follow the situation in Libya from a distance, hearing from those who are stuck in detention:

There are my friends in Libya, they are in bad condition. Forty persons dead because of disease – TB [tuberculosis]. There is big problem in Libya. So I speak with them on the telephone. I hear a lot of things. I talk to them on Facebook. I think about them. But UNHCR doesn't care about them. (Interviewee 1006, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The NGO translator interviewed for the purpose of this book explained:

When there are a lot of bodies, they are put in big garbage bags. It was the immigrants who did that. Afterwards, they made a big hole elsewhere, with security and that's it.

There were sometimes some who gave them as food for dogs. I have already seen a human, totally bitten. We could see the bones. [Sigh]. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)



Figure 13.2 Photograph of a dead body in an official detention centre in Libya
(Sent by interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, April 2019)

In general, little information is available about the number of people who die in official detention centres and what is done with their corpses.

Payments

According to many interviews, prisoners are sometimes allowed to pay (the guards or the heads of prison) to get out of official detention centres. The amounts paid are on average between 500 and 2,000 Libyan dinars (USD 110–435) (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019). According to journalist Sara Creta, the payment of ransom for redemption can constitute a real source of income for armed groups ruling official detention centres:

[The authorities] organise an attack, they seize the neighbourhood. They arrest 200 people and they bring them to jail – to the detention centre. And then they say: “OK, if you want to go out, it is 2,000 dinars [USD 435], or 200 dinars [USD 45]”. And that is the price to pay if you want to get out. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some refugees explained they felt that the armed groups were using them as a way to get money. A Sudanese man explained:

I have been on the boat to Europe, the balloon boat. After two days, Libyan militias [armed groups] caught us and sent us to prison – Zawiyah Prison. It was really bad. There, they used us to get money. If we gave them 2,500 dinars [USD 545], then, they would let us go. (Interviewee 1018.1, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp call, October 2019)

And a Guinean man added:

It is advantageous for the militiamen [to have many migrants in prison], because they also sell you as a slave. Or you pay yourself to go out. Example: if they have 1,000 migrants, maybe more than 500 will get out [by paying] the militiamen. They will give 500 euros, 800 euros, it depends. (Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Another Guinean man who managed to escape Zawiyah detention centre explained how he then negotiated the release of his wife, who was still in Zawiyah:

I started working with an Arab, because I do earthenware. But, I had a headache, I couldn't work. The Arabic asked me: "Ma hi mushkilatuk?", "What is your problem?" I told him that my wife is in prison. He told me that it is very easy. Because they can easily get Africans out of prison. He told me to go with him. I told him that I came from this prison and that if the boss of this prison sees me, I can die. He said to me: "OK". Because he had a lot of work, he couldn't take me and put me in jail. The Arabs, when you have worked with them, they will caress you until you finish the job. He left and took my wife out, and then I didn't give him any money [for that]. He admired my work so much. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

A Sudanese refugee in Libya explained how they negotiate to get their friends out of detention centres:

You know here in Libya, we pay money to get someone out of prison. The first thing that we do, we are going to have a deal with someone to get [our friend] out of prison. The deal is on how much money we are going to pay. This is the first thing. And then, where we can meet. This is the second thing. And the third thing is my condition: [...] I am going to tell him: "If you bring my guy, I am going to give you the money". [...]. The person you deal with could be Libyan or the soldier himself or another guy from the nationality. (Interviewee 1028.3, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, 26 February 2022)

As the excerpts above show, the ransoms to get out of the so-called 'official' detention centres are generally much less expensive than the ones paid to get out of the other centre. The two have very different business models. However, in some cases recorded in the interviews, the process of extorting ransom by the guards in the official detention centres is similar to the extortion of ransom by the human traffickers in the unofficial detention centres. One Eritrean man interviewed in Italy said that he paid USD 6,500 to get his nephew out of Al-Mabani official detention centre (Interview 9001-2, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021). He said that he paid the ransom to the police, but refused to explain how. This testimony is the only one collected with such a high amount requested for the ransom. Another interview with a refugee who worked as a translator inside a DCIM detention centre gives insight into human trafficking for ransom inside an official prison:

I was translating for them [the guards], because they are kidnapping West-African people from the road during the night. Those who are working in cafeterias, in every place... They are kidnapping and taking money from them using... They are using electric shocks inside the compound! That place! [...] But nobody knows. They are keeping it a secret in the house. (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

This kind of testimony shows that the border between official detention and human trafficking for ransom is blurred.

Forced labour

Many refugees also stated that in several prisons, Libyan citizens could come and hire prisoners to work for one day or more. The jobs that they are asked to do are mainly cleaning or building houses. Sexual slavery also occurs and is elaborated on in Chapter 15: *“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*. Payment or rewards are often promised in exchange for the work accomplished, but not always delivered. A refugee explained:

There are some people that are Libyans, but they are militias [armed groups] of that area. They come there and ask: “I need five slaves”. They come in front of the gate of [the prison]. So these people, they are detainees from UNHCR, we are there because of UNHCR, not because of Libyans. [...] Me, I started to work to find a job. Every morning when someone comes there, he says: “We need five eubayd”, which means 5 slaves. “I need five slaves.” Everybody that is hearing that one, they are feeling angry. But we are eating the same food every day. In order to get vegetables or cigarettes, we are following them. Sometimes, they are giving us, sometimes they are saying, “Akab sayara”. Just: “Follow this car, they will bring you to prison.” Without giving you food, without giving you ... (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Several interviewees explained that it is actually during this forced work that they were able to escape from detention. An Eritrean refugee shared the following:

After four months, they took me to work outside. I had to clean. Then, I escaped from the work. Then, I went to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019).

In the testimonies above, refugees are bought from detention centres for only a day and they are brought back in the evening to their cells. It can also happen that they are bought for long periods and have to pay back their employer in labour for their release. A West African man explained:

Sometimes when you're locked up in prison the [Libyans] want to come to the prison, then they ask who is a mason, to get out there. You will accept, you go out there. They send you [to their] home. They will say to you: "OK, I am going to take you out, you stay with me, you work for a few months or a year, after you reimburse me my money." You can imagine the job, you're going to do more than a month, when to get out it's CFA 500,000 or 800,000 [USD 763 or 1,220]. So it is worth a week of work. But I work with him for a year. He's the one who will win with you. It's like slavery. (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Forced work occurs outside of the detention centres, but also inside the walls of the prison. As explained earlier in this chapter, refugees can be forced to work in the detention centre (e.g., cook or clean) and even participate in conflict. One interviewee worked as a translator for the guards (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020). An Eritrean detainee recalled that the chief of Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre used to take prisoners to work in his house. He said that refugees are not paid for their work, and that sometimes they are taken randomly. However, he also said that refugees may agree to carry out such labour for free just to spend some time outside the prison and get some fresh air (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Sold to human trafficking networks

Libyan authorities, through the Libyan Coast Guard and DCIM detention centres play a key role in human trafficking (Contreras, 2016). Numerous testimonies show that migrants and refugees are regularly sold to human traffickers. The testimony of an Eritrean refugee met as part of this research confirmed this:

I will tell you a story. One ship was caught by the Libyans – this is a true story. The ship was caught by the Libyan navy. When they caught the ship, they came near

the sea. The UNHCR took them to Khoms. After that, those people waited for a long time. After that, the boss did something; the people, they sold them, to Bani Walid. The man that took the people was the worst man in Libya. So the persons were underground – they tried to put them, they tried to ... even two people or one was killed. He asked for 20,000 [US] dollars for one person. Eighteen people – he asked 20,000 for each one. (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

It is not only when migrants and refugees are transported between the beach or the port to the detention centre that human traffickers can get new victims. Testimonies collected from Eritrean refugees show that human traffickers can also buy migrants and refugees from the police or directly from detention centres. A number of Eritrean refugees interviewed confirmed this:

We were arrested by the policemen. They have communication with the connection man. They took me to Misrata's police station. Another connection man knew this place. His name is Abdusalam. He is Eritrean. He has good communication with the police. He asked the police to catch the people so that he could take them afterwards in exchange for money. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

When we entered the prison, some connection men made contact with the soldiers to ask to buy us. But all of us, we said: "Me I stay in prison. If you want me out, you have to kill me". We all agreed. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

They told us once, they need to take 50 migrants from Eritrea to sell them to the smugglers. But we asked them: "What do those people want? Why do you want us to go with them?" He said some bad words to us. Then [we said]: "Yeah. Tell us. If you need some people, tell us for what reason you want to use them". Because we know if some policemen take people, sometimes they sell them to smugglers. They never come back to the prison. So we asked them. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

According to some testimonies, large-scale kidnappings also take place in official detention centres. It is not clear from those testimonies who the perpetrators are. The case below happened in Gharyan Al Hamra detention centre around the end of 2017. It was

described by two different Eritrean refugees met at different periods in different countries:

One day, some people came to kidnap us. Their faces were covered. They broke the gate by shotgun. Some people were kidnapped, but we managed to escape. (Interviewee 1014, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Suddenly, 5 a.m. morning, some smugglers came. Those are... I don't know. Mafia. I have seen only people like this in movies. They are covered. They have masks on their faces. They have guns. They open the door with one shot. They shoot and open the door. "Emsbi, Emsbi." "Go, go, go, go" to the car. They have two big trucks. They bring all the computers and cameras in that prison. Then, they came to that room where we are living. Then, most of the rooms, they opened it. We were shouting. Really, really shouting. We didn't have any opportunities. There is not someone who can fight against [them for] us. Even the chief of that prison. Even the members. They were not there. We were left alone. About 100 people, they took them. Most of them were Somali. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As the research stands, no information has yet been found about what happened to those who were kidnapped from official detention centres.

The above testimonies show that detainees in official prisons can be sold to human traffickers, as future victims of human trafficking for ransom. They can also be sold to traffickers who organise the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Journalist Sara Creta explained:

[Migrants] told me [that human traffickers] were directly coming to the centre to pick up the people to put them at sea. [This happens] in Tajoura. In Zintan it is the same. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

A refugee contacted in Libya stated the same:

In the prison where I was, Abu Issa prison, some smugglers come to buy people. If they are bad smugglers, they will bring you to Bani Walid. If they are good, they will bring you to the sea and ask you to pay again to be pushed [sent to sea]. (Interviewee 1027.2, interview with Wirtz, Messenger phone call, August 2020)

The connection between the Libyan Coast Guard, those running official detention centres, and the human traffickers is very problematic. The EU is financing the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent what it considers ‘illegal migration’ – although not all people on the move are ‘illegal’, as refugees have a right under international law to seek asylum in Europe. The Libyan Coast Guard ‘sells’ migrants and refugees to human traffickers – they hand them over to the traffickers for money and, hence, can be considered part of the human trafficking network. For refugees, this is very frustrating and several argue that the EU is responsible for their fate. An Eritrean man and a Somali man shared the following:

We are suffering more than anything. And nobody takes responsibility. This is a shame on the EU. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, December – April 2019)

Even Europeans, they are working with the Libyans. They are giving money to the Libyan Coast Guard, which is selling us to Bani Walid. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One Eritrean interviewee suspected that the Libyan Coast Guard may have sold other refugees returned from the sea together with him directly to traffickers, although he could not be sure:

0010: [They brought us] to Qasr bin Ghashir. Unfortunately, 38 persons from [among] us, they are kidnapped by the Libyan Coast Guard.

Interviewer: What happened to them?

0010: Actually, we don't know what happened to them.

Interviewer: 38 people taken by the Libyan Coast Guard? Do you know why those people were taken by the Libyan Coast Guard and not others?

0010: Just separately by 30 people, 38 people, separate people like this. Unfortunately, the 38 people they didn't come with us in the Bin Gashir detention centre. They were sold to other smugglers. Actually, we think that maybe they were kidnapped, but we don't have an idea; but, sometimes, they do things like this. Some are going back to the detention centre and some are kidnapped in order to take money from them. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The refugees are trapped in a cycle from which it is very hard to escape. If they finally get the chance to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought to official detention centres – or sold to the human traffickers – and the cycle starts again.

Caught in violent conflict

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the security situation in Libya has been unstable (see Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*). Migrants and refugees travelling across the country are caught in the middle of conflicts and civil wars fought between different military groups. Even in prison, their safety is not guaranteed. Official detention centres are ruled by armed groups and are often located close to – and sometimes inside – military bases or military targets. An Eritrean refugee described Qasr Bin Ghashir detention centre, in Tripoli as follows:

Our place is in a big war zone. In our place, our compound, there is the material [...] and the guns [which are stored] inside our compound. [...] They [Libyan armed groups] prepare the guns and everything inside the compound. [...] So they try and test the guns every day. The sounds are extremely [loud]. [...] We no longer think about the food and small things, we think about when we will escape from this war. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

On 23 April 2019, Qasr Bin Ghashir detention centre was raided by armed men and detainees were shot at (Amnesty International, 2019). At least 12 ended up in hospital. One of the detainees who spoke with Amnesty International (2019) explained that their phones were taken by the attackers and that they were being shot at afterwards. Later, on 2 July 2019, Tajoura, another migrant detention centre, was bombed. At least 44 migrants and refugees died and over 130 had severe injuries (Wintour, 2019). According to the spokesman for the Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar, their target was a camp run by armed groups nearby (Wintour, 2019). One of the Eritrean

interviewees was in touch with people inside the centre when the attack happened:

Yesterday in the midnight [there was an] air strike – twice within 5 minutes. Forty people are dead and 80 injured. It's so heart breaking. (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, March-August 2019)

Some detention centres have also been closed due to their proximity to war zones. In 2018, Abu Salim detention centre was abandoned by guards fleeing clashes and, for more than 48 hours, about 8,000 migrants and refugees stayed locked in the prison without food and water (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; Trew, 2018). Several interviewees also stated that something similar happened around October, November 2018 in Tariq Al Matar detention centre. An Eritrean explained:

The war happened and the guards left us and we escaped from that place because it was really bad and everybody moved. Everybody broke the door and went out. These 1,500 people started walking in the street. And me and others were separated from the others and going our way. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

As some of the official detention centres are ruled by armed groups, migrants and refugees are also sometimes forced to engage in the conflict. The UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel stated: “Some people who were in detention camps in Libya have reported that they were given the choice, stay in the camp for an unknown period of time, or be sent to the front to fight” (Wallis, 2017).

An interviewee who had been detained in Tajoura detention centre explained how he was asked to work for the armed group. He started with cleaning rooms in the military buildings of the compound. Then, he was told to clean weapons as well. Eventually, he was forced to take part in the war:

I was working for them cleaning the weapons and loading the weapons even during the war. The first war, I was there. They forced me to follow them to the battlefield. I was sharing food for the militias [armed groups] – those who were fighting. [...] When they ambushed somebody, we would follow them. And they tell us to search their pockets, and bring anything that is inside. They stay away. [...] If we are

finding money on a dead body, we give it to them. (Interviewee 1091, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

After a while, the interviewee did not want to work for the armed group anymore. However, he was told that he had to work for them for the rest of his life and was not allowed to go back to the prison.

So, as I was working there, I was working there every time, they were forcing me. Even ... as I was working for them, the second war came. The last war that happened last year, between Haftar and these guys. And again that one, I was there. (Interviewee 1091, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

The armed groups also work with the mercenaries from other sub-Saharan countries, who joined the conflict willingly. About 3,000 Sudanese men are reported to be fighting on the side of the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar (Burke & Salih, 2019). Sudanese mercenaries are also involved in smuggling activities, which blurs the difference between those who were forced to take the weapons and those who did it by choice (Burke & Salih, 2019).

According to a translator who used to work for an NGO in Libya, migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres are also sold to serve as mercenaries in other countries:

The Libyans are there to run their business. They were dealing with the smugglers to bring sub-Saharan Africans there and [...] they directed [some of] them towards Saudi Arabia to fight against the Yemenis, towards the Emiratis also to fight against the Yemenis. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities

As official detention centres are under the control of the DCIM, actors like I/NGOs, UN agencies, journalists, embassies and representatives of authorities can have access to these centres. However, as will be discussed in this section, the Libyan administration does not encourage this access and it can have repercussions for the detainees. Having raised this point, this section

elaborates on the assistance received by refugees imprisoned in official detention centres and the lack of trust they have of I/NGOs and UN agencies. Finally, resettlement and voluntary return will be examined as a potential solution for Eritreans refugees to escape Libya.

Lack of access

Libya has not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees or its 1967 Protocol. These document sets out, among other things, the obligations of states to protect refugees. But in Libya, there is a legal vacuum on asylum. To justify their presence on the ground, humanitarian actors must constantly negotiate with the authorities. Sources, who preferred to stay anonymous, explained that visas to Libya are hard to obtain for staff of I/NGOs, UN agencies, and journalists. Once on the ground, the security situation complicates travels within the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions made visits to some detention centres all but impossible for long periods of time.

Those who obtain a visa and who manage to travel within the country, despite the context, have to be patient in dealing with Libyan bureaucracy and gaining access to prisons (Contreras, 2016). Sara Creta, a journalist who specialised in migrants and refugees in Libya explained:

Everything needs to be negotiated and needs to be negotiated on a daily basis. So this means that I may have the agreement with this colonel: “Yes you can film”. But then the night before there was a protest, or there were people who were killed or anything is happening, so then you are not allowed to film. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Official detention centres open and close their doors often, which also complicates access to them and any follow-up by external actors. Some prisons, located further from the capital, are also difficult for NGOs and UN agencies to access. The refugees locked up in these centres feel abandoned. A Somali refugee shared the following:

In the prison where I was, one week ago, they killed seven people! If you die there, as it is far away from the cities, no one will know. This prison is in the bush. (Interviewee 1027.2, interview with Wirtz, Messenger phone call, August 2020)

An Eritrean refugees said:

We wanted to go to Tripoli, because we saw everything. All the people are resettled from Tripoli, but we were in Gharyan, in a far place. We thought that problem made us far from UNHCR and everything. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Even when access is granted to external actors, it is under the strict surveillance of the authorities. Sara Creta explained:

Even if you are allowed to film, there will be someone next to you with a gun, and telling you: "You film this, you don't film that." [...] If media don't have access and if access to media is reduced, we cannot understand what is going on, we cannot have an independent report on what the conditions exactly are. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

An Eritrean refugee explained how the visits of external actors can be carefully prepared by the guards of official detention centres:

When I entered Tariq Al Matar, I was afraid because there were many, many people of different nationalities. There were almost 1,500 people in one store. [...] UNHCR came once a week. When UNHCR was about to come, the Libyan policemen took all the Eritreans outside. They will say: "These people are free". You understand? There are many, many Europeans who come to see you in that place. So when they are leaving, all the people will enter the store. When they have finished their work, they start to beat us. "Go!" "Enter!" When you are praying, [they] beat [you]! When you need to sleep, [they] beat [you]! They have problems of water, problems of medical. Some people are sick. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, talking to 'foreign visitors' can be perceived by the guards as gross misconduct and is often punished by beating after the departure of the visitor (humanitarian worker, journalist or other official). An Eritrean refugee explained:

Even if you talk to someone who was coming, if the police see you talking with that person, after that, when they leave that place, when they are alone, the police will come to you and say: "Come, come. What were you talking about with that white people?" They hit us many times. Even they lock us up alone. So we were afraid. We could not talk in front of them. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

This young Eritrean recalled how frustrating it was to be unable to speak with visitors in Tariq Al Matar detention centre:

They told us that white people were coming. But we didn't know what they wanted. We thought they needed to talk to us. They needed to see our situation. Even we saw them. We were locked up, but we saw them. What did they mean? What do they need the chief to inform them? We were locked. We cannot speak freely with them. We know our pain. But we didn't have any opportunity to talk to them face-to-face. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

The situation is also very hard for the visitors to the detention centres, because they know that the ones who agree to talk to them might be beaten after having delivered their testimony. Sara Creta, who was able to get information from a refugee detained in Tajoura confirmed the following:

The information I collected speaking with this fellow's friends in Tajura, by hidden phone, they are all extremely scared to speak about this, because they are so afraid of what could happen to them. They told me: "He was beaten in front of us, like a snake". And he could not even stand up after they had been beating him, and then he was brought to this separate cell, where he is now staying with other guys that either have tried to escape from the centre or so on. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Despite the risk, some interviewees try to find ways to report on their situation:

Some people within the prison smuggled a phone which people could use. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

According to this interviewee, the refugees use this phone to share photos, videos, protest and information with their friends, families, activists and journalists (see Chapter 17: *Active Agency, Access and Power*:

Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya). An Eritrean refugee noted that a friend of his shared a picture on Facebook to ask for help when they were together in a detention centre (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, July 2019). Many refugees interviewed for this book reported exchanging information and pictures with one another about what happens in other detention centres in Libya as well. For example, videos about the Tajoura bombing in July 2019 were shared widely among the refugee community.

Assistance received

Many reports exist on the activities of I/NGOs and UN agencies in official detention centres in Libya. The point of this section is not to enumerate all of them, but to inform the reader of the kind of assistance provided, as highlighted by the interviewees. Several refugees told about the non-food and personal hygiene items – such as blankets, mattresses, clothes, shampoo, soap or toothpaste – provided by I/NGOs and UN agencies, when they manage to have access to official detention centres in Libya. Primary healthcare and psychosocial support are also provided, as well as COVID-19 vaccinations.

A young Eritrean woman recognised that because UNHCR was more present in Abu Salim detention centre, her living conditions were better than other places in Libya where it was not working (Interviewee 1016, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Some interviewees also underlined that thanks to the UNHCR mediation, they could access information and get in touch with their families, even though they were detained in Libya or stuck in Niger. An Eritrean refugee remembered that:

[The organisations] came with a telephone. They took me outside and they gave me a telephone to call my family. (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 2019)

A Somali refugee explained:

MSF [came] every two weeks. [...] If you wrote a letter to give to someone outside, they would send it. They would not cheat you or, for example, treat you bad.
(Interviewee 1084, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

UNHCR also helps particularly vulnerable detainees to be freed. This type of procedure is extremely rare, as it requires the approval of prison officials and strong advocacy (Carretero, 2022). Resettlement and voluntary return are organised by UNHCR and IOM. Those programmes will be explored further later in this section.

I/NGOs and UN agencies have advocated for many years for the closure of official detention centres and published numerous valuable reports denouncing the abuses perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya.

Distrust

Despite the support provided by I/NGOs and UN agencies, and even though some refugees stated their living conditions were better when these organisations were present in detention centres in Libya, many voiced distrust in relation to the staff of these organisations. There is a widespread sense of frustration towards UN agencies among migrants and refugees in Libya. The interviewees expressed their frustration over the perceived unfairness, especially in priorities for resettlement. They feel that these organisations do not care about them, but rather their own reputation. A Guinean man explained:

[Talking about IOM] No registration. Sometimes they repatriate people to show international opinion that they are working. But it's the opposite. IOM is going to prison every two weeks. Or sometimes they don't even come for a month.
(Interviewee 1048, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

A Somali refugee argued:

They don't even want to register us. They are wasting their time. They are just writing the name of the fathers, for two persons and after two weeks later, they come back and they will ask you the name of your mother. They will return back again. After five months, or six months, they will come back to you, they will start again to register

another person. (Interviewee 1092, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Among the grievances of the refugees are the infrequency of visits by UN agencies and the difficulty in reaching them to call for help. An Eritrean refugee in a transit centre in Libya reported that he:

[...] contacted the EU and UNHCR on Twitter and by email, [but] they didn't respond to my claims. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, January 2019).

A Somali refugee similarly stated:

I have the number of three organisations: Libyan Red Crescent, IRC, ... There are a lot of NGOs. But if we call them, they don't come. They will give you another number and say: "Call this person". Then this person will give you another number again... Until you get tired! One of my friends has TB [tuberculosis]. He is not breathing. I called and I said: "There is a guy here, he can't breathe. He is not eating. I am living in Abu Salim". They gave me another number, then at the other number, they gave me the number of the first person I had called. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

The question of language is another issue that affects communication between refugees and I/NGOs and UN agencies. Many refugees do not speak Arabic, French or English. Some refugees offer their services to translate for their compatriots, but the accuracy level of the translator and the question of trust remains a problem. An Eritrean refugee explained:

You cannot trust the translator. But it's not a problem from the translators. There is a problem with translating. The problem is from the UNHCR. The translators are not from our country. They are from Ethiopia. Sometimes, the Ethiopian translators cannot understand your language. Sometimes the Tigrinya [they speak] is not the same as us [what we speak]. He cannot understand Tigrinya very well. (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

In some cases, the interviewees raised the fact that they have no say whatsoever about what is published about them or about their story. In the following interview excerpt, an Eritrean refugee is complaining about posts shared by Libyan forces and by humanitarian

organisations. For him, who had escaped from the hands of human traffickers and who was ‘saved’, only to be locked up in an official detention in Benghazi, stories shared on social networks are not telling the truth:

One soldier took a photo of us and shared it on social media. After that, in the morning, the Red Crescent came to us and took us by car to Benghazi. Then, the soldier said in front of us, recording us a video: “We saved these people from smugglers, we do like this, we did like this”. Then he was sharing it on social media. [Later], the immigration did the same. They recorded us and said: “We did like this and like this and like this”, on social media. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Distrust is particularly expressed toward local workers in these organisations and their suspected relations with the prison guards. Journalist Sara Creta described the following:

MSF has local doctors, but they are Libyans, so they are not trusted. Even local staff of UNHCR are not trusted. IOM is not trusted. We do understand this, I think. And even if I am on the ground with a Libyan colleague, or a Libyan translator or fixer [facilitator], I will ask them to step away when I am doing an interview. (Interviewee Sara Creta, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

And a Somali interviewee said that:

They are just there to waste their time, making their stories with the soldiers... They are the same people. But if you complain... For instance, once the Dutch Embassy, or something like that, came there. When we told them our problems, the UNHCR informed the Libyan soldiers, the militias [armed groups] [who talked with them]. Because UNHCR [...] they will say: “This man is talking about you, about your soldiers.” [...] UNHCR, you can’t tell them a secret. (Interviewee 1095, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Two interviewees referred to official detention centres as ‘UNHCR prisons’. The lack of communication between the staff or humanitarian organisations and migrants and refugees feeds the feeling of distrust. In many cases, the refugees have been brought to detention centres under the eyes of NGOs and UN agencies, who

were on the shore when they were repatriated, after their arrest on the Mediterranean Sea.

It has to be noted here that migrants and refugees imprisoned in Libya face daily abuse and human right violations. The fact that external actors such as NGOs, UN agencies, journalists or state actors come to visit the prisons and see the conditions in which they are held, but that the situation does not change, is extremely concerning.

Resettlement and ‘voluntary’ return

In 2007, UNHCR started to evacuate ‘particularly vulnerable’ people from Libya, via Niger and Rwanda, as part of an emergency evacuation programme to resettle them in so-called ‘safe’ countries in Europe and North America (UNHCR, 2021a). In Niger and Rwanda, refugees are placed in transit camps while waiting for their applications to be processed (see Chapter 14: *“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*).

Priority for resettlement is given to ‘most vulnerable’; this usually means women, children or sick people. This selection causes confusion and feeds feelings of distrust towards UN agencies. An Eritrean refugee contacted by phone while he was in a detention centre in Libya explained:

[The UNHCR came and resettled] Seven overages; four males and three females. The UN forgets people who are between 32 and 45 years old. They don’t see that we have been living here for more than eight months. And they pick newcomers who have been here for maybe two months. [...] UNHCR is slowly killing us. [...] The UNHCR registers people to unregister them. (Interviewee 0009, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, April 2019)

Some interviewees said that they suspected corruption, for example, that UNHCR workers are bribed to register some over others. An Eritrean refugee stated:

Those who come registered don’t have priority. For instance, those who have registered on 15 October 2017 still, up to now, they are waiting in a bad situation. There are also so many Eritreans who are overage, but registered as underage. No one complains about them from UNHCR members. Even ladies who are single have

registered as married, fakey. (Interviewee 3003, private messages with Mirjam Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 2019)

The same interviewee reported that a person who had died had his identity stolen, and someone else was registered in his name. Among the refugees, there is a feeling of broken promises. “The UNHCR is playing with our cases” is a statement that was made by several interviewees. Many said that they waited for months in official detention centres with the hope of being resettled, but nothing happened. All of the refugees feel that they have the right to be resettled, after what they have been through. As of 1 October 2021, UNHCR estimates that there are 41,681 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Libya; 6,544 refugees and asylum seekers were resettled or taken to a third country between 2017 and October 2021. The UNHCR resettles an average of 1,636 individuals per year, so it would take around 32 years to resettle everyone (UNHCR, 2021c).

Another possibility to escape Libya is voluntary return to one’s country of origin. IOM offers this option and has returned tens of thousands of migrants and refugees. But for Eritreans, this option is not possible, as they face prison and re-enlistment in the national service upon arrival in Eritrea. There are also suspected connections between the Eritrean government and human traffickers for ransom (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). One refugee shared the following:

Another West African from Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin... These countries have embassies. The embassy will come here, he will make some processes and he will return back. But Eritrean and Somali and Ethiopian people cannot go back to their country because they have political problems. Maybe the government will say: “It’s free”. But it’s not free there. Every person when they go to Eritrea, they have only prison. (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

One Eritrean interviewee explained that his embassy paid him a visit when he was in prison. However, he did not trust them:

When I was in Tariq Al Matar, Eritrean officials came to say: “Now there is peace. Go back to your country”. But every person cannot accept and go back, because they will be put in prison or be killed by the government [once in Eritrea]. That is

why all the people are afraid. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Despite this, some rare Eritreans decide to benefit from voluntary return. The authors have spoken to one refugee who returned to Eritrea to later flee the country again, as well as to a journalist who has spoken to three more people who did the same. The people who made the choice to return did not do so not because they expected a safe return, but out of desperation. One Eritrean interviewee stated:

I would rather die in my country than here. (Interviewee 0019, interview with Smits, face-to-face, November 2019)

Returning to Eritrea poses a great risk for refugees. This means that, with the small number of places available for resettlement, the only option left for Eritreans to escape Libya is to flee to other countries via land borders or across the Mediterranean Sea. If they choose this second option, they risk death during the crossing or being arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard and brought back to Libya and this never-ending cycle.

Discussion

This chapter describes the tip of the iceberg of the situation facing migrants and refugees in Libya. From the interviews emerges a frightening picture of detainees in the official detention centres being kept in unsanitary conditions, without enough food or safe water, and beaten, punished, raped and tortured. The interviews also describe refugees dying from disease and being killed while in detention. These findings correspond with numerous other reports published by research groups, journalists, humanitarian organisations and UN Agencies (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020; 2021; Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018; Creta, 2021b; ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; El Taguri & Nasef, 2021; Hayden, 2022; OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2016; 2018). On the basis of 1,300 first-hand accounts and after regular monitoring visits to eleven immigration detention centres in Libya, OHCHR and UNSMIL observed:

Severe overcrowding, lack of proper ventilation and lighting, inadequate access to washing facilities and latrines, constant confinement, denial of contact with the outside world, and malnutrition. Conditions lead to the spread of skin infections, acute diarrhoea, respiratory tract-infections and other ailments, and medical treatment is inadequate. Children, including those separated or unaccompanied, are held together with adults in similarly squalid conditions. UNSMIL has also documented torture and other ill-treatment, forced labour, rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by DCIM guards with impunity. The fact that women are held in facilities without female guards further facilitates sexual abuse and exploitation. UNSMIL staff found that female detainees are routinely subjected to strip searches by or under the gaze of male guards. (OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2018, p. 5)

The majority of interviewees explained that they ended up in official detention centres after having been arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, which was also pointed out by many journalists and researchers. OHCHR and UNSMIL write:

[After having faced the perilous crossing of Libya], the journey continues with the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossings, increasingly ending in interception or rescue by the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and then transfer back to Libya where migrants face indefinite detention and frequent torture and other ill-treatment in centres unfit for human habitation. (2018, p. 4)

The refugees interviewed for this research said that their possessions were stolen after their arrest. Other researchers also denounced particularly traumatic body searches:

These searches often include internal cavity searches – sometimes susceptible to amount to the crime of rape – and are carried out on arrival at a new detention centre or place of captivity or transit to find and steal money and phones from migrants and refugees. (ECCHR et al., 2021, p.37)

Killings have been reported in official detention centres. The interviewees said that many die in detention. Little is known about what is done with the corpses of the detainees. Testimonies describing detainees being shot at when they tried to escape are not rare. On 8 October 2021, six detainees were killed by the guards of Al-Mabani detention centre while they were trying to escape; 24

others were injured. IOM stated: “Some of our staff who witnessed this incident describe injured migrants in a pool of blood lying on the ground. We are devastated by this tragic loss of life,” (IOM, 2021). The incident led to demonstrations in front of the UNHCR office in Tripoli. Thousands of migrants and refugees gathered to ask to be evacuated from Libya (Magdy, 2021).

In addition, migrants and refugees are prevented from telling their story to those outside the detention centre. They are punished if found using phone and face retribution if they talk to visiting journalists, researchers or staff from humanitarian organisations.

The migrants and refugees in detention are also caught up in the violent conflict that afflicts Libya, which leaves them even more fearful, distressed and vulnerable. One refugee explained how he was forced to work as a mercenary for the guards. The findings of this chapter correspond with other events that have been reported. On 20 June 2021, an explosion occurred in Abu Rashada detention centre in Gharyan. Satellite images collected by Middle East Eye show how the compound where migrants and detainees are detained looks like a military base, with armoured vehicles parked in front of the buildings (Creta, 2021b). Survivors said that the explosion was caused by a spark in the ammunition depot. This was denied by the authorities, who stated that the blast was caused by a gas canister and that no people were injured. Other witnesses said that many people were injured in the explosion and that a hundred died (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021).

The findings of this research suggest that refugees may be sold on to human traffickers, from official detention centres. This finding corresponds with information from other sources. Most strikingly, the number of refugees does not add up. There is a discrepancy between the number of people intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard (according to the UNHCR, 27,551 people were arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard and the General Administration for Coastal security between January and October 2021; UNHCR, 2021b) and the number in official detention centres. Although the actual number of detainees is likely to be much higher, only 7,000 migrants and refugees were registered in DCIM detention centres in October 2021

(ECCHR *et al.*, 2021). In an interview with Le Monde Diplomatique, Federico Soda, IOM head of mission in Libya, claims that “the figures do not stick” (Urbina, 2022):

The difference undoubtedly corresponds to all those who end up in these improvised secret prisons, managed by smugglers and militiamen, and forbidden access to humanitarian workers. (Urbina, 2022)

The suspicious disappearance of migrants and refugees has been denounced by many humanitarian organisations (ECCHR *et al.*, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020).

Once the migrants have been repatriated by the Libyan Coast Guard and the NGOs have done their work with the survivors, the procedure is to take them directly to the official detention centres. Although NGOs, UN agencies, journalists, embassies and representatives of authorities can have access to those official detention centres, this access is dependent on the security situation and the good willing of Libyan bureaucracy. Journalists and humanitarian organisations regularly complain about the consequences of the difficulties they face in accessing official detention centres. The newspaper Libération wrote: “As the only witnesses to the abuses [committed in detention centres], NGOs, such as MSF, are often considered undesirable by the prison masters or their superiors” (Macé, 2021). In July 2021, for example, MSF lost its access to peripheral detention centres in central-western Libya following the suspension of authorisations by the central authorities (Macé, 2021).

This intensifies the lack of trust expressed by migrants and refugees towards NGOs and UN agencies. All Eritrean refugees interviewed stated that they felt abandoned by the UNHCR and that not enough was being done for them. The disappointment of migrants and refugees towards NGOs and UN agencies is expressed in many press articles.

The documentary *Libya: No Escape from Hell* (Creta, 2021a) shows the frustration of refugees over the selection of refugees for resettlement. This was particularly intense after the bombing of the Tajoura prison

in 2019, after which the UNHCR evacuated some refugees to the Gathering and Departure Facility (GDF) in Libya, while the others, having nowhere else to go, walked there.

The interviews indicate that the treatment of Eritrean refugees in official detention centres differs from the treatment of other migrants and refugees (although this needs to be further explored). There are several aspects that distinguish Eritrean refugees from other migrants:

- Eritrean refugees cannot benefit from support of their Embassy or from IOM voluntary return programme, as they would put their life in danger by returning to their country.
- Eritreans are considered refugees. As a Somali interviewee explained, in some detention centres, they are put in a separate room with those who are generally considered refugees by UNHCR: “Room number three is for Eritrean and all of those who need to be registered by UNHCR [...]. Sudanese, Eritreans and Somali are in the same room because these people are refugees, real refugees” (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020).
- Eritreans are among the nine nationalities eligible for the Emergency Transit Mechanism and have a chance (even if small) to be evacuated out of Libya by the UNHCR and resettled in a third country.⁶
- Eritreans have an important monetary value in the hands of human traffickers, for various reasons, which are elaborated on elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). Hence, they are at more risk of being sold to human traffickers by the guards of official detention centres.

⁶ UNHCR is registering individuals from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen. Almost 60% of migrants living in Libya come from Niger (20%) Egypt (18%) Chad (15%) and Nigeria (6%) (Bonnet & Hartpence, 2021).

- Many Eritreans do not speak Arabic, English or French, which can make it difficult for them to understand what is going on and what the guards of the prison are saying.
- Christian Eritreans face discriminations in official detention centres on the basis of their religion.

This chapter is based on the first-hand testimonies of people who have been incarcerated in official detention centres in Libya. The extent to which the testimonies triangulate is remarkable. During the research, different people were interviewed in different places (mainly Tunisia, Niger and the Netherlands) at different times (between 2019 and 2020). Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews showed that they were describing the same detention centres and experienced the same human rights abuses. Nine of the interviewees were actually in Tariq al Matar at the same time, in January 2018. They describe the same conditions in different words. One interviewee was also, accidentally, interviewed twice: In April 2019 by Morgane Wirtz, and in July 2019 by Klara Smits. Although the words are slightly different, his testimony is the same.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to assess the conditions in official detention centres, particularly DCIM centres, from the perspective of the detainees. Insufficient food and water, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions lead to the outbreak of diseases like tuberculosis, lice and scabies. Pregnant women lack assistance when delivering and access to medical care is scarce. Diseases, as well as mistreatment, cause deaths in detention centres.

Refugees in official detention centres face torture including by deprivation of food, water and sleep. Beatings and sexual violence are common. The use of electric shocks was reported by several interviewees. Torture is applied as a form of punishment, a way to ensure discipline, to make the detainees stay in line and remain silent, on the basis of their religion or nationality, and to humiliate the detainees. Dissemination of information about the situation in detention centres is met with harsh punishments including beatings

and detention in a separate cell. Escape attempts can be dealt with by shooting at (and killing) the detainees.

The guards of official detention centres are making money from the detainees by stealing their possessions, through the money paid to get out of prison, and by selling them to human traffickers. This creates a never-ending cycle that traps migrants and refugees in Libya. To fight against what it considers ‘illegal migration’, the EU finances the Libyan Coast Guard, which intercepts and arrest migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. After they are arrested, migrants and refugees are sent (back) to detention centres, from where they may again fall into the hands of human traffickers. Hence, the EU, through its policy of funding the Libyan Coast Guard, is exacerbating the predicament of the migrants and refugees.

The official detention centres are often led by armed groups and sometimes located inside military bases; these are not safe place for the refugees. On several occasions, detainees reported being forced to fight in the conflict or to handle weapons. Some have become collateral victims of the civil war.

NGOs and UN agencies lack access to official detention centres. Without legal protection for refugees in Libya, these organisations have great difficulty negotiating with the Libyan authorities for visas for their staff and access to detention centres. The small amount of provisions they manage to provide to detainees are often stolen by guards and the lack of other options (like resettlement) – and the opaqueness of the procedures around such options – result in a lack of trust in UNHCR by refugees and migrants, who are left living in a hell on Earth with a feeling of broken promises.

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Ethical clearance

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Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz wrote the initial version of this chapter and is author of sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen is author of sections of this chapter and edited the overall text.

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