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Klara Smits

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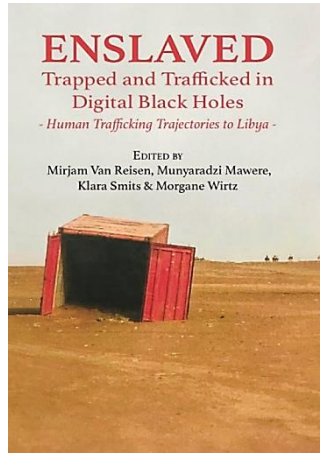

Cite as: Smits, K. (2023). “Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 627-668. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240197_Dead-dead_Trapped_in_the_Human_Trafficking_Cycle_in_Libya Book URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367254851_Enslaved_Trapped_and_Trafficked_in_Digital_Black_Holes_Human_Trafficking_Trajectories_to_Libya

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Chapter 14

"Dead-dead": Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya[1]

Klara Smits

Introduction

In Libya, Eritrean migrants and refugees find themselves in vulnerable situations. With no legal status or viable options, and limited access to information, migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations, making them easy prey for traffickers and others seeking to exploit them. Sold, sold-on, used for forced labour and prostitution, and tortured for ransom, these migrants and refugees become trapped in a cycle of abuse and exploitation that is hard to escape and is best understood as a human trafficking cycle.

The human trafficking cycle was first identified in relation to Sinai trafficking by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). They observed that when migrants and refugees[2] who had been trafficked for ransom were released, after payment of their ransom, or managed to escape, their ordeal did not end. Some managed to cross into Israel, where they ended up in prison or detention; others were arrested by Egyptian security forces and either detained or handed back to the traffickers. Many perished in the desert or simply disappeared. In the Horn of Africa, migrants and refugees find themselves trapped in a continuous cycle of abuse, exploitation, and vulnerability. With no

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

[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).

legal status or viable options and limited access to information, migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations, making them easy prey for traffickers and others seeking to exploit them (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).[3]

Eritreans are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, due to the grave human rights situation in Eritrea (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; 2016; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017), the lack of legal ways for them to obtain an exit visa, and the shoot on sight policy at the border, which forces them to turn to smugglers if they wish to leave, as well as the involvement of top Eritrean officials in the human trafficking network (UN Security Council, 2011; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). In addition, there are a large number of Eritreans in the diaspora who can afford to pay the ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), making them a target group for human traffickers.

Although Sinai trafficking stopped in around 2014, for various reasons, including the erection of a fence in the Sinai between Egypt and Israel, which prevented migrants and refugees from entering Israel (Human Rights Watch, 2012; 2014), this same modus operandi morphed into trafficking for ransom in Libya (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019). In the Sinai, Eritreans made up a large proportion of the victims of human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015), and this is still the case in Libya, mainly due to their situation in Eritrea, which prompts them to leave in large numbers (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). The modus operandi is roughly the same and it is possible that the same trafficking networks

[3] Human trafficking is usually analysed by looking at what happened to the victims during the act of trafficking. This act is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as having three main components: the act (such as transportation or recruitment), the means (such as threats or deception) and the purpose (for exploitation) (UNODC, n.d.). According to this definition, the process appears linear. However, this is not always the case in practice in places like Libya, with the process being more circular.

are involved (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*).

Amnesty International (2020) describes the abuse of migrants and refugees in Libya outside of detention as part of what it calls the cycle of abuse of refugees and migrants. This includes economic hardship, exploitation and robbery. Migrants and refugees living in Tripoli told Amnesty that their money and phones are frequently stolen, and that they have no means to seek accountability, as they live illegally. One refugee shared the following:

> *The militias rob us in the streets, they take our money, purses, phones. They also beat us with their weapons or use knifes to threaten us. The landlord also comes at night to beat us and threatened us with a knife and took our money and phones.* (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 37)

In addition, Amnesty names forced labour, sexual violence and barriers to healthcare access as key concerns for refugees and migrants in Libya (Amnesty International, 2020). Other humanitarian organisations present in Libya, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), stress in their reports that the protection options that humanitarian organisations are able to offer to migrants and refugees are extremely limited (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). Furthermore, Libya has been characterised as a 'black hole' in the digital landscape (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019), which further heightens the vulnerability of refugees and migrants to trafficking, as they have no independent access to information, or a way to make themselves heard (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

In May 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and REACH (2022), in their assessment of the humanitarian needs of migrants and refugees in Libya, identified that:

> *…needs were most commonly found among East African respondents, with 95% of respondents from this region found to have severe or extreme needs. This group was also found to have the most complex needs profile, with 22% of total respondents from East Africa presenting a combination of health, shelter, and non-food item (SNFI), and protection-related needs.* (UNHCR, & REACH, 2022, p.3)

Despite the high level of needs of East Africans, including Eritreans, in Libya, there is a dearth of literature focusing specifically on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya. Among the limited publications on this practice, Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019), focus on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya. However, beyond the locations of detention, their situation is not analysed in-depth. Other authors focusing particularly on the journeys of Eritreans through Libya, including Belloni (2016) and Kuschminder (2021), do not go into detail about what happens to migrants and refugees who end up stuck in Libya long term or try to escape in ways other than successfully crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Achtnich (2022) wrote a detailed essay based on the lives of two Eritreans she met in Tripoli, Libya. In her essay, Achtnich describes Libya as "a human bioeconomy" that aims to derive value from refugees and migrants. In Tripoli, the two Eritrean migrants/refugees she spoke to reported feeling singled out as foreigners, and felt they had little power to stop anyone from mistreating or robbing them (Achtnich, 2022). However, due to the limited sample, according to the author, the essay serves merely as "a compelling entry point".

A thorough analysis of the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees in Libya, as part of the human trafficking cycle, is lacking. Therefore, this chapter asks the question: *To what extent does the situation that Eritrean refugees find themselves in Libya – after escaping from human traffickers or detention – fuel the human trafficking cycle?*

This chapter focuses on the situation of migrants and refugees from Eritrea in Libya (for a full justification of this focus, see Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*), but also makes use of the testimonies of other people on the move (mainly people from Somalia, Sudan, and West Africa). It compares the situation in Libya with the human trafficking cycle in the Sinai desert in Egypt, as defined by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). This chapter uses Eritrean refugees as a case study to determine if a human trafficking cycle can also be identified in relation to human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It looks at what happens after people escape from the human traffickers and detention centres

in Libya and explores how the conditions they find themselves in fuel the human trafficking cycle in Libya.

The next section sets out the methodology used in this chapter. Following this, the findings of the research are presented, including what happens to migrants and refugees after they escape from human traffickers or detention, while they are travelling within Libya, and while living in urban areas. This chapter also briefly touches upon the facilities provided by humanitarian organisations, such as those of the UNHCR, and what these can and cannot provide to those in need of assistance. It then looks at examples of slavery (other than human trafficking for ransom, before turning to the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and what happens when migrants and refugees are intercepted and returned to Libya. Next, the findings on other ways that migrants and refugees leave Libya are presented, including by crossing a land border to a third country (using the example of Tunisia) and the option of evacuation from Libya to a third country (using the example of Niger). Finally, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

Methodology

The methodology detailed here describes 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.*

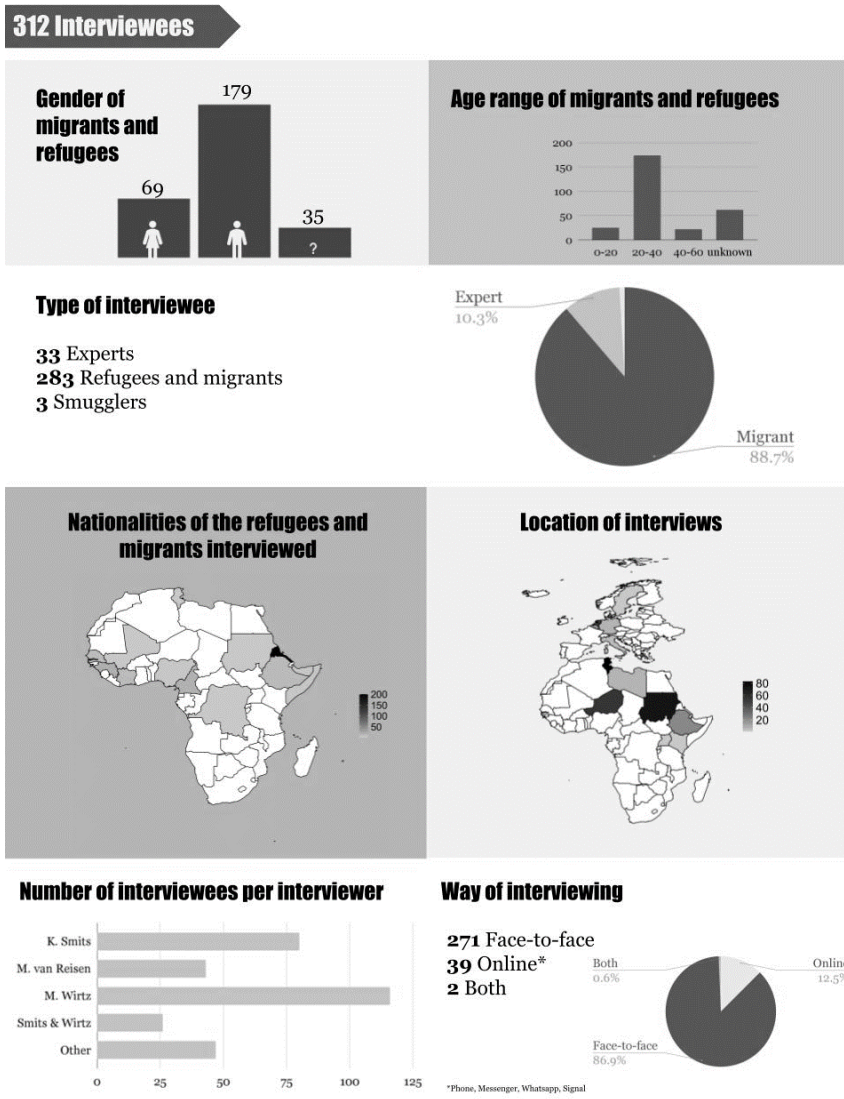
The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background of this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social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

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).

After analysis of all the interviews, the interviews of the participants who had been in detention in Libya were selected for use in this chapter. All of the interviews were analysed looking at the part of the story during and after the migrants and refugees escaped, were released, or otherwise fled situations of human trafficking and detention.

Figure 14.1. Overview of interview statistics[4]



The following sections present the findings of the research.

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

Escape from detention – what's next?

There is no legal pathway out of the official detention centres for refugees and migrants in Libya (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). Leaving the warehouses and holding camps[5] run by traffickers is equally as difficult. In Chapter 12 of this book (*Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*) and Chapter 13 (*Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*), Wirtz and Van Reisen describe some of the ways in which people leave human trafficking camps: by either paying the ransom and being released, being resold (including after paying the ransom), being transported to the Mediterranean Sea after paying the ransom, or death as a result of torture, starvation, or illness. Sometimes, migrants and refugees manage to escape the detention centres or holding camps/warehouses. One interviewee who escaped a human trafficking warehouse in Bani Walid explained:

> *We break the door, and escape. It's dead-dead. If I stayed in that place, I would be dead… If I break out, I could be dead. Dead-dead.* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

After more than one year in Libya, and after having been arrested or kidnapped about a dozen of times, a young Eritrean refugee managed to escape twice in over a day. At 10 pm he escaped the house of human traffickers who were asking him for 3,000 Libyan dinars (approximately USD 2,000[6]) for his release. Then he was arrested by the police and put in prison in Zuwarah. That night, he did not let it go:

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[5] 'Detention centres' are established or 'officialised' by the Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) under the Ministry of Interior and are run by the DCIM or militia. 'Holding camps' and 'warehouses' are some of the terms used to describe the places where migrants and refugees are kept while on route to through Libya (also called 'prisons', 'houses', 'hangars', 'stores', 'farms', and 'credit houses'); they are generally are run by human traffickers (see Glossary of Terms).

[6] The exchange rate used throughout this chapter was calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

> *I talked with some Eritreans. They were thinking of escaping from that prison. Six boys and four women. "What are you thinking?", I asked. "We are thinking of escaping." Then, I joined them. At 1 am we used a robe. One by one. We escaped. I didn't sleep. In the morning, they [the police] put me in the prison, at night, I escaped.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

There are more stories among the migrants and refugees of decisions made as a group to escape. For example, one group decided that they had had enough of being dragged by human traffickers to different places to avoid police and fighting in Sabratha:

> *When I stayed there almost four days it was really difficult. No food. That is why the whole 205 people agreed. The whole people said, "We will go to the Red Cross". We broke the door and went to the police station.* (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Several interviewees in this research had escaped detention centres and holding camps. Many said that the guards of these places used to send them to work for Libyan citizens, which presented an opportunity for them to escape. A young Sudanese man explained:

> *Az Zawiyah Prison was really bad. There, they used us to get money. If we gave them 2,500 Libyan dinars [USD 512], then they would let us go. They sent us to work. I escaped from work […]. One day at work, I said to the others, I don't want to enter prison again. I escaped. I just went like a normal guy and after a while, I ran because I knew this place. I had already worked there.* (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, July 2020)

The civil war in Libya also led to the flight of thousands of migrants and refugees held in official and unofficial detention centres. In August 2018, two interviewees escaped Tariq Al Matar detention centre in Tripoli, in the middle of military clashes:

> *The war happened [civil war in Libya] and the guards left us; we escaped from that place because it was really bad and everybody moved. Everybody broke the door and went out. About 1,500 people started walking in the street.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Then in Tariq al Matar, in August 2018 a war started. [...] One day, at night, we couldn't sleep, even one minute, because it was very crowded with weapons and bombing going off near us. Many, many bullets got inside and hit many detainees. Even one was dying in the morning. They shot him in the heart. He died immediately. Then, it was very, very, very shocking; all of the people who were surviving in that environment left that place and went far away. We even left the police, all of the police left us alone – we broke the door. After we broke the door, the military saw us. Because, we were a large group – about 1,400, like that. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

After he fled Tariq Al-Matar detention centre, the interviewee from the second excerpt received a bit of assistance from a Libyan citizen and was able to enjoy a bit of autonomy for a while:

I met some Libyan man, I asked him: "Please save me. Please give me some water, some food". He told me: "Okay. I will give you water. I will give you food, then you have to clean this, you have to do this, this". I said, "Okay no problem". At night, I was sleeping. I stayed with him for one or two weeks. Then I found some Eritreans. I talked with them. "How are you? Where are you living?" We found a house to rent. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

But freedom is difficult to maintain for an Eritrean in Libya, especially in the rural areas. They are at constant risk of being kidnapped or sent to prison. One Eritrean refugee interviewed had a bad experience after he escaped from a warehouse in Bani Walid:

At the mosque, we saw the Sheik and we asked him to give us a phone to call the smugglers to go to Tripoli. He said, "Okay. Wait here and I will give you a phone". After he brought two men. One of the men was a smuggler. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

In the context of the civil war and feeling singled out as foreigners, migrants and refugees in Libya find it difficult to trust anyone. What is also revealing in this testimony is the direct request for the telephone to contact a smuggler. For people on the move, this is practically the only way in which they can travel in Libya, despite the cost and the dangers involved.

During this research, the author also came across testimonies of migrants/refugees who had been helped by Libyan citizens:

> *After that, one Muslim priest, he found us and he took us to his house. We stayed for one week in his house. He took us to Tripoli and he left us on the road. [...] He didn't tell us his name, because he was afraid they would take him. He helped us so well. That means 10% of Libya was good. But the 90%…* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Escaping detention often leads to a cycle of re-incarceration and extortion in Libya. In the next section, the onward strategies used by people on the move to navigate Libya and flee the country are explored.

Travel within Libya

After escaping from the place where they are detained, migrants and refugees face a difficult choice – where to go and who to trust. Migration and its facilitation are criminalised in Libya. Moreover, the police and armed groups often cooperate with the human traffickers:

> *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. [...]. He [the human trafficker] asked the police to catch people so that he could take them afterwards in exchange for money.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewee's testimony indicates that the police in Libya form a link in the human trafficking chain. Another interviewee also described a negative experience with the Libyan police:

> *We met one sheik inside a mosque and we told him we were migrants and we had been kept in a warehouse. We asked him to bring the police for us, to tell the police. He brought the police. The police came and took us to a soldier camp, their camp. We stayed there one day. In that camp, they were planning to sell us. We cried, cried. And they shot at us. They brought a car to transport us. But finally, we don't know why, they stopped. They stopped selling us. Then we spent the night in that camp. And we slept in the open light. We had nothing, no blankets, … I slept on the ground outside. One soldier took us and shared our story 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 shared it on social media. (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 15 November 2019)

As described in Chapter 11: *"You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*, it is not uncommon for police to have direct ties with the traffickers and they may sell migrants and refugees who are captured or who ask the police for help. In other cases, interviewees state that the police took them to a Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) or detention centres run by armed groups.

After escaping from human trafficking warehouses, most Eritrean migrants and refugees ended up in a detention centre. Some had reported to humanitarian organisations (such as the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] and UNHCR), but were then also transferred to a detention centre, after having received care.

They brought us to the place of the Red Cross. They gave us blankets and jackets and food. It was in Sabratha. After that, we changed to Ghiryan al Hamra prison. (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Some of us managed to escape. We walked for three hours, in the direction of Tripoli. After, we were approached by Libyan soldiers. The day after, the UNHCR brought a bus. They first sent us to Tariq al Sikka and the day after to Tariq al-Matar. (Interviewee 1015, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The most common experience of the interviewees who escaped or were freed before reaching the sea was to be either arrested by the police or picked up by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), then taken to a detention centre. If a migrant/refugee wants to avoid being detained, they need to find another way to travel that does not involve contact with the police. One Eritrean refugee thought about approaching a police station, but chose to hitchhike instead:

[...] We saw police station and we didn't have any choice but to go there, even if they sold us or do anything to us. [...] Okay, so I was already exhausted, in addition being pregnant, and at that point we couldn't trust any Libyan, because even their policemen, they were also thieves – out for themselves – and, as far as I can remember,

I think we left [...] from that place, we were scared and left. [... we] stood on the way [hitchhiked] and it was that man who brought us to a place called Tajura. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

However, this person who picked the interviewees up was apparently linked to traffickers, and brought them to a trafficking warehouse. A Senegalese man who was in Libya between 2012 and 2020 described the travel conditions:

If you want to move, it is very risky, the transportation in Libya is very risky. It's risky, because if the Arabs see you they will take you and put you in prison, they will sell you and take the money, and you will stay there to suffer again. They will attack and ask for money, they take everything – your phone, everything – and you start from scratch. (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This man's testimony illustrates that not only could any person pluck you off the streets and sell you, but they also rob you, particularly of your mobile phone. Another Eritrean refugee described the situation after his escape as:

We were walking and running. Some people opened the fire on us. Other people wanted to hold us to sell us. [...] In Libya, any migrant/refugee is dollars. When they see people from Eritrea, what they see is money. That is why they want to have us. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The same interviewee went on to reach out for help:

In Misrâtah, we called human rights [organisation], a Swedish NGO. We knew that they help Eritreans. One of us had contact with a Swedish woman from that NGO. We called her. The Swedish woman made contact with UNHCR. She got one person from Libya, to bring us to UNHCR. She gave the money for this person – 200 Libyan dinars [USD 41]. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

This example shows the challenge of communication for migrants and refugees caught in 'black holes'.[7] It takes one person with connections to a humanitarian organisation to both contact the UNHCR and also arrange transport from a Libyan person to take the group to UNHCR. However, finally, UNHCR transferred them to the prison of Ghiryan al Hamra.

On rare occasions, some interviewees managed to get from one place to another by finding someone willing to help; for example:

> *When we broke out of this prison, we were not going together. Everybody went anywhere. So I went with three people. After that, we travelled a lot of miles. After that we tried to go out by the road. One Muslim priest, he found us and he took us to his house. We stay for one week in his house. He took us to Tarabulus and left us in the road.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

This way, the interviewee managed to make it to Tripoli. The outcome was, however, still the same for him, as he ended up in Tariq al Sikka detention centre. Having reported to the UNHCR office in Tripoli, they gave him a choice:

> *He left us on the road near Burji – you know Burji? The UNHCR office in Tarabulus. At that time, we went to that office. We told them about this [our situation]. They asked us: can we give you a house to stay in that place, or send you to enter Sikka, or… they want us to leave Libya. So we went to Sikka.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Having been given the choice to either live in a house in Tripoli, or a detention centre – but with the chance of being relocated out of Libya – the interviewee chose detention, where he spent three months, and a further three months in the hospital after contracting tuberculosis.

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[7] 'Black holes' in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

Others, however, do eventually end up in urban areas outside of detention. The next section presents the findings of the research on the situation in urban areas.

Urban areas

Although the situation in the official Libyan detention centres is often highlighted by humanitarian organisations, this is not where the majority of the migrants and refugees are located. Data collection by the International Organization for Migration's (IOM's) the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) counted 635,051 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Libya over the period of December 2021 to January 2022 (IOM, 2022). UNHCR (2022a) estimated in January 2022 that only 2,300 of them were in official detention centres. This number fluctuates constantly as people are arrested, escape or are released. However, the majority of migrants and refugees remain outside of detention, mostly in urban areas of Libya.

It is hard for humanitarian organisations to estimate the number of migrants and refugees in urban areas. Much of the migration to Libya is for the purpose of work. However, the fact that there is no migration policy and that migrants and refugees have no legal status in Libya makes them vulnerable and leads to abuse (UNSMIL, 2018). The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) highlighted that, as a result, "migrants and refugees refrain from approaching police stations or armed groups engaged in law enforcement, fearing arrest and other abuses" (UNSMIL, 2018, p. 52). Libya does not recognise refugees or asylum seekers, so, even if they are registered by the UNHCR, refugees remain illegal.

In January 2020, UNHCR counted 4,000 Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees registered and living in cities in Libya (UNHCR, 2020b). Less than half of the Eritreans interviewed for this chapter explained that they lived in cities after having escaped from official or unofficial detention centres. They reported trying to find accommodation, access medical care, and work or wait for money to be sent by relatives, and until the conditions were right for them to cross the

Mediterranean Sea (like summer or Ramadan). They described combining resources with several other Eritreans to rent a room.

However, life is not easy for Eritreans living in urban cities. They are often exploited by their employer, if they are fortunate enough to work. One Eritrean refugee explained that he was employed at a supermarket, but never felt safe.

> *Then when we got that house to rent, me, I started work in a supermarket. It was not easy. When I go to work, I am looking around. Because if they see you in the road, they take you. They ask you for money. I was afraid for many days. Every day.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Eventually, this interviewee was tricked by his employer and taken by people who asked him to pay money for his release. Slavery is common in Libya, as we will cover later in this chapter. An Eritrean refugee explained:

> *I escaped from that detention, then, I was caught by one Libyan who asked me to become a slave. He asked me to work for two weeks with them, then we escaped again. Because the Libyans, if they catch you on the streets, they will take you and you will become a slave, or some people will ask you for money. It is upon a chance.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Due to the civil war and their illegal status, migrants and refugees living in urban areas of Libya are always in danger. In January 2020, two Eritreans asylum seekers were shot to death in their accommodation in Tripoli (UNHCR, 2020b). The people interviewed for this research know how dangerous it is for them to simply live in Libyan cities:

> *In Tripoli, there were too many problems. I was living in a rental house with six people. [...] I was not free there. You can just go to the shop, but we are afraid to go. Every night, it was the war. Every night. I couldn't relax in Tripoli.* (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Several interviewees reported having been kidnapped by human traffickers while they were living in urban areas, simply when they were walking on the street or at work.

Facilities provided by humanitarian organisations

There are locations that migrants and refugees are kept in that are not detention centres. The most well-known of those was the Gathering and Departure Facility (GDF) run by the UNHCR from 2018 until its closure in January 2020 amidst security concerns due to intensification of the Libyan civil war around the complex (Wallis, 2020). The main purpose of the GDF was to house those migrants and refugees who had been selected for evacuation. They would wait in the GDF until they were able to be transported out. Several interviewees who had been to the GDF experienced it as a relief, even though they had to stay there longer than expected. However, entering the facility was not always easy – a 15-year-old minor who was brought to the hospital, because he was sick with tuberculosis, was brought to an urban area by UNHCR and was expected to pay rent, rather than bringing him to the GDF. Only after his guardian, already in the GDF, contacted as many people as he could, was the minor admitted (Interviewee 7024, interview with Stocker, WhatsApp, October 2019).[8] Eventually, and especially after the bombing of the Tajoura detention centre in July 2019, the GDF became overcrowded and the UNHCR started to re-assess its strategies to focus more on urban support.

At the beginning of 2020, UNHCR closed the facility, citing security concerns over it becoming a military target, as military exercises were taking place nearby (UNHCR, 2020a). Alternatives for support were provided mainly on the streets, such as the Community Day Center (CDC) in Tripoli. The CDC was a place where humanitarian partners provided aid to migrants and refugees, but it was closed at the end of 2021 and people camping in front of the building were violently removed (InfoMigrants, 2022). Migrants and refugees have taken to camping at places that still provide assistance, such as the UNHCR registration centre, as alternative shelters are not available.

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[8] 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*.

Slavery in Libya

In the interviews, different types of slavery are highlighted. These include forced labour, forced labour in the context of conflict, and sex trafficking. One interviewee said that, as a black person on the streets of Libya, people immediately see you as someone that they can exploit:

> *But inside the country, if you are walking like this, as you are a black man, if they see you they all know you are a stranger. Some people insult you, some people throw stones at you – many things like that. [...] Some people will pay you. Some people may give you work [and] after the work is finishing they don't pay you. And you cannot challenge them, because you don't have power there and in that country, you are the stranger. All of them, they will be one against you. You don't have the power to challenge the people there.* (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, Face-to-face, May 2020)

Migrants and refugees are even referred to as slaves by some Libyans. This was particularly highlighted by several interviewees who had experience this in official detention centres. One interviewee described the situation in the Tajoura detention centre, where people would come to pick out people to work for them and they were referred to as slaves:

> *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 anything…* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One interviewee saw many people taken to work for the boss of Bin Gashir detention centre.

> *Sometimes they take you by permission, sometimes they are taken randomly. [...] for those who they are taking by permission, those who want to work, they do so because they want to be free from the hole. They're taken, they work and then they are*

returned back. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

This interviewee talked about people leaving voluntarily to do the work. They do not do this for payment, which the interviewee clarified they do not get, but for a chance to escape from what he calls 'the hole'. However, he said that one person later died doing this work:

The boss took a group for work in his house. They entered the house and there was an electric line. When he touched the electric line he died. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The lack of any formal protection for those involved in such forced labour, which in this case led to death, highlights the dehumanisation of refugees and migrants in Libya. Another interviewee in a detention centre in Zawiyah calls the practice of slavery in detention centres dehumanising, as he feels they are not seen as humans at all:

They sent us to work. I escaped from work with a fucking Libyan guy. Sometimes, the Libyans we worked for didn't pay us anything. They just gave us food. They don't see us as human beings. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, October 2019)

Also in unofficial places of detention, slavery takes place. One interviewee reported that from the moment of entering Kufra in Libya:

They forced me to work with Libyan people in a garden for six months, without getting money. I was not working for a salary. I was working during the day and the night, I was sleeping in the hall with the other people. He said that if I were not going to work, he would hit me. So I must work. (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

These examples from interviewees clarify how pervasive and normalised the use of migrants and refugees for labour and other exploitation is in Libya. According to one interviewee, this became even more common place during COVID-19. He described the situation on the streets of Tripoli as follows:

> *The Libyans, they are now all detaining people and asking for money. Militias, people from the government, regular people – all of them. Small people, they come to us and they abuse us racially. They kidnap people, even in Tripoli. This was not like that before. You can't dress, because they ask you where you got the money from. If you are eating at a restaurant, they will come and ask: "Hey slave, where did you get the money from to eat".* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Hence, when walking on the streets, migrants and refugees are careful to hide any money that they have, for fear of being robbed or kidnapped for ransom. Kidnapping also takes place in informal job settings. There were two examples where interviewees were working in Libya, only to be taken to another location and extorted for ransom (Interviewee 1019 and 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019). One interviewee described it as follows:

> *Then, one time, a Libyan took me to work in his car. And… I knew it before, because he took me on a long journey. And I asked him "where are you taking me?" and he said: "I am taking you to work, then I will take you back to your home after you finish the work". Then I waited. Then we passed many checkpoints, then he took me to Zouara. In Zouara he locked me in and he asked me money. I met there two person who were locked in. They were Sudanese. I asked them. They said he did the same to them as he did to me.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Several interviewees had been forced to pick up weapons during the war in Libya. One of the interviewees told of being forced to work providing support during the war:

> *As I am 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 am sharing food with the militias. Those who are fighting.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

It is apparent from the testimonies that even if interviewees do get paid for the work they do, this is arbitrary, as they do not have the means to pursue legal action or complain if they are not paid.

> *They look for me a job as a housemaid. I was living with the Arabs, working for them. For eight month. Every month, they were paying 500 Libyan dinars [USD*

> *103]. So it was collected. And later, when I tried to ask him, how much they pay me he said that is for eight month. There was much work, so I wanted to know. This is how I got to know, because I asked and asked and asked.* (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

From this testimony it can be seen that such situations of forced labour are not always completely unpaid, but they are still often forced, underpaid and dangerous. Interviewees described long hours and being assigned physically hard labour:

> *But even those who work do not get healthy. Because after you go to work for them, you will have to start at seven o'clock in the morning and work until eight o'clock at night. And you as a black man – you will be doing mostly hard labour. And he is going to pay you only 25 dinars for an eight hour day [USD 5].* (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In addition, refugees and migrants can be forced into prostitution on the streets of Libya (such situations are described in Chapter 15: "*We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*).

Although trafficking for ransom is one form of slavery, this section shows that there are other forms of slavery that are pervasive in Libya, as illustrated in Figure 14.2.

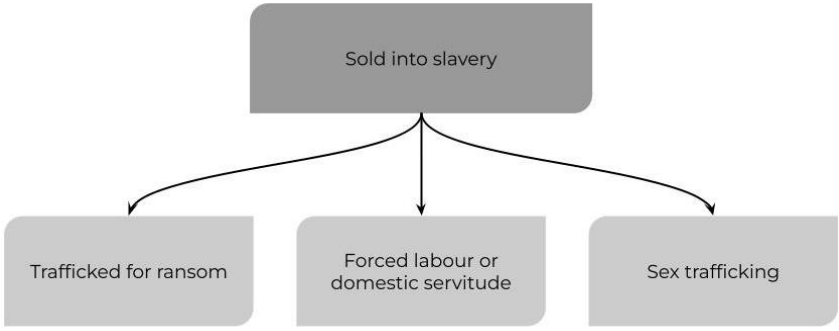

Figure 14.2. Types of slavery described most often in the context of Libya

The sea

From the beginning of the journey, the main intention of the majority of the interviewees was to reach the northern shore of Libya and cross the Mediterranean Sea. When they reach the coast, they usually wait in (ware)houses or camps for the moment to attempt the crossing. However, not all reach the Libyan coast. Bringing migrants and refugees to the coast requires some serious logistics:

> *After ten months, the money was paid. Kidane and Wedi Isaac, another Eritrean connection man, mixed together 400 persons. These 400 people were going to go to the sea. We took big trucks from Bani Walid to Zawiya.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Attempts to cross the Mediterranean are usually surrounded by uncertainty. They take place when the person organising the journey, who is often connected to the human trafficking networks, brings together the necessary logistics and conditions. The first uncertainty comes with the transport to the coast; the roads can be good or bad.

> *They told us to get ready to go to the sea. Then, the smuggler said the way is not safe. The road is closed. So, you have to go another way. So, he took us to Ajdabiya.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Those interviewed for this chapter reported that they had to wait for several days or months in houses or warehouses, again in poor conditions, characterised by a lack of access to food, water, and medical care. Abuse was also reported by the interviewees:

> *0002: Shortage of water, shortage of food, shortage of clothing, shortage of medicine – all that was there.*
>
> *Interviewer: And you were also beaten, abused?*
>
> *0002: Yes, yes!* (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

When waiting for the roads to the sea to open or when waiting for the right boat or conditions to cross the sea, migrants/refugees risk being trafficked again:

> *They tried to send us near the sea, but it is war, like… a lot of things. [...] I never saw the sea. [...] After that, after five months, he sold us.* (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Communication continues to be severely restricted in places of transit to the sea. If migrants/refugees have any possessions, these may be taken, including any mobile phones. The only communication they are sometimes allowed by the traffickers is to contact NGOs, such as Alarmphone, to say you are departing – so that they can alert the coast guard. In some cases, the interviewees on the boats were given a satellite phone for this purpose. Thus, the communication is again severely restricted.

> *When you are in the place before departing, they take all your money and your phone. It is only the day before the departure that the phone is allowed. You can contact the NGOs to say that you are departing.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

An interviewee described the Mediterranean as:

> *…the deadliest sea in the world. It is a whole continent coming here to drown.* (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Although the central Mediterranean route is one of the most dangerous journeys in the world (Robins, 2019), many interviewees say that they would rather die at sea than stay in Libya (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Migrants and refugees run the risk of dying and undertake this perilous journey in overcrowded and fragile boats. The moment of crossing is decided by the smuggler. Once the time comes to board the boat, turning back is not allowed (Smits, 2015). An Eritrean man who attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea remembered the journey:

> *This was not a real boat. It was a... balentina [dinghy]. It had an engine. It was really dangerous. I went with it and it was a really dangerous situation. It was 12 December 2016. That is cold, that is a dangerous sea. There are many storms there. Cold.* (Interviewee 0002, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Another said that the boat in which they undertook the journey was leaking:

> *The ship was broken. You could see the water come in. We took it out with our hands. You know the [type of] ship, the plastic ship? There is some wood under the ship. So the wood was broken. That's why the ship was broken. We told the Libyans at that time when we first entered into the sea, the ship was broken, but they didn't listen to us, only by force.* (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

According to one interviewee, security on the boat comes with a price:

> *There is a price for rubber [boat] and there is a price for wooden [boat]. I paid for wooden.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)

Some interviewees said they had received safety jackets, but this is not always the case. Some interviewees also received a satellite phone to be able to call an NGO once in international waters (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019).

External sources describe how roles are defined between the refugees and migrants on board the boats before they depart. These include the captain, often also in charge of the satellite phone, the 'compass holder', and a commander in charge of order on the boat (Urbina, 2022). Such roles appear to be mostly, if not exclusively, taken by the migrants and refugees themselves. Taking on the role of captain is risky, as those who do may be accused of being a smuggler (Harari, 2018). However, often, the captain does not have to pay. Multiple interviewees confirmed that the captains of their boats were migrants or refugees like themselves.

The crossing is an intense experience. Tensions often arise between the drivers and migrants. One interviewee described how he took the lead in his boat with one of his friends, because the passengers were unhappy with the captain:

> *Because the boat driver… we are not speaking Arab well at the time, but he spoke Arab. He beats us, all of the people. At last, me and [another refugee], he is living in Swiss… we can rob the driver. Because we do not have a choice. [...] Because we don't have a chance. We don't have food, we don't have water… and then there are*

almost 5–6 children. (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Tensions can also breakout between the passengers:

If you are a smuggler, if you have Eritreans, you put Eritreans aside. Because Eritreans and Somali, they are fighting together. Even Sudani, like that. Even in the boat, Somali are sent in a Somali boat. Because Somali in the sea, they may throw people [overboard]. Even the blacks – Nigerian and such – do like that [throwing people overboard]. Because the place is so tight. The Nigerians are so big. If there is a small Eritrean near him, they throw him. They are not afraid of that. The Somalis are on one ship, the blacks on another. (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Such tensions increase the risk of the crossing, as the boats are already overloaded. While some people reach European waters and coasts, others are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard. In 2017, European governments signed the Malta Declaration, which delegated responsibility to the Libyan Coast Guard in the central Mediterranean (European Council, 2017). A Libyan search and rescue area and rescue coordination centre were created in 2018 and funded by Europe (European Commission, n.d.). Instances have been described where Frontex airplanes have helped the Libyan Coast Guard to locate boats to intercept (Urbina, 2022). Migrants and refugees being brought back to Libya describe the experience mostly with disappointment and resignation:

The police stopped me at sea. We had been at sea for four days. We hadn't arrived. On the fourth day, the Italian police, we called them. But they said, "No. As long as you haven't touched Italian waters, we're not going to save you". They are not going to come. But they sit down, they look at you in the sea. They look at us, yes! But if we haven't hit Italian waters, they're not going to save us. (Interviewee 1071, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

After going for seven hours, we were arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard. We were brought back to Libya. When I was on the ground of the ship, even when we were returned, I thought that I had reached Italy. [...] When I reached that ground, I was expecting that I reach Italy. Unfortunately, I see some Libyan guards. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Migrants and refugees intercepted in Libyan waters are taken back to Libya. After being returned, they are registered and taken to Libyan detention centres:

> *They take us to the near sea by a bigger ship. After that they take us to Tariq al Matar [detention centre]. At that time, near the sea, they took us to UNHCR. They give us a blanket, jacket, and clothes.* (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

Two interviewees indicated that they had witnessed the disappearance of people during this process. One Nigerian person said that he had been handed over to traffickers after being returned. Another, Eritrean, interviewee described the process as follows:

> *Unfortunately, the 38 people, they didn't come with us to the Bin Gashir detention centre [after being returned]. They were sold to other smugglers. Actually, we think that maybe they are kidnapped, but we don't know, but sometimes they do things like this. Some are going back to the detention centre and some person are kidnapped in order to take money from them.* (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Most of the interviewees for this book did not make it to Europe, either because they had either not been able to attempt the crossing or they had been intercepted on the way. Other than evacuation by the UNHCR, crossing the Mediterranean Sea is perceived by most migrants and refugees to be the only option to escape Libya:

> *When I was going, I forgot all the problems of store [trafficking warehouse]. I had hope. I would see the sea. Maybe tomorrow, I will enter Italy. I will change my life. Also I will help my sister and my brother. Also there are many people in Eritrea, I will help them, because I know the way.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

However, there is another option – to cross the border from Libya to another North African country.

Escaping by land to Tunisia

Migrants and refugees also flee to neighbouring countries, on foot or using smugglers. This section is based on the testimonies of those who fled Libya to Tunisia, as this is where the interviews were

conducted. None of the Eritrean interviewed by the authors during this research originally planned to go to Tunisia,. Some of them arrived after being rescued in Tunisian waters during a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Others changed their migration trajectory after experiencing the inhumane conditions in Libya. Tunisia is perceived as a safe option for survival by some. A man who escaped from a prison in Zuwarah said:

> *I decided that I was going to come to Tunisia. I started doing research on my phone and I saw that the UN and the Red Cross are here in Tunis. So I decided to start walking.* (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

The routes to Tunisia and other neighbouring countries are unsafe; the migrants and refugees run the risk of being picked up by traffickers or falling victim to fighting or criminal activity along the way. The interviewees reported having to hide on the roads by disguising themselves:

> *[I arrived in Tunisia] by smuggler. I paid the smuggler. I wore the hijab that ladies are wearing. I put the hijab like this, like a cap. I covered my face like a lady, wearing big socks and I followed the driver. So the Libyans they are not looking at you.* (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

When they reach the border with Tunisia, migrants and refugees are tired. They have been sequestered for a long time in Libya, and they have had a difficult and dangerous journey to reach the western part of the country. However, they still have to show strength to cross the border illegally:

> *I took a taxi [...] to Abu Kamash. [...] And from there, I started walking down. I walked for three days before I got to Medinine with my baby on my back.[...] It was very difficult. It is a very big feat. You have to jump in, and you have to jump out. Crossing it was not easy with the baby. You have to cross the barbed wire.* (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

One interviewee reported having to scale a barbed wire fence, only to be sent back to Libya:

> *At the border there are guards, they are searching with a lamp. When this light is catching you, you will just hide yourself in small places. They will never see you. But if you stand up, the light will catch you and they will come and capture you. They know where you are because it is a desert. There are only a few trees. So, when you come to Tunisia, there is a wall there, after you get inside that wall, [you hide] […]. It [the border] has a lot of fences. One is barbed wire. This one is very bad. It will catch you and slice you in your body, in different places. So, we brought big stones, and we broke it. We broke the wall, everything. We entered this place. The first time, they caught me and they returned me back to Libya. They beat me.* (Interviewee 1099, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

As Tunisia has no national asylum law, the management and recognition of refugee status has been delegated to UNHCR, which manages three refugee reception centres in Medinine and Zarzis in southern Tunisia (UNHCR, 2022b).

Within 60 days, the exiles must decide whether to apply for asylum in Tunisia or to opt for voluntary return to their country of origin through IOM. If the asylum application is rejected, there are three options: stay illegally in Tunisia, return to Libya or attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (Boukhayatia, 2021).

Some interviewees said that, compared to Libya, Tunisia is a relatively safe country where they feel better. But it remains a country that offers few opportunities in the context of a difficult democratic transition and a political and social crisis. Migrants and refugees report facing cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as religious discrimination, as evidence by this testimony:

> *First, there is discrimination and also, we do have language barriers. The livelihood is very difficult. You cannot afford to pay for whatever you like, buying whatever you want. Even working in the street is not something you can do here.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 202

The lack of job and education opportunities, and inability to see what their future will be, puts many asylum seekers living in Tunisia in a difficult situation. They usually owe debts to their families, who in most cases paid a lot to fund their migration and rescue them from the hands of human traffickers. Many feel that they did not achieve

what they set out to do: reach Europe, or safety and help their families. This has resulted in many migrants in Tunisia experiencing mental health issues, and some even consider returning to Libya. An Eritrean woman living in a UNHCR shelter in Tunisia shared the following:

> *Sometimes it comes to my mind that I have to decide to go back to Libya and sometimes I just feel that I have to do something worse, like commit suicide. I have some health issues [...] Here, so many people suffered mental issues. There are people who have lost their mind because of all those issues.* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

This excerpt shows that their mental state and the pressures of life in Tunisia may drive migrants and refugees to return to Libya to complete the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, Tunisia is becoming a popular point of departure. Some Tunisian nationals also seek to go to Europe, with Tunisians making up the largest population of arrivals in March 2022 (IOM, n.d.).

Evacuation to Niger

For migrants/refugees, another way out of Libya is by evacuation. In 2016, Italy established a humanitarian corridor that allows selected numbers of migrants/refugees to be evacuated directly from Libya to Italy (UNHCR, 2021a). However, for most countries where migrants and refugees are relocated to, this direct corridor is not available. In order for migrants and refugees to travel elsewhere, they are first evacuated to a third country, which serves as a country of transit.

For these situations, the UNHCR has set up the Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) with Niger and Rwanda (UNHCR, 2021b). The programme in Niger was established in 2017 and works on the premise of evacuating potential refugees to Niger, where the UNHCR can register and interview them to determine their refugee status. This process is done jointly by UNHCR and the Government of Niger. Then, resettlement files are produced, from which governments can select. Missions are then sent to interview those selected in order to consider them for resettlement (UNHCR, 2021b).

Twenty-four of the people interviewed for this book were located in Niamey, the capital of Niger, where they were interviewed regarding their experiences in Libya. Some have since been resettled to the Netherlands, Canada, Finland, Belgium and the United States. Others are still in Niger. They are housed mostly in the refugee camp Hamdallaye, as well as in several houses in Niamey. While interviewed in Niger, they frequently brought up their current situation in Niger, where they had been brought with the promise of a short transition. Often, this turned out differently.

Although refugees expressed gratitude towards the UNHCR for bringing them to a safe country, the large majority of interviewees were concerned about their situation in the transit country and about the procedures for resettlement, which are marked by ambiguity and delays. They feel that they are in a deadlock:

> *UNHCR brought me here. They didn't see me. I am not thinking about eating. I am thinking about my life. I want freedom. I want education, [...] I have been here for one year and three months. It is really difficult. I was not expecting when I entered Niger to stay one year and three months. Now, really, I am not waiting for UNHCR, I am waiting for God.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The refugees have no information about their file while the processes of interviewing, determining refugee status and selection from resettlement files is going on, and cannot choose their country of resettlement, although factors such as having family members in said country can play a role.

The UNHCR is responsible for identifying potential refugees to be transferred from Libya to Niger and Rwanda. It is also responsible, together with the Nigerien government, for processing applications for refugee status determination and producing resettlement files for other countries. In both of these circumstances, refugees have no choice but to wait for UNHCR's response, which can take months or even years. As in Libya, UNHCR in Niger is under fire from refugees and asylum seekers because of their perceived lack of communication and care. An Eritrean man in Niamey explained:

> *We have asked UNHCR for a long time, by groups and alone, to give us an answer, but they say our case is with the government of Niger. When we ask the government of Niger, they say it is at the UNHCR. They are playing with our cases.* (Interviewee 1005, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Nearly all of the interviewees voiced frustration and cited adverse mental health effects because of the delays with their relocation, which pushed some of the interviewees to go back to Libya. Others who were brought to Niger said that they wanted to go back to Libya to try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Many said that they did not choose to come to Niger and that UNHCR made this choice for them:

> *UNHCR doesn't think or do anything about us. I don't come here for Niger. But UNHCR, for its own reasons, they brought me to Niger.* (Interviewee 6003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, August 2019)

The interviewees said that they only agreed to be brought to Niger because they were promised a short transition to a third country. Multiple interviewees stressed that they signed the paper agreeing to evacuation on the basis that Niger would be a country of short transit.

This translates to a sense of abandonment and the idea that UNHCR does not care about them:

> *The food of UNHCR is not good. They didn't care about people. [...] Even if you go to our centre, there is no water, there is no light. Light is not straight. Cut. Cut. Cut. Even the food. The food is not good. A lot of people don't eat that food. We have no money. We came by UNHCR, not by our family. Am I right? If UNHCR brings us to this town [Niamey], they should protect us by anything. But they don't do anything. They don't care about us. If you make interview. If you have any problem, they should make a solution. But they do not care about our problems.* (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *They [UNHCR] took you from Libya to Niger. To help you. So where is the help? No money, even soap. After six months, they give it to you. Really. Nothing. Clothes, shoes, everything. You need something, you want to use the telephone – nothing.* (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

One interviewee said that in the UNHCR centre in which he was staying, freedom of speech was repressed:

> *We have no authorisation to talk freely with media. But anyway, the media cannot help.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

Before researchers can enter the refugee camp of Hamdallaye, they need permission from UNHCR. One of the researchers for this book was denied access due to a recent security incident in the camp.

Lack of communication about how the process of relocation works is also an issue. Refugees arrive in Niger with the expectation of being resettled from there. Some state that the UNHCR promised them that the process would be quick. However, from some interviews, it emerges that refugees do not receive clear information about their cases and how the process works:

> *They didn't tell me. I had one interview, one year and five months ago. Still I am waiting for something, but they don't say anything. If you have any problem, you say something. If something is not clear, you can ask me again or discuss about this. But UNHCR does not do it like this. They said to me: "the first interview has expired. It's not here. Because the one that interviewed you, is not here. So you can do another interview". So I do a second, just like the first time, I make an interview again. They eat my time.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, June 2019)

Another interviewee complained that he waited nine months before being interviewed by UNHCR:

> *There's no information. Yeah, even me. I have been in Niger for one year and six months [...] You know, I was staying for nine months without any interview. Yeah, first, I come to Niger. They called me, they registered and I did one interview for three hours. In January. They didn't call me. Still nine months. I asked many times, but they didn't answer. Finally, after nine months they call you to interview. After that, I finished the interview. And after some months, they told me they can't resettle.* (Interviewee 0016, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The lack of understanding of the procedure is particularly frustrating when refugees see others who came after them leaving much sooner than them:

UNHCR is discriminating. This is the main point. We see other people taken in charge after two months. (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

To protest against these conditions, refugees organise sit-ins (Reidy, 2020). An Eritrean man reported that he participated in a demonstration in March 2019. He added that the Nigerien security forces used tear gas to disperse the protesters (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019).

As is the case in Libya, the lack of information and the frustration hampers a constructive relation between the refugees and the UNHCR. However, many refugees express positive sentiments about humanitarian organisations. Some interviewees have since managed to resettle. One interviewee who the author spoke to 1.5 years after the first interview expressed thanks to the UN and government of resettlement, which had helped her escape the situation (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019, follow-up in December 2021). However, the main thing on her mind when speaking to the author was her fellow refugees, who still remained in Niger.

Discussion

During their non-linear journeys, for example, when passed from trafficker to trafficker, or when there is no hope of release from official detention centres, some refugees attempt to escape. Two basic strategies of escape were described by the interviewees in this research: gathering a group together and breaking the door, and running off while engaged in (forced) work outside of the place where they are held. Especially during the chaos of war, a number of interviewees were able to escape the trafficking warehouses.

After they escape, migrants and refugees have to find a way to travel in Libya, which is all but impossible without assistance. Although some of the interviewees indicated that they were able to travel by foot for long distances, they usually rely on others to transport them. By using such transport, they run the risk of being captured, locked up again and extorted for ransom. Contacting the police is not seen

as a safe alternative. In the worst case, the police have connections with the traffickers, and even hand the migrants/refugees over to the traffickers. In the best case, the migrants/refugees are arrested and sent to the DCIM detention centres. In most cases of escape described in this research, the interviewees ended up in official detention centres. Humanitarian organisations like UNHCR also link them with the police and then to official detention centres in most cases, as reported by the interviewees.

Most refugees and migrants in Libya live in urban areas. Due to the fact that the interviewees in this book were mainly Eritreans and were mainly interviewed outside of Libya, most of them had not spent a lot of time in urban areas. However, the testimonies of life in urban areas described the constant danger of being arrested or kidnapped for ransom. This links to the pervasiveness of slavery in Libya, which this chapter also covered. Being sold into slavery can lead to human trafficking for ransom, forced labour/domestic servitude and/or forced prostitution. The interviewees indicate that they were often seen and treated as slaves. Payment for labour (forced or voluntary) is uncertain or non-existent. Migrants and refugees cannot go to authorities when they are not paid, due to their illegal status, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation and to situations of modern slavery, other than human trafficking for ransom.

Persons sold into slavery may also end up directly or indirectly in positions of forced labour or sexual slavery. Various media reports have paid attention to the topic of slavery in Libya, such as CNN (Elbagir, Razek, Platt, & Jones, 2017), Time (Baker, 2019) and BBC (Einashe, 2021). Most often, the form of slavery described in these articles is the extortion of ransom under torture. However, forced labour, domestic servitude and sex trafficking are also covered. In a 2017 report, IOM stated that one out of two refugees and migrants interviewed by them had worked for someone without having received the compensation that they expected in return (IOM, 2017). Hence, the conditions for migrants and refugees in Libya make them vulnerable to trafficking, and many find themselves trapped in a cycle for abuse and vulnerability from which it is difficult to escape (US

Department of State, 2021), as also shown in the testimonies of interviewees presented in this chapter. In addition, the control over technology (including stealing of phones) leaves the refugees in a black hole in the digital landscape, adding to their vulnerability.

Some interviewees tried to escape the human trafficking cycle by attempting to flee Libya. This chapter covered the various ways in which they did so. The sea was the first and foremost goal of all of those interviewed. Although the interviewees in Europe had managed to cross, most of the other interviewees who had actually been on board a boat – which was a minority – had been intercepted. After interception, the migrants/refugees reported being returned to Libya and taken to a DCIM detention centre.

Other ways to escape from Libya include crossing a land border, such as the border with Tunisia, or evacuation (by IOM) to a third country like Niger. The crossing to Tunisia is dangerous and difficult, and the situation for migrants and refugees in Tunisia is harsh. The interviewees said that they feel guilty because they have not achieved what they set out to do (cross to Europe) and are unable to repay the money they owe to family members who helped them fund their migration – some even consider returning to Libya to try and complete the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. In Niger, the migrants and refugees said that they lack information about their situation and feel frustrated that what was explained as a 'short transit' in Niger has turned into a long-term stay. Many interviewees in Niger said that they felt abandoned.

The interviews show how migrants and refugees in Libya are positioned in black holes in the digital landscape. Phones, which are often the migrant/refugees only source of information and contact with the outside world, are among the first things to be taken from them when embarking on their journey, if they are arrest, when crossings the Mediterranean Sea, or during robberies in Libya. Third countries also emerge as black holes in the digital landscape, where information about the refugees' dossiers, progress, and potential countries of resettlement are tightly controlled by the UNHCR, and this information is not given out with any regularity.

Conclusion

The testimonies given by the interviewees in this chapter show that it is very difficult to escape from the cycle of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Simply paying the ransom does not lead to freedom. Rather, it most often leads to further detention, being on sold, kidnapped, or intercepted at sea, but hardly ever to escaping the cycle. This cycle can involve one or more of the following (in a variety of orders):

- Slavery, other than trafficking for ransom (e.g., forced labour, sex slavery or prostitution)
- Arrest leading to human trafficking for ransom
- Arrest leading to detention centres
- Urban living, including high risk of robbery and other abuse
- Escape across the Mediterranean Sea (potentially leading to interception and return in many cases)
- Escape to a third country (potentially leading to return to Libya to complete the journey)
- Evacuation to a host country (in a very limited number of cases)
- Evacuation to a third country (also in a limited number of cases, potentially leading to return to Libya to complete the journey)

Even after having escaped from Libya to Tunisia or Niger, some migrants and refugees consider returning to Libya to finish their journey – to complete what they set out to achieve. This shows that the human trafficking cycle in Libya traps even those who not only know about, but have experienced, the violence and exploitation in Libya. A lack of viable options to live in or leave Libya – or third countries – has created a trap that is very hard for people to escape from. As pressure to flee from Eritrea continues, and trafficking networks to transport Eritreans are increasingly well organised, this means that people will continue to be trapped without a clear path of escape.

In conclusion, as seen from the testimonies presented in this chapter, once caught in the human trafficking cycle, people find themselves trapped in a cycle of abuse and vulnerability, and are often re-trafficked. With no legal status and limited access to information, they are unable to enforce their rights, are often not paid for their labour, robbed and kidnapped by civilians, armed groups, and traffickers. Even the police are not safe, with interviewees reporting being handed over to traffickers by police. Even after escaping detention or traffickers, migrants and refugees are unable to find sanctuary in Libya, neighbouring countries, or when evacuated to third countries. Without any viable option, many return to Libya, despite knowing the risks, to attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, rather than living in a situation in which they feel there is no hope.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Europe External Programme in Africa (EEPA) for its support, through the project Europe-Africa Response to Human Trafficking and Mixed Migration Flows.

Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from Tilburg University REC2017/16; REDC # 2020n13; REDC# 2020/01 3a; REDC 2020.139.

Author contributions

Klara Smits is the author of this chapter. Asma Ben Hadj Hassen contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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