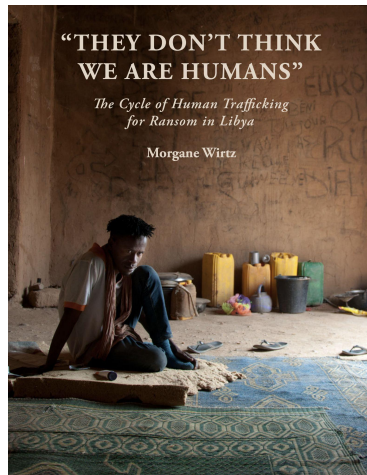


Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle

Morgane Wirtz

Chapter in:
“They don’t think we are humans”
The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya



Cite as: Cite as: Wirtz, M. (2025). Researching what Words Fail to Describe In: Wirtz, M. “They don’t think we are humans”The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 293-325.

Book URL:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396701785_They_don't_think_we_are_humans_The_Cycle_of_Human_Trafficking_for_Ransom_in_Libya

Table of Contents

Summary	7
Table of Contents	11
Acronyms	18
Glossary	21
Acknowledgements	29
Ethical clearance	32
Prologue: Genesis of a thesis	33
Chapter 1	
Researching what Words Fail to Describe	37
1.1 Dying to live	37
1.2 A word on terminology	40
1.2.1 Defining human trafficking for ransom	40
1.2.2 Defining survivors/victims of human trafficking for ransom	41
1.2.3 Defining smuggler and human trafficker	41
1.3 Problem statement and problem gap	42
1.4 Objective of the research and research questions	45
1.5 Location of the research and population studied	46
1.5.1 Libya as a geographical area of human trafficking for ransom	46
1.5.2 Niger, Tunisia and Sudan as strategic places to research human trafficking for ransom	48
1.5.3 Eritreans as victims of human trafficking for ransom	49
1.6 Theoretical framework	51
1.7 Relevance of the research	53
1.8 Philosophy of knowledge and research approach	54
1.8.1 Philosophy of knowledge: Interpretivism in a pragmatic mixed episteme approach	54
1.8.2 Inductive research approach	59
1.8.3 Qualitative research design	59
1.8.4 Ethnography as a research strategy	60
1.8.5 Cross-sectional and longitudinal techniques and procedures	62
1.9 Timeline	62
1.10 Research collaborations	64
1.11 Ethical, emotional and security considerations	66
1.11.1 Ethical considerations of FAIR Data management and re-use	67
1.11.2 Ethical considerations concerning the emotional handling of the material	68
1.11.3 Emotional issues of the interviewees	70
1.11.4 Detecting and supporting emotional issues of the researcher	72
1.11.5 General security measures	74

1.11.6 Methods to keep respondents anonymous and de-identified	76
1.11.7 Conversations with minors	76
1.12 Previous published work	77
1.13 Structure of the thesis	80
Chapter 2	
Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Theoretical Framework	85
2.1 Introduction: Framing migration as a human rights issue	85
2.2 Push and pull theory of migration	87
2.2.1 Flaws in the theory	87
2.2.2 The framing of the migration ‘crisis’ and its consequences	89
2.3 Accessing human rights	91
2.3.1 The right to have rights	91
2.3.2 Human rights culture	93
2.4 The human trafficking cycle	94
2.5 Black holes in the digital landscape	99
2.6 Categorising acts of sexual violence	100
2.6.1. Sexual violence as a tool for subjugation	102
2.6.2 Sexual exploitation	102
2.6.3 Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime	103
2.7 Conclusion on key concepts for the research	103
Chapter 3	
The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges	107
3.1 Introduction: Positionality and emotions as information	107
3.2 Research methodology: Ethnography	109
3.3 Data collection	112
3.3.1 Positionality and access to the field	112
3.3.1.1 Agadez (Niger)	113
3.3.1.2 Niamey (Niger)	115
3.3.1.3 Tunis (Tunisia)	116
3.3.1.4 Medinine (Tunisia)	117
3.3.1.5 Tunisia	119
3.3.1.6 Sudan	120
3.3.2 Overview of respondents	121
3.3.3 Data collected	123
3.4 Data analysis	128
3.4.1 Framework analysis	128
3.4.2 Coding-labelling strategies	130
3.5 Use of artificial intelligence	131
3.6 Data management	132

3.7 Ethical challenges	132
3.7.1 Trust building and ethical challenges in answering the hopes of the interviewees	134
3.7.1.1 Financial compensation	134
3.7.1.2 Hope for help	135
3.7.1.3 Desire to denounce	137
3.7.1.4 A need for information	138
3.7.1.5 Gender relations	139
3.7.1.6 Power relations	140
3.7.2 Changing thesis topic to address an ethical conflict	141
3.7.3 Empathy and relationship with interviewees	142
3.8 Emotional challenges	146
3.8.1 Dealing with interviewees' trauma	147
3.8.2 Dealing with my secondary trauma	148
3.9 Conclusion: Growing as a researcher	150
Chapter 4	
The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature	153
4.1 Introduction: A look behind	153
4.2 From human smuggling to trafficking: Blurred boundaries	154
4.3 The context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya in the literature	157
4.3.1 Thirteen centuries of uninterrupted trade in people	157
4.3.2 From 1959 to 2011: Human trafficking and smuggling under Muammar Gaddafi	159
4.3.3 2011 onwards: War as a breeding ground for human trafficking	161
4.3.4 Containment policies	165
4.3.4.1 Libyan containment policies	165
4.3.4.2 The case of Niger and law 2015-36	166
4.3.4.3 EU containment policies	168
4.4 Human trafficking for ransom in Libya in the literature	171
4.5 Official detention centres as new hubs in the human trafficking cycle	174
4.6 Literature review on sexual violence in Libya	177
4.6.1 A culture of sexual violence in Libya	177
4.6.2 Sexual violence as part of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom	179
4.6.3 Sexual violence in official detention centres	183
4.6.4 Sexual exploitation	185
4.7 Desk Study: COVID-19 pandemic and migration flows in the region of Libya	186
4.7.1 Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes	186
4.7.2 New health protocols and quarantine arrangements	189

4.7.3 Economic repercussions	190
4.7.4 Access to support	191
4.7.5 Crossing the Mediterranean Sea	191
4.8 Conclusion: A need to understand human trafficking for ransom	193
Chapter 5	
Slavery, War and Criminalisation: A Context of Human Trafficking	195
5.1 Introduction: Crossing the desert is not just a job	195
5.2 Dependence on smugglers to cross the Sahara desert	197
5.3 Racism and slavery	201
5.4 Migrants and refugees as collateral damage in the civil war	204
5.5 A constant state of insecurity	206
5.6 Criminalising migration as one of the roots causes of human trafficking for ransom	210
5.7 Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard feeding human traffickers	213
5.8 The human trafficking cycle as a consequence of containment policies	216
5.9 Conclusion: A succession of obstacles	218
Chapter 6	
Routes, Hubs and Prisons: Mapping Migration in Libya	221
6.1 Introduction: Straight lines in the sand	221
6.2 Southwest route (from Niger)	224
6.2.1 Qatrun	227
6.2.2 Sabha	227
6.2.3 Brak	228
6.3 Southeast route (from Sudan)	229
6.3.1 Kufra	231
6.3.2 Shwayrif	232
6.4 Western route (from Algeria)	233
6.5 North-western route (from Tunisia)	235
6.6 Northeastern road (from Egypt)	237
6.6.1 Tobruk	240
6.6.2 Jaghbub	240
6.6.3 Benghazi	241
6.6.4 Ajdabiya	242
6.7 North Libya – Departure point for the Mediterranean Sea	244
6.7.1 Tripoli	245
6.7.1.1 Qasr bin Ghashir Detention Centre	246
6.7.1.2 Tajoura Detention Centre	247
6.7.1.3 Tariq al Matar Detention Centre	248
6.7.1.4 Tariq al Sikka Detention Centre	249
6.7.2 Bani Walid	250

6.7.3 Garabulli	251
6.7.4 Gharyan	252
6.7.5 Khoms	253
6.7.6 Misrata	253
6.7.7 Sabratha	254
6.7.8 Sirte	256
6.7.9 Zawiyah	257
6.7.10 Zintan	258
6.7.11 Zuwarah	259
6.8 Conclusion: Bloody pathways	260
Chapter 7	
The Warehouses: At the Heart of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya	263
7.1 Introduction: Living skeletons	263
7.2 Conditions of detainees in trafficking camps	265
7.2.1 Starvation, disease and lack of hygiene	266
7.2.2 Torture	267
7.2.3 Use of drugs by traffickers	270
7.2.4 Solidarity among detainees	272
7.3 Extortion of ransoms	273
7.3.1 Use of mobile phone	273
7.3.2 Ransom amounts	274
7.3.3 How ransoms are paid	276
7.3.4 Ransom negotiations on the phone	280
7.3.5 Trapped without room for negotiation	282
7.3.6 Humans commodified: Sold and resold from on trafficker to another	284
7.3.7 Forced labour	288
7.4 Conclusion: Dehumanise to exploit	290
Chapter 8	
Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle	293
8.1 Introduction: Official prisons in containers	293
8.2 Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard	295
8.3 Conditions in official detention centres	297
8.3.1 Panic and incomprehension	297
8.3.2 Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions	298
8.3.3 Treatment of women	300
8.3.4 Torture, violence and punishment	301
8.3.5 Death	306

8.3.6 Payments	307
8.3.7 Forced labour and enslavement	309
8.3.8 Sold to human trafficking networks	311
8.3.9 Caught in violent conflict	313
8.4 Relationship between detainees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities	315
8.4.1 Lack of access	315
8.4.2 Assistance received	318
8.4.3 Distrust	319
8.4.4 Resettlement and ‘voluntary’ return	322
8.5 Conclusion: Detention, commodification and exploitation of migrants	324
Chapter 9	
Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya	327
9.1 Introduction: Many did that... rape	327
9.2 Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation	329
9.2.1 On route through the Sahara	329
9.2.2 In trafficking camps	330
9.2.3 In official detention centres	334
9.3 Sexual exploitation	335
9.3.1 Prostitution networks	336
9.3.2 Perpetrated by ISIS	339
9.3.3 In official detention centres	339
9.3.4 Prostitution as a way to survive in Libya	340
9.4 Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime	341
9.4.1 On route in the Sahara desert	342
9.4.2 In trafficking camps	344
9.4.3 In official detention centres	346
9.4.4 In urban areas	346
9.5 Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma	348
9.6 Conclusion: The objectives of rape	350
Chapter 10	
‘On the Move’ in the Region of Libya during COVID-19	353
10.1 Introduction: Perfect circumstance to test the push and pull theory	353
10.2 Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes	357
10.3 New health protocols and quarantine arrangements	360
10.4 Economic repercussions	364
10.5 Access to support	367
10.6 Crossing the Mediterranean Sea	371
10.7 Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks	374

Chapter 11

Discussion and Conclusion: The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya	377
11.1 Introduction: A closing trap	377
11.2 Discussion: Expanding networks	378
11.2.1 Internal consistency	378
11.2.2 Validation through the presentation of results	383
11.2.3 External validity	385
11.2.4 Limitations	388
11.3 Towards a development of the Human Trafficking Cycle	389
11.3.1 The context of human trafficking for ransom	389
11.3.2 The places of human trafficking for ransom	392
11.3.3 Extortion and torture practices associated with human trafficking for ransom	393
11.3.4 Sexual violence in the context of human trafficking for ransom	394
11.3.5 Impact of the measures to contain COVID-19 on survivors of human trafficking for ransom	395
11.3.6 The Human Trafficking Cycle	396
11.4 Policy recommendations	401
11.5 Conclusions	402
11.6 Final word	403
References	405
Annex 1: Interview Topic List	441
Annex 2: Information Letter for Interviewees	443
Annex 3: Consent Form	447
Annex 4: Relationship Between Labels and Research Questions	449
Annex 5: List of Duplicated Work per Chapter	453
Annex 6: Publications	459

Chapter 8

Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle⁶⁰



Figure 8.1. A container in the desert, Sudan
(*Photograph: 2021, © Morgane Wirtz*)

8.1 Introduction: Official prisons in containers

When travelling in the Sahel, I got used to seeing metal shipping containers in the desert. In the refugee camps of the Western Sahara, they were piled on top of each other and used as walls to demarcate areas. The photograph above was taken in Sudan and this container appears to have simply been abandoned there. As a researcher working on Eritrea, I learned that containers were used as

⁶⁰ This chapter is based on the chapter ‘Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in Official Detention Centres in Libya’ authored by Wirtz, M., & Van Reisen, M. published in Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langa RPCIG.

I (Morgane Wirtz) am the first author of the chapter. I prepared the research plan, conducted the interviews, carried out the analysis, worked in a team and supervised junior researchers carrying out the transcriptions and coding/labelling. This chapter is reworked to address the research questions investigated in this dissertation. The re-use and reproduction of part of the text has been approved by the other author.

prisons in Eritrean detention centers (Amnesty International, 2013). And this research has shown that this is also the case in Libya (see Chapter 6: *Routes, Hubs and Prisons: Mapping Migration in Libya*). The conditions are difficult for the detainees locked up in containers, as these places are very hot during the day and cold at night. The interviewees explained that in the Gharyan Al-Hamra detention centre, up to 100 to 110 people were held together in a container. Yet this detention centre is an official facility, and under the mandate of the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), which is part of the Ministry of Interior in Libya.

The literature review presented in Chapter 4: *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature* has shown that in Libya, official detention centres are often managed by independently operating armed groups, connected to human traffickers, and for whom migrants and refugees are perceived as a source of income. Yet, official detention centres appear to be a new hub in the human trafficking cycle. Hence, the objective of this chapter is to investigate how migrants and refugees experience and perceive the conditions of detention in official detention centres in Libya and what is the role played by those detention centres in the human trafficking cycle.

The research questions answered in this chapter is:

SQ 3: Which extortion and torture practices associated with human trafficking for ransom in Libya do survivors report?

This chapter is written from the perspective of migrants and refugees who have been through official detention in Libya. On some occasions, other migrants and refugees as well as experts are quoted when their testimonies provide key details to answer the research question. One photograph is used in this chapter for illustrative purposes. Pictures and videos sent by migrants and refugees to our research team are part of the primary data collected for the research that led to this chapter. I have chosen not to reproduce the images here because I did not take these photographs, and I cannot verify whether the individuals depicted have given their consent. I consider it essential to respect the image rights and dignity of those portrayed, particularly given their vulnerable circumstances while incarcerated. As journalists and NGOs occasionally have access to official detention centres, photographs and videos are readily available online, in the press and in NGO reports. I encourage readers who want to see what these

detention centres really look like to explore the images captured by my colleagues.

The following sections present the findings in three parts: arrests by the Libyan Coast Guard, conditions in official detention centres, and relationship between detainees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

8.2 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. Photojournalist Narciso Contreras photographed 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. [...] 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, even 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 migrants and 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 migrant 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)

As the interviewee above states, detainees in official detention centres are not in a safe place. This will be developed in the further sections.

8.3 Conditions in official detention centres

8.3.1 *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 migrants and refugees. In some instances, interviewees state that body searches are carried out. The detainees' possessions are stolen, as they have monetary value for the prison guards. Journalist Sara Creta explained:

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 detainees can be stolen. In the following testimonies, Eritrean and Somali refugees explain how the guards confiscated goods that they had authorised in the past:

I had a phone, but the Libyans [prison guards] 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)

By confiscating the phones and money from the detainees, guards act as gatekeepers and deliberately cut their connection and access to the outside world. This puts those held in the detention centres in a digital black hole. They have no power to communicate. They also are not receiving information from outside other than what they can access through the guards. Confiscation of belongings can also be humiliating. It indicates the lack of regards the guards have for the detainees. A Gambian man explains:

Sometimes you are lying down, they will come inside, because they know that they have searched us but they will think, "Maybe this guy has

something else with him.” They will come and they will remove all people outside. And they will start searching again. They will remove your bags. They will remove your trousers. Even your boxer, they will ask you to remove it. They don’t care about you. (Interviewee 1046, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

The stealing of belongings is also a means of exploitation faced by detainees in the detention center. Several interviewees explained 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 aid workers 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)

This shows that stealing possessions from detainees can be a way for armed groups ruling official detention centres to make profit.

8.3.2 Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions

In many cases, official detention centres are not suitable for imprisonment. Locked in big halls, prisons, military compounds, old schools or containers, migrants and refugees in Libya find themselves in dangerous situations:

The people who were beaten there [in 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 migrants and 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. An Eritrean interviewee reported that, in Tariq al Matar detention center, there were more than 1,000 migrants in one room with just four bathrooms, which were usually clogged with dirty water:

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 were] 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 survivors and journalists described the lack of food in those official facilities. 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 diseases 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).

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.

8.3.3 Treatment of women

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

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. She questioned the 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)

No other testimonies of forced abortion were gathered during the research, but the experience shared by this woman seems to indicate a possible deliberate act of poisoning or the use of a noxious substance to control the pregnancies of detainees. It may also be the consequence of a toxic or harmful substance being administered to women without regard to its effects. This issue requires further research.

In addition to the human rights violations mentioned above, women in official detention centres regularly face sexual violence. This is discussed further in Chapter 9: *Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya*.

8.3.4 Torture, violence and punishment

The interviewees stated that torture is carried out in various ways, for example, by depriving the detainees of food, water and sleep. Migrants and refugees are also beaten on a daily basis. 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 migrants and 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 detainees 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 young Eritrean 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. (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Researcher Kai Smits was first contacted by this interviewee when he was in the detention centre. At that time, he managed to share with him 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, detainees take a large risk:

Sometimes when [the guards] see some material that is not allowed by them, if they see it, [it is] extreme punishment. They are punishing [migrants and 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)

This testimony, like the one that follows, shows that revealing information about prison conditions puts detainees in danger. It also shows that guards in official detention centres are afraid of disclosing information about prison conditions:

Before I escaped, I had heard rumours from other refugees. They said that people are communicating with journalists, Human Rights 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)

By acting in this way, the guards in the detention centres prevent migrants and refugees from accessing justice. They also prevent them from getting help, as one Eritrean detainee in Gharyan explained that complaining to humanitarian workers could result in 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).

It is extremely difficult for those held in the detention centres to report about the torture in the detention centres. The interview by Van Reisen held over a long period of time with an Eritrean refugee detained in Zintan reveals a similar situation as the person interviewed by Smits. While the refugee was able to take photos sometimes, he had to be extremely careful (Interviewee 3003, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, February 2019). 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 was also 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).

Protesting inside detention centres and sharing of these events by phone is also forbidden. Different interviewees explained how protests 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)

This testimony demonstrates once again the ability of migrants and refugees to overcome obstacles. Despite having been tortured and coerced, and in some cases sold to human traffickers, the detainees mentioned in the extract above decided to demonstrate and try to escape.

8.3.5 Death

The living conditions in official detention centres are dire and can lead to the death of detainees. As some of the excerpts above show, the lives of detainees do not seem to have a lot of value in the eyes of the guards. One Eritrean refugee 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, this interviewee kept in touch daily, while providing updates on 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 said that IOM started taking away those who were sick – presumably for treatment. Among the pictures this interviewee managed to send, which he would then immediately delete out of fear of repercussions, were pictures of bodies wrapped in sheets. Other refugees stated that people died from diseases, mostly tuberculosis. An Eritrean man explained: “Month 3 to month 8 [March to August], I saw a lot of people [dying from tuberculosis, maybe] over twenty, 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 held in detention:

There are my friends in Libya, they are in bad condition. Forty persons died because of disease – TB [tuberculosis]. There is a 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)

An NGO translator interviewed for the purpose of this research explained:

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

Little information is available about how many people die in official detention centres and how their bodies are disposed of. It has been mentioned on several occasions that bodies are dumped in the desert. This, along with the statement above that human bodies are fed to dogs illustrates the complete dehumanisation of detainees. In this case, humans are considered as less than animals. The dehumanisation continues even after the death of the victims.

8.3.6 Payments

According to many interviewees, 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 migrants and refugees explained that they felt that the armed groups were using them as a way to make money. A Sudanese man explained:

I have been on the boat to Europe, the balloon boat. After two days, Libyan militias [Coast Guard] 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 prison:

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 trafficking camps. 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 trafficking camps. 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 was forced to work 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 testimony shows that the boundary between official detention and human trafficking for ransom is blurred. Further research has to be conducted on the issue of kidnappings for ransom organised directly by the guards of official detention centres. It is clear from this section that migrants and refugees are perceived as a source of income for armed groups managing the DCIM centres, which is worrying for the respect of detainees' human rights. The secrecy of the ransom extraction in detention centres makes it difficult for victims to seek justice or escape the cycle of violence this causes.

8.3.7 Forced labour and enslavement

Many migrants and 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 9: *Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards 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 FCEA 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 and enslavement conditions occur outside of the detention centres, but also inside the walls of the prison. Migrants and refugees can be forced to work in the detention centre (e.g., cooking or cleaning) and even to 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 detainees are not paid for their work, and that sometimes they are taken randomly. However, he also said that migrants and 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).

This situation reveals a complete immersion of the culture of enslavement, forced labor, and the disregard for the rights of migrants and refugees within the detention system. Coupled with the violence, dehumanisation, extortion, and torture reported in these detention centers, this creates a toxic environment from which migrants and refugees find it nearly impossible to escape. Their identity is reduced to that of a "slave," stripping them of their humanity and further entrenching them in a cycle of abuse and oppression.

8.3.8 Sold to human trafficking networks

Libyan authorities, through the Libyan Coast Guard and DCIM detention centres, play a key role in human trafficking. Numerous testimonies show that migrants and refugees are regularly sold to human traffickers. One of them is this story, told by an Eritrean refugee:

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 migrants and refugees show that human traffickers can also buy migrants and refugees from the police or directly from detention centres, as this young Eritrean man who recalled:

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)

According to the survivors' testimonies it happened that people were sold by the dozen to smugglers. Another Eritrean refugee explained:

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)

Large-scale kidnappings also take place in official detention centres, explained survivors. 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 and interviewed 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" ["Move forward!" in Arabic]. "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.

Besides the cases of detainees kidnaped or sold to human traffickers, it was reported that detainees have been sold by the guards of

official detention centers to smugglers or traffickers who organise the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Journalist Sara Creta explained:

[Migrants] told me [that human smugglers] 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 also stated:

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 testimonies above highlight how migrants and refugees are considered and treated as commodities that can be bought or sold. Whether they are sold to traffickers or smugglers, migrants and refugees are forced to pay more.

Some migrants and refugees expressed the feeling that they had been betrayed by Europe. By funding the Coast Guard to send them back to Libya, the EU is handing them over either to human traffickers or to indefinite official detention centres where conditions are deplorable. “We are suffering more than anything. And nobody takes responsibility. This is a shame on the EU”, stated an Eritrean refugee (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, WhatsApp, December – April 2019). And a Somali man said:

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)

The collusion between the guards in the official detention centres, the smugglers and traffickers and the coastguards facilitates the sale of migrants and refugees and traps them in the cycle of human trafficking.

8.3.9 Caught in violent conflict

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been in the grip of civil war (see Chapter 5: *Slavery, War and Criminalisation: A context of Human Trafficking*). Migrants and refugees travelling across

the country are caught in the middle of conflicts fought between different armed 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.

It happened that following bombings, detention centers were deserted by the guards. Agreeing with other interviewees who were imprisoned in october/november 2018 in Tariq al Matar detention center, an Eritrean man 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. 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 fighting:

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:

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)

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)

Further research is needed to verify the details of this allegation. The theme of the use of migrants and refugees exploited as mercenaries in Libya or elsewhere needs further attention.

8.4 Relationship between detainees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities

Official detention centres are under the control of the DCIM, and multiple actors like I/NGOs, UN agencies, journalists, embassies and representatives of authorities can have access to these centres. However, the Libyan administration does not encourage this access. Visits can have repercussions for the detainees. Having raised this point, this section elaborates on the assistance received by migrants and refugees held in official detention centres and the lack of trust they have in I/NGOs and UN agencies. Finally, resettlement and voluntary return will be examined as a potential pathway to escape Libya.

8.4.1 Lack of access

Access to official detention centres is hard to get. Sources, who preferred to stay anonymous, explained that visas to Libya are difficult to obtain for staff of I/NGOs, UN agencies, and journalists. Once on the ground, the security situation complicates travel within the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions made visits to some detention centres nearly 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 the Libyan bureaucracy and gaining access to prisons.. 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 reach. The people 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 refugee 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!" (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 we 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)

Survivors recalled how frustrating it was to be unable to speak with visitors of the official detention centre. A young Eritrean refugee stated:

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 those 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 detainees used this phone to share photos, videos, protest and information with their friends, families, activists and journalists. 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 interviewees 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 (see Chapter 4: *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature*) were shared widely within the migrant and refugee community.

8.4.2 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 interviewees 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 the prisons. 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 to free particularly vulnerable detainees. 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 in Libya and published numerous reports denouncing the abuses perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya.

8.4.3 Distrust

Despite the support provided by I/NGOs and UN agencies, and even though some interviewees stated that the living conditions in detention centres in Libya were better when these organisations were present, 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 who have been incarcerated in Libya. The interviewees expressed their frustration over perceived unfairness, especially in relation to 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 father, 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 migrants and 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 migrants and refugees and I/NGOs and UN agencies. Many migrants and refugees do not speak Arabic, French or English. Some of them offer their services to translate for their compatriots, but the accuracy of such translations and 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 of 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)

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 humanitarian aid workers and migrants and refugees feeds feelings of distrust. In many cases, the migrants and 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 rights 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.

8.4.4 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, asylum seekers and refugees are placed in transit camps while waiting for their application to be processed.

Priority for resettlement is given to the ‘most vulnerable’; this usually means women, children or people who are ill. 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)

Among the asylum seekers and refugees, there is a feeling of broken promises. Statements like “The UNHCR is playing with our cases” were made by several interviewees. Many said that they waited for months in official detention centres with the hope of being resettled, but nothing happened. Many had moved towards Libya or entered official detention centres in the hope of being resettled. All of the interviewees feel that they have the right to be resettled, after what they have been through. But it would be impossible to give this opportunity to all the refugees in need⁶¹.

Confronted with competition to be registered and later eligible for resettlement, migrants and refugees are multiplying their tricks. An Eritrean refugee reported that a person who had died had his identity stolen, and someone else was registered in his name. He added :

⁶¹ 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).

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, fakely. (Interviewee 3003, private messages with Mirjam van Reisen, WhatsApp, 2019)

Another possibility to escape from 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 many this option is not possible as they fled war or as they would not be safe back in their country for a variety of reasons. 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)

Returning to Eritrea poses a great risk for refugees as they face prison and re-enlistment in the national service upon arrival in their home country⁶². Despite this, some rare Eritreans decide to accept 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

⁶² Since 2002, national service in Eritrea has been compulsory for anyone and is indefinite. Grave human rights abuses have been reported occurring as part of the national service (Palacios-Arapiles, 2023; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).

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)

With the small number of places available for resettlement and the great risks associated with returning for many survivors, the only option left for them 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.

8.5 Conclusion: Detention, commodification and exploitation of migrants

Migrants and refugees are arrested in Libya and detained in official detention centres because they don't have a visa and are illegally on the territory (General People's Congress, 2010) and they have no legal status because Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. They don't have a political belonging to enjoy the right to have rights. For Arendt (1951), the application of human rights depends on the willingness of nations to uphold these rights, and in this case Libya is not willing to uphold the human rights of migrants and refugees who are not citizens of this country.

Numerous human rights violations in official detention centres were reported by the interviewees. Some of them can be classified as violence as a tool of subjugation. This comprises the violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees as a way to degrade, humiliate and subjugate them, to impose discipline or to be able to exploit them later. This include overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, lack of food and water, lack of care in case of disease or childbirth, insults, beatings, tortures and punishment, sexual violence and shootings. Those violence really express how little consideration the guards have for the human lives of the prisoners. An interviewee shared suspicion that women were given tea that induced abortion. Even the dignity of a burial is not always granted to the detainees. This is violence that dehumanises and commodifies migrants and refugees.

Other human rights violations reported by the interviewees can be classified as exploitation. Those are the violence committed for the

purpose of a monetary profit. This includes stealing of belongings, extraction of ransoms, forced labour and abduction and selling of detainees as slaves or to smugglers and 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 arrests 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.

Official detention centres appear from this chapter as another hub in the human trafficking cycle. As in trafficking camps, detainees are locked in a black hole and their access to connectivity and even to the outside world is strictly controlled by the guards of the prison. Phones are stolen. Attempts to communicate or report on the human rights violations through hidden phones, demonstration or the share of information with journalists and NGOs who manage to obtain access to the prison are punished by severe beating and torture, including electric shocks.

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

NGOs and UN agencies have very limited 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 UN agencies by refugees and migrants.