

# Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses

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**Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in Libya are trapped in a vicious cycle of cruelty with little to no hope of finding safe and legal pathways out, Amnesty International said in a new report published today. After enduring unconscionable suffering in Libya, refugees and migrants risk their lives at sea seeking safety in Europe, only to be intercepted, transferred back to Libya and delivered to the same abuses they sought to escape. This comes a day after the European Commission announced its new 'Migration Pact', a major pillar of which is even stronger cooperation with countries outside the EU to control migration flows.**

Libya, a country torn apart by years of war, has become an even more hostile environment for refugees and migrants seeking a better life. Instead of being protected, they are met with a catalogue of appalling human rights abuses and now unfairly blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic on deeply racist and xenophobic grounds. Despite this, even in 2020 the EU and its member states continue to implement policies trapping tens of thousands of men, women and children in a vicious cycle of abuse, showing a callous disregard for people's lives and dignity,

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The report ['\*Between life and death': Refugees and migrants trapped in Libya's cycle of abuse\*](#) documents the harrowing accounts of refugees and migrants who have suffered or witnessed a litany of abuses in Libya including unlawful killings; enforced disappearances; torture and other ill-treatment; rape and other sexual violence; arbitrary detention; and forced labour and exploitation at the hands of state and non-state actors in a climate of near-total impunity. The report also details more recent developments, including the transfer of people disembarked in Libya to unofficial places of detention – such as Tripoli's notorious Tobacco Factory – and the summary deportation of thousands of refugees and migrants from Libya's eastern regions.

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"Given the Libyan authorities' consistent failure to address long-standing patterns of abuse against refugees and migrants, including by state officials and affiliated militias, the EU and its member

states must completely reconsider their co-operation with Libyan authorities, making any further support conditional on immediate action to stop horrific abuses against refugees and migrants. This would include ending arbitrary detention and closing immigration detention centres. Until then, anyone rescued or intercepted in the central Mediterranean should not be returned to Libya, but instead be allowed to disembark in a place of safety.”

Since 2016, European Union (EU) member states, led by Italy, have been collaborating with the Libyan authorities – providing speedboats, training and assistance in the co-ordination of operations at sea – to ensure people attempting to flee the country by boat are intercepted at sea and brought back to Libya. During this period, an estimated 60,000 men, women and children have been captured at sea and disembarked in Libya by the EU-supported Libyan Coast Guard (LCG), 8,435 of them between 1 January and 14 September 2020 alone. Driven by a desire to stop arrivals at all costs, EU states have offered their support to Libya – in an effort to circumvent international laws prohibiting pushbacks – without conditioning it upon strict human rights guarantees.

### **Brought back to Libya to face abuse**

Refugees and migrants intercepted at sea by the LCG are brought back to Libya, where they are subjected to enforced disappearances, indefinite and arbitrary detention, torture and extortion.

When disembarked in Libya in 2020, thousands of refugees and migrants have ended up detained in official Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) detention centres, under the authority of the ministry of interior of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), in control of western Libya. But thousands more have been subjected to enforced disappearance in 2020 after being transferred to unofficial places of detention, including the Tobacco Factory (a reference to its former function) under the command of a GNA-affiliated militia led by Emad al-Trabulsi in Tripoli, amid fears for their life and safety.

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On land, refugees and migrants also live under constant risk not only of being arrested and sent to detention centres, but also of being abducted by militias, armed groups and traffickers. Some are tortured or raped until their families pay ransoms to secure their release. Others die in custody as a result of violence, torture, starvation or medical neglect.

Dozens of refugees and migrants described to Amnesty International witnessing the death of their loved ones while detained at official DCIM centres or in other places of captivity run by traffickers.

On 27 May 2020, armed men opened fire on around 200 refugees and migrants held by traffickers near the town of Mazda, killing at least 30 and injuring 11. The others remain unaccounted for, feared dead or abducted.

Libyan authorities’ promises to investigate the Mazda killings and other crimes against refugees and migrants have not led to accountability. Two men under arrest warrant by the Libyan prosecution and placed on the UN sanctions list for their alleged role in human trafficking retain official ties to the GNA. Ahmad al-Dabbashi, also known as “al-Amou”, was seen fighting alongside GNA forces in

April 2020, while Abdelrahman Milad, also known as “Bidja”, works as an LCG commander at the al-Zawiya oil refinery.

### **Caught in the crossfire**

Militias and armed groups have committed violations of international humanitarian law against refugees and migrants including unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and apparently indiscriminate attacks. Amnesty International verified videos showing militias and armed groups parading and abusing refugees and migrants. They have also forced migrants to participate in military operations, endangering their lives and safety.

One refugee told Amnesty International that in May 2020 a militia affiliated with the GNA took him along with other refugees and migrants from a Tripoli DCIM detention centre, where they were all detained, and forced them for hours to transport ammunition between two positions in Tripoli. At that time, fighting was raging in Tripoli.

### **No way out but the deadly sea**

Given the horrific conditions and abuses, existing resettlement and evacuation programmes are insufficient for providing safe and legal pathways out of Libya for those in need, with only 5,709 vulnerable refugees benefiting from such programmes since 2017, as of 11 September 2020. This reflects the small number of resettlement pledges made by countries receiving refugees, including EU member states. Travel restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the situation, with only 297 refugees evacuated from Libya in 2020, before borders closed in March 2020.

A refugee told Amnesty International in August: “Right now refugees [are] going to cross the sea... [There is] no evacuation and no resettlement... Refugees in Libya are at risk. [We are] between life and death.”

This means that desperate refugees and migrants have few viable ways out of Libya other than risk crossing the Mediterranean on unseaworthy boats. Crossings, however, continue to be extremely dangerous, including because of interceptions by LCG and criminal groups. In one deadly incident in mid-August, survivors told Amnesty International that armed men on board a boat named “Captain al-Salam 181” robbed them and then fired at their boat, causing the engine to catch fire and the boat to capsize. An estimated 40 people died after being left in distress at sea.

### **Exploitation, squalid living conditions, violence**

Amnesty International’s research found that refugees and migrants are often exploited by employers and subjected to forced labour by militias and armed groups.

Many live in squalid conditions without access to clean water and washing facilities, increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19 with physical distancing and preventative hygienic measures impossible to follow. Despite this, refugees and migrants face barriers to accessing health care and have been largely excluded from official COVID-19 prevention efforts.

Refugees and migrants are also a constant target for robbery. Women and girls are at heightened risk of sexual violence. They refrain from approaching police or prosecutors, fearing detention or revenge by alleged perpetrators.

### **Racism and xenophobia**

Refugees and migrants also face rampant racism and xenophobia. Government officials, members of armed groups and militias, and media often use racist language to refer to Black people. The COVID-19 pandemic has further fuelled racism, with officials and private individuals publicly blaming refugees and migrants for the spread of the virus and calling for their expulsion.

Amnesty International's research revealed that de facto authorities in eastern Libya forcibly expelled over 5,000 refugees and migrants in 2020 without due process or the opportunity to challenge their deportation. The accusation that those arrested were "carriers of contagious diseases" was among the reasons cited for the deportations.

In a blatant incident of discrimination documented by Amnesty International, an armed group prevented a bus from entering the south-eastern city of Kufra, unless three Chadian nationals alighted. The armed men ordered them to take a COVID-19 test and left them in the desert outside the city. The other passengers, all Libyan nationals, were allowed to proceed without the need for COVID-19 testing or other checks.

## **Background**

The plight of refugees and migrants in Libya is taking place against the backdrop of ongoing armed conflict, insecurity and lawlessness. The struggle for governance and territorial control rages between the GNA, in control of most of western Libya, and the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army, in control of most of eastern Libya.

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