

The return of slavery in Libya

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Abstract

Today Libya is, alas, still a breeding ground for slavery. The migration crisis has multiplied opportunities for smugglers to reduce many migrants to the “status” of slaves. They are often kidnapped, physically abused by long working hours, but also sexually abused by traffickers of women and children. Unfortunately, this harsh reality has only gotten worse with the health crisis that the world has been experiencing for almost a year now.



Libya, a transit zone for migrants and traffickers

Slavery in Libya will never be a distant memory. Since 2011, with the collapse of the Libyan regime resulting from the death of its leader Muammar Gaddafi, the country has never ceased to sink into a pit of problems, with the migration crisis playing a role in this collapse. It is important to bear in mind that crossing the Mediterranean Sea in a makeshift boat is a dangerous and even deadly journey. Migrants risk everything in the hope of a better life. Some are fleeing civil war in a country controlled by different militias, others are fleeing religious persecution or even poverty. The journey is already perilous, but they are also the prey of armed groups and networks of smugglers. Indeed, a very high proportion of migrants are used as day labourers in the construction and agricultural sectors. They are beaten, sometimes to death, but also ransomed, raped, kidnapped, starved and enslaved. Slavery may have been legally abolished in a majority of countries, but for some populations it still remains a stabbing reality.

Libya is an important transit area for migrants and refugees hoping to reach Europe by sea. Human trafficking networks have thrived in anarchy, created by warring militias fighting for control of territories since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are between 700,000 and 1 million migrants in Libya. Africans from the Maghreb are subject to unlimited trafficking. It is racism, rooted in Libyan culture, that drives them to sell, buy and torture black people. In April 2017, IOM noted that human trafficking has become an increasingly common practice among smugglers. Migrants are bought and sold in garages and car parks in the southern Libyan city of Sabha. They are held there for around two to three months, and for an average price of 200 to 300 dollars (between 190 and 280 euros).

In November 2017, CNN journalists conducted a hidden camera investigation near Tripoli, the capital city. "Slave markets" that would take place once or twice a month were thus brought to light ; "markets" where human beings are sold like trinkets to the highest bidder who then uses them as "tools" in his or her farm(s) or factory(ies). This phenomenon has been normalized, and makes it possible to drastically reduce production costs and increase turnover, since there is no longer any need to deduct the wage cost.

It is therefore a real parallel economy that has been set up in a country where the economy is at its lowest. Migrants are the new "livelihood" for smugglers but also for individuals who have seen their business(es) destroyed due to the economic situation and are looking for a way to restart their business. While some migrants are sold to be forced into labour, others are used in sex trafficking and all for the benefit of those who have nurtured these people's desire to migrate to Europe by assuring them that they could help them cross the Mediterranean.

This year, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered more than 1,600 missing persons in Libya. However, according to the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) which aims to keep a record of every disappearance, there are approximately 10,000 people currently reported missing in Libya alone.

Finally, because of Covid-19, it is now impossible for ICRC analysts to bring large groups of people together to listen to the names of missing persons or look at photos. In addition, as many countries have suspended travel between States or provinces, it has become extremely difficult to undertake large-scale research.



Torture in Libya, testimonies

In May 2020, at least thirty migrants (twenty-six Bangladeshis and four Africans) were brutally murdered in Libya by the family of a smuggler and human traffickers.¹ Initial reports suggested that many of the wounded were in critical condition, some with signs of beatings and physical abuse. The Libyan Interior Ministry said he issued an arrest warrant for the alleged attackers. The IOM described the killing as “senseless” and called on the Libyan authorities to immediately open an investigation “to bring those responsible to justice”². However, the arrest warrant against the alleged perpetrators has not yielded any results to date.

Alpha Kaba, migrant and victim of these traffics, tells us about the abuses he suffered: “*We met the smuggler who asked us for the price, we talked with him, and on the other side there was a car waiting for us*”, he said³. Later, he was sold for 220 €, and taken away and locked up with dozens of other people. He was working in construction and agriculture, passed from hand to hand like a commodity and even had to bury the corpses of his brothers who died in the desert. He was also beaten when he did not obey or did not work fast enough.

Amina, an 18-year-old Somali woman, was trying to flee the civil war but was abducted and taken to a torture chamber in the Libyan desert. Amina's kidnappers then demanded US\$8,000 from her parents for her release. The young woman escaped a year and a half later while crossing the Mediterranean, but was arrested by the Libyan coast guard and was forced to live in a government-run detention centre. According to her testimony, living conditions were worse in the detention centre because access to food and water was very limited and people were dying due to diseases. She now hopes that a secure country will welcome her. In the meantime, she lives in a refugee camp run by the United Nations agency⁴.

There is a multitude of similar testimonies from migrants. Like Sami, an 18-year-old Eritrean, who saw his best friend die from electrocution in front of him, or Yonathan Tekle, also a 24-years-old Eritrean who stated, “*it doesn't matter if I die in the sea. It's better than the hell I saw in Libya and the hell that awaits me in Eritrea if I go back there*”⁵.

However, little is heard from the smugglers' point of view. *Deutsche Welle* (DW) interviewed Abdel Aziz who is a smuggler since 2015. He fully assumes the fact that he is selling migrants and is aware of the abuses committed against them. However, he seems to have a clear conscience and convinces that this is

¹ N.D. (2020). Libye : pour venger sa mort, la famille d'un passeur tue 30 migrants. *Le Parisien*. [online] 28 May. Available at: <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/libye-pour-venger-sa-mort-la-famille-d-un-passeur-tue-30-migrants-28-05-2020-8325816.php> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].

² OBERTI, C. (2020). Libye : 30 migrants tués par la famille d'un passeur. *Infomigrants.net*. [online] 29 May. Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/22527/l-accord-choquant-entre-l-italie-et-les-garde-cotes-libyens-renouvelé-pour-trois-ans> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].

³ ALPHA, K. (2019). *Esclave des milices*. Paris: Fayard.

⁴ DW. (2019). Human trafficking in Libya - dw.com. *YouTube*. [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/HKOoRgodZg4> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].

⁵ NAIB, F., 2020. Slavery In Libya: Life Inside A Container. *Aljazeera.com*. [online] Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/slavery-libya-life-container-180121084314393.html?fbclid=IwAR36PBxF-g8rWooVzLgPKX8MWvDCDuGwmOF-GxLx6XIm49um8z50NCxWvLo> [Accessed 1 August 2020].



in no way against the divine will. For him, this is just a transaction like any other to “make ends meet”; if migrants are unable to pay for their ticket to cross the desert, he says, they will have to pay with the only thing they have left, which is their body.

Reaction of the international community

In April 2017, IOM called for urgent action on the parallel trade in human beings that took place in Libya. The knowledge of these abuses immediately drew the attention of the international community and more particularly of the Security Council of the United Nations, unanimous on the fact of judging the Libyan situation as a violation of human rights which is unacceptable. The Security Council therefore launched a Global Plan of Action to finally put an end to this trafficking⁶. The council likewise urged the transitional and host States to carry out procedures for identification, early detection and assistance in order to, not only be able to protect and support individuals who enter migration routes, but also to reorganize the trafficking networks, or even, in the long term, to condemn the actors in these parallel networks. As António Guterres⁷ put it, “this crime has no place in the 21st century”.

However, it seems important to note that, even if the members of the Security Council all agree that atrocities are occurring in Libya, they have failed to integrate the key element which is to find out the root cause of these happenings. It was the Russian Federation that reminded us: the upsurge in violence in Libya is due to the collapse of the Gaddafi regime and is therefore, by extension, indirectly linked to the decisions and interference of Western powers. Indeed, many have already assumed that if the Western powers had not intervened in Libya, the regime would never have collapsed and the crimes committed today in the country certainly would not have developed there. This remains hypothetical, but it would still be naive to consider that the lawless zone in Libya now is not linked to the previous destruction of the regime by the Western powers, which has created a fertile ground for most violent crimes.

Libya's Government of National Accord, concerned with upholding national and international law, has launched an investigation into the trafficking and has pledged to prosecute its instigators. While these measures are not sufficient, the Security Council reiterated the need for the States of origin of migrants to manage upstream migration flows - and therefore to carry out structural work to drastically reduce these flows so that these migrants do not end up in networks of human trafficking. The President of the Security Council has made it a point of honor to encourage all States and all regional organizations (European Union, African Union) to “*consider, as a matter of priority, ratifying the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto, in particular the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air*

⁸”.

⁶ UN (2017). The Security Council is strengthening its machinery to combat trafficking in persons, “a crime that has no place in the twenty-first century”. *Un.org*. [online] 21 Nov. Available at : <https://www.un.org/press/fr/2017/cs13081.doc.htm> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].

⁷ Portuguese statesman, member of the Socialist Party, Secretary General of the United Nations since 1 January 2017.

⁸ UN (2000). United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto. *Un.org*. [online] 15 Nov. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/fr/treaties/CTOC/> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].



Three years have passed since the Security Council's declaration, migrants however continue to be sold, and little initiative on behalf of governments have been observed to help Libya manage this migratory crisis with dignity and to guide the authorities so that they succeed in restoring law to the region. Civil and European associations, such as SOS Méditerranée, Ocean Viking, and many other migrant protecting organizations already sent out signal alarms in 2015. Nevertheless, even their voices did not have much impact. Regional organizations and more particularly the European Union, which is the primary destination of migrants, are struggling to find solutions and find themselves confronted with the discord on the theme of migration within their national governments. This blockage is manifested in the politics of some countries of the European Union, such as Greece or Italy, who today act more like walls rather than hands reaching out to individuals who need help. It is of no doubt that Italy and Greece find it difficult to manage the flow of migrants and speak very harshly towards these nomadic populations. While graduated individuals are more likely to be granted asylum, this is not the case for less qualified immigrants. To stem the arrival of immigrants, these two European countries therefore made an agreement with the Libyan coast guards on Sunday, 2 February 2020, for a period of three years. This agreement, supported by the European Union, once again provides for financial assistance for Libya and the training of the Libyan coastguard in operations to rescue and return migrants to Libya. Unacceptable and "inhumane", as Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner, judged it, even as these governments are aware of the corruption that reigns in the country and the treatment of migrants⁹.

Thousands of testimonies have surfaced in three years. Unfortunately, the majority remain only deaf echoes within the European Union, torn between the rise of populist parties and a gradual lack of resources. Nevertheless, the European Union is not the only one who receives criticism. The countries of origin of asylum seekers are also under fire for not having clear and well-defined migration policies that could truly protect their nationals. They are carrying out very few concrete structural and economic reform policies to improve and boost the living and working conditions of their peoples. Sometimes, the desperate cries of these migrants are still heard. Rwanda was very responsive and offered to welcome 30,000 migrants in response to the indignation of the President of the African Union, Alpha Condé, a promising first step which we hope will be the first in a long time.

Conclusion

The massive escape of nationals from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe effectively caught many states by surprise, failing to measure the impact that these migrations would have on their domestic and foreign policies. However, miscalculated events should not be a pretext for approaching the situation with apathy or contempt - this as a consequence will leave desperate individuals in political and social hell. It is time to come up with real solutions in order to put an end to the ignominy of human trafficking, slavery and crimes against humanity, which might get worse due to the current coronavirus crisis. "Inaction

⁹ DIALLO, A. (2017) Libye : la souffrance des migrants détenus est un outrage à la conscience de l'humanité, selon le Haut-Commissaire Zeid. *Un.org*. [online] 14 Nov. Available at: <https://news.un.org/fr/audio/2017/11/1003931> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].



could lead to a sharp increase in the number of people enslaved by the novel coronavirus crisis,” said Mr Obokata, who began his term as an independent expert at the UN on the 1st of May¹⁰.

¹⁰ UN. (2020) Le Covid-19 risque d’aggraver le fléau de l’esclavage moderne, alerte un expert de l’ONU. *Un.org*. [online] 05 May. Available at: <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2020/05/1068112> [Accessed 01 Aug. 2020].



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For more information on the subject:

- Short film by Domitille Piron entitled Libya. After discovering a Reception and Orientation Center installed in a village near the Ardèche, since November 2016, he stages Ussein, Abdouraman, Fakri and Mustafa who are fleeing Sudan for another hell.
- In 2019, Alpha Kaba, who is a former journalist at a local radio station in Kankan, Guinea's second city, also a victim, wrote a book Slave of the Militias. He has been threatened with death since 2013 because one of his shows is considered too critical and has decided to flee.

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