



Libya's Migrant Crisis:

Legal, Human Rights, and Societal Challenges

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Reviewing: Research Unit - Defender Center for Human Rights

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Sep 2024

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Overview of the Libyan Migration Crisis.....	4
Improving The Legal Position of Migrants in Libya.....	5
The Current Situation.....	5
Necessary Actions.....	7
Detention Living Conditions and Suggestions for Improvements.....	8
The Current Situation.....	8
Recommended Changes.....	9
Conclusion.....	12
References.....	13

Introduction

The waves of conflict witnessed outside and inside Libya have produced repetitive fluxes of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) over the years (Mneina, 2022). IDPs make up the larger majority of those seeking humanitarian aid in the country.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are at least 160,000 IDPs and over 40,000 asylum seekers in Libya (Mneina, 2022). Libya is a key transit country for those seeking to enter Europe from Africa and other adjacent continents and countries (MMC, 2019). Its strategic position makes it a potential destination for migrants arrested and detained by the country's Coast Guard.

The high numbers of refugees create significant pressure on the available resources, including the camps where migrants are kept by the local and central authorities in Libya. This creation of 'safe' detention camps following an agreement between the Libyan government and the European Union (EU) seems to have worsened the plight of refugees and immigrants in the country (Ananthavinayagan, 2019). Migrants and asylum seekers in Libya have repeatedly been subjected to severe rights violations due to the existing legal gaps and the ongoing political instability in the country. This has paved the way for poor health and wellbeing as well as illegal activities in the detention camps. This article aims to analyse the refugee crisis in Libya with a view to recommending alternative approaches to addressing the problem. The article focuses on the legal position of migrants and the detention living conditions to provide alternative solutions to the challenges. The article also examines the human rights issues of the migrants and societal factors that impacted on the solutions of this crisis.

Overview of the Libyan Migration Crisis

Once a destination for those seeking employment and economic growth from Africa during the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has become a transit zone for those seeking asylum in Europe and other countries (Kuschminder, 2020). The Libyan civil war, since the 17 February 2011 uprising, led to the onset of the refugee crisis in the country.

The livelihoods of more than 650,000 migrants remaining in Libya have been uncertain in the subsequent waves of violence and hostility. Refugees in Libya are at higher risks of undergoing “violent extortion, overcrowding, sexual abuse, forced labour, torture and deprivation of food, sunlight and water” (Kuschminder, 2020). During the time of Gaddafi’s autocratic rule, the Libyan regime used the migrants coming to Libya, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, as a political bargaining tool with Western European countries. After the 17 February revolution which led to Gaddafi’s demise, the situation of migrants through Libya and refugees worsened due to political instability in the country, continuous infighting between different factions in the country and the exploitation of migrants by criminal gangs (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck, 2019).

The migrants struggled to obtain refugee status and many of them ended in large detention camps in major cities (Phillips, 2020). Libya continues to experience political and legal uncertainties since the end of the civil war. Lack of political unity in the country implies lack of a formal legal framework protecting the rights of its refugees. Even though institutions like the EU have set up operations to help control the situation, the continuous power struggles across different factions leave Libyan refugees in significant legal uncertainty. Efforts by the EU have continuously faced resistance and opposition from internal security agencies and are criticised for a perceived complicit alliance with Libyan regimes (Cox, 2021). Libyan refugee camps are rife with lawlessness and lack of a well-defined legal framework protecting these vulnerable people (Cox, 2021). The controversies surrounding the Libyan detention centres also partly originate from the EU’s financial and technical involvement (Cox, 2021).

A study by Ndabateze (2023) posits that the EU’s migrant policy is a recipe for the persistent abuse of migrants in Libya and other countries where such

policies have jurisdiction. In collaboration with the Government of National Accord (GNA) set up in Libya post the civil war era, the EU has continuously funded efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration- (DCIM)-led detention centres and the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) since 2016 (Cox, 2021). The international community's response to the Libyan migrant crisis has, therefore, not made much progress in solving the crisis. According to Jackson (2023), migration externalisation in the EU emerges as another key issue leading to the deteriorating plight of refugees in the country. The politicisation of international immigration laws and policies continuously empower the home countries to take full control of immigrant problems. This view, according to Cox (2021), leaves Libya particularly vulnerable, given its geographic proximity as a transit route. Furthermore, Mneina (2022) states that the extent of political instability and the emergence of militias and cartels continuously degrade the state of migrants in the Libyan detention camps.

Improving The Legal Position of Migrants in Libya

The Current Situation

Libya is a signatory of the Organization of African Unity's 1969 Convention governing refugees' problems in Africa (Iqbal, 1973). However, the country lacks a comprehensive legal framework to regulate migration and the right to seek asylum. The Constitutional Declaration of 2011 does not recognize the right to asylum and the country has not ratified the Refugee Convention of 1951 nor the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 2011).

While Libyan authorities do not formally recognize the UNHCR, they allow the agency to carry out registration, documentation, Refugee Status Determination, and the identification of durable solutions (Wilson et al., 2022). Libyan laws in place to govern migration are seen as insufficient for the protection of refugees and migrants (Amnesty International, 2012) and do not meet international standards (Bitar and Chakka, 2023). For example, Article 17 of Law No. 6 of 1987 on organising the entry, residence, and exit of foreigners in Libya provides that non-citizens who have overstayed their residence permit and who have illegally entered the country must be deported and/or given a fine and/or imprisoned for up to three years. This Law was amended by Law No. 2 of 2004

which in turn increased the requirements to obtain a Libya entry visa and the sentence for smuggling crimes.

European pressure on the Libyan government over time has led to the implementation of new laws such as Law No. 19 of 2010 on Combating Illegal Immigration (Library of Congress, 2023). Yet, many articles within this new law and its current implementation do not align with international standards related to migrants and refugees. For example, Article 6 of Law No. 19 of 2010 indicates that unauthorized immigrants must be detained and deported after serving their sentence (Library of Congress, 2023). This fails to comply with the provisions of Article 16(4) of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) (UN G.A. Res. 45/158, 1990), to which Libya is a signatory. This Convention prohibits subjecting migrants to arbitrary arrest or detention. Article 17 of the same Law provides that any lawful deportation must be based on a judicial order, or a substantiated decision issued by the General Directorate of Passports and Nationality (Library of Congress, 2023).

However, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented that Libyan authorities have arrested and deported thousands of migrants between 2019 and 2020, in operations lacking meaningful due process and procedural safeguards (OHCHR, 2021). Law No. 19 of 2010 also proscribes asymmetrical entry into stay or exit from Libya with a severe punishment of imprisonment without considering the circumstances of individuals and their protection needs or concerns. It was also reported that survivors of trafficking and refugees are among those subjected to compulsory and unspecified arbitrary detention (Wilson et al., 2022).

These legislation gaps imply that Libya does not have a well-established legal framework recognising the legal status of its migrants. Additionally, there is a general lack of the recognition of refugee status by the country's authorities. These gaps pose significant obstacles to the protection of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Global Protection Cluster, 2022). As Alalem and Abumais (2021) state, the absence of a national asylum law in Libya means all migrants are considered illegal and are liable to arrest, detention and abuse.

Necessary Actions

The situation in Libya calls for immediate action to bring about essential reforms and adopt more appropriate administrative and legislative mechanisms to grant regular migration status to migrants in Libya. The reform of national law should consider international principles within the 1951 Refugee Convention and its protocol. In addition, the international community, especially the EU, should provide technical assistance to the Libyan government to help establish legal and policy frameworks to counter human trafficking and the abuse of migrants (IOM, 2022).

According to the Danish Institute for International Studies (2017), strengthening a framework for legal migration would help protect the legal status of all asylum seekers and migrants in Libya. Finally, Libyan authorities should ensure that expulsions only proceed based on an individual assessment of the full range of circumstances that may prohibit expulsion, in accordance with the principle of non-refoulement and the prohibition of collective expulsions (OHCHR, 2021). These recommended steps suffer the mishap of lack of a legitimate and recognised government in Libya. The GNA continuously faces criticism locally and internationally for lack of control over the country's challenges (Winer, 2019). This significantly hampers its capacity to enforce the necessary legal measures to protect refugees and asylum seekers. Thus, there are some even more immediate steps to improving the life of migrants in Libya, explored in the next section.

Detention Living Conditions and Suggestions for Improvements

The Current Situation

Migrants in Libya face many challenges. They are repeatedly subjected to arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and extortion by armed groups and smugglers (IOM, 2019). Hundreds of migrants remain missing since the end of the 2019 civil war in Tripoli when a self-proclaimed general from the East of the country attacked the capital (Harchaoui and Lazib, 2019). Furthermore, thousands remain displaced in Libya due to damaged properties, presence of landmines, or fear of persecution. Recently, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that over 60 migrants are believed to have drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Libya in December 2023. Migrants in Libya are often compelled to accept 'voluntary return' in conditions that may not meet international human rights laws and standards, found a new OHCHR report. This 2022 report concluded that the situation of migrants in Libya leaves no room for a free choice for these migrants because "migrants are frequently compelled to accept assisted return to escape abusive detention conditions, threats of torture, ill-treatment, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, extortion, and other human rights violations and abuses" (OHCHR, 2022). The assisted returns, in essence, are never voluntary or out of free consent (OHCHR, 2022). Instead, migrants are left with no choice but to comply with the conditions provided by the authorities. Migrants and refugees in detention centres in Libya lack legal rights such as communication with lawyers, relatives or UN agencies (Bitar and Chakka, 2023).

The brutal treatment of this population and the poor conditions they live in have been widely condemned and reported. When they are captured by the country's coastguard and returned to Libyan disembarkation zones, migrants and refugees are placed in immigration detention facilities with poor and inhumane conditions (Bitar and Chakka, 2023). Various studies and reports indicate issues such as: frequent water and food shortages, overcrowding, lack of healthcare, forced labour and slavery, and sexual and gender-based violence (Wirtz and Van Reisen, 2023; Bitar and Chakka, 2023; Beşer and Elfeitori, 2018; EuroMed Rights, 2023). According to an initial assessment by the office of the Prosecutor

of the International Criminal Court, the mistreatment of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers detained in Libya “may constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes” (Global Detention Project, 2023). Some of the country’s detention centres are ran by the Libyan DCIM of the Ministry of Interior, which receives financial and logistical support from Italy and the EU (EuroMed Rights, 2023). According to the latest data provided by the IOM, at least 2,857 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were being detained in eight detention centres in Libya (IOM, 2023).

The real figure is, however, likely to be far higher because many centres are still under the control of militias and unreachable by independent observers. Global Detention Project (2023) estimated that the actual numbers could be anywhere between 10,000 to 20,000 detainees. Several international organisations have provided overwhelming evidence about how torture is widely and systematically practised in detention centres in Libya. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has confirmed treatment of detained migrants for fractures and other injuries resulting from beatings (MSF, 2021).

Additionally, more than half of the people interviewed by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in 2023, mentioned that several deaths between migrants happened because of torture and poor conditions of detention (HRC, 2023). They also reported that many of them lost sight and hearing after getting beaten on their heads and ears (HRC, 2023).

Recommended Changes

One solution to the Libyan refugee crisis is implementing community-based alternatives such as supervised release programs. This solution could provide migrants with better living conditions and give them access to education opportunities and other services such as health and jobs opportunities.

The UNHCR's Alternatives to Detention (ATD) program in other countries has successfully reduced reliance on detention, promoting the well-being and integration of migrants. One example is The United Kingdom's ATD program, implemented by the UNHCR in collaboration with the British government, which has successfully reduced reliance on detention for asylum seekers (Field and

Edwards, 2006). Instead of detaining individuals while their asylum claims are processed, the program offers community-based alternatives. Participants are provided with accommodation and support, promoting their well-being and integration into society (UNHCR, 2018). The community-based release programs should be managed by multi-stakeholder teams comprising national and international agencies with a view to protecting the human rights of the migrants and asylum seekers. The other solution which could help the migrants in Libya, as well as the local communities, is to improve the infrastructure of the urban centres in the country. A remaining challenge with regards to Libya is that it has an issue of IDPs as well.

The latest information from the UNHCR states that Libya hosts more than 40,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2023). Additionally, there are approximately 130,000 IDPs and 600,000 returnees (UNHCR, 2023). However, Loewenberg (2011) believes that establishing more camps and settlements would not help improve the situation in Libya. Further, improving the current settlement infrastructure would not fully address the challenge. Lack of a well-defined legal framework therefore seems to be, perhaps the, key issue in Libya.

Improving the current infrastructure and state of the refugee camps would only temporarily improve the welfare and plight of the migrants and asylum seekers, subject to the wider legal challenges facing them. Another solution to the problem is the offer of training to detention staff to ensure humane treatment, cultural sensitivity, and respect for human rights.

The IOM (2017) reports a recent training event in which officials from five detention centres - Abu Sleem, Triq Al Sekka, Triq Al Matar, Ghariyan and Al Khums - were trained in best practice to protect human rights and dignity within the camps. There is also evidence from The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) that such training could improve living conditions of migrants. ICMPD has conducted training programs for Libyan officials to enhance their capacity to manage migration and address humanitarian challenges. However, these programs are not frequent or widespread (ICMPD, 2020). Finally, there is a need to consider replacing the detention centres with alternative housing programmes. According to the UNHCR (2017), open reception centres would be a more appropriate alternative to the current refugee

camps and detention centres. Such open reception centres would “allow refugees and asylum seekers freedom of movement, giving priority to the most vulnerable among them” (UNHCR, 2017). According to MSF (2022), open reception centres should be established and delivered through multi-stakeholder agreements with a view to protecting the rights and welfare of refugees and asylum seekers.

A potential limitation of this recommendation is, again, the lack of a well-established legal framework upon which to pursue it. However, collaborations between national and international authorities would help set up such alternative housing programs to curb the human rights violation challenges in the current detention camps. The recommended changes therefore require anchoring in a robust legal framework. A report by Marsi (2021) shows that the risks and threats to migrants’ health, safety, and well-being mostly originate from the absence of well-defined regulatory frameworks. The situation in detention camps indicates a degree of lawlessness in relation to the management of migration issues. As such, the realisation of the recommended changes would only be possible under a new set of policies, laws and rules set out by the Libyan authorities and the international community. The EU and other bodies should pay attention to criticism and consider alternative ways of regulating illegal migration. To ensure the effectiveness of open reception centres, Libyan authorities must move swiftly to regulate safe passages and recognise the legal rights of migrants. Strict measures against violators should be implemented to ensure migrants’ rights are protected and preserved by law.

Conclusion

An examination of the complex and challenging reality of Libyan migrants reveals that the historical context, political dynamics, and legal framework all contribute to the difficult migrant situation and arguably, the latter failing underpins all of the other challenges faced everyday by Libyan migrants. The historical narrative of Libya, marked by diverse migration routes and the amalgamation of communities, emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the issue. However, the autocratic rule of Gaddafi and the subsequent political turmoil have worsened the challenges faced by migrants, with detention camps becoming a focal point of human rights violations.

An analysis of Libya's current legal framework on immigration reveals glaring gaps warranting urgent solutions. Despite being signatory to the OAU's Convention, Libya lacks a robust legal structure governing migration and asylum. The existing laws fall short of international standards, leading to arbitrary detention, deportation, and the absence of due process. This suggests the urgent need to improve the legal status and rights of migrants and asylum seekers. The extent of human rights abuse in the detention camps calls for major changes, with community-based programs and improved infrastructure both meriting consideration. Incorporating these and other recommended measures would help address the migrant crisis in Libya. The success of these changes lies with the Government's commitment and active multi-stakeholder engagements. Such measures would help establish a solid legal background upon which the suggested changes would be built and regulated.

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