



East Africa, take heed as European governments feed the business of suffering in Libya

How migrants and refugees are living in Libya should shock the collective conscience of Europe's citizens and elected leaders while at the same time, Africa should take note.

Blinded by the single-minded goal of keeping people outside of Europe, European funding is helping to stop the boats from departing Libyan waters, but this policy is also feeding a criminal system of abuse. East Africa is a point of origin and transit region for refugees and migrants, and hosts millions fleeing conflict and other drivers in the continent. European Union policies are a prime example of what to avoid at all costs when changing immigration policies and implementing frameworks to properly control borders and humanely manage migration.

For millennia migration has been a normal part of our shared human condition which is why Doctors Without Borders (MSF) stand in solidarity with migrants and refugees through the medical care and support we provide to people in distress – be it on boats in the Mediterranean Sea or on land in Europe or Africa.

Detention of migrants and refugees in Libya is rotten to the core. It must be named for what it is: a thriving enterprise of kidnapping, torture and extortion. And European governments have chosen to contain people in this situation. People cannot be sent back to Libya, nor should they be contained there.

MSF has assisted people in Libyan detention centres in Tripoli for over a year, and we have witnessed first-hand the scheme of arbitrary detention, extortion, physical abuse and deprivation of basic services that men, women and children suffer in these centres.

I visited a number of official detention centres last week and we know that these official detention centres are just the tip of the iceberg.

People are simply treated as a commodity to be exploited. They are packed into dark, filthy rooms with no ventilation, living on top of one another. Men told us how groups of them are forced to run naked in the courtyard until they collapse from exhaustion. Women raped and then made to call their families back home asking for money to be freed. All the people I met had tears in their eyes, asking again and again, to get out. The despair is overwhelming.

The reduced numbers of people leaving Libyan shores has been lauded by some in Europe as a success in preventing loss of life at sea, and smashing smugglers' networks.

But with the knowledge of what is happening in Libya, lauding this as a success demonstrates, at best, pure hypocrisy and at worst, a cynical complicity in the organised business of reducing human beings to merchandise in human traffickers' hands.

The people trapped in these well-documented, nightmarish conditions in Libya need a way out. They need access to protection, asylum and increased voluntary repatriation procedures. They need an escape to safety via safe and legal passage, but to date, only a tiny fraction of people have been able to access this.

This horrific violence against them must stop; there needs to be a basic respect for their human rights including access to sufficient food, water and medical care. Despite declarations by governments that improvements need to be made to peoples' immediate conditions, this is far from happening today.

Instead of confronting the vicious cycle that their own policies are creating, European politicians have hidden behind unfounded accusations towards NGOs and individuals who attempt to help people in dire straits. During our search and rescue operations at sea, MSF has been shot at by the European-funded Libyan coast

guard and repeatedly accused of collusion with traffickers. But who is colluding with criminals here? Those seeking to rescue people, or those enabling people to be treated like a commodity, to be packed and sold?

Libya is just the most recent and extreme example of European migration policies which go back several years, where a primary objective is to push people out of sight. The EU-Turkey deal which in 2016 effectively outsourced asylum, what we have seen in Greece, in France, in the Balkans and beyond, are a growing trend of border closures and pushbacks.

What this does, is close options for people who seek safe and legal ways of reaching Europe and pushes them further and further into the smugglers' networks which European leaders insist they want to dismantle. Safe and legal avenues for people to cross borders are the only way to eliminate the perverse incentives that allow for smugglers and traffickers to thrive whilst at the same time fulfilling border control objectives.

African governments should remain vigilant, and take heed of Europe's cynical actions and the impact of the regressive policies that erode humanity. As point of origin for many migrants and refugees, leaders in Eastern Africa have an opportunity to manage migration differently, to avoid human suffering caused by containment strategies. Stifling freedom of movement and keeping people in refugee camps without access to local integration or dignified living conditions and livelihoods causes refugees to move onwards amongst others via Libya, to Europe or alternatively to South Africa; a journey that that imperils the health and lives of migrants and refugees.

We cannot say that we did not know that this was happening in Libya. The predation on misery and the horrific suffering of those trapped must end now. In their efforts to stem the flow, is allowing people to be pushed into rape, torture and slavery via criminal pay offs a price European governments are willing to pay?

By improving its immigration policies with their stated mandate to harmonize migration management and allow free and safe movement of persons the East Africa Community can work hard to be the positive example to lead the way for proper, humane migration management, instead of the European approach which causes so much unnecessary suffering.

Rather than wait out their lives, many feel they have no choice but to risk physical, psychological and sexual violence, arbitrary detention and deportations in Libya and a dangerous sea crossing in the hope of eventually reaching safety and freedom in Europe. For more in-depth analysis refer to [*Dying to Reach Europe: Insight into the desperate journeys Eritreans make to reach safety.*](#)

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Sincerely,
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International President
Médecins Sans Frontières

