LIBYA: Conflict in Tripoli puts lives in danger, demonstrating that Libya is not a place of safety

TRIPOLI/Amsterdam – 31 August 2018 – Over the past 72 hours following clashes in Tripoli, the lives of Libyans and an already vulnerable group of refugees and migrants have been put in grave danger, according to the medical humanitarian organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF). MSF reiterates that Libya is not a safe country, and that European governments must acknowledge their responsibility to help the most vulnerable people trapped in Libya.

On Sunday, 26 August, conflict erupted between rival armed groups in Tripoli. Heavy shelling in residential areas has led to an unspecified number of casualties. The fighting has further jeopardised the lives of an estimated 8,000 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who have been trapped and arbitrarily held in closed detention centres throughout the city. After fighting began on Sunday, some of these people were trapped for more than 48 hours in an area affected by heavy shelling without any access to food. Others who were released had no choice but to flee to nearby neighbourhoods where they were at risk of being caught in the crossfire.

“The recent fighting demonstrates that Libya is not a safe place for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers,” said Ibrahim Younis, MSF’s head of mission in Libya. “Many have fled from war-torn countries or have spent months in horrible conditions, while being held by human traffickers before they were put in these closed detention centres. These people are already extremely vulnerable, and now they find themselves trapped in yet another conflict without the ability to escape. They should not be held captive simply because they were looking for safety or a better life. They should be immediately released and evacuated to a country where they will be safe.”

Since the fighting broke out, the humanitarian needs in and outside the detention centres have grown from already alarming levels. MSF teams are conducting the first medical consultations since the fighting began and are providing food, water and nutritional supplements to some of the people still in detention centres. However, MSF and other humanitarian actors have limited access to other people in need of assistance. Libyan communities in and around Tripoli have also been affected by the fighting and have inadequate access to healthcare.

According to UNHCR, nearly half of all people held in detention centres are refugees from conflict regions, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. While these people are entitled to protection under international law, the Libyan authorities, governments of safe countries and the UN have failed to establish an effective mechanism for processing asylum claims. European countries have even established polices that prevent asylum seekers from leaving Libya.

These same polices prevent people from crossing the Mediterranean by having the European-sponsored Libyan coastguard return people rescued at sea to Libyan shores. The vast majority of people currently in the detention centres have been intercepted at sea and returned to Libya. Such polices have exacerbated the already poor and overcrowded living conditions in Tripoli’s detention centres. The situation has deteriorated over the past few months as limited access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare has led to increased physical and mental health consequences.

Present since 2011 in the country, MSF has been working in the Tripoli detention centres since 2016, providing primary healthcare, mental health support, and water and sanitation services. MSF is also the only organisation providing emergency referrals to hospitals for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers inside the detention centres. MSF also works in detention centers in Khoms, Zliten and Misrata and provides medical consultations in Bani Walid.

MSF calls on European governments to acknowledge that Libya is not a place of safety. More must be done to help people trapped within its borders to find a safe and dignified way out.

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