

Slavery in Libya: The Migration Crisis Reaches New Heights

by [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#)

Ben Fishman is a Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

The international outcry over a videotaped slave auction underscores the urgency of addressing the country's broken political system.

Since being broadcast on November 11, a CNN report on slave auctions in Libya has prompted international outrage. African artists and sports figures in Europe have protested during performances and matches, and demonstrations have erupted outside Libyan embassies in Brussels, London, Paris, and elsewhere. On November 21, UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres stated that he was "horrified" by the undercover footage, calling on "all competent authorities to investigate these activities without delay and bring the perpetrators to justice." Meanwhile, France called for an emergency UN Security Council session; when that meeting was held on November 28, officials highlighted the need for sanctions and other aggressive measures against human traffickers as well as better cooperation with Libyan authorities. The issue also overshadowed the annual African Union-European Union summit on November 29-30, where French president Emmanuel Macron proposed repatriating migrants and suggested deploying European security forces to address the crisis. For its part, the Libyan government promised to investigate the slavery reports but appealed for more international assistance to deal with the migration challenge.

Alongside the outrage, the crisis has exposed tensions in the EU's goals for Libya. On the one hand, Europeans support the UN-led peace process to restart the country's political transition, and they agree that a stable Libya is in their own best interests. On the other hand, Italy, France, and other countries often seek to limit the flow of migrants by keeping them in Libya, which tends to worsen their situation and foster criminal enterprises such as underground slave markets. Short-term efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis will likely proceed, but without a stable government and a process for incorporating militias into the legitimate business of protecting the state, slavery and abuse of migrants will continue.

FORCED LABOR AND THE MIGRATION CRISIS

This April, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began sounding alarms about forced labor in Libya after conducting interviews with escaped migrants. Escapees in Libya and Niger told very similar stories: they were sold by smugglers whom they had paid to transport them to the coast or kidnapped by traffickers along the route. Many were extorted for additional money to earn their freedom; others were recaptured after escaping or being freed by different groups. While detained, they often faced abuse, malnutrition, and sexual assault. The CNN story was the most high-profile exposure of such criminality. Posing as a migrant looking for a relative, the Somali-origin journalist and her producer secretly recorded and confirmed a human-trafficking auction.

The scope of the problem is difficult to quantify, but an estimated 20,000 migrants currently reside in state-affiliated detention centers in Libya, including individuals who failed in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea or were captured before they could set sail. Some estimates suggest that several hundred thousand more migrants have evaded detention and are still seeking ways out of the country. After his staff visited several of the Libyan centers in November, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad Al Hussein stated, "Many of those in detention have already been exposed to trafficking, kidnappings, torture, rape and other sexual violence, forced labor, exploitation, severe physical violence, starvation and other atrocities in the course of their journeys through Libya, often at the hands of traffickers or smugglers." He called the condition of migrants in detention "an outrage to the conscience of humanity."

ROOT CAUSES

The growth of human trafficking in Libya and the general abuse of African migrants seem to stem from two main factors. First, many traffickers exploit migrants' desperation to reach Europe, often trapping them in Libya, extorting more money from their families, and selling them as slaves or into the sex trade if they do not receive payment. These traffickers enjoy free rein in Libya, exploiting the country's lawlessness in the same manner that the Islamic State did in 2015-2016 when it took control of Sirte. Smugglers and gangs overlap with the militia landscape, making it extremely difficult to curtail the activities of one group without impacting the overall profit stream.

For example, after one militia was paid to limit migrants in Sabratha, a key departure point to Europe, it was attacked by a rival militia angry about the resultant decline in its own trafficking revenue. The ensuing violence forced some 13,000 migrants into the already overcrowded detention system in September alone. That surge corresponded with a marked drop in monthly arrivals in Italy, from a high of 23,500 in July to a low of 4,000 in August. Overall migration patterns on the Central Mediterranean route are down by nearly a third in 2017, compared to around 160,000 as of November 1, 2016.

Second, the main push factors that compel migrants to risk these treacherous journeys -- namely, poverty and lack of opportunities in their home countries -- have not been adequately addressed. In 2015, the EU established an emergency trust fund of 3.2 billion euros to facilitate migration management at the point of origin in Africa. To date, 1.9 billion euros in economic development and migration-focused programming have been approved, but judging from the poverty and extremely low capacity that continue to prevail inside the target countries, the EU-led initiative needs to be greatly expanded. Otherwise, efforts to curb migration will either fail or cause spikes in humanitarian abuses inside countries like Libya.

At the AU-EU summit, France and Germany joined several African countries in agreeing to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of African migrants who had chosen Libya as their launchpad to Europe. IOM will implement the project with EU funding, and African embassies working in Libya will identify their citizens and arrange their departures with Libyan authorities -- a complicated logistical task. Initially, one camp comprising 3,800 migrants will be repatriated while the relevant authorities work to establish additional targets.

As for Macron's suggestion that military action might be necessary to combat traffickers, he has not yet provided

details. Currently, around 4,000 French troops are engaged in counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. Paris also supports the joint initiative by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (known as the G5) to strengthen border security efforts in the region. Macron may seek to extend these efforts in order to target smuggling in Libya's southern desert. Yet a French military presence on Libya's coast would be more difficult to implement politically and logistically, and would likely complicate the peace efforts of UN special representative Ghassan Salame.

ADDRESSING THE CRISIS

The revelation of slave markets in Libya underscores the urgency of Salame's plan to get the political transition back on track and stabilize an agreed unity government. So far, he has reported progress on amending the Libyan Political Agreement and is actively negotiating its terms between the House of Representatives and the High State Council, but internal divisions within each rival faction have widened in the process

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-un-action-plan-for-libya-prospects-and-challenges>). Equally important is the military dialogue between armed groups, which should address joint steps against gangs and human traffickers. A solution must be found for those militia actors who participate in such trafficking -- whether a general amnesty in exchange for clear disarmament and demobilization, or criminal prosecution.

Although the migrant crisis is not as urgent for the United States, Washington should still play the important role of ensuring that European efforts on migration complement rather than contradict Salame's political efforts. This entails close U.S.-French dialogue on the scope of Macron's military ideas. The United States already supports French military efforts in the region with transportation, refueling, and intelligence assistance, and this support could be broadened to enable French efforts against human trafficking and terrorism in Libya's vast south. If Paris seeks to extend operations to the coast, Washington would need to ensure that the mission complements U.S. and UN interests. Moreover, while the EU should fund the majority of IOM repatriation work as Libya moves to shut down migrant detention centers, the United States can provide more emergency funding to the organization for that purpose, as it did with a \$1 million contribution in 2016.

Finally, Washington should press Libyan authorities to be as responsive as possible in addressing the migration crisis. This includes helping other African countries repatriate their citizens as much as possible rather than putting up unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. During Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj's first visit to Washington on November 30-December 1, the administration avoided the slavery controversy in readouts of his meeting with President Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, likely to keep the focus on supporting him, the General National Congress, and the UN process. Hopefully, concerns about migration and slavery were addressed privately. The recent revelations have put a stain on Libya's reputation, and all those who aspire to lead the country should address the matter quickly in order to concentrate on other pressing internal problems.

Ben Fishman, an associate fellow of The Washington Institute, served as director for North Africa on the National Security Council staff from 2011 to 2013. ❖

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