

# Ethnic violence and mass deportations of immigrants in Libya

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Beginning in September, African immigrants living in Libya have been routinely set upon and killed by gangs of Libyan youths, with no action taken by the security forces to prevent the attacks. Immigrants, including thousands of Nigerians and Ghanaians and many from Chad, Niger, the Gambia and Sudan have since been forcibly removed from Libya as part of an organised repatriation in the wake of the widespread violence. Some of the deportees said they had suffered beatings, while others said they had been robbed or had their homes burned down.

The clashes began after Libya's top legislative and executive body ordered a crackdown on the employment of foreigners—many of whom have no official papers—and had made arrangements for their forcible deportation. Prior to the violence, many of those labelled as “illegal immigrants” had spent weeks in various detention centres.

A Ghanaian minister, Daniel Ohene Agyekum, said on October 8 that his government was speeding up the evacuation of about 5,000 of its citizens who had been living in unhygienic conditions in camps outside the capital, Tripoli. About 3,000 Sudanese workers have also been flown out of Libya. Sudan's *As-Sahafi Ad-Dawli* newspaper quoted returnees saying many Sudanese were killed or displaced in attacks in the towns of Zawiya and Zahrah, to the west of Tripoli.

Nigeria and Libya concluded an agreement to repatriate thousands of Nigerians and within days forcible repatriations began, with 700 being airlifted in two days in a Libyan airliner. Doyin Okupe, special assistant on media and publicity to Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, said thousands of Nigerians living in Libya had become a “burden” on their host country by engaging in various kinds of “anti-social activities”. “The bulk of these Nigerians fall within the category of those that left in search of better opportunities abroad and ended up in Libya,” Okupe said.

Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gadhafi has attempted to distance himself from the ethnic attacks. He blamed the violence on enemies of African unity determined to scuttle his project to create “the Union of African States”, citing

“hidden hands,” presumably from the West. But interviews with those fleeing the ethnic attacks say that they were carried out by gangs of youths with the complicity if not direct involvement of state forces. Certainly the atmosphere of hostility to black Africans was whipped up by the Libyan regime's plans to deport “illegal” immigrants.

One example of this official support came from the *chargé d'affaires* at the Libyan Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria. He is reported in the Nigerian *Post Express* saying that the expulsions were “good riddance to bad rubbish”. He said more immigrants residing in Libya illegally would be “fished out”, alleging that the Nigerians had been responsible for the rising crime wave. He claimed that, “some of them who can't get a job, get involved in drug peddling, prostitution and armed robbery, which our society does not like.” He said the Libyan Ambassador to Nigeria, Mohammed Sherif, had been summoned to Tripoli for briefing, adding that only Nigerians with legal documents would be allowed to stay in the country.

Reports of the figures for those killed range from 50 to 500. The Libyan authorities claim to have counted only 33 bodies in the morgue, but eyewitnesses said they believed that hundreds had been killed.

Although very little has been reported in the heavily censored Libyan press, reports in the Nigerian and Ghanaian media give some indication of the wide scale of the violence. A typical report is given in the Nigerian *Post Express*. Victor Ilori from Lagos State, one of the Nigerians forced to flee, said that not all were illegal immigrants. “Our problem however, started with the attack early last month by the Asma Boys [a gang of Libyan youth] who invaded Gregarage, a suburb of Tripoli occupied mainly by foreigners, including Nigerians.” The attack then spread to Zawai, Zamzu, Abuzhin and other suburbs.

The *Post Express* reports returnees explaining: “It was so fierce. It was so horrible, it was so terrifying that even the Nigerian Ambassador himself could not withstand the situation.” One immigrant said, “Some others were unable to come out in the cross fire. They died. But mine was only

injuries sustained from machete cuts,” he added.

Other reports of Nigerian returnees, including young women, said that many Nigerians had been killed, especially as Libyans launched attacks on black Africans following a minor dispute during a football match.

Those returning to Nigeria were outraged by the collaboration of Nigeria in the deportations. “Even in Nigeria, our own fatherland, we are being treated like outcasts,” one said. They had received none of the compensation they had been promised for their property that had been destroyed in Libya.

The Ghana Foreign Ministry said in a statement that about 1,500 Ghanaians fled their homes as a result of the clashes. Ministry officials said that the numbers ejected from their houses during the riots and evacuated to security camps had been swollen by those who fled to the camp for fear of attacks. This, they added, had complicated plans to resettle them, warning of a risk of epidemics.

15 Ghanaians were driven out of their homes in El-Zawia, about 45km from Tripoli, along with about 300 Nigerians and Chadians. The victims suffered wounds and burns, leaving some in a critical condition. The Libyan security forces are reported to have sent several of the victims, including children and pregnant women, to detention camps. Ghanaian newspapers said they had proof that one Ghanaian was found dead on the streets of Zenata, Sherigia and Dirbi almost everyday. A pregnant woman, interviewed by the *Chronicle* newspaper upon arrival in Ghana, said that Ghanaians could not walk freely on the streets of Libya or sit in public transport without being attacked and brutalized by Libyan security agents. “When you are in a taxi going to the market, they will bring you down and beat you for several hours before leaving you to continue your journey.”

The mistreatment of immigrants reveals the real state of social relations in Libya. Gadhafi has at times declared his regime to be “socialist”, but an affluent elite rules Libya. Despite the country's oil wealth, the just over 5 million-strong Libyan population has received little of its benefits. According to the *Economist* magazine, a teacher is paid a mere \$1,200 a year and health care provision in the country is so bad that those who can afford to travel to Tunisia for treatment.

For decades immigrant workers, particularly black Africans, have been employed as labourers or in the most menial jobs, and are treated as second-class citizens. Now that there are signs of an increasing crisis in the Libyan economy, immigrants are being used as scapegoats and forced to leave.

Whilst Western governments denounced Gadhafi for supporting various nationalist movements in the 1970s and 80s, the limited room for manoeuvre that he enjoyed during

the Cold War period is now clearly at an end. In his latest speeches he has announced the “death of Western imperialism”, calling for a new era of “collaboration”, and used his influence to buy off the hostage-taking guerrillas in the Philippines. “When African leaders come asking for arms, I fund hospitals,” he said in a recent speech. In fact there is evidence that Gadhafi is supplying arms to a number of African regimes, including Charles Taylor in Liberia. He is now attempting to put himself forward as the local facilitator for the Western powers in both Africa and the Middle East. A stream of Western diplomats and government ministers, mainly from countries in the European Union, have been visiting him and attempting to make business deals, particularly involving projects to repair the country's collapsing infrastructure.

Gadhafi's plans have included ambitious schemes for both Arab and African unity, advancing himself as the leader of various areas of economic cooperation in the Maghreb or the Middle East. None of these plans have ever got beyond the stage of expensive diplomatic junkets. In recent years his attention has turned towards Africa, and his Pan-African speeches were taken at face value by the thousands of desperately poor Africans who flocked to work in Libya.

On September 1, Gadhafi declared to nine assembled African heads of state that he would proclaim a “new USA”, the “United States of Africa”, at a summit to be held in Libya next year. However, the hollowness of Gadhafi's Pan-Africanist pretensions was rapidly reinforced by the brutal ethnic attacks and deportations that followed his declaration.

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