

Amnesty International report exposes EU role in mass torture of refugees in Libya

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In order to keep masses of refugees from reaching Europe, the European Union (EU) is helping build, fund and equip a vast network of prison camps in which refugees are arbitrarily detained, beaten, tortured, sexually assaulted, sold into slavery and murdered. This is the conclusion of a harrowing Amnesty International (AI) report published yesterday, titled “Libya's Dark Web of Collusion.”

The horrific abuses detailed in the AI report are already well known. Protests erupted in North Africa, France and worldwide last month, after CNN broadcast videos of human traffickers selling refugees into slavery in Libya. However, AI's extensively documented report, based on government documents and dozens of interviews with refugees, underscores not only the vast scope of this barbaric prison system, but the key role of EU technical and financial support.

Moreover, while the AI report says very little about NATO's 2011 war in Libya, it makes clear that the origins of this prison system lie in the wave of imperialist wars across the Middle East and Africa and the ensuing global refugee crisis. The people-smugglers that operate prison camps in Libya are mostly militias that NATO backed against Gaddafi during the war, and that took power after NATO destroyed the Gaddafi regime.

This is a devastating indictment of the pundits, academics and pseudo left parties like France's New Anti-capitalist Party or the International Socialist Organization in the United States that hailed the war in Libya as a humanitarian intervention to aid a democratic revolution. While they claimed that imperialist war would bring democracy and freedom to Libya, it brought slavery, rape and murder.

According to International Organization on Migration (IOM) statistics cited by AI, at least 416,556 refugees

were trapped in Libya in September 2017. Of these, over 60 percent are from sub-Saharan Africa, 32 percent are from North Africa, and 7 percent from Asia and the Middle East. The EU is working with militias and criminal gangs to keep them in Libya.

The strategy was codified in the February 2017 Malta Declaration, in which the EU endorsed and vowed to support Italian cooperation with Libyan authorities against refugees. This involved funding, training and arming border guards and the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) to block refugee departures, and “upgrading and financing” so-called “reception centres” where refugees captured by the LCG are detained. Also, AI notes, the EU has “struck deals with Libyan local authorities and the leaders of tribes and armed groups—to encourage them to stop the smuggling of people.”

As a result, AI notes, refugee departures from Libya are collapsing: “In the first semester of 2017 a total of 83,754 people had reached Italy by sea, a significant increase over the same period in 2016, when 70,222 arrivals were recorded. However, the trend then changed dramatically: between July and November 2017 a total of 33,288 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy, 67 percent fewer than in the same period of 2016, when 102,786 arrived.”

With EU assistance, tens of thousands of refugees are being thrown into prison camps where they are subjected to beatings, torture and murder. Currently, AI writes, “about 20,000 refugees and migrants are detained in centres normally managed by the General Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM),” an EU-funded branch of the Libyan Interior Ministry. As Libya does not have a functioning judicial system since Gaddafi's overthrow, AI adds, refugees are “deprived of any formal administrative or judicial

means of challenging their detention.”

AI cites testimony from many refugees who escaped to Italy from camps in Libya. Mariam from Eritrea said the guards “were hard; they were drunk all the time. Then one day there were four Somalis who tried to escape. The Eritrean smugglers told us they killed them, three of them; the fourth [was] in the hospital.

“Then they beat the rest of the Somalis. [They were] getting tortured; you could hear the screaming. They used electricity and beat them with Kalashnikov [rifles].”

Samir from Sudan described how he escaped from the DCIM's Nasser detention center, but his friends did not and were sold into debt bondage: “The electricity was out and there was no water, so they took us outside to gather water. Me and two other friends—we ran; they shot after us but we were fast. ... The other three were bailed out by the Sudanese man and they have to work to pay off 4,500 Libyan dinars to the factory owner.”

Ousman from Gambia described a DCIM detention center in Tripoli: “I saw many people dying in prison, either because they fell sick or were beaten ... Guards were Libyan—they used to beat everybody, without a reason. Before entering the prison, police search you and take away all money, phone, everything.” He added, “I saw one boy in the prison—they gave him a phone to call

his family, and they beat him with a metal stick while [he was] on the phone, on arms and everywhere...after five months I escaped with other people, but the guards started shooting and many were killed. I don't now how many were killed, but I saw some falling and screaming.”

Mohamed, a Bangladeshi steelworker living in Libya, said: “A group of Libyans came in the shop one day and said they had work for us. Three of us went with them. There were three of them. We got in the car with them. They told me to put my head down, and not look; they became aggressive. They took us to a place, next to a factory. When they took us inside, there were about 500 people, it was one big place filled with people. ... They beat me with a metal rod; it broke my fingers [he showed deformed fingers on his right hand]. I have problems with my right leg also and my shoulder because of the beating. One guy was beaten to death in front of my eyes. I stayed there for 20 days. I then paid 2,000 US dollars to get out; my friends managed to

collect the money.”

The NATO war in Libya and the country's ensuing collapse into a bloody civil war are searing lessons in the reactionary role of imperialism. The EU's foreign policy has emerged from the Libyan war completely criminalized, using the most barbaric methods to deny refugees' right to asylum. The EU is complicit in the torture of refugees not only in that it provides support to DCIM to operate its semi-official prison camps in Libya; EU naval aid to train and arm the LCG, as well as deals cut with various regional or local militias that control prison facilities, also play a key role.

AI explains, “The LCG's increased capacity, due to support from EU member states, has led to an increasing number of such pull-back operations. So far in 2017, 19,452 people have been intercepted by LCG and taken back to Libya. When the LCG intercept boats at sea, they bring refugees and migrants back to Libyan shores and routinely transfer them to DCIM detention centres.”

AI singled out a particular deal between Italy, the former colonial power, and influential warlord Khalifa Haftar: “Italian government representatives also discussed measures to reduce irregular migratory movements with Khalifa Haftar, the head of the self-styled Libyan National Army, which controls the east of the country. Haftar visited Italy on 26 September 2017 to meet with the Italian Ministers of Interior and Defence.”



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