Libyan militias shoot 15 dead after mass escape from migrant torture camp

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Libyan militias killed at least 15 African migrants and wounded 25 others as dozens attempted to escape a migrant torture camp on May 23, according to the aid organisation Doctors Without Borders. The bloody massacre, one of the few to be made public, occurred in Bani Walid in the hinterland of Tripoli and Misrata. Smuggling gangs, Islamist militias and the Libyan Coast Guard collaborate in the region to profit from the lucrative refugee business.

On the evening in question, 100 people sought to flee from the internment camp. Most of them were teenagers from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, including many women. In their efforts to reach Europe, they ended up being transported to the Bani Walid camp, which is one of the so-called private camps to which neither the United Nations nor other aid organisations have access.

Following the attempted escape, 25 injured people managed to reach the Bani Walid hospital, where they met a team of medical personnel from Doctors Without Borders. The migrants told them about the 15 refugees who had been shot to death, as well as up to 40 more they had to leave behind injured. They also reported that some of them had been imprisoned for up to three years and that they had been sold on numerous occasions and then brought back to the camp. Their bodies revealed horrific wounds, including burns caused by electric shocks, and infections.

The smuggler militias sought to recapture the refugees with armed force but pulled back from an open attack on the hospital, with the oldest members of the community and the security forces standing in front of the refugees to protect them.

Doctors treated seven refugees, who had suffered gunshot wounds and broken bones, in the inpatient ward. The rest were brought by Libyan police to Tripoli, where they were once again imprisoned the next day. Doctors Without Borders subsequently issued an appeal for access to the refugees on its website stating: “Arbitrary detention is no solution. They urgently require protection and aid.”

In Libya, the business of kidnapping and ransom payments is booming. There are dozens of camps in which refugees from Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria and other countries are confined, tortured, sold or murdered. Around 700,000 immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are currently in Libya, and many of them face a similar fate.

Even those who make it to the Mediterranean coast and into a boat with the hope of reaching Europe are far from being out of danger. On behalf of the European Union, the Libyan Coast Guard hunts them down at sea in order to keep them from reaching European shores.

The Libyan Coast Guard is being financed, trained and armed by the EU, Germany and Italy, according to a January 2018 report by *Monitor*. The measures taken by the European governments to keep immigrants fleeing violence in Africa and the Middle East out of Europe thus contributes directly to increasing the misery of refugees in Libya.

Germany, Italy, the EU and the UN jointly finance and cooperate closely with the unity government of Fayed al-Sarraj in Tripoli. In consultation with the EU, Sarraj has expanded Libyan territorial waters, which has resulted in the Coast Guard capturing many more refugees. At the same time, the EU is cracking down brutally against sea rescue services in the Mediterranean. The conflict is once again intensifying, with the warmer weather encouraging more people to risk crossing the Mediterranean.

The European countries are acting in contempt of international law. They pay the Libyan Coast Guard to

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forcibly return migrants to Libya, where the Coast Guard then transfers these unfortunate people, including many children, to official and illegal operators of torture camps.

Christophe Biteau, Doctors Without Borders' country coordinator for Libya, explained in a statement on the organisation's website that in practice the distinction between official and illegal refugee camps is entirely unclear. "In principle, anything can happen. Somebody brought back to Libya from the sea can very rapidly fall into the clutches of people smugglers, and the torture begins all over again."

"Whoever survives the illegal prisons is financially, physically, and psychologically destroyed," Biteau noted.

A report published by German broadcaster N-TV six months ago revealed that people were being sold at slave markets and made to perform forced labour.

Even Germany's Foreign Ministry describes the Libyan camps as "concentration camp-like institutions," making a direct comparison with the Nazis' horrific extermination camps.

A 2017 report produced by German diplomats, which only came to light recently when the Foreign Ministry was forced to publish it in redacted form described "concentration camp-like conditions" in Libya's refugee camps. The website FragDenStaat (AskTheState) had repeatedly demanded the release of the report, citing freedom of information laws, and was finally able to publish it in early May.

The report states: "The eyewitness reports of returned refugees paint a horrifying picture of the worst kinds of systematic human rights abuses in Libya. Authentic mobile phone photos and videos provided evidence of the concentration camp-like conditions in the private camps."

The report was based on "the eyewitness testimony of a migrant who returned voluntarily to [Niger]." The International Organization for Migrants maintains a reception centre in Agadez for returning refugees.

"The migrants showed the authors pictures of severely abused people," the Foreign Ministry report stated, and they reported that regular rapes of both sexes were carried out. "The authors were also shown the signs of torture on their bodies." According to the report, there are daily instances of "executions of migrants unable to pay, torture, rape, blackmail, as well as disposal in the desert."

"Anyone who cannot pay or obtain money from their family within a set period of time is shot," the report continued. "Eyewitnesses spoke of exactly five executions per week in the prison–which were announced and took place every Friday to make room for new arrivals."

Thousands of Libyans are also being held in such camps. On April 10, the UN reported on a camp where government and state-aligned militias detain thousands of people permanently and in violation of the law, where torture and abuse are practiced. "Men, women, and children throughout Libya are illegally detained or robbed of their freedom in violation of the law due to their tribal or family ties, or suspected political association," the UN Human Rights Office noted.

Despite such horrors, the European governments, led by Germany, have no desire or intention to change their policies. On the contrary, they are preparing to deport African refugees in large numbers to North Africa. Just last week, Germany's CDU-SPD grand coalition government agreed to designate Libya's neighbouring states, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, as safe countries of origin, paving the way for more such horrors.

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