France illegally arming Libyan coastguards to stop refugees from Africa

Anthony Torres, Alex Lantier
1 June 2019

While hundreds of thousands of refugees are attempting to escape Libya to Europe, the Macron government in France is providing the Libyan coastguard with six ships to catch refugees sailing to Europe and return them to Libya, where they are imprisoned in concentration camps. The policy, which has been condemned by multiple human rights organizations because of the prevalence of torture, rape, slavery and murder in the camps, is both barbaric and illegal.

At a February security conference in Munich, Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly informed Faïez el-Sarraj, the President of the Government of National Unity based in Tripoli, that France had purchased six boats for Libya. The purpose was to stop the flow of migrants attempting to journey across the Mediterranean. According to the press, the ships, built by the company Sillinger, which equips the French special forces, include dedicated supports for the Libyan regime to mount machine guns.

On May 10, the Paris Administrative Court rejected the request of eight human rights organizations—including Amnesty International, Doctors without Borders, Cimade, and Migreurop—to suspend the boats' delivery. They had pointed to European and UN embargoes against the sale of arms to Libya, and the "foreseeable consequences of the delivery of the six boats for the human rights of migrants and refugees intercepted and returned to Libyan soil."

In the French-language press, a deafening silence reigns over the atrocious conditions in which refugees are being held in Libyan camps built with the financial support of the European powers. By 2017, human rights organizations and CNN had reported torture, sexual abuse and murder in the detention centers (See: " Amnesty International report exposes EU role in mass torture of refugees in Libya ").

Last November, *La Croix* interviewed Vincent Cochetel, special envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, on the conditions for refugees detained in Libya.

When asked whether the practicing of slavery in Libya reported in 2017 was disappearing, Cochetel replied: "On the contrary, these practices have increased in number. As it is more difficult to leave Libyan soil, traffickers need to monetize their investment by exploiting even more detainees who are sold or lent by the day. In addition, detention situations have deteriorated."

He added, "We don't know much about detention centers controlled by traffickers and militia. But … since the beginning of the year, 14,595 people have been intercepted at sea by the Libyan coastguard and repatriated to Libyan soil. Some of them were finally able to return home with the help of the International Organization for Migration. But it is clear that a large proportion of them have been sold to traffickers to be used for labour on farms or construction sites, or even, for women, for sexual exploitation."

Cochetel's testimony underscores that the denunciations of human trafficking by European countries are entirely cynical, because the concentration camps they have built are an essential component of the financial strategy of these networks. According to Cochetel, Libyan law specifies that any irregular foreigner must "pay a fine or hard labour. This legal framework promotes human trafficking and the detention system is part of its business model."

Libya is currently experiencing a resurgence of civil war between the militias that NATO powers supported during the imperialist war waged in 2011 to destroy the

© World Socialist Web Site

Gaddafi regime. The growth in military conflict, against the backdrop of a struggle for influence between Paris, Rome and other regional powers in the strategic and oil-rich country, only intensifies the suffering of refugees.

Marshal Khalifa Haftar, in conflict with the puppet government in Tripoli, launched an offensive in early April to conquer the capital. According to UN agencies, at least 278 people were killed, 1,332 injured and 35,000 displaced. The International Committee of the Red Cross stated: “The humanitarian situation in and around Tripoli has deteriorated severely in the past three weeks.”

Michael Neuman of MSF, an NGO that still has staff on the ground in Libya, testified to *La Croix*: “Libyan coastguards are menacing when they intercept migrants at sea, and systematically send them to detention centres. France is complicit in these practices.”

Nevertheless, despite unequivocal evidence, the Paris Administrative Court approved the transfer of the six French ships to Libya to force the refugees to remain in that country: “The decision to make such a free transfer of equipment intended for the Libyan armed forces is not detachable from the conduct of France’s external relations.” The court therefore declared itself incompetent to issue a judgment preventing the transfer of the vessels to the Libyan coastguard.

In other words, French foreign policy is not “detachable” from the torture, rape and murder of thousands of refugees, and a calculated disregard for their basic democratic rights. French policy follows the strategy of Rome, which has also concluded agreements with militia, particularly in Sabratha, to prevent boats from departing for Europe.

This also underlines the fraudulent nature of the official propaganda calling upon workers and youth to vote for pro-EU parties, supposedly to block the rise of neo-fascist organizations. In fact, the imperialist war in Libya has paved the way for the criminalisation of European foreign policy, in line with the xenophobia openly incited by the extreme-right.

This is an unforgettable lesson in the nature of the imperialist war in Libya—as well as the charlatanry of the pro-imperialist petty-bourgeois “left” who applauded NATO’s bombing of Libya as a “humanitarian” operation to liberate the country from Gaddafi.

Postmodernist essayist Bernard Henri-Lévy and the leaders of Olivier Besancenot’s New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) insisted that the country should be bombed, and that rebel Islamist or tribal militias must be armed in order to overthrow the regime. In 2011 Professor Gilbert Achcar of the NPA said that French imperialism should be called upon to protect Libya: “We are in a situation where the population is really in danger and there is no other alternative to protect them.”

These representatives of the wealthy middle classes, whose careers depend on their presence in the official media or on the state funding of their university research, have all adopted the view that imperialism could liberate Libya through a democratic revolution. It was a pack of lies. Now their “democratic revolution” has restored slavery and the most atrocious abuses, partly financed and facilitated by European money and military equipment.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site