

International Trade Union Confederation

ITUC OnLine

Libya's Humanitarian Crisis: Solidarity First

1 April 2011: According to IOM and UNHCR figures, before the Libyan popular uprising against the dictatorship of Colonel Gadaffi broke out on 17 February, there were 3.5 million migrant workers, including about 1 million Egyptians, in Libya. Today there are still over 1 million, many from sub-Saharan Africa.

Taking a resolutely versatile diplomatic approach to migration policy, the Libyan government has repeatedly opened its arms to Arab migrant workers in the name of Pan-Arabism and then to sub-Saharan migrants in the name of Pan-Africanism. Later, pandering to Europe's security policies, the Libyan government imposed visa obligations on Arab and sub-Saharan migrants, forcing thousands of undocumented migrants into an illegal existence.

Suddenly exposed to conflict, brought on by Colonel Gadaffi's refusal to listen to his people's wishes, the undocumented migrants found themselves trapped, with many embassies failing to give them any real support. Thousands of workers from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, or China found themselves completely abandoned for weeks before their repatriation was finally organised. The last Vietnamese workers have only just left Libya this week. Despite the insistence by the countries of origin that they should come home, nearly 2,000 Filipino nurses and a hundred professors would still prefer to risk violence in Libya than find themselves out of work in the Philippines. Their choice speaks volumes about the economic woes of their countries of origin, driving migrants to brave all risks.

Today entire families of sub-Saharan migrants have gone to ground in their homes for fear of being caught up in the fighting or being targeted because of their skin colour, mistaken for the African mercenaries recruited by Gadaffi. According to Human Rights Watch, dozens of sub-Saharan African have been arrested in the last few days in the rebel-controlled zones.

Every day hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants arrive at the Tunisian border where they find themselves in camps in which thousands of their compatriots, mainly Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians, are already crowded.

Others fled south across the desert in inhuman conditions, victims of racketeering, before ending up in Agadez, the crossroads of the routes linking the Maghreb to Western Africa, 1,000 km south of the Libyan border. Back in Niger, which is where they either come from or are going through on their way to other West African countries, they find themselves unwelcome, because of the country's desperate economic state.

Some 20,000 Algerians and Moroccans have been evacuated by boat thanks to cooperation between the Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian authorities. But there are still about 180,000 Algerian and Moroccan migrants in Libya. Since mid January about 20,000 migrants, mainly Tunisians but also Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians, have taken to the sea to reach the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, just 113 km off the African coast. Over 6,000 of them are cooped up there, with deplorable and degrading sanitary conditions.

Berlusconi's government agreed a compensation package of 5 billion dollars with Colonel Gadaffi in 2010 in exchange for Libya reinforcing the control of its coast line and a policy of turning back the "illegal immigrants", many of whom were in reality refugees fleeing the Libyan dictatorship.

Leaving Italy to deal with the problem alone on a purely bilateral and security focused basis without any procedures to protect fundamental human rights, the European Union continues to prove itself incapable of responding to this crisis, which in the last few weeks has turned

into a humanitarian emergency. Only yesterday another 12 undocumented migrants died at sea, outside the Tunisian port of Sfax.

“The international community has to tackle this historic crisis in a coordinated manner and respect international law. There must be an end to the confusion between ‘illegal’ immigration and the fundamental human right to political asylum as foreseen by article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” appealed Sharan Burrow.

“Europe is on the geographical front line. It must urgently develop a coordinated, solidarity based policy to this crisis. It is high time to leave behind the purely security focused approach, which simply embeds xenophobia and the violations of migrant workers’ fundamental rights,” stated the ITUC General Secretary.

Global policies in support of democratic transition and economic development in Tunisia and Egypt go hand in hand with coherent and humane migration policies, the international trade union believes. “The international community must seize this historic opportunity to help these two countries that have bravely rid themselves of their dictatorial regimes. Building real democracy conducive to economic development and social justice is the only way to give a future to a young generation for whom immigration was just a means of escaping the lack of freedom and future prospects,” continued Sharan Burrow.

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The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates.