



Detention centres and trafficking camps in Libya ¹

Research overview:

Refugees in Libya face a lack of rights, and are subject to systemic racism and dehumanization. In addition, they are reliant on the services of human smugglers for transport, which often evolves into situations of human trafficking. Detention and kidnapping of refugees has become commonplace, with most refugees finding themselves captive in detention centres controlled by authorities and armed groups, or in the extortion warehouses of human traffickers, often multiple times throughout their journey. This policy brief covers research which extensively revealed the circumstances and dynamics in locations of refugee detention.

DCIM detention centres

The Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) was founded in 2012 as a Libyan institution mandated with managing migration. Numerous official DCIM detention centres exist throughout the country, with detainees primarily consisting of refugees captured at sea or arrested within the country due to their illegal status. In practice however, these centres are often run by armed groups connected to human traffickers.

The conditions in most centers have been described as inhumane. Refugees are often held indefinitely. Within an environment of dehumanization, abuse is widespread. Reported abuses include: the lack of food and water; overcrowding; sanitary issues; starvation; widespread disease with little medication; killings; systemic beatings and sexual abuse; torture; forced labour, and enslavement. Refugee lives are often not of large value in the eyes of guards.

Guards hold power over detainees by confiscating any means of communication with the outside world, leaving them trapped in a digital blackhole, unable to access help, information, or justice. UN organizations and NGOs have limited access and oversight of the centres.

Summary

Detention of refugees in Libya is commonplace. Those intercepted at sea or arrested inside the country are often held indefinitely in detention centres. Conditions are extremely dire, with detainees treated as commodities, used for forced labour, sold to human traffickers, or compelled to buy their freedom. Human trafficking for ransom has further emerged as a standard practise, with refugees kidnapped into trafficking camps, facing daily torture whilst calling relatives demanding large ransom payments, subjected to extreme abuses.

¹ The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Wirtz, M. (2025). The Warehouses: At the Heart of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya, and Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle. In: Wirtz, M. "They don't think we are humans" The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 263-325.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396743869_Routes_Hubs_and_Prisons_Mapping_Migration_in_Libya Additional external sources are listed below.

Most detention centres have evolved from a government responsibility into a means of making money, with refugees as their commodities. Detainees are often sold to human traffickers, used as free labour, or compelled to purchase themselves to freedom for an average of USD 110–435, with reported cases of larger ransom payments in the thousands of dollars.

Trafficking camps

A new modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom has increasingly spread across Libya. It has become commonplace for refugees to get kidnapped, sold or hustled by their ‘connection man’, and transferred to human trafficking camps; overcrowded warehouses holding between 100 and several thousand captives. In hotspot Bani Walid alone there are reports of at least 17 different camps.

Each day captives are forced to call relatives while being tortured, with traffickers demanding large ransom payments. Refugees are often extorted again or sold to another trafficker after payment. These payments have increased over time, with refugees paying thousands to tens of thousands of dollars.

Abuses are more extreme than in DCIM detention centres, with survivors reported to look like skeletons with large eyes, bearing severe trauma. Various forms of violence are used including beatings, electric shocks, burning with hot plastic and sexual violence to speed up the payment of ransoms, whilst refugees remain trapped in a digital blackhole, unable to access help, information, or justice.

Relatives are commonly forced to sell possessions and property, paired with begging for money to make the payments. The daily phone calls often leave them with second degree trauma and impoverished, with reported cases of homelessness.

Traffickers running these camps are connected to a global criminal network, where armed groups and authorities are often complicit in practices on their territory, profiting from this extortion industry. In this system migrants have become trapped in a human cycle of trafficking, often sold and kidnapped multiple times, limited to no options for return, viewing sea crossings as their only means of escape, despite being fully aware of the risks.

Key research findings:

- Normalized detention: Libya not signing the UN Refugee Convention, expanded security policies, political instability, and systemic racism, has resulted in refugees holding no legal rights, whilst relying more on traffickers. This resulted in widespread detention for exploitation, with most refugees being detained one or multiple times in their journey.
- Abuse: Various forms of abuse are used to subjugate and exploit refugees in official detention centres and human trafficking camps, including: widespread torture and rape, killings, starvation, and forced labour. In trafficking camps conditions are most inhumane, With refugees routinely tortured and forced to call relatives to demand large ransoms.
- Operational network: Refugees have been seen as a commodity, maximally squeezed and traded in a network of authorities, armed groups, and human traffickers, who facilitate a broader global criminal trafficking network across Libya and beyond.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

Promote safe migration pathways: Work towards creating safe and legal migration pathways for individuals fleeing conflict or persecution. This can help reduce the reliance on traffickers and decrease the number of people vulnerable to exploitation.

Expand resources to fight and persecute human trafficking: Expand the investigation of the responsibility of government officials, halt the refoulement of victims of trafficking for ransom, work on the identification of victims of human trafficking for ransom and support the provision of (mental) healthcare to victims.

Stop supporting the return of refugees to Libya: Stop supporting Libyan authorities to stop migration and to return refugees to Libya. Ensure that refugees rescued in international or European waters are not returned to Libya in line with Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other international conventions; expand search and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea.

Increase resettlement capacities: The limited resettlement capacities have led to refugees and migrants, to re-enter the cycle of detention having little to none resettlement prospects.

Recommendations for NGOs:

Support survivors: Provide support for victims that have been exploited and abused, including legal, psychological, and medical support.

Advocate for policy change: Engage in advocacy efforts to influence policymakers to decriminalize irregular migration, and focus on top-level traffickers and other perpetrators.

Document and share survivor stories: Document the abuses perpetrated against refugees and migrants, and collect stories of the experiences of survivors to raise awareness and inform policy discussions. Sharing these stories can help humanize the issue and highlight the urgent need for action.

References

What happens in the torture camps in Libya? [Video] Nieuwsuur.

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