

IN DEPTH

## Libya: disappearing on the way to Europe

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Tens of thousands of migrants continue to cross Libya in a desperate attempt to reach Europe. We know little or nothing about the circumstances in which these people disappear along the way, either dying from the harsh conditions of the trip or, if they are imprisoned by criminal groups, because everyone –even their family– loses track of their whereabouts.

It all starts with a five-day trip across the desert on the back of a truck loaded with everything from furniture to goats. They are told to tie themselves on with ropes, because the driver won't stop if someone falls off. Along the route, they can see the sun-scorched corpses of those who fell off on previous crossings. The first people to disappear on the Libyan route to Europe do so even before entering the country. No one knows their names, nor are there any statistics. Who could gather those figures in the vastness of the Sahel? But it is said that more migrants die there than in the Mediterranean.

Once on Libyan soil, the survivors will have barely recovered from that first shock when they find themselves in another nightmare. Sabha, in the south of the country, is an unavoidable first stop, a place in the middle of the desert where the mafias hunt down sub-Saharan Africans.

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## **No names, no statistics. Who could gather those figures in the vastness of the Sahel? ”**

Each street in the southern capital has its own “ghetto”, which is what they call the places where migrants are imprisoned and beaten until someone, usually their family, pays the ransom the mafias demand for their release. The money, if it eventually arrives, does so through *hawala* (which means “transfer” in Arabic banking jargon). This is a system that leaves no trace, in which a person in one place receives the amount on deposit and a person in another part of the world pays it out. When this has been done, the family of the kidnapped person receives a code that they have to send by SMS to the kidnapper. The detainee will be released... until the next time, until they fall into the hands of another mafia.

Dozens of stories collected by this journalist, both inside Libya and on the humanitarian rescue ships, confirm this account. The names of the victims and how long they have to wait before being released vary, but the size of the ransom seems to be more or less fixed: between US\$500 and US\$700. Sometimes the family will be too poor to pay or perhaps the person kidnapped simply has no one to turn to. In that case, the victim will be sold to a gang boss to work as a slave in cleaning or construction. If their health is so bad that nobody is willing to pay for them, their captors will kill them right there.

Only the lack of contact over a period of time will put their family or their travelling companions on the alert over their disappearance. In a country with no effective institutions, nobody will be held responsible for their absence or carry out an investigation.

This vulnerability reaches its highest level when it comes to women. While there are a lot less of them –about one in ten of the people on the rescued migrant boats are women– testimonies collected by numerous journalists and NGOs indicate that sexual abuse is rife. Not for nothing do most women ask to be tested for AIDS/HIV as soon as they step onto the deck of a rescue ship, as this journalist has witnessed. Those who stay in Libya will look for a job as a domestic worker or a cleaner in the main hotels of

cities like Tripoli or Misrata. In the worst case, they will disappear into the prostitution networks.

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### **The coast**

The International Organisation for Migration calculates the number of migrants in Libya at between 700,000 and a million. However, like everything else in Libya, these are rough estimates rather than verifiable figures. It is impossible to calculate the number of people who disappear into the hands of the mafias or of the armed militia groups that claim to be the armed forces of the two rival governments. Most of these militias operate on the coast, where 90 percent of Libyans live and where migrants have to start from scratch over and over again until they can put together the money needed to get onto one of the precarious boats headed for Europe. You only have to go somewhere like the bridge in the Gargaresh neighbourhood of Tripoli to find a multitude of individuals, most of them Sub-Saharan, waiting to get onto the back of a pick-up truck for occasional construction or cleaning jobs. On a good day they can earn up to 20 Libyan dinars –about five Euros; on a bad one, they will end up being captured by a mafia. And back to square one. Mahmud, a 26-year-old Nigerien, said he was building a wall in Tajoura –east of Tripoli– when he was kidnapped.

“They made me call my family on a mobile phone they handed me and I had to tell them that they would kill me if they didn’t pay US\$700. While I was talking to my aunt, they beat me nonstop, I suppose so they could see that I’d be beaten to death if the money didn’t arrive”, the Nigerien remembered. After two months of beatings and threats, the ransom ended up arriving through the *hawala*.

The victims of these abuses are rarely able to provide details that let us know where they were imprisoned. Normally it is impossible to clarify whether it was one of the

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official detention centres, also called “holding centres”, or just a place where some gang locked them up. To visit the former, the permission of the Ministry of the Interior in Tripoli is required. Detainees will be held in more or less overcrowded dilapidated rooms and, with luck, a pile of five-litre water containers will cover the lack of running water in the bathrooms. The diet, generally based on rice and pasta, is undeniably monotonous, and we know that the rare occasions when apples and cigarettes are handed out are due to visits by journalists or humanitarian workers. The centres are generally disused schools or warehouses, and the refurbishment doesn't go beyond laying out mattresses where before there were chairs and desks. Humanitarian organisations such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International give approximate figures of around twenty centres in the west of the country, and these often change their location for security reasons or simply because someone ends up claiming the building in question.

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The number of detainees is impossible to calculate. Sometimes massive numbers of people are released, when there is a large and unexpected arrival of new detainees. Equally, detainees are sometimes moved from one centre to another. Each centre receives a fixed amount from the Tripoli government for each inmate, so “trading” in human beings is habitual even within the network that falls under the Ministry of the Interior. The Geryan prison –90 kilometres east of Tripoli– is well known, both for the terrible conditions for detainees and because of its leading position in the trading market.

Of the “unofficial” centres, those that the mafias use to retain hostages, we only have photos taken with mobile phones by the captors themselves, or by those who participate in the auctions in which the commodity on sale are human beings.

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This situation of extreme vulnerability suffered by migrants on Libyan soil is a product of the atomisation of power in the country following the war that brought an end to four decades of dictatorship by Muammar Gaddafi. On paper, Libya currently has two governments –one in the east and one in the west– and hundreds of militias that impose their own laws on the ground. The situation for migrants has deteriorated even more since April 2019, when General Haftar, the military leader of the forces in the east of the country, launched his offensive on the Libyan capital. The clashes continue in an area south of the capital, near the airport, in an industrial district where there are many empty hangars that could be used as detention centres. Matthew Brook, the deputy head of the UNHCR mission in Libya, told the British newspaper, *The Guardian*: “The threat to refugees and migrants in Tripoli has never been so grave”. Survivors of the deadly Sahel crossing, of the nightmare in southern Libya and of the ongoing firefights on the coast will play their last card on an overcrowded boat. But while the sea crossing is dangerous, crossing this part of the Sahel alive also represents a challenge.

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**“Dead and disappeared”**

One of the biggest mistakes when trying to understand what is happening in Libya is to see the mafias, the militias and the security forces as actors that are independent of each other: the fact is that they form an intricate network of interrelated elements. So how can you ask the Police to investigate the disappearance of somebody in the hands of a pro-government militia? How can you demand that a judge opens a case against a minister whose brother is a well-known human trafficker? In Libya, the police and army are words on paper for entities that do not yet exist on the ground. Security, or the lack of it, is in the hands of the insurgent groups that rose up against Gaddafi, but who continue to defend their own interests, almost always in tribal terms, rather than on the

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basis of ideology or even religion. In the absence of a state, the tribe is the only thing that protects you, and hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees in Libya have no tribe.

It was at the end of October 2016 that 89 Libyan cadets and officers constituted the first group to receive training under the so-called Operation Sophia, the EU's joint naval mission to combat trafficking in human beings and arms in the central Mediterranean. The training of the Libyan coast guards, still ongoing, is one of the most controversial points, especially given the growing number of incidents between the Libyan fleet and the NGOs that participate in search and rescue missions. Even the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) stated that it had "credible information of involvement by State and local officials in smuggling and trafficking networks". There are confirmed cases in which coast guards demand bribes to allow boats to continue towards Europe. Those who do not pay are retained and their occupants are returned to detention centres where they will be abused or traded. Meanwhile, the Libyan fleet, trained by the EU and with Italian-made ships, is becoming increasingly efficient in acting as a "firewall" to check the flow of migrants that create so much concern on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. The figures have gone from the peak of 180,000 arrivals in Italy in 2016 to just over 10,000 last year (United Nations figures). The figures for "dead and disappeared" (2913 and 750 respectively) refer only to the final, maritime, part of the route northward. Thus it is increasingly difficult to reach Europe, as migrants who do not disappear at sea are returned to the Libyan coast. It is a repetitive nightmare, a return to the deadly obstacle course from which everyone dreams of escaping.

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A raft capsizes in the middle of the sea before it can be rescued by a ship of the humanitarian NGOs or the Libyan Coast Guard. Hours or days later, the bodies will appear on the beach, or become entangled in some fishing nets. When the bodies are collected, the Red Crescent will process them for identification, but this is not always possible. The bodies will be buried in places like the makeshift cemetery of Zuwara –in the west of Libya– where, in the face of the inaction of uncaring authorities, a group of volunteers takes charge of burying them. More than 2,000 have been buried in that place alone.

### **Everything remains to be done**

Although the images of migrants in this part of the Maghreb have grown in number over recent years, coming to be part of our social consciousness, human movements from Libya to Europe are far from new. From the Middle Ages until well into the 19th century, the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi were the destinations of slave caravans from the interior of Africa; these merchant routes became institutionalised during the four centuries of Ottoman rule. Then there would be the demographic experiment of the 1920s [when Italy promoted the emigration of its “excess population” to its then colony of Libya], but the human traffic changed direction in the second half of the 20th century. By then, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees were leaving for Italy in precarious boats while Libyan officials looked the other way. Gaddafi was fully aware of the concern that this traffic raised in the former colonial power and its neighbours. In 2004 he began to sign agreements with various European states to control the flow of migration. In 2010, the Libyan president suggested that, without his help, Europe would “turn black”, stating that “we don’t know if Europe will remain an advanced and united continent or if it will be destroyed, as happened with the barbarian invasions”. He made these declarations in a speech at a dinner with 800 guests organised by his old friend and ally, Silvio Berlusconi. During that event, Gaddafi asked for 5 billion Euros a year in exchange for closing his country and its coast to refugees and migrants. The rest is history: after Gaddafi’s savage lynching, in October 2011, the hitherto monolithic Libyan state shattered into fragments, in the form of city-states in which armed groups fight over the control of streets and neighbourhoods.

**“ The drama of irregular migration through Libya  
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restoration of minimally solid state structures ”**

Chaos is the norm in the country, so the solution to the drama of irregular migration through Libya cannot be effectively addressed without the restoration of minimally solid state structures that can guarantee the safety of locals and people from outside. Likewise, if we accept the International Organisation for Migration's figures of around one million migrants on Libyan soil, it is easy to calculate the dimensions of the disaster in a country whose local population is less than six million: it is as if a Spain in ruins and in the middle of a war had to deal with the needs of some eight million individuals passing through the country.

Everything remains to be done. In May 2019, the UNSMIL declared that it was “deeply concerned about increased cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, abduction, kidnapping and disappearance in Libya, inflicted upon officials, activists and journalists”. Apart from anything else, this is a clear indication of the chaos that the country finds itself in. And if the groups they refer to are victims of such abuses, it also gives us an idea of the nightmare that migrants face in Libya. In August of the same year, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, sent a report prepared by various UN agencies reporting abuses such as the “loss of liberty and arbitrary detention in official and unofficial places of detention; torture, including sexual violence; abduction for ransom; extortion; forced labour; and unlawful killings”. The package includes enforced disappearances. The report gives the figure of 4,900 migrants currently detained in government prisons, but points out that “an additional unknown number of persons are reportedly held in other informal detention facilities”.

Last December a group of national, regional and international NGOs called on the UN Human Rights Council to act urgently for “the establishment of a robust international investigative mechanism” concerning “violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law, including those that may amount to crimes against



humanity and war crimes” in Libya. They also referred to the violations suffered by migrants.

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As the situation deteriorates for both locals and those from abroad, the external interference from a range of regional and international powers that back one or other of the Libyan governments makes it impossible to achieve the stability required to build an agreement to rebuild the State. Faced with the chaos that Libya is today, Europe has chosen to establish the “firewall” mentioned above to try simply to cut off the flow of migrants, which is undoubtedly the most sought-for result of a highly questionable short-sighted policy that involves supporting local militias led by known human traffickers. The fox is left guarding the hen house in Libya, a country whose power vacuum is seen by many as an open door to Europe. It is also a huge mass grave.

In some village in Nigeria, Eritrea or any of those countries from where young people end up being spat out towards Europe, a family asks itself about the whereabouts of that son or husband who promised to reach the northern side of the Mediterranean so as to maintain his family in the south. When we say that they ask *themselves*, it is because they have no one else to ask.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karlos Zurutuza is a journalist specialised in human rights and armed conflict in the MENA region. He is also the author of *Tierra Adentro, vida y muerte en la ruta libia hacia Europa* (“Inland, life and death on the Libyan route to Europe”) (Libros del K.O., 2017), among other books of reporting and non-fiction.

Photography Hawala market

