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A human life: yours for just €750

Harrowing video footage of Libyan slave auctions raises wider issues about migration

'Big, strong boys for farm work! Four hundred? Seven hundred? Eight hundred?' So begins a mobile phone video that was passed to American broadcaster CNN this summer, showing people purportedly being auctioned at an unknown location in Libya. Three young men are eventually sold for 1,200 Libyan dinars each – about €750. The amateur footage has created a wave of horror and indignation around the world.

CNN journalists claim that after spending months verifying the video's authenticity, they travelled to Libya in October and witnessed a similar slave auction near its capital, Tripoli. Using a hidden camera, they recorded a dozen people being auctioned within six or seven minutes. Journalists who did the groundwork for CNN claim there are a number of other such markets in the country.

In fact, this news is not new. In April, Othman Belbeisi, head of the Libyan mission of the International Organization for Migration, spoke of 'migrants [...] being sold in the market as a commodity'. Germany's public broadcaster, ARD, reported that refugees were being sold for as little as $200. The British newspaper The Guardian and other international media have been covering the slave markets and gross mistreatment of refugees in Libya for some time – without European or African policymakers taking note.

Humans as commodities to be exploited

Dr Joanne Liu, international president of Doctors without Borders, wrote an open letter to EU leaders in September, after speaking with people in detention centres controlled by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

'People are simply treated as a commodity to be exploited,' she wrote. 'They are packed into dark, filthy rooms with no ventilation, living on top of one another.'

Detainees told how, having been sold to the people who run the camps, they now have to pay hundreds of euros to be freed. Liu asks, 'In their efforts to stem the flow [of refugees into Europe], is allowing people to be pushed into rape, torture and slavery via criminal pay offs a price European governments are willing to pay?' The lack of an answer is deafening.

Images of slave markets make it harder to justify taking no action to end the inhumane conditions in Libyan refugee detention centres. The video has roused indignation in many African countries, some of which have recalled their ambassadors from Libya. In various countries there have been protests against the treatment of migrants in Libya, while online, people have described being sold.

Finally, at the end of November, the GNA condemned the slave auctions and called for more regional and global support to resolve the problem: 'We, in Libya, are victims of illegal migration and we are not a source of it.' According to their statement, mistreatment of refugees can only be ended when the reasons for fleeing their homelands are identified and combatted. This is a cross-border problem that Libya cannot resolve on its own.

A country torn apart

But Libya has not been left alone to cope with migration; quite the opposite, in fact. For many months, the EU has been attempting to partner with Libya to stem the flow of refugees – an arrangement that many human rights activists and opposition politicians heavily criticise. Since NATO helped topple Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011, the country has had no functioning government and wars have been tearing it apart. The GNA – which required UN intervention before it could take office – doesn't even control the capital. Europe has no real partner but behaves as if it were dealing with a functioning government in Tripoli, because it needs one.

In June 2015 the EU began Operation Sophia, which is tasked with stopping human traffickers and smugglers in the southern Mediterranean. Last summer, the operation's mandate was extended until 2018. However, the Libyan coastguard being trained as an EU partner is repeatedly reprimanded for attacking refugee boats in the Mediterranean. The lack of a national government that functions in the Western understanding of the term means there are no state security forces, just various militias that are moderately disciplined at best.

The 'coastguard' militia is supposed to save shipwrecked people and

combat human traffickers, according to EU specifications. In mid-November the EU announced plans to expand training for the Libyan coastguard and to begin training police involved in securing the coast. It will further equip police forces with boats and transport vehicles – plans that the UN condemns.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, calls the EU approach allowing the Libyan coastguard to intercept migrant boats on the Mediterranean inhumane: 'Only alternatives to detention can save migrants' lives and physical security, preserve their dignity and protect them from further atrocities.'

The EU denies any responsibility for the conditions in Libya's refugee centres, saying it did not create the system.

Crime against humanity

The news that people are being treated like slaves is not new; only the images are. Since publication of the amateur videos, African politicians have begun to confront Europe. First, Mahamadou Issoufou, president of Niger, demanded European and African heads of government discuss human rights violations in Libya at EU-Africa summit this last November. He also called on the International Criminal Court in The Hague to initiate investigations: slavery is a crime against humanity.

The African Union chair, Guinean president Alpha Conde, partly blames Europe for the chaos and criminality in Libya. Africa News reports that he appealed to Libyan authorities: 'These modern slavery practices must end and the African Union will use all the tools at its disposal.

This all sounds good for the folks at home, but it is dishonest. If West African authorities were not content to look the other way, hundreds of thousands of people would never make it across the continent to Libya. Most migrants reach the Malian town of Gao, an important transit hub en route to the north, in ordinary buses. Once there, smugglers detain the eager travellers while organising their journeys through the Sahara.

For years, Eric-Alain Kamdem, coordinator of the Migrants House in Gao, has reported with increasing desperation that smugglers easily bribe the Malian security forces to not intervene. The situation in Gao is just one example. Many, many people are living off a system of migration that is killing the migrants. Now, at last, scenes of slave auctions are creating public awareness, and crocodile tears are rolling down both European and African cheeks.



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Bettina Rühl is a freelance journalist based in Nairobi and Cologne who has been writing about Africa for over 20 years. Her reports, which focus on how big political decisions and upheaval on the continent affect ordinary Africans, have been featured on German public TV and radio, as well as in newspapers including the *Berliner Zeitung* and the *Tageszeitung*.