

Slavery Report: Libya

Latest Numbers

As of 2016, [according](#) to the U.N., there are between 700,000 and 1 million Sub-Saharan African migrants currently in Libya; of these, the Global Slavery Index [estimates](#) as many as 48,000 of them live as slaves of some nature.

In the wake of the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, formal slave trading still occurs, as infamously exposed when CNN obtained [video](#) of an actual slave auction in 2017.

In the past, Libya has been an infamous nucleus of slavery in the Arab world, both [black](#) and [white](#). Today, it is the epicenter of where African mass migration to Europe meets bestial bondage.

Black Africans attempting to escape poverty and violence for Europe make their way to Libya via migration “trade routes” stretching for thousands of miles across the continent. Once there, they are detained, then are often horrendously abused, tortured, and some enslaved.

Many of the migrants trekking to suffer in Libya are Nigerians [fleeing](#) the death squads of *jihād* organizations like Boko Haram (see Nigeria [report](#)), but many — some non-black — also originate from [Burkina Faso](#), [Egypt](#), [Eritrea](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Mali](#), [Niger](#), [Somalia](#), and [Sudan](#). Even before the rise (post-Qaddafi) of Boko Haram, ash-Shabab, and other current sources of violent social chaos, Libya underwent a significant influx of Sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom were brutally exploited for labor. A 2018 Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE) [report](#) describes how the Qaddafi regime’s “cheap labor” immigration policies habitually attracted and entrapped black migrants:

Gaddafi’s policies may thus have acknowledged and legitimised the already substantial Sub-Saharan immigration to the country, rather than provoked it. Nonetheless, both the welcoming rhetoric and the practical implementation of the CEN-SAD [Community of Saharan and Sahelian States] — which included the removal of visa requirements for Sub-Saharan migrants — undoubtedly encouraged and facilitated Sub-Saharan immigration into Libya, which was ‘eager for cheap labour’. An estimated two and a half million Sub-Saharans lived in Libya by 2003.

The existing migration routes that connected Libya with the Sahel and West Africa were expanded and consolidated as a result, and became linked with East Africa’s migration system. Workers from Sudan or Ethiopia now migrated to Libya, and refugees from Darfur and Eritrea began to take the route to Libya as well.

Despite the official message of pan-African solidarity, however, the treatment of Sub-Saharan immigrants in Libya was, already by then, marked by arbitrariness

and racism. ‘Slave’ was reportedly the most common term to refer to Sub-Saharan Africans in Libya; and detention camps for migrants allegedly existed already before 2000 — when a deadly anti-immigrant backlash in Libya marked a new turn in the country’s immigration policies. Some authors argue that the precarity of the immigrants’ legal status in Libya at the time was deliberate, as it guaranteed the reversibility of the country’s immigration policy (p. 14).

Experiences of the Slaves

A January 2, 2018 BBC [report](#) interviewed Nigerians who were eventually deported back to Nigeria after being detained in Libya:

“It’s because of money,” ...said [Agen Akhere], pleading and craning his neck to get closer to the microphone. “My friend, he’s still there. His name is Samson. He’s still there, in Gharyan.”

Gharyan is a prison in the mountains about 100km (60 miles) south of Tripoli. And it is a place where all of the migrants we spoke to were taken before they made it home.

Again and again they tell the same story, of detainees horrifically abused by prison guards, starved, beaten, raped — and traded as slaves.

“They come to our caravans [cells], they pick six persons to do their dirty jobs to do farming, brick-laying work,” says Lucky Akhanene. He returned in the same group as Mr Akhere and was held in Gharyan for four months.

“They give us out to their friends. They don’t pay us. It’s just hard labour, if you’re not fast with your job you get beaten.”

Three separate people spoke about being leased out by the prison for day labour like this. Others said they were sold.

Jackson Uwumarogie and Felix Efe were arrested “on top of the sea,” off the coast of Libya and taken to Gharyan.

They said one night a prison guard came and counted out 20 men, he took them outside and blindfolded them.

Mr Uwumarogie overheard the men talking about a price — 1,000 dinars (\$735; £550). They were put into a van and taken to a farm.

A January 26, 2018 *Al Jazeera* [article](#) featured testimony from two Eritrean migrants who had been sold as slaves by traffickers multiple times, and still remain in Libya. Sami, 18-years-old, said:

They asked me to pay \$6,500 more to proceed further...

We were lied to. They beat us with sticks and a water hose. And they electrocuted us. We told them we had no money, but that did not stop them from beating us.

My mother had to sell our home in Eritrea and other assets we had and was also forced to borrow money from family and friends abroad for my trip.

They then took us to the town of the Libyan Bani Walid, where we were held in an illegal detention centre. They gave us one piece of bread a day.

We endured physical torture but the mental torture was worse. Our captors would systematically choose people unable to pay to set an example.

They would hang them upside down and beat them. They would electrocute their nipples and waterboard them. They would pour hot oil on them and burn them. We saw people dying while being tortured.

My friend died in front of me after he was electrocuted. He came with me and we survived the journey through the desert only for him to die as a slave in captivity.

Watching others being tortured made people call anyone they could for them to send money by any means. They made us call while being tortured.

While men are sold as economic slaves, women, deep in debt, are [forced](#) into sexual slavery in return for being trafficked to Europe — some even forced to become prostitutes only after they have reached their destination.

The political [turmoil](#) in Libya only worsens the crisis. With control of the country split between a U.N.-backed government in Tripoli, a rival government in the east, and the *jihad* rebel groups in the middle, there is barely any supervision of migrants' treatment or accommodation.

Libya has banned Western journalists from entering the country after the humiliating leak of the 2017 slave market footage. An October 2, 2018 *PBS NewsHour* [report](#), the first in nearly a year to detail the savage abuse of Sub-Saharan migrants, details how the government is desperate to cover it up:

We're under constant observation by government minders, their suspicions shadowing us everywhere. They don't want us seeing this, the thousands of migrants and refugees from throughout Africa and beyond who use Libya as a way station north to Europe.

Each time we try filming them at government facilities, Libyan authorities shut us down.

...Libya wouldn't allow American journalists in for nearly a year after CNN showed African migrants being auctioned off at a Libyan slave market last November.

Those whom the government detains — and possibly avert enslavement — are kept in horrific conditions.

Political Developments

Action taken on the part of Libyan coast guard services and the European Union has reportedly yielded some results. Though slavery persists, the Libyan migration route is decreasing in use, at least from countries like Niger. According to a July 16, 2018 TelesurTV [report](#), “In 2016, 330,000 people crossed Niger, primarily directed to Europe via Libya. The number fell to 18,000 in 2017 and to around 10,000 [in 2018]...” The migrants, however, have likely not decreased, with Morocco now emerging as a gateway to Spain. No reports of slavery yet exist from Morocco, though the situation must be monitored.