



Child rape case sparks protests in Myanmar

Hell in high water: Braving the monsoon to save India's rhinos



AT SEA: German migrant rescue NGO Sea-Eye shows their vessel 'Alan Kurdi' during an operation during which they rescued 65 people from an overloaded rubber boat in international waters off the Libyan coast. —AFP

Fate of refugees trapped in Libya

Forced labour, starved, tortured and bombed

PARIS: Acute malnutrition, forced labour, torture: NGOs have sharpened their tone against the shocking conditions endured by refugees and migrants in Libya, where over 40 people were killed in an air strike on a detention centre. Tuesday night's strike on the centre at Tajoura near the capital Tripoli, in which 70 people were wounded, underscored the vulnerability of the mainly African migrants trapped in conditions the UN has called "ghastly".

Their plight has been blamed by NGOs on an agreement between EU nations and the Libyan coastguard to prevent the migrants from reaching Europe's shores by boat. Since January, over 2,300 people have been intercepted at sea and brought back to Libya, according to the UN. Once back in Libya, they are transferred to detention centres like the one in Tajoura.

The situation has deteriorated further since Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, whose forces have been blamed for the airstrike, launched an offensive in April to capture Tripoli, triggering a wave of violence in which over 700 people have been killed. "There is a certain blindness among European countries among the situation of migrants in Libya," Vincent Cochetel, special envoy for the Central Mediterranean at UN refugee agency UNHCR told AFP.

"The recent fighting has created an even worse situation. It cannot be business as usual in terms of this cooperation (with the EU) on returns to Libya," he argued. The levels of despair among the migrants are such that in May, a man in a rickety boat who spotted the coastguards approaching jumped into the sea rather than be captured - a scene captured on video by German NGO Sea-Watch. The man was later rescued by a passing ship.

EU on the defensive

Excruciating footage filmed inside hidden prisons run by human traffickers that was broadcast by Britain's

Channel 4 in February gives some idea of the brutality inflicted on migrants by militia members who use them to try to extort money from their families. In one clip, a man is seen lying on the floor, screaming in agony as his captor burns his feet with a blowtorch. Another man, wearing a bloody t-shirt, is suspended from the ceiling by his feet, a gun pointed at his head.

A third is bound and lying face down, a huge concrete block crushing his back and arms as someone flogs the soles of his feet. According to figures from the International Organization for Migration, at least 5,200 people are currently trapped in official detention centres in Libya, mostly from troubled countries such as Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. There are no figures for the number of people held in illegal centres run by human traffickers.

The EU has fended off criticism of its pact with the Libyan coastguard on the ground that it has dramatically reduced the flow of migrants seeking to reach Italy, which began turning away rescue boats a year ago. Questioned by AFP, the European Commission defended its record, saying that since 2014 it had raised some 338 million euros for programmes linked to migrants in Libya and helped with the repatriation of 38,000 people in the past 16 months.

"We are extremely concerned by the deterioration of the situation on the ground," Commission spokeswoman Natasha Bertaud recently said. The Commission, she said, was hamstrung by the failure of EU members to agree on common approach towards migrants and asylum-seekers. When NGO vessels rescue people in the Mediterranean, "it effectively falls on the Commission to ring round nearly 28 capitals to find places for people to disembark," she said, adding: "That is not sustainable!"

The dead piling up

Ten NGOs working in Libya, including the Danish

Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee and Premiere Urgence Internationale (PUI), decided in May to break their silence on the catastrophic conditions there. They called on the EU and its member states "to urgently revise their policies on migration", saying they were "gravely concerned about the human cost" of such policies which were encouraging "a system of criminalization and detention". "Migrants and refugees, including women and children, are at risk of arbitrary and indefinite detention in Libya" where they are held in "appalling" and "inhumane conditions", they said.

Benjamin Gaudin, who heads the Libya operations of French NGO Premiere Urgence Internationale (PUI), called on the EU to stop sending migrants back to Libya altogether. Describing conditions in the six official detention centres where PUI works, Gaudin said: "At times, the migrants are literally piled up on top of each other, in appalling sanitary conditions with huge problems getting access to water - sometimes there is no drinking water at all."

"They don't receive enough food; in some centres, there is absolutely no way to protect yourself from the cold or the heat. Some don't even have an outside area so the migrants there never see the light of day," Human Rights Watch, which visited many detention centres in 2018 and spoke to about 100 migrants, documented the "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" suffered by migrants in a report earlier this year.

"The bodies are piling up inside Libyan detention centres," Julien Raickman, who heads the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) mission in Libya said. "The people who are detained there, mostly refugees, are continuing to die from sickness, hunger and are victims of all sorts of violence, of rape and the arbitrary treatment of the militias," he said. And now, he added, "they have found themselves trapped by the ongoing conflict."

'Locked up for a year'

Their plight was taken up last month by the Council of Europe, a pan-European rights watchdog whose human rights commissioner asked European countries to suspend their cooperation with the Libyan coastguard on account of the "torture, rape, slavery, exploitation or indefinite and unlawful detention" suffered by migrants.

The UNHCR on June 7 denounced the "ghastly conditions" in the centres, with spokesman Rupert Colville saying 22 people had died in an outbreak of tuberculosis at a facility in the western Libyan town of Zintan since September. MSF, which has recently begun operating in Zintan as well as Garyan, a city south of Tripoli, spoke of a "sanitation catastrophe". According to the NGOs and the UNHCR's Cochetel, the vast majority of those trapped in these centres are bona fide refugees, who would be granted asylum in a developed country.

The UNHCR has, however, struggled to find safe countries in Europe or elsewhere willing to take in the refugees. "There is a strong sense of despair over this impasse: in centres where we have been working in the region of Misrata and Khoms, people have been locked up for a year," MSF's Raickman said. General Ayoub Kacem, spokesman for the Libyan navy, which is in charge of the coastguard, argued that Libya was a "victim" of the migration flows.

Calling the migrants a "burden" for the country he accused the EU of "lacking concern" for their fate and urged EU members to finally adopt a common approach to the issue. For MSF's Raickman it is long past time for talking. "European states have a scandalous level of responsibility for all these deaths and this suffering," he said. "What we need is action: the urgent evacuation of refugee and migrants who are trapped in extremely dangerous conditions in Libya." —AFP

5 years into war, Yemen at 'rock bottom'

SANAA: Like most residents of Amran, a strategic gateway to Yemen's capital Sanaa, Mohammed Al-Najri thought the capture of his city by Houthi rebels five years ago would not last long. But fighting quickly spread to most areas of the country, plunging the Arab world's most impoverished nation into a devastating conflict that is yet to end. Fifty kilometres north of Sanaa, Amran was taken by the Iran-backed Houthis on July 8, 2014.

It was the first major city to fall, in a military campaign that saw the rebels seize vast swathes of Yemen from the internationally recognised government. At the education ministry office in Amran where he works, Najri has gone without his salary ever since the beleaguered government two years ago moved the central bank from Sanaa to Aden, its makeshift capital.

"Five years have passed since the war broke out, but we know there is still a long way to go," the 40-year-old civil servant told AFP by telephone. "Our situation has deteriorated ... We have reached rock bottom. Everything has collapsed," he said. Mohammed Taha, 48, a journalist from Amran who has continued to cover his home city since the Houthis seized it, does not even consider the possibility of peace. "Five years of war were sufficient for me to adapt and adjust my life and that of my family accordingly," Taha said. "Yes, we were affected by the war at the start, but we were able to live with its consequences. I no longer care if it continues or ends," he said.

'Dangerous' plot

The United Nations says Yemen is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, warning that millions

are on the verge of famine. Thousands of civilians, including hundreds of children, have been killed and tens of thousands wounded. Essential health, education and other services have all but collapsed, especially since a Saudi-led coalition intervened in March 2015 in support of the government.

In Amran, rebels carrying automatic rifles remain vigilant day and night, while revolutionary slogans are daubed everywhere on the old city's brown buildings made of clay and stones. "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on Jews and victory for Islam," reads one slogan. Two Yemeni government officials told AFP that when Amran fell into the hands of the Houthis, no one was aware of the rebels' plans to take their military campaign to Sanaa and other regions.

Beyond the city limits, Amran is a key province in Yemen historically, boasting important archeological landmarks, including the 100-year-old Shaharah Bridge - meaning the 'bridge of sighs' - which links two mountains. It is also home to Raydah town, where the last of Yemen's Jews lived, before they made their way to Israel in 1949-1950 in a secret airlift dubbed "Operation Magic Carpet". Amran occupies a strategic location between Sanaa and the rebels' stronghold of Saada in the far north. It is also home to the Hashid, Yemen's most powerful tribe.

'Almost unimaginable'

The Houthis overran government forces in Amran after a two-month siege and then moved south, capturing the capital in September 2014 before pushing into other parts of Yemen. Sixty months after seizing the city, the rebels still hold the upper hand on the battlefield, despite major military campaigns by the government and airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition. The rebels still hold a firm grip on Sanaa and most cities in northern, central and western regions including the strategic Red Sea port city of Hodeida.

They have made strong use of their fighting experience in mountain ranges. But the war has devastated



SANAA: Yemenis inspect the rubble of destroyed houses in the village of Bani Matar, 70 kilometers (43 miles) West of Sanaa. —AFP

Yemen. It "has fragmented the country down the lines of identity, geography and ideology in ways that were almost unimaginable before it began," Peter Salisbury, a Yemen analyst at the International Crisis Group, told AFP. The rebels and the government have participated in several rounds of UN-sponsored talks, the last held in Sweden in December, but they failed to strike a deal to end the bloody war.

The United Nations says that 3.3 million Yemenis are

displaced, while at least 24 million - some two-thirds of the population - need assistance. "The country is not on the verge of collapse, it is collapsing. It is collapsed actually," Fabrizio Carboni, the International Committee of the Red Cross regional director for the Near and Middle East, said in Geneva on Thursday. For Salisbury, "it will take a lot more than five years to get us back to even 2014 levels of internal cohesion, if at all, (in terms of) service delivery and economic development." —AFP