

International

War creates new uncertainty for refugees, migrants in Libya

Migrants risk abuse in and out of detention

TRIPOLI: After three days at sea trying to reach Europe, Demba Dembele was intercepted by Libya's EU-backed coastguard and returned to Tripoli - where, like dozens of other migrants, he got in a taxi and set off into the city. For years, migrants sent back to Libya have been routinely transferred to government-affiliated detention centers notorious for squalid conditions and abuse.

Now, with several centers closing, some migrants are being allowed to walk free when they disembark, though they face an uncertain fate in a country shaken by renewed conflict over the past six months. Dembele, a 28-year-old from Mali, had twice tried to get to Europe. After his first attempt failed, he spent three months in detention where he said he saw guards firing on migrants who tried to escape on two occasions.

"The first time, people forced the door to get out and they shot at them ... they beat people," he said. One Liberian man was shot dead. "It was done in front of me." Smugglers' boats still leave frequently for Europe, but the proportion of migrants being intercepted and returned to Libya has risen over the past two years during an Italian-led, EU-backed push to cut off crossings that has drawn sharp criticism from rights groups.

This has coincided with a collapse in the networks that sent more than 600,000 across the central Mediterranean from 2014-2017, as armed groups seeking to clean up their image have moved away from the trade. Just 8,400 migrants have made the crossing to Italy so far this year, and 7,400 have been intercepted and returned, according to UN data. But the shift has made Libya even more brutal for migrants who remain, exposing them to increased levels of abuse and extortion by smugglers struggling to make money in a shrunken market, researchers and aid workers say.

Since April, there has been sustained fighting in western Libya after eastern-based forces led by Khalifa Haftar

made a bid to seize Tripoli. A 49-year-old Nigerian on the same boat as Dembele, said he had been in Libya for four years, and was working in a cellophane factory in southern Tripoli before the recent fighting began. "It was just the war that made me decide to leave," the Nigerian said.

Migrants enlisted

Detention centers nominally under the Tripoli-based, internationally recognized government are controlled by armed groups now involved in the fight against Haftar, and some migrants have been enlisted in the war effort, aid workers and rights groups say. A Reuters reporter saw migrants moving weapons at an armed group base not far from the front line in southern Tripoli.

The centers have also become targets. In July, more than 50 migrants were killed in an air strike on a centre in Tajoura, close to where Dembele disembarked. Those who fled the strike have overwhelmed a facility designed by the U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR, for refugees and asylum seekers, which has been plagued by problems since opening late last year.

The Tajoura detention centre took in more migrants after the strike but is no longer accepting new arrivals, a coastguard official said. Centres in Al-Khoms and Misrata have shut after international pressure calling for their closure. Though Dembele and more than 80 other African migrants who left in taxis avoided immediate detention, aid workers worry that some may be even more vulnerable to underground smugglers if they are not taken to the centers, where international organizations at least have sporadic access.

UNHCR, which has struggled to evacuate people from Libya and recently started transferring refugees to Rwanda, has said some migrants try to bribe their way into centers in the hope they will be resettled. Libya has an estimated migrant population of 640,000. The centers house just



AL KHUMS, Libya: Rescued African migrants sit by the coast in the Libyan town of Khoms, 120 kilometers east of the capital Tripoli, after being rescued from the Mediterranean Sea. — AFP

5,000, but turnover can be rapid. In the past, centers that were closed have reopened, or new centers have sprung up at different sites.

After closing the centre in Misrata last week, Libyan authorities transferred more than 100 refugees and migrants to two other centers with a record of "abuses,

exploitation and forced disappearances", said Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), which provides care for migrants detained in Libya. "They are moved from one detention centre to another, seeing conditions go from bad to worse in an endless cycle of despair and violence," said Sacha Petiot, MSF's mission head. — Reuters

The Vatican out of money? Heavens no, says pope ally

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis's economic adviser yesterday denied reports the Vatican was at risk of default, saying the allegations were part of a campaign to discredit the pontiff. "To say that the Vatican is at danger of default is false," said Honduran Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga, who heads a group of six cardinals that advise Francis on economic reforms within the Catholic Church's governing body.

"It seems to me there is a discrediting strategy underway," he said in an interview with the Repubblica newspaper. Maradiaga was reacting to allegations in a book by Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi, who claims to have seen internal documents that show the Vatican's finances are in a dire state and the institution is "at risk of default." "They want to undermine the pontificate: first by depicting a Church made up mainly of paedophiles, and now by showing economic negligence. But it's not true," Maradiaga said.

Nuzzi has made a name for himself by publishing a series of books on Vatican financial scandals. In his latest, published Monday, he analyses the Vatican's books for 2018, showing them to be in the red and getting worse. The book says APSA, a department of the Holy See which oversees real estate and investments, had a deficit of nearly 44 million euros (\$49 million) in 2018, compared to 32 million the previous year. Nuzzi said the real estate portfolio was worth an estimated 2.7 billion euros and was badly managed.

Some 800 properties were lying empty, he said, while 15 percent of the 3,200 rented properties were being let for free, and others were being rented out below market prices. — AFP

Pedestrian fatalities on US roads hit almost 30-yr high

WASHINGTON: US traffic deaths fell 2.4% in 2018 to 36,560 although the number of pedestrians killed rose to its highest level in nearly three decades, the US auto safety agency said yesterday. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said traffic deaths fell for the second straight year - down 913 from 2017. The fatality rate fell by 3.4% to 1.13 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, the lowest rate since 2014.

Despite the decrease in overall deaths, pedestrian and cyclist fatalities continue to rise, with deaths of those on foot climbing 3.4% to 6,283 last year. The number of people killed on roads while using bicycles and other non-motorized vehicles rose 6.3% to 857. More pedestrians and cyclists were killed in 2018 than in any year since 1990. Deaths of pedestrians have jumped by 42% in the last decade even as the combined number of all other traffic deaths has fallen by 8%.

Auto safety experts say the growing number of drivers distracted by mobile devices is at least partly to blame. NHTSA said yesterday it is looking for ways to reduce fatalities among pedestrians and bicyclists. The Governors Highway Safety Association said in February the increasing shift in US vehicle sales away from passenger cars to light trucks is a factor in the rising number of deaths. The group said the number of pedestrian fatalities involving SUVs increased at a faster rate - 50% - from 2013 to 2017 compared to passenger cars, which increased by 30%.

Earlier this month, AAA said its research showed that automatic emergency braking systems designed to stop vehicles from striking pedestrians did not always work effectively and had a significantly higher failure rate at night. Three-quarters of all pedestrian deaths take place at



PHILADELPHIA: A pedestrian walks past Souvenir Jewelry store in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

night, NHTSA says, while 38% of pedestrians killed had some alcohol in their systems and 74% were not at intersections when struck. NHTSA said last week it may include vehicle technologies tied to the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists when it revises its five-star New Car Assessment Program. In 2017, the United States had 6.4 million traffic crashes reported to police agencies resulting in 2.7 million injuries, according to a NHTSA report released last month. Still, US roads are far safer than they were a half-century ago, when the fatality rate was nearly five times higher and more than 50,000 people died annually in crashes. — Reuters

Canada's poll brings call to arms against gun violence

TORONTO: Long associated with gang violence, the Regent Park neighborhood of Canada's largest city Toronto has changed. But firearms continue to claim lives, prompting calls ahead of national elections Monday for tougher gun controls. But those working on the ground to make the community safer and steer youths away from a life of crime say tougher laws are not enough to stem the violence.

"I've seen things here that you only see in movies," said Christopher Rogers, a 35-year-old former gang member who grew up in the neighborhood and now leads a youth awareness group. "I have great memories here and I also have very sad memories here, stuff that changed my life and made me who I am today," he adds.

Regent Park was one of the largest social housing projects in Canada when it was erected in the late 1940s, but drug trafficking, shootings and gang activity have since then made it synonymous with crime. Subject to an ambitious revitalization since 2005, it now looks very different, yet remains a hotbed of violence. Just last month, two young men were wounded in shootings. Since the beginning of the year, Toronto has been the scene of 370 shootings—more than twice as many as for the whole of 2014 - which killed 30 people.

That prompted Mayor John Tory, along with other big city Canadian mayors facing similar spikes in gun violence, to demand stricter gun controls from the federal government. Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau proposed a ban on assault rifles but stopped short of the handgun ban sought, saying only that he would help cities to restrict pistols and revolvers. "You don't need military-grade assault weapons, ones designed to kill the largest amount of people in the shortest amount of time, to take down a deer," he said in Toronto at the start of his re-election campaign in September.

Gangs and smuggling

Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, who is neck-and-neck with Trudeau in the polls, said he supports tougher penalties for gun crimes rather than gun restrictions. While regulation is essential and proven in Canada, researcher Adam Ellis says the political debate around guns is distracting from substantive issues. "It's not necessarily the gun itself that's the problem," he told AFP. "The problem is the masculinities that are attached to the gun." "Let's stop talking about the guns, let's have a bigger real conversation about toxic masculinity in society, how we socialize young boys to feel like they have to be violent... and the only way they can prove their manhood is through a loaded gun," he said. Police attribute most of the violence to gangs and the many guns being smuggled into the country from southern neighbor the United States. In response to the recent spate of shootings, Toronto in August launched an 11-week action plan to boost outreach and policing in hotspots. Within weeks, police say they made more than 200 arrests and seized a number of guns.

'Harsh reality'

But some experts have criticized the crackdown, saying it is an "emotional response" that will only lead to more violence. After decreasing between 2009 and 2013, violent gun crimes rose by 42 percent across Canada in subsequent years to 2017, according to Statistics Canada. The rise was due in large part to the situation in Toronto, the agency said. Ellis, who left gangsterism to become a criminology researcher at the University of Toronto, said the violence is rooted in social inequities in the city of six million people, where the cost of living, especially housing, has skyrocketed in recent decades. "We see a lot of young males, and now we find more and more females, drifting toward a gang life as a way to survive," he says. Ron Chhiner, a detective in the Toronto Police Gang Prevention Unit, is also concerned about the age of those involved in the violence. "The harsh reality is that we're seeing kids younger and younger committing more and more violent acts. You're seeing potentially 12 to 13 year-olds with guns," he says. "You're seeing them associated to shootings." — AFP

Protests snarl transportation; 15 die in Chile

SANTIAGO: A hobbled metro system and damage to downtown streets snarled public transportation in the Chilean capital Santiago yesterday, following days of protests throughout the country that have left 15 dead and led to the arrest of 2,600, officials said. Thousands of people poured into Santiago's central squares on Monday to protest high living costs and inequality.

As pressure mounted, Chile's center-right President Sebastian Pinera said he would meet with opposition leaders to forge a "new social contract." Ten cities throughout Chile have been placed in a state of emergency and under evening lockdown since riots broke out last Friday. The general in charge of security in Santiago, Javier Iturriaga early on Monday told Chileans that the city "had slept tranquilly last night." Iturriaga reported only minor, isolated incidents following a military lockdown that began at 8 p.m. The widespread protests have nonetheless continued to sow destruction across the city. Santiago's central Plaza Italia, the focal point of much of the unrest, was littered with broken glass and stone, graffiti and still-smoldering fires. Many downtown streets reeked of tear gas early on Monday.

'Nothing changes'

Roxana Yanez, 56, a factory worker, said she had had a difficult commute. "On the one hand, we support these protests. We don't earn much, just enough to pay our bus fare," she said. "What we don't support is disorder, riots, looting. That doesn't help." The recent protests in Chile were sparked by an increase in public transport fares in early October. But they reflect simmering anger over intense economic inequality in Chile, as well as costly health, education and pension systems seen by many as inadequate.

"This won't stop until people see real change," said Brandon Rodriguez, 25, a security guard. "Governments of



SANTIAGO: Protester clashes with riot police during a protest in Santiago, Chile. — AFP

the left and right have come and gone...but nothing changes for ordinary people." Late into the day on Monday, demonstrators spread along main avenues, plazas and bridges around the city, and remained on the streets until past the 8 p.m. curfew before soldiers dispersed them using water cannons, tear gas and verbal persuasion.

General Iturriaga said he was aware of videos circulating on social media suggesting brutality by police or the military in dealing with protesters and vandals. "We are investigating every one of these situations. We're not going to hide anything," Iturriaga told reporters. Interior

sub-secretary Rodrigo Ubilla declined to identify the 15 people killed thus far in the riots.

The unrest in Chile has yet to dock copper output from the world's top producer of the red metal, mining officials said. Workers at BHP's Escondida copper mine, the world's largest, nonetheless initiated a 5-hour strike in the morning, union officials said. At Santiago's international airport, many passengers were stranded after hundreds of flights were canceled by major airlines over several days and airlines laid out camp beds on the airport forecourt to accommodate them. — Reuters