

AFRICA

Many Refugees From Libya Don't Want to Go Home

By SCOTT SAYARE MARCH 9, 2011

CHOUCHA TRANSIT CAMP, Tunisia — Europe fears Abdou Dirisu Minimu Aliu.

A towering, square-jawed Nigerian, his forearms swollen from years of building furniture in Libya, Mr. Aliu, 26, arrived at this sprawling camp on the Tunisian border after fleeing the violence in Tripoli. Destitute, his \$2,600 in savings stolen by Libyan fighters, he now hopes desperately to reach a stable, prosperous country. Europe beckons.

There are thousands like him here, on the northern coast of Africa, and almost certainly tens of thousands more trapped in Libya. They had left their home countries for an oil-wealthy nation offering abundant employment and higher wages. They shrink from the prospect of returning penniless to the corrupt governments and stagnant economies they first fled.

“There is something I want you to know,” Mr. Aliu told a United Nations aid worker. “I’d have preferred to die in the war zone in Libya than to go back to Nigeria.”

“Do you know what it’s like to be a man who has lost everything?” he asked, plaintive, staring blankly at the ground. The aid worker, David Welin, moved close to Mr. Aliu.

“I’m sure that what you lived in Libya, what’s awaiting you in Nigeria, is not good,” he replied. But the United Nations would probably not be able to help, Mr.

Welin said. For the time being, Mr. Aliu and thousands like him, principally from sub-Saharan Africa, are left to contemplate the 70 miles of sea that separate Tunisia from the Italian island of Lampedusa, and the European continent beyond. Some have begun to make arrangements with Tunisian traffickers for an illegal crossing.

“So many Nigerians are wanting to go over,” said Stanley Tawaris, 42, a slender Nigerian welder who lived for a decade in a two-room cinder-block lean-to in Zawiyah, west of Tripoli. “We struggled in Libya and acquired nothing. The best thing for us is to go forward, and not to go back to our country.”

His three children live in Nigeria; he sent \$200 or \$300 most months, he said, and worries he would never be able to provide so much if he returned to Nigeria. He hopes to join relatives in Germany, France or the Netherlands, Mr. Tawaris said, and find work.

“Anything,” he said. “Even if it is labor work, I don’t care.”

He hopes the winds that have whipped through this dusty camp will soon ease, and leave the Mediterranean calm; a friend has been arranging for a boat.

There are currently 15,000 migrants here, but there are provisions to accommodate as many as 30,000, organizers say. Bulldozers are clearing ground for an additional two camps nearby, and humanitarian groups continue to stockpile food and supplies in anticipation of thousands upon thousands more fleeing migrants, as Libya descends further into civil conflict.

About 1.5 million foreign laborers were thought to reside in Libya before the outbreak of violence last month; about 200,000 have since fled the country.

What little they had to lose was often lost in their flight out of Libya.

It is perhaps a measure of their desperation that they had chosen to stay in Libya at all. Workers here offer accounts of harassment and violence directed against the foreign laborers who worked on Libyan oil platforms, kneaded Libyan bread and built Libyan houses.

In Libya, “dogs are treated better than black Africans,” said Jean-Philippe Chauzy, a spokesman for the **International Organization for Migration**. Because many of them enter the country illegally, he said, they “have no official status, no visibility.” They have come to constitute a sort of abusable underclass.

“This country is racist, there’s no other word for it,” said Mansouria Mokhefi, the director of the Middle East and North Africa program at the Paris-based **French Institute of International Relations**. “There is a hierarchy of races.”

Blacks are widely referred to as “Abd,” or slaves. Bangladeshis are viewed as little better, and even Arab Egyptians and Tunisians are considered to have limited rights.

Migrant workers tell of the “gangsters” who hold foreigners at knifepoint in the Libyan streets, stealing their money and telephones with impunity.

At night, said Francis Appiah, 35, a Ghanaian mason who fled the western Libyan city of Zuwarah, “you weren’t able to go out to buy anything,” for fear of attacks. He added that thieves had once stolen a DVD player, a television and speakers from his home.

“I didn’t go to the police, because sometimes they arrest black people for no reason,” he said. His landlord once had Mr. Appiah arrested, he said, because he had requested payment for plastering the interior of the man’s house.

A small, broad-smiling man with angular cheeks and no front teeth, wearing a faded Levi’s denim jacket, Mr. Appiah said he had come to Libya two years ago hoping to move on to Europe. Now, he said, perhaps he will. “I’m here with nothing,” he said. “Where there is money, where there is work, I will go.”

“If Africans were not poor, they would not be in Libya,” said Mr. **Tawaris**, the Nigerian, who was once stabbed repeatedly in the thigh by a thief who attacked him in the street. Though he found a Libyan doctor willing to stitch up a black man’s wound, he could not find a doctor willing to remove the sutures; he removed them himself. “If you are not strong, you cannot live there,” he said.

He has been languishing in his tent here, drawing slowly on cigarettes sold at the edge of the camp by local Tunisians, hoping for a boat.

“If our country was a very nice place to be,” said Mr. Tawaris, his face stern, “we would not have gone to a place like Libya.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 10, 2011, on Page A12 of the New York edition with the headline: Many Refugees From Libya Don't Want to Go Home.

© 2019 The New York Times Company