

NATO powers indifferent to Libyan refugees

By the Bill Van Auken
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The same NATO countries that have waged war on Libya in the name of “protecting civilians” have given “an abysmal response to the plight” of refugees during this conflict, Amnesty International charged in a report released Tuesday.

The report calls urgent attention to the conditions facing some 5,000 refugees and asylum seekers who are stranded at squalid encampments on the borders with Tunisia and Egypt. Forced to flee violence in Libya—just as many of them had been forced to flee their home countries for refuge in Libya—they are no longer allowed to go anywhere else.

In addition to killing and wounding tens of thousands of Libyans and leaving much of the country’s infrastructure in ruins, the US-NATO war launched last March has proven a catastrophe for the estimated 1.5 million to 2.5 million foreign-born workers who were living and working in Libya when the war began.

The majority have fled the country, losing their livelihoods and facing extreme hardship. For many thousands, however, escape has proven thus far impossible.

At least 1,500 of these workers are believed to have lost their lives trying to flee Libya by boat. NATO, which has deployed a naval armada off the Libyan coastline, was charged with refusing to rescue people who drowned or died of thirst or starvation while trying to make the crossing to Europe.

The majority of these workers came to Libya in search of work from poorer countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan.

They, along with black-skinned Libyans, have been targeted by the NATO-backed “rebels” for violent assaults, imprisonment and lynchings based on the spurious charge that Colonel Muammar Gaddafi used Sub-Saharan African mercenaries to defend his regime.

The US and the European powers that conducted the

war against Libya have turned a blind eye to these racist pogroms, while celebrating the supposed dawn of a new “democracy” and lining up to secure a bonanza in oil and reconstruction contracts.

Most of the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who were able to make it across the Tunisian or Egyptian border have been repatriated to their home countries.

Nearly 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers, however are stranded at the Choucha refugee camp near the Libyan-Tunisian border, while 1,000 more are stuck at the Saloum Border Post in Egypt.

The Amnesty report states that the Choucha camp is located in an isolated area of desert that is known in Tunisia as “the door to the Sahara,” where conditions are extremely harsh. Conditions at the Saloum Border Post in Egypt are even worse, with the majority of the people living in makeshift tents made of blankets and plastic sheets.

According to the report, women and children at the Saloum camp are housed in two large tents. The makeshift shelters do not protect their occupants from “the heat of the day and the cold at night, nor stop the scorpions and fleas.”

Amnesty interviewed refugees in the two camps about why they had come there. As the report states, “As the violence increased, thousands of refugees and asylum-seekers tried to leave Libya. Many of those who fled Libya to Egypt and Tunisia told Amnesty International that they were stopped at check-points by armed men, robbed of their possessions, and in some cases beaten. Some witnessed other Sub-Saharan Africans being shot.”

At the Choucha camp, Amnesty spoke to Hafiz, a young man from Darfur, Sudan. “When the problems [conflict] started, local people carried guns and accused us of being mercenaries,” he said. “They came in cars and would take our belongings. They would fire their

guns in the air. One night Gaddafi's guards came to the house and searched us. That is when I realized there is no security and it is better to go to a safe place."

Another Darfuri refugee at the Saloum border post in Egypt told a similar story: "When the conflict started I was living in Benghazi. I stayed home for a month because I saw on the news and heard from Sudanese friends that the *thuuwar* ["revolutionaries", as the NATO-backed forces are known] were targeting dark-skinned people. My Filipino neighbour did not face problems because he is white; he would buy us food. On 17 March 2011, before sunset, three or four armed rebels entered the house. They hit me in the face with the end of the gun, then took our money, passports and mobiles."

Another refugee told Amnesty that he had been beaten by the so-called rebels and taken to a court in Benghazi. He recounted: "There were 40 to 50 people in the court's hall, mostly from Chad, Sudan and Nigeria. People would beat us all over the body with the end and the belt of their guns. They would take one person after another inside the rooms. I could hear the screaming of the people inside and I could see marks on their body after they came out; I believe they were being tortured. A Chadian national was shot in the shoulder; he was bleeding and had no medical help. The people around me would tell me to forget about my life, that we were dead. After six or seven hours my employer came to the court to confirm that I was not a mercenary. I was released."

Needless to say, President Barack Obama made no mention of these atrocities in a speech delivered Tuesday to a "friends of Libya" meeting convened at the United Nations in New York City. He spoke only of a new Libya that would be "free and democratic and prosperous," and about Washington's determination "to build new partnerships to help unleash Libya's extraordinary potential."

The Amnesty report notes that only eight European countries have agreed to resettle any of the refugees stranded in Egypt and Tunisia. And between them they have agreed to take in a total of only 800 people.

"This is an abysmal response to the plight of displaced refugees on Europe's doorstep," the report states. "It also ignores the fact that some European countries, by participating in NATO operations in Libya, have been party to the very conflict that has

been one of the main causes of the involuntary movement of people."

The report also aptly notes that these same European powers had aligned themselves previously with the Gaddafi regime, in part because of its promise to "stem the flow of people arriving in Europe from Africa."

The report underscores the hypocrisy of the claims made by Washington, London and Paris that the war they waged to overthrow the Gaddafi regime in Libya was motivated by a concern to "protect civilians." The hostility and indifference toward the refugees squeezed out of the country by NATO bombardments and racist violence is emblematic of an imperialist war that has used "humanitarianism" as a pretext for the conquest of an oil-rich North African country.

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