

Imperialist wars and interventions fuel refugee crisis in Africa

By Thomas Gaist
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Large numbers of persons fleeing war and famine in sub-Saharan Africa are transiting through Libya in a desperate effort to reach Europe, UNICEF reported last week.

An estimated 80,000 refugees, including 25,000 children, left Libyan ports in an effort to cross the Mediterranean Sea and enter southern Europe last year, with 4,000 of them dying during the crossing.

Another 320 refugees died attempting the crossing during the first two months of 2017 alone, a 300 percent increase from the same period in 2016. Some 16,000 African refugees have crossed from Libya to Italy so far this year, nearly double last year's figure for the same period. Twenty-two refugees from sub-Saharan Africa were killed and 100 wounded during clashes between smugglers along Libya's Mediterranean coastline on Tuesday.

There are 5.5 million Africans currently refugees in other countries, while 11 million Africans are displaced within their home countries, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) reported in January. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says 18 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of becoming refugees in the coming year.

The tide of refugees comes predominantly from countries where the United States and its European allies have intervened most heavily. In Africa, just as in the Middle East, decades of imperialist warfare have shattered entire societies and turned large sections of the population into refugees. This is the most important factor underlying the huge exodus of dispossessed people now struggling to reach European shores.

Libya, which was destroyed and plunged into chaos by the 2011 US-NATO war, has become the epicenter of Africa's refugee crisis. Refugee smuggling routes from across sub-Saharan Africa converge on the

country, which has a long Mediterranean coastline and virtually no functionary authorities. A growing number of criminal networks and extremist militias specialize in transporting, and extracting money from, the refugees. While most of Libyan society remains in chaos, a system of detention centers, including for-profit camps run by militia groups, has managed to take hold.

"There are dozens of illegal prisons over which we have no control. There are at least thirteen in Tripoli. They are handled by the powerful armed militias," a Libyan police official told UNICEF, quoted in the organization's report, "A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route."

In Uganda, 120,000 South Sudanese refugees have crossed the border fleeing war in the past two months alone. Thousands of South Sudanese are fleeing the country every day, the United Nations refugee agency reported this week.

The South Sudanese civil war (2013-present), fought out between factions of a regime installed by Washington in 2011, is causing an unprecedented social collapse. The violence is fatally disrupting economic life, causing widespread famine and has forced 1.5 million to flee the country.

The South Sudanese war is producing "the destruction of all the social fabric in all parts of the country," according to a secret report by the United Nations secretary-general, leaked to the *Washington Post* Monday. The South Sudanese government in Juba is blocking humanitarian aid from reaching areas in need, according to UN humanitarian secretary Stephen O'Brien.

January saw preparations for airstrikes by US F-16 warplanes based in Djibouti, with speculation they could be directed against targets in South Sudan.

The war in northern Nigeria is producing another humanitarian catastrophe that is among the worst in Africa. Five million northern Nigerians are in need of food in the northern provinces of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, and two million Nigerians may starve in the coming year, UN officials reported Monday.

The Nigerian war has involved a steadily growing US role. The Obama administration steadily expanded the US troop presence in neighboring countries. In May 2014, the Obama administration sent 80 US Air Force soldiers to Chad, under the pretext of searching for Nigerian schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram. In March 2015, a US-backed Chadian army invaded northern Nigeria and seized several towns.

In May 2015, the White House authorized direct US military operations in Nigeria. In October 2015, the US Defense Department sent 300 soldiers to Cameroon, along Nigeria's eastern border.

Last November, US AFRICOM General Donald Bolduc told the New York Times that the Lake Chad Basin, where Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon share borders, is becoming "ground zero for the fight against militant Islam in Africa." Of the 30 million residents of the Lake Chad Basin, 2.6 million are already displaced as a result of military violence, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Although presented as the fault of "radical Islam," Africa's refugee crisis has, in reality, developed out of the crisis of world capitalism and the worldwide eruption of US militarism. The transformation of millions of Africans into homeless refugees, fleeing for their lives, is above all the responsibility of the American ruling class, and the criminal strategic aggressions it has pursued during the past two and a half decades.

Prior to the 1990s, the existence of the Soviet Union imposed constraints on US imperialism's efforts to dominate Africa. The end of the USSR removed a political obstacle inhibiting the imperialist powers from pursuing the military conquest of their former colonies. It marked the beginning of a new scramble to redivide and enslave the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

For 25 years, Washington has sought to violently reorder African society and politics in accordance with the interests of American capitalism. Africa's national elites eagerly adapted to the new situation, and have

grown rich amidst the spread of war and famine. They have welcomed ever more US and NATO soldiers into Africa and have thrown open their economies for unrestrained exploitation by foreign capital.

Today, decades after Africa's "independence" and decolonization, thousands of American troops are permanently stationed in Africa. The United States maintains an elaborate military infrastructure across large areas of the continent, including "forward bases" and "security locations" in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal, the Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda.

"AFRICOM, as a new command, is basically a laboratory for a different kind of warfare and a different way of posturing forces," Oxford Research Group security director Richard Reeve said. "There are a myriad of 'lily pads' or small forward operating bases ... so you can spread out even a small number of forces over a very large area and concentrate those forces quite quickly when necessary."

This week, joint US-African war exercises are taking place along the Nigerian border, involving thousands of US and Africa soldiers, including forces from Burkina Faso, Tunisia, Cameroon, Mauritania, Morocco and Chad.

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