

An asylum spring in the new Libya?

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The legacy of almost half a century of authoritarianism and isolation has left the new Libya vulnerable to inheriting the previous regime's human rights failings. The international rights of migrants in general, and of refugees in particular, were largely ignored and often violated under Gaddafi's rule. The events of 2011 have given rise to immediate issues in this domain, including a crisis of internal displacement, that require fair and lasting responses.

These circumstances highlight the urgency of engaging with the human rights of the displaced and tackling internal displacement and mixed migration flows in and across North Africa. These issues set the agenda for a joint two-day workshop organised by UNHCR and the University of Tripoli in early May 2012, which attracted students and academics, plus representatives from civil society, international organisations and the diplomatic community.

For UNHCR the workshop constituted its first public event since its post-revolution return to Libya. For the University of Tripoli the workshop was among its first opportunities for open dialogue with a wide array of interlocutors, both internally and externally. Interventions by local participants focused on the complexity of the challenges facing the new Libya in meeting its international obligations, as well as its national priorities.

At the same time, they demonstrated an incipient openness to recognising the importance of international protection and Libya's role in this regard. The students were keen to contribute to the development of a genuine asylum space in Libya and to the design and implementation of just policies for resolving internal displacement. While the workshop exposed a number of misconceptions, it also revealed great enthusiasm to address these multifaceted issues within a human rights framework. These problems require local solutions, supported externally and informed by international standards.

The Refugee Studies Centre, which we represented at the workshop, has made a commitment to collaboration with the University of Tripoli, in partnership with UNHCR. A joint programme of activities will be designed with a view to promoting human rights education and research in the new Libya.

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