

# Resettlement is needed for refugees in Tunisia

Amaya Valcárcel

**With Tunisia experiencing wide-ranging political, social and economic change, there is an imperative need to alleviate the burden of hosting people fleeing Libya who are unable to return to their countries of origin.**

The countries neighbouring Libya were not in a position to provide more than temporary refuge for many people who had experienced multiple displacement from their countries of origin and previous countries of asylum.

"I am very happy but also fearful," says Tigi<sup>1</sup>, a 21-year-old Eritrean woman who has been living in Shousha camp in southern Tunisia since the early days of the war in Libya and who has been selected to go through a resettlement programme to Australia. She fled her country when she was 15 years old, first to Sudan and then Libya. "Life in Libya was very difficult. I worked as a domestic worker."



Sudanese refugee says farewell to friends in Shousha camp. She and her family have been accepted for resettlement in Norway.

Musse has been less lucky. Also from Eritrea, his resettlement application to Norway and USA has been rejected and his life is about waiting. "Going back to Libya now is not an option. Sub-Saharan Africans are being detained and tortured." Some of his friends went back to Libya to take a boat towards Europe. "They are now in Italy. We have to wait for a slow solution here in the camp, so they decided for the quick solution. We are young but time is against us." Talking to these young men, one realises how many of them are ready to risk their lives taking a boat for Lampedusa or Malta. Many say, "The alternative is Shousha, so what can I lose?"

Extended stay in Shousha camp poses considerable risks to families with small children, unaccompanied minors, persons with serious medical conditions and other vulnerable persons. Resettlement is, for the time being, the only realistic durable solution for the refugees in Shousha. But there has been a limited response by European countries thus far in providing resettlement spaces for

refugees living in Shousha camp with the majority of refugees being submitted to the US. However, vulnerable cases face significant difficulties because of the slower processing time of the US (6-12 months before departure is the norm). In addition, some refugees in Shousha camp will be ineligible to be submitted for resettlement to the US due to its restrictive approach to persons perceived to be affiliated to certain opposition groups. Alternative solutions need to be found for these individuals.

Of the people who are stranded in Shousha, more and more are going back to Libya, despite facing serious risks there, in order to board boats for Europe and embark on a perilous sea journey. Thomas from Nigeria says, "Arriving in Lampedusa is a question of luck. If you fail, ok; if you succeed, it's fine.<sup>2</sup> One needs to have courage in life to continue moving forward. Here we are stuck... but how can we go back to Nigeria empty-handed? Our families paid so we could earn money to send it back home. If we could go back at least with some money, we would not feel ashamed." If IOM and UNHCR were to provide some financial assistance to migrants (as well as assistance in terms of transportation and documentation), they would be in a better position to decide to go back home.

Given their proximity to the affected region and their comparatively greater resources, EU Member States should be taking a leading role in responding to the grim situation of these refugees. EU Member States bear a heavy responsibility for the way in which in recent years they have ignored Libya's dire human rights record on the one hand, while actively seeking the collaboration of Colonel Gaddafi's government to stem the flow of people arriving in Europe from Africa, on the other. The policies of the EU resulted in serious violations of the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

EU countries' poor resettlement response so far to the plight of displaced refugees on Europe's doorstep 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.

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1. The names used in this article are not their real names.

2. In 2011 the Mediterranean took the record for being the deadliest stretch of water in the world: more than 1,500 people drowned or went missing (and these numbers may be an underestimate).