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 Tigi1, 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.”

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 stuck... but how can we go back to Libya 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.”

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. 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.”

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).