

## Video of apparent slave markets triggers outrage and calls to investigate

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Television news footage of African migrants being sold in Libya has led to international outrage and far-reaching condemnation.

CNN earlier this month aired scenes of what it described as smugglers “auctioning migrants off as slaves,” fanning the pains of Libyans about the decay of their state and society. CNN crew members said they witnessed a dozen men being sold within a few minutes at a property outside Tripoli. The footage showed two young men standing in the dark while another shouted out prices. They were apparently sold to bidders for the equivalent of \$400 each.

The November 13 report revived the divide in Libya as the government in the east blamed its rivals in Tripoli for the gruesome abuses of migrants. Mohammed Sayala, foreign minister of the UN-backed government in Tripoli, said the authorities would investigate the report.

Neither one of the rival government is currently able to assert law and order across the whole country as they are vying for power and wealth, six years after longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown and killed.

While CNN’s report includes the first confirmed footage of Libyan “slave markets,” according to independent Libyan researcher Mary Fitzgerald, similar accounts of abuse and torture have long been reported amid Libya’s strife.

Many African migrants during Muammar Qaddafi’s rule worked for some time to raise the needed money to pay smugglers to sail illegally to Italy, often seen as a gateway for migrants to Europe seeking

a better life.

Young African men bound for Europe have been frequently caught in trafficking networks and sold for labour in Libya, where many have been detained, tortured and even killed, according to the UN International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

French President Emmanuel Macron denounced the auctioning of Africans as a “crime against humanity.” His government called on November 22 for an emergency UN Security Council meeting to address the issue.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has also called for an investigation by the appropriate UN bodies to bring the perpetrators to justice. “Slavery has no place in our world and these actions are among the most egregious abuses of human rights,” said Guterres, adding that migration must be addressed “in a comprehensive and humane manner” and should include a crackdown on smugglers and traffickers.

The news of open-air slave markets has prompted a backlash from the Libyan populace, with many citizens sharing the hashtag “#LibyansAgainstSlavery.”

Writer Omar Abulqasim Alkikli said the news of the slave markets was indicative of “the decline of human values within Libya’s social fabric.”

“Poor Africans seeking a better life outside their homelands found themselves trapped in Libya by horrible and miserable decoys of Libyan human beings to abuse of their bodies and dignity and sell them to work as slaves,” Alkikli wrote.

There was also public outrage in African capitals, with protesters gathering outside Libyan embassies in Bamako, Mali and Conakry, Guinea, as well as in Paris between November 18-20, according to local news reports.

Athletes and musicians voiced



**Placing blame.** A woman demonstrator holds a placard with the message “Loving Freedom, reduced to slavery. Europe is an accomplice to crimes” as she attends a protest against slavery outside the Libyan embassy in Paris, on November 24.

(Reuters)

their opposition as well, with Manchester United’s Paul Pogba, who is of Guinean descent, throwing his hands up in a protest symbol after scoring a goal on November 18 and posting a message on Instagram for “those suffering slavery in Libya.”

Ivorian reggae artist Alpha Blondy wrote in a Facebook post

addressed to African leaders: “What are you waiting for to react and intervene???”

In Tunisia, trade union UGTT labelled the sale of migrants an “aggression against humanity” and called on political forces in Libya to fight terrorist militias and other criminal gangs that “are borrowing their practices from Daesh (an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State) in Syria and Iraq.”

A number of African men in Cameroon were quoted by Agence France-Presse talking about being sold into slavery in Libya. “It was total hell,” said Maxime Ndong, who arrived back home in Cameroon with a group of 250 migrants flown by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

“There is a trade in black people there. People who want slaves... come to buy them,” Ndong said “If you resist, they shoot at you. There have been deaths.”

Another migrant, 22-year-old Sano, said he had been caught by people who said they were police before being sold to a slave trader. He was then forced to work on a tomato farm.

The European Union has come under fire for allegedly cooperating with the Libyan coastguard to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean into Europe.

UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini called this policy “inhuman” and accused the international community of turning a “blind eye to the unimaginable horrors endured by migrants in Libya.”

African and European leaders are due to meet in Ivory Coast’s main city of Abidjan on November 29-30, where migration and Europe’s efforts to tackle it by co-opting Libya likely will be high on the agenda.

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.

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### Viewpoint

## Mirage of Libya reconciliation: no control, no security, no unity

Rhiannon Smith and Lachlan Wilson

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Six years after the death of Muammar Qaddafi and the declaration of a “new” Libya, the country has never been closer to collapse. Three governments, two parliaments and myriad militias compete power and influence, using political manoeuvring and military might to attempt to gain leverage over one another. Increasingly, these divisions are coalescing along regional lines, with the east of the country pitted against the west.

A reinvigorated UN dialogue process launched in September by the UN envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salame, hopes to reconcile rival factions, approve a new constitution and establish presidential and parliamentary elections within a year. The first stage of the process is to amend the 2015 Skhirat Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) so that both political factions will ratify it. In his address to the UN Security Council on November 16, Salame stressed that negotiations between the House of Representatives (HoR), the parliament based in eastern Libya, which is aligned with military commander Khalifa Haftar, and the High Council of State (HCS), an advisory body based in Tripoli and aligned with the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), remained on track.

Yet on the ground, tensions have recently ramped up between allies of the GNA in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and the so-called Libyan National

Army (LNA) in eastern Libya, led by Haftar.

Sarraj is Libya’s internationally recognised head of state, and, as such, he derives his legitimacy from the LPA framework and the support of international backers. However, Sarraj has little power over the actions of militias nominally under his control. Conversely, Haftar has no formal political role but has exerted control over swathes of eastern Libya through the LNA. He claims he can be the strongman the country needs and bring the militias under control.

As the UN-led talks have started, both factions and their patchwork of ever-shifting allies have attempted to extend their spheres of influence into the domain of the other to strengthen their claims to legitimacy. Both have failed. Haftar’s military prowess now wanes and Sarraj is scrambling to consolidate his position.

Haftar sought to expand his limited military presence in western Libya. In early October, forces allied with the LNA took control of Sabratha from the people smugglers who had ruled the roost there and Haftar declared that the capital was next. In response, the GNA sided with the LNA-aligned groups in Sabratha, declaring it a victory against criminals. However, Haftar’s allies appear to have overstretched themselves in the pursuit of taking west Libya and the GNA struck back. In early November, an alliance of forces linked to the GNA defeated LNA-aligned forces in Wershefana,

south of the capital. Significantly, Haftar’s longtime allies from Zintan joined the GNA in this fight, considerably weakening the LNA’s military momentum in western Libya and undermining Haftar’s strongman image.

Recent developments have shown that Haftar is unable to ensure civilian protection even in so-called controlled territory. Benghazi is seeing a breakdown in security, with rising levels of armed assaults, kidnappings and assassinations. The situation is being compounded by the LNA’s inability to control aligned militias, with battalions and commanders recently implicated in massacres and war crimes.

Haftar’s opponents in the west are not faring much better. The GNA sought to extend its political power into eastern Libya. In August it appointed Faraj Gaem as the GNA’s interior minister in Benghazi. Gaem received significant resistance to his presence in the city, including two assassination attempts. While Haftar was on the back foot over the defeat in Wershefana and accusations of war crimes, Gaem attempted to challenge the strongman’s control over the city. This backfired and resulted in Gaem’s arrest and a ban on GNA officials travelling to the east.

Even in its own backyard, the GNA’s lack of control over militias involved in smuggling or criminal activity continues to erode its legitimacy. There is evidence of massacres and torture carried out

by GNA-aligned militias, including reports of prisoners from the Wershefana campaign being executed. A recent CNN report showing slave auctions taking place near Tripoli has not helped this.

Haftar’s military prowess does not give him de facto veto in the political environment if he can’t even use it to consolidate territorial control, while Sarraj’s ability to use politics to challenge authority appears impotent.

The hope is that the UN political process will provide a route out of this stalemate. On November 21, the HoR voted to approve the latest round of LPA amendments. However, it remains unclear whether it approved Article 8, which gives the supreme command of the armed forces to the Presidential Council. This has long been a sticking point for the HoR and its allies in eastern Libya as Haftar wants this power for himself. The LPA lacks significant buy-in from local groups and organisations, particularly the militias, in part because its support for any broader faction is usually based on concerns not addressed in the political agreement. For local elites, the formation of larger alliances puts local unity at risk.

As it stands, the larger political and military alliances are becoming increasingly irrelevant for normal Libyans who have been abandoned to fend for their own personal security and economic survival. Not only is reconciliation fracturing at the top, it is undermining things at the bottom too.

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