

United Nations Warns of Abuse of Libyan Refugees on Shocking Scale



United Nations, October 23 (RHC)-- The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has warned that thousands of Libyan refugees are currently living in dire conditions in a hub to the west of the capital Tripoli, saying they could be exposed to abuse on a shocking scale. The UNHCR said its staff working in the city of Sabratha with authorities of Libya's internationally-recognized government had described a "picture of human suffering and abuse on a shocking scale" among refugees previously held by smugglers.

UNHCR spokesman Andrej Mahecic said some 14,500 refugees were currently held by government-allied forces after suffering for months at the hands of smugglers. He said another 6,000 people were still being held by smugglers, prompting fears that a similar pattern of sexual abuse and forced labor could be enforced on them.

"Amongst the refugees and migrants who suffered abuse at the hands of smugglers, there are pregnant women and new-born babies," said Mahecic, who was speaking to reporters in Geneva, Switzerland. The official added that hundreds had not eaten for days when found by authorities, while hundreds of others had no shoes and clothes. Many of them also recounted how they had suffered from abuse, including

sexual violence and forced labor while showing their bullet wounds.

The UNHCR said official detention centers and assembly points were packed with refugees and many children, among them "a worrying number of unaccompanied and separated children, many under the age of six," were forced to sleep in the open. The UN agency also said that the facilities lacked water tanks and other sanitation equipment.

Libya, gripped by chaos and lawlessness since the fall of the North African country's leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, was until recently the main embarkation point for mostly African refugees seeking to head to Europe. The flow across the central Mediterranean subsided, however, when the European Union reached an agreement with local militia to provide them with funds and training on relocation of refugees.

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