

Minors accuse guards at Libyan detention center of sexual assault

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Nearly 13,000 men, women and children, a record number, have been intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and returned to Libyan shores from the start of the year up to June 12 [File: Mahmud Turkia/ AFP]

Tripoli, June 21 (RHC)-- A group of teenage migrant girls housed in a government-run detention centre in Libya have accused guards at the facility, funded by the European Union, of sexually assaulting them, according to a report by the Associated Press.

A 17-year-old Somali girl, whose identity has been kept anonymous, told AP that she was raped by a guard at the Shara al-Zawiya centre in the capital, Tripoli, in April. More girls from the centre have come out with similar allegations, with some sharing their ordeal with AP.

The teenager was rescued by Libyan security forces in February more than two years after she was captured by traffickers, who sexually abused her. Traffickers are notorious for extorting from, torturing and assaulting migrants and refugees like her trying to reach Europe.

But the 17-year-old said the sexual assaults against her have continued, only now by guards at the government-run centre where many of the migrants or refugees are being kept.

She and four other Somali teenagers undergoing similar abuses are pleading to be released from the Shara al-Zawiya center. It is one of a network of centers run by Libya's Department for Combating Illegal Immigration, or DCIM, which is supported by the European Union in its campaign to build Libya into a bulwark against mainly African migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

"While it is not the first time I suffer from sexual attacks, this is more painful as it was by the people who should protect us," the 17-year-old said, speaking to The Associated Press by a smuggled mobile phone.

"You have to offer something in return to go to the bathroom, to call family or to avoid beating," she said. "It's like we are being held by traffickers."

Smugglers and traffickers in Libya – many of them members of militias – have long been notorious for brutalising migrants. But rights groups and United Nations agencies say abuse also takes place in the official DCIM-run facilities. "Sexual violence and exploitation are rife in several detention centres (for migrants) across the country," said Tarik Lamloum, a Libyan activist working with the Belaady Organization for Human Rights.

The UN refugee agency has also documented hundreds of cases of women raped while in either DCIM detention or traffickers' prisons, with some even being impregnated by guards and giving birth during detention, said Vincent Cochetel, the UNHCR's special envoy for the Central Mediterranean.

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