

15 November 2018

Dear Mr. Negash and Mr. Stauffer,

On behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who has asked us to respond, we wish to thank you for your letter of 21 September, expressing concern over the dire situation of Eritrean and other sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees in Libya and calling for greater resources and solutions to address their plight.

From the outset, we wish to assure you that UNHCR and IOM share your concerns, and that we are doing our utmost to respond to the situation, despite the very challenging and dangerous circumstances in which we are operating on the ground. Restricted and unpredictable access to populations of concern has further limited our scope of action and ability to provide protection and assistance to those in need. We are also reliant on the support and cooperation of governments and other entities who have the ability to facilitate our work. Despite these challenges, we have made some progress as outlined below.

With respect to detention, we estimate that there are currently over 5,400 refugees and migrants in official detention facilities in Libya, including some 2,500 from Eritrea, while the number held in unofficial facilities is unknown. Our access even to the official centres is restricted and unpredictable. Despite this, since the beginning of 2018, we have managed to conduct more than 1,000 monitoring visits, during which UNHCR and IOM distributed life-saving assistance, and UNHCR conducted registration.

Meanwhile, we continue to advocate their release from detention and the establishment of alternative reception facilities, particularly for the most vulnerable. UNHCR completed the rehabilitation of a transit facility in Tripoli in June 2018, which can house 1,000 vulnerable asylum-seekers persons of concern and provide a safe location where registration can be carried out and solutions pursued. We hope that circumstances will allow the facility to be opened shortly. IOM has also succeeded in having over 60 vulnerable individuals released from detention and placed with host families or safe shelters and establishing a transit centres for a small number of vulnerable migrants.

In parallel, solutions outside Libya are being sought to alleviate suffering and bring the most vulnerable to safety. UNHCR has succeeded in negotiating the release of some 2,100 refugees and asylum-seekers from detention, following which they were evacuated to temporary transit facilities in Niger and elsewhere, until onward solutions including resettlement to third countries could be found. However, swift onward resettlement is needed in order to sustain these efforts, as the centre in Niger has periodically reached the limit of 1,500 evacuees who can be accommodated at any given time, resulting in temporary suspensions of the programme.

Mr. Eskinder Negash
President and CEO
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

Mr. John Stauffer
President
The America Team for Displaced Eritreans

So far in 2018, more than 900 individuals have departed for resettlement, either directly from Libya or following evacuation to Niger, including a substantial number of Eritrean nationals. However, increased opportunities for resettlement and other legal pathways for admission, including family reunification, are urgently needed. Your advocacy with resettlement countries would be highly appreciated in this regard. IOM's Voluntary Humanitarian Returns programme is also providing support for migrants who wish to return to their home countries. Since the beginning of 2018, nearly 13,700 people have been released from detention and provided with assistance to return home.

To address the situation of dangerous movements, by land and sea, of both refugees and migrants, both agencies are working with countries of origin and transit to disseminate information about the risks involved and urging States to strengthen measures to prevent smuggling and trafficking. We have also urged targeted investments in countries of asylum and transit, as well as efforts to tackle the root causes of these movements more strategically and with substantive resources.

UNHCR has also updated its position on returns to Libya (September 2018), which can be found at <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5b8d02314.pdf>, and is calling on States to suspend forced returns until the security and human rights situation have improved. This includes the return not only of Libyan nationals, but also third country nationals who departed from Libya and were intercepted or rescued at sea. Many of the concerns you raised in your letter regarding the situation in Libya are reflected in his position paper. We also invite you to regularly monitor UNHCR's country data portal on Libya, which contains up to date information on the situation.

Once again, we thank you for your concern and encourage you to continue your advocacy and support for our work. Please feel free to share this message with your network of partner agencies.

Yours sincerely,



António Vitorino
Director-General
International Organisation for Migration



Filippo Grandi
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees