

Black refugees remain trapped along border between Tunisia and Libya

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Refugees hold placards reading "Black Lives Matter" in Sfax on Tunisia's eastern coast on July 7, 2023 [AP Photo]

Tunis, July 13 (RHC)-- Two further groups of sub-Saharan African refugees, including children, have been confirmed to be trapped in a militarised border zone between Tunisia and Libya despite reports that hundreds had been evacuated to state-owned properties in the surrounding region.

A group of the approximately 150 people trapped said they were deposited in the border zone on Tuesday after Tunisian police had beaten them. They said on Wednesday that they have had no access to food or water for several days. Video shared by Human Rights Watch (HRW) showed one group sheltering under a tree as they called for water, saying that people are dying.

"It's crazy," said Hamza Meddeb, a research fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Centre who is based in Tunis. "We have all these agencies, but none is talking to the other, so it's chaotic. Every one is reacting to whatever crisis they're seeing in front of them without telling another. There's no coordination, no strategy, nothing."

In addition to those expelled to the Libyan border, a large group of Black refugees was taken by bus from the port city of Sfax to the desert frontier with Algeria. While the NGOs Alarm Phone and HRW were able to maintain contact with the group as it splintered, both NGOs have now lost contact. Two bodies of Black refugees have since been recovered from the area.

Hostility to people from sub-Saharan Africa has exploded after the death of a local man in Sfax on July 3, with many Black refugees forced to flee the city amid violence targeted against them.

Despite the arrest of three men from Cameroon for the man's killing and the expulsion of hundreds of Black refugees to the country's borders, anger at the presence of undocumented immigrants only appears to be growing in Tunisia.

In Ben Gardane, a town on the Libyan border where many refugees were removed from the militarised zone to a school dormitory, local education unions have petitioned for their removal.

Some have not waited to be evicted. One group of Black refugees relocated from the Libyan border to a half-built school in the desert town of Medenine have begun to make their way northwards by foot after being refused train travel.

"This hasn't come from nowhere," Meddeb said, referring to growing racial tensions. "It's been coming since 2022, and they're still panicking. They collect them in Sfax. They dump them in the desert. They pick them up in the desert. They dump them in an old school. I mean, what's the point? What are they achieving?"

In Sfax, more than a week since violence first flared, public parks still host crowds of refugees, including families, sheltering from the relentless July heat. Men with bandages wrapped around wounds described being beaten and attacked with machetes while women said they had been subjected to sexual violence. All were forcibly evicted from their homes.

While hostility to Black refugees is rife, a fundraising effort on behalf of those forced from their homes in Sfax raised more than 45,000 dinars (\$14,600) in its first 48 hours. A protest against the treatment of Black refugees in Tunisia's second largest city is also slated for Friday.

Ingrained unemployment in Tunisia, a rising cost of living and uncertainty over the future have worn away at the patience of many Tunisians. Many are joining the sub-Saharan Africans in seeking an escape route across the Mediterranean to Europe.

The situation was inflamed significantly in February when President Kais Saied spoke of "hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa" coming to Tunisia and spreading "violence, crime and unacceptable practices" as part of a plot to change the demographic makeup of the country. Saied's

conspiracy theories found a receptive audience in a country beaten down by an economic crisis and acute shortages of subsidised staple foods, such as sugar, vegetable oil and rice.

Violence followed Saied's speech. Black refugees were beaten, sexually assaulted and made homeless. Despite international censure, the anger remains. Tunisia has received little international criticism for its mass expulsions of refugees to its borders despite legal organisations saying the state's actions represent a clear breach of international law.

The European Commission is instead weighing an aid package worth more than 1 billion euros (\$1.1bn) to shore up Tunisia's economy and better police its borders. An EU spokesperson said last week that the bloc is monitoring the situation closely.

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