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Tunisia's seaborne samaritans rescue stranded migrants

Irin (14.10.2014) <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100713/tunisia-s-seaborne-samaritans-rescue-stranded-migrants> - In Zarzis, a small port city of some 70,000 in southeastern Tunisia, fishermen plying the Mediterranean have become saviours, rescuing boatloads of illegal migrants to Europe setting out from the shores of Libya.

Ahmed is one of them. He squints in the bright light as fishing boats with names scrawled in Arabic across their sterns bob gently around him. He sits on a pile of nets, his broad woven mdhalla hat angled back on his head, while in the distance, large cargo ships sit docked in a nearby commercial port.

On their two to three day fishing trips Ahmed and his colleagues often come across boats full of migrants who have been set adrift by smugglers in boats with little fuel or whose motors break down. "With no government left in Libya, there's plenty of *harraga* [burners]," he said, using the local word for illegal migrants. Too often, he said, fishing trips have to be cut short to drag the *harraga* to shore.

"In the near future we're going to see *harraga* coming out of Libya in huge numbers," he said, asking that his real name not be used.

"Why? Because of the deteriorating situation we see there now."

As Libya's civil strife has intensified, the country's 1,770km coastline has become the most popular site for smugglers to cram migrants from across the world onto boats with the promise of making it to Europe.

Dunnapar Fern Tilakamonkul, an officer with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Libya, said that according to the UNHCR's most recent estimate, 165,000 people have made the crossing so far this year - almost triple the 60,000 who crossed in 2013. Of them, the vast majority are believed to have departed from Libyan shores, with the country's weak coastguard largely powerless to stop them.

Yet many do not make it as far as Europe. Huge numbers end up capsizing and drowning, whether by accident or in some cases through deliberate attacks, while others still are left to float aimlessly in the Mediterranean. Some of the lucky ones float into Tunisian waters, where they are sometimes rescued by fishermen like Ahmed.

"Before 2011 we used to save the [migrants], bring them into the port, and let them go on their way without telling the authorities," Ahmed said, with an air of nostalgia. "In the

past couple of years, though, security has tightened. Now all those we find at sea we have to report to the coastguard.”

UNHCR noted in a statement earlier this month that, "90,000 people crossed to Europe between 1 July and 30 September, and at least 2,200 lost their lives, compared to 75,000 people and 800 deaths for the period between 1 January and 30 June."

For Mongi Slim, head of the Tunisian Red Crescent's regional operations in southern Tunisia, the smuggling business of migrants and asylum seekers out of Libya is a big part of the problem. "There are smugglers in Libya who say, 'We'll take you for 1,500 Libyan dinars [US\$1,230].' They put the migrants on boats with up to 150 people, point north and say, 'It's that way to Lampedusa.'"

He added that the wave of migrants is likely to continue unabated until the end of October, when good sailing weather falls off.

When the migrants are brought into Zarzis, Slim said, the Red Crescent receives them, offering food and water. For those who decline to be voluntarily repatriated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the next step is housing. Red Crescent Tunisia operates two dormitories in the city of Medenine, just inland from Zarzis.

Culture clash

Yet in a turn that has brought more distress to the exhausted migrants coming ashore, Slim noted that conservative locals in Medenine have come into conflict with sub-Saharan African migrants because of behaviour they view as disrespectful.

"This happened [in early August] when we brought in 240 migrants who were mostly Nigerian. The locals were upset about migrant women who wore revealing clothes, and who walked the streets unaccompanied. Locals said they were prostitutes."

As for what becomes of the migrants housed in the Red Crescent shelters, Slim said that migrants in Medenine rarely stay more than three months. Often, he said, "they adapt to the country and find work in construction or agriculture," two areas of the regional economy in perennially high demand of labour.

Citing the group of 240 largely Nigerian migrants rescued in August, he said half had voluntarily returned to Nigeria with the help of IOM. However, he claims that the other half slipped back across the border into Libya, where they will likely try again to cross to Europe from the port of Zuwara, only 60km from the Tunisian border.

For years Libya has attracted hundreds of thousands of sub-Saharan, Asian and Egyptian migrant workers and refugees, attracted by opportunities created by oil wealth and, in many cases, the vast unpatrolled borders that Libya shares with six countries. Gerry Simpson of Human Rights Watch in Geneva, said the organization spoke with the Libyan Ministry of Labour, which noted in April 2014 that about 170,000 mostly Bangladeshi, Egyptian, Pakistani, and Sudanese nationals were given work permits in 2013. The Ministry pointed out, however, that it believes there are an estimated two to three million undocumented migrant workers in Libya.

In October 2013 after more than 400 refugees perished in two accidents just off of the Italian coast, the European Union established the Mare Nostrum initiative. Administered by the Italian navy, Mare Nostrum coordinates search and rescue of migrants and refugees at sea, and has saved over 92,000 people at its most recent count. Yet, the Italian authorities plan to phase out the programme soon, citing costs and claiming that it only serves to encourage smugglers, while rights groups say many lives will be lost if Mare Nostrum is discontinued before the EU can fill the gap.

Nicanor Haon, a former officer in the migrants' rights department at the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, claims that not enough is being done on the part of international actors to save desperate migrants stranded off the North African coast. Due to a lack of coordination between governments over who is in charge of rescuing migrants, he said, lives are lost. "Sometimes people call the Italian coastguard for help, but Italy and Malta then argue over who's responsible. In the meantime, people die."

Prosecution risk

Further, Haon said fishermen like those in Zarzis also face the risk of prosecution for helping migrants at sea. "Depending on which international borders [the fishermen] cross," he said, "they may be accused of smuggling."

While rights groups criticize the international community for not doing enough to save the lives of *harraga*, the fishermen of Zarzis continue to try to take up the slack.

While Ahmed says fewer *harraga* have been brought into Zarzis in recent weeks, he claims this is due to inclement sailing weather, and fishermen staying in to celebrate the Muslim holiday of Eid. Yet, with rising instability and violence in Libya, his forecast is dark. "We will see *harraga* coming in each day," adding "but we can't leave people out there in an overflowing boat to die, because we're Muslims."

Honor killing: A father burned his 13-year-old daughter to death

Ryot (14.06.2014) /

<http://www.ryot.org/father-tunisia-murder-daughter-honor-killing/720789> - A man in Tunisia has been accused of burning his 13-year-old daughter to death after she walked home from school with a boy in her class.

The girl, a middle school student named Aya, spent nine days in the hospital before succumbing to her fourth-degree burns on June 7th.

Her father has since been arrested.

Tunisia Live reports that her murder is believed to be an "honor crime" — a killing made when a relative is perceived to have brought shame to the family.

Though common in Pakistan and Syria, the website reports that honor killings are "almost unheard of" in modern-day Tunisia.

A social media movement in the country has launched in response to the killing, with activists calling for greater news coverage of the incident.

"I cannot believe that this case could fall into oblivion," said one blogger in a Facebook post, translated from French into English by Tunisia Live. "What happened is an unacceptable crime. Further, the reactions of some people who justify this barbaric act reflect the degree of ignorance that prevails in the country."

Local supporters have planned a march in solidarity for Aya on June 19th. The event page states that her murder is symbolic of a society that "continues to demonize the female gender."

That statement isn't far from the truth. Honor killings are an atrocity that, more often than not, are committed against women. Even in contemporary society, these honor crimes still occur regularly.

One study found that the attacks have actually risen over a 20-year period from 1989 to 2009, either signifying a real increase in killings or a greater willingness to report them.

In order to make sure murders like Aya's don't keep happening, things need to change.

In 2013, there was a 226-page study published on the world's Muslim population. Researchers surveyed people from 23 countries, and those from Afghanistan and Iraq were most in support of honor killings.

In fact, people from nine out of the 23 countries approved of honor killings. That means the majority of Muslim communities in nine nations believe it's okay to murder your own family member.

Still, we can't place the blame on the Muslim community. People of all backgrounds around the world are guilty of violence against women.

It's a terrible violation of human rights, but sadly, many women who fall victim to these killings aren't aware of their own rights.

In Afghanistan alone, 90 percent of women aged 15-49 believe it is okay for their husbands to beat them under certain circumstances. The statistics are similar in other countries where these honor killings occur.

To end these horrific occurrences, we need to educate women about the power they actually have — and to educate men about the importance of women's rights.

Habib Kazdaghli acquitted

Habib Kazdaghli acquitted: "the rule of law wins in Tunisia" says the EHF

European Humanist Federation (03.05.2013) -Accused by a student wearing a niqab to have slapped her while she was vandalizing his office, in March 2012, Habib Kazdaghli, the dean of the Manouba University of Tunis, was charged with "*acts of violence committed by an official in the exercise of its functions.*" Although he has always vehemently denied the charges, Habib Kazdaghli was facing a sentence of five years in prison. Pierre Galand, President of the European Humanist Federation, visited Tunis on several occasions to show solidarity with the dean. "

Even if it's just a fair decision, the acquittal of Habib Kazdaghli is a great relief for all democrats who supported him in Tunisia and abroad throughout the trial," commented Pierre Galand just after the court reached its verdict. Victim of assault, threats and violent occupation of the Manouba University by Salafist militants, Habib Kazdaghli has always opposed the full veil (niqab) in the classrooms. "*I am delighted with the role played by judges who took the side of justice,* said Habib Kazdaghli soon after the court's decision. *This means that the struggle for the rule of law is still possible in Tunisia.* "

Young Tunisian woman who scandalized Muslim hardliners by baring breasts fears for her life

AP (07.04.2013) - A 19-year-old Tunisian who bared her breasts and taunted Muslim hard-liners said this weekend that she now fears for her life and wants to take refuge abroad.

The woman known only as Amina appeared in photos on Facebook last month with the words "My body belongs to me" scrawled on her bare chest, a particularly bold act in a Muslim country led by a moderate Islamist party, Ennahda.

Amina's act was inspired by the Ukraine-based group Femen, which stages bare-breasted protests for women's and gay rights. The group held an International Topless Jihad day last Thursday in support of Muslim women, including Amina.

Amina went into hiding after reportedly receiving death threats, prompting wild rumors over her whereabouts, including that she had been interned in a psychiatric hospital. But she reappeared in an interview broadcast Saturday with the French cable TV station Canal Plus in a village hours from the Tunisian capital where she's been hiding.

She told Canal Plus that she "must leave Tunisia."

"I'm afraid for my life and the lives of my family," she said, adding that she doesn't think it possible to return to school in Tunisia and wants to study journalism abroad.

Amina made an earlier TV appearance with a private Tunisian channel, in mid-March, her face blurred. She insisted her action had not aimed to provoke. "We Femen, we have the courage to cry out our demands to liberate women," she said at the time.

Amina told Canal Plus that though she fears for her life in her homeland, she will keep her Femen principles "until I'm 80."

Chokri Belaid assassination prompts protests

BBC News (06.02.2013) - Relatives say Mr Belaid was shot in the neck and head on his way to work.

He was a prominent secular opponent of the moderate Islamist-led government and his murder has sparked protests around the country, with police firing tear gas to disperse angry crowds.

President Moncef Marzouki has condemned the killing and is cutting short a visit to France to return home.

He has also cancelled a scheduled appearance at a summit in Egypt to return home.

Tunisia is currently gripped by political crisis as talks on a long-awaited cabinet reshuffle to include a wider range of parties in a coalition led by the Ennahda party have broken down.

BBC Arabic's Wafa Zaiane says this is the first time a political leader has been assassinated since the Arab Spring uprising of January 2011, in a country where political assassinations are rare.

Speaking in front of the European Parliament on his visit to Strasbourg, President Marzouki said the murder of Mr Belaid should not affect Tunisia's revolution.

"There are many enemies of our peaceful revolution. And they're determined to ensure it fails," he said.

'Great anger'

Referring to Mr Belaid as a "long-standing friend", he said his "hateful assassination" was a threat.

"This is a letter being sent to us that we will refuse to open. We reject that message and we will continue to unmask the enemies of the revolution," said the president, who was to participate in the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation in Cairo on Thursday and is instead returning home directly from Strasbourg.

According to AFP news agency, people torched the premises of the Ennahda party in the central town of Mezzouna, and ransacked the party's offices in the mining town of Gafsa in protest at Mr Belaid's death.

In Tunis, police fired tear gas to disperse protesters who had gathered outside the interior ministry, it reports.

Crowds had been chanting they want a "second revolution", the BBC's Sihem Hassaini in the city says.

Police also fired tear gas at demonstrators in Sidi Bouzid, the town where the revolution that toppled Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from the presidency began a little more than two years ago, AFP reports.

A resident, Mehdi Horchani, told Reuters news agency that more than 4,000 people protested in the city, burning tyres and throwing stones at police.

"There is great anger," he is quoted as saying.

It is not known who is responsible for the attack on the politician.

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali said his murder was an "act of terrorism" and promised to pursue all efforts to "immediately" arrest the murderer.

Mr Belaid was the co-ordinator of the left-leaning Democratic Patriots party, part of a group of opposition parties which has been challenging the government since it came to power following the country's first post-Arab Spring election in October 2011.

"This murder robs Tunisia of one of its most courageous and free voices," French President Francois Hollande said in a statement.

On Saturday, Mr Belaid accused "mercenaries" hired by the Ennahda party of carrying out an attack on a Democratic Patriots meeting.

The Paris-based France 24 TV station has reported that Mr Belaid reportedly received recent death threats.

It said that he died in hospital after being shot by "three men in a black vehicle".

"My brother was assassinated. I am desperate and depressed," Mr Belaid's brother Abdelmajid Belaid told AFP.

Correspondents say that although Mr Belaid's party did not have a large share of the election vote, it spearheaded popular concern over the rising level of political violence in Tunisia.

New constitution and challenges of the transition

A conference at the European Parliament addressed the issue of the future of Tunisia: a democratic state or a theocratic state?

By Riccardo Benvenuti for *Human Rights Without Frontiers International*

HRWF (21.11.2012) - On 15th November the S&D Group organized an event at the European Parliament to discuss the new Tunisian constitution and the democratic transition process that is currently occurring in the country.

Arab Spring

Tunisia was the first Mediterranean country affected by the popular revolts of the Arab Spring. Tunisia also represents a unique and important interlocutor for the European Union.

During the first panel moderated by MEP Carmen Romero Lopez (S&D), Lobna Jeribi, vice-chair of the committee on the Constitution Preamble and fundamental principles of the National Constituent Assembly, and Marouane Dimassi, professor at the University of Sousse, discussed the new Constitution and the constitutional process. Ms Jeribi underlined that Tunisians do not want a theocratic state but a democratic one that serves citizens and ensures the equality of all people, regardless of their origin, gender or religion. She also confirmed that the work on Tunisia's new constitution, which was meant to have been finished by the end of October, would be completed by the start of 2013.

Professor Dimassi stated that the National Constituent Assembly needs to listen to the Tunisian people and what they want. He said that the Tunisian people wanted a better democracy, more job opportunities and more done to fight against corruption. Professor Dimassi also stressed that fundamental rights should be the main core of the constitutional preamble.

Judicial and media freedom

In the second panel discussion, moderated by MEP Veronique De Keyser (S&D), focus was placed on the justice sector and on the importance of pluralism in the media during the transition process. Khaltoum KANNOU, President of the Association of Tunisian Judges, and Kamel Labidi, President of the National Authority for Reform and Information and Communication, insisted on the need to fight corruption in both the Tunisian judiciary and the media. Alexandre Delvaux, a professional consultant working in support of the Tunisian media sector, confirmed that excessive politicization of the justice system and media is undermining public trust in these institutions. Only as trust is restored in

Tunisia's leadership can the revolution result in a democratic change that serves the people of that country.
