

Libya's displaced Tawergha threaten unilateral return

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Two years on from the start of the Libyan revolution, one major humanitarian issue awaits resolution: the internal displacement of around 60,000 Libyans accused of close ties to the Gaddafi regime and committing abuses during the nine-month conflict.

Around half of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) are ethnic Tawergha, according to the Libyan Humanitarian Relief Agency (LibAid) - driven from their home town of the same name to the east of Tripoli.

Now Tawergha community leaders say they are fed up waiting for reconciliation to start, and in June this year say they will leave their 20-odd camps - mainly in Tripoli and Benghazi - to return home.

"The life which we live now, it is no different from dying, and so we prefer to die at home," Abdelrahman Mahmoud, head of the Local Council of the Tawergha in Tripoli, told IRIN.

"This is our final decision. We tried with all sides. We are weak, what can we do? What threat are we to anyone? We are normal people and we want to live our lives."

Informal settlements

At the Felallah IDP camp in Tripoli around 1,000 Tawergha live in temporary cabins next to a large construction site, crammed into dormitory rooms and supported by food supplies from LibAid and with monitoring support from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Eviction from similar sites and student dormitories is a frequent threat.

"If any camps are evicted this will create a big crisis - it will be very difficult to find a place for them," said Mohamed Al Sweii, an adviser on international cooperation and coordination with LibAid.

As the Libyan economy picks up and international companies start to return, displaced people find their informal settlements under pressure.

LibAid, the government's humanitarian arm set-up in 2006 and under the responsibility of a deputy prime minister, tries to negotiate with companies where possible, and coordinates with international agencies and local NGOs to provide material support.

The UN has been providing humanitarian support with a special focus over the past year on helping LibAid set-up a database to track IDPs for Tawerghas, and also, other ethnic groups such as the Mshashiya and Qawalish.

"There have been improvements... but even today the conditions in which they are living are not really acceptable," said Georg Charpentier, UN deputy special representative and resident coordinator in Libya.

"From a humanitarian point of view, it is not right that a resourceful country like Libya has a number of its own citizens living under those conditions."

What happened?

The town of Tawergha and its population of around 35,000 were attacked by anti-Gaddafi brigades during the 2011 conflict, mainly from the nearby town of Misrata, 40km to the north.

An estimated 550,000 people were displaced by the fighting in Libya, according to UNHCR, though most have now returned.

But the Tawergha remain displaced. They live in camps and with host families, though some are held in detention, often still under the authority of local militias.

About 1,300 people from Tawergha are detained, missing, or dead, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), which said earlier this month that crimes committed against the Tawerghans "may amount to crimes against humanity and could be prosecuted by the ICC".

The generally dark-skinned Tawergha were accused by the brigades of siding with Qaddafi and of killing and raping residents of Misrata during the revolution

Among the missing Tawergha is the husband of Aicha*, an IDP living at the Felallah camp. A mother of three, she has not heard from her husband for 18 months since he was taken by armed men along with their car in downtown Tripoli.

"The life which we live now, it is no different from dying, and so we prefer to die at home," Abdelrahman Mahmoud, a Tawergha leader "I don't want anything from the government - just my husband and the chance to hear his voice," she told IRIN. "They said his identity papers were fake but that was just an excuse. I've had no news since."

Such stories are widespread in the camps.

Improvements

Despite the lack of resolution to the Libyan IDP problem, the last 12 months have seen a number of improvements, including a reduction in incursions by armed fighters into the camps.

"Today the environment for a dialogue and reconciliation process is much more conducive than it was, say, one year ago. It's quite natural. Emotions are decreasing and people tend to look at things more rationally than emotionally," Charpentier told IRIN.

The predicament of the Tawergha is now far more openly discussed in Libya, including in the local media.

"In the beginning there were so many lies about the Tawergha - people had the wrong image of us and what we had done in the war. Now people are becoming better informed," said Mahmoud.

But these changes have not yet translated into a durable long-term solution, even if IDP access to government services has improved.

"It's less desperate than it was but these are fairly temporary arrangements. The longer they stay there the more it impacts psychologically, and also on their welfare, with the children not really being in a real home or village," said Emmanuel Gignac, head of UNHCR in Libya.

Plans to return

While IDP numbers are fairly stable and the government has the finances to support them, the return of IDPs is closely tied to the success of any reconciliation process.

"The key issue is not so much responding to their humanitarian needs for ever; the key issue is to encourage and trigger a dialogue and a reconciliation process that will lead to a durable solution for them," said Charpentier.

UN officials have held regular meetings with politicians, and local and military councils in Misrata to try to chart a path forward.

As part of a roadmap for a return, Tawergha community leaders issued an official apology to the residents of Misrata and the nation in February 2012 and say they will surrender anyone accused of committing abuses, and help the judicial authorities.

LibAid officials say they are hopeful they can organize a long-delayed IDP conference in mid-March, though there remains a degree of uncertainty over whether the government or the General National Congress should lead reconciliation efforts.

"There are negotiations going on at the moment concerning the return but nothing concrete - there seems to be a lack of interest," said Mahmoud, and the community has now unilaterally decided to move back home on 1 June.

They say politicians will never speak out on the IDP issue because of the risk of undermining their support ahead of constitutional debates.

"It's good, it's the right approach, but I just feel that June is a bit early. But again, it's fair play to use this as a way to put pressure because you can't just wait for the process to be addressed," said Gignac.

"The later you deal with difficult issues that require reconciliation, the more difficult it is. The message is not that you have to deal with it as quickly as possible; the message is that you have to start dealing with it as quickly as possible because you may need several years to deal with it, even decades."

The idea of a June return has increased discussions of an eventual return - but such a move is unlikely to be successful without support to rebuild a heavily looted town.

"I hope the IDP situation can be sorted out in 2013 - but for close to two years they are still in the camps. Most of them didn't do anything during the revolution - they are women and children," Al Sweii from LibAid told IRIN.

"We need all Libya to enjoy the revolution and its anniversary. We don't want people in the camps to hate the revolution. But it's very difficult if some are celebrating the revolution while others are living in camps and have a miserable life."

*not her real name