

TRIPOLI, Libya, September 13 (Infosplusgabon) - The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, says it is stepping up efforts towards alternatives to detention in Libya and solutions for vulnerable refugees in the country.

UNHCR says Libya remains one of the most complex mixed migration situations in the world, with refugees travelling alongside migrants through perilous routes, surviving dangerous desert crossings and abuses that include sexual violence, torture, detention in inhumane conditions and abductions for ransom.

"All this before they even embark on the deadly Central Mediterranean sea crossing, where the risk of dying is one in 39. Libya is also in the middle of a conflict that has displaced hundreds of thousands of Libyans," UNHCR said in a statement on its website.

It says while irregular mixed migration movements may represent challenges for states, detention is not the answer.

"As a refugee protection agency, UNHCR is opposed to the routine detention of refugees and displaced persons and has been very outspoken, including at the highest level, on the appalling conditions in which refugees and migrants are being held in Libya's detention centres."

It notes that during a recent visit to Tripoli, for example, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi met refugees and migrants in detention centres and expressed his “shock at the harsh conditions in which refugees and migrants are held”, adding that no refugees or asylum seekers should be detained.

At the same time, UNHCR says it is currently negotiating with the Libyan authorities the establishment of an open reception centre that would allow refugees and asylum seekers freedom of movement, giving priority to the most vulnerable among them.

In this reception centre, UNHCR could provide registration, accommodation, food, social services, counselling and support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and solutions in third countries for the most vulnerable.

UNHCR also says it is working to assist and protect over 535,000 people in Libya, including over 226,000 Libyans displaced by conflict, 267,000 Libyans who have now returned to their homes but continue to be in a vulnerable situation and 42,834 registered refugees and asylum-seekers.

While expressing concern about the conditions in detention centres, UNHCR says it considers it important to maintain a dialogue with the relevant authorities in Libya to ensure access, distribute life-saving assistance and advocate for enhanced access to screening, identification and registration, as well as for measures preventing risks of sexual and gender-based violence.

“We conduct regular visits to official detention centres in order to provide life-saving assistance,” explains Roberto Mignone, UNHCR Representative for Libya.

“Our presence in these detention centres does not qualify as an endorsement of these places nor of what happens there. It is our duty, however, to provide refugees and asylum seekers with help and advocate for their protection, including when they are in detention. This year, UNHCR and partners have conducted 658 visits to detention centres. Thanks to our combined efforts, some 1,000 refugees and asylum seekers have been released from these places,” according to Mignone.

In Libya, UNHCR says, it works to improve the situation of hundreds of thousands of civilians affected by the conflict. It also works to provide international protection, humanitarian assistance and solutions to persons of concern who are living in the country, or are in transit towards Europe.

It works in close coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other partners.

The constraints they face in Libya are many, including limited access throughout the country due to the current security situation.

"Still, UNHCR is making every effort to scale up its presence and response inside Libya through national staff, partners, and the regular rotational presence of international staff, who are currently operating from Tunis."

UNHCR says given the urgent humanitarian needs and appalling conditions in detention centres, it is essential that the Un refugee agency continues to be engaged in the provision of life-saving assistance, protection and solutions, as well as advocacy for alternatives to detention, as the first and foremost priority.

"The assistance UNHCR provides in detention centres helps alleviate the suffering of detainees," says Mignone. "We provide hygiene kits, blankets, slippers and clothes. Additionally, through our partner IMC (International Medical Corps), we are able to provide primary health care to those in need, which is often the only medical assistance detainees have access to."

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