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Mass graves reveal 25 more bodies

Women, kids in Libya detention centers 'at immediate risk'



TRIPOLI: African migrants gather at a makeshift shelter in the capital Tripoli's suburb of Ain Zara. Libya is a key departure point for tens of thousands of migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, hoping to reach Europe. — AFP

TRIPOLI: A further 25 unidentified bodies have been found in mass graves in the Libyan town of Tarhuna, Libyan authorities said, following years of brutal militia rule. The farming town was controlled for years by the Kaniyat militia, run by six brothers who imposed their dominance by slaughtering opponents and their entire families. Around 200 bodies have so far been found, according to the department for uncovering the remains, which said another "five graves were discovered" containing another 25 corpses.

The latest grim finds come after another 10 bodies were uncovered on October 4. On the same day, a UN fact-finding mission found that all parties to Libya's decade-long conflict have violated international humanitarian law since 2016, with some possibly guilty of war crimes. Mass graves were initially discovered in Tarhuna in June 2020 following the withdrawal of forces of Khalifa Haftar, an eastern Libya-based military chief who had spent a year trying to seize Tripoli.

The Kaniyat, members of the Kani family, had after seizing control of the town in 2015 then allied with Haftar, providing him with a rear base for his Tripoli operation which he launched in 2019. The group "often abducted, detained, tortured, killed, and disappeared people who opposed them or who were suspected of doing so", according to resi-

dents' testimonies cited by Human Rights Watch. Members of the Kaniyat have been sanctioned by the United States and Britain.

Their chief Mohamed Al-Kani was shot dead in the eastern city of Benghazi in July and others are rumored to have fled east or abroad, reports that are not possible to verify. Libya has seen a decade of violence since the fall in 2011 of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed rebellion, with a myriad of militias and foreign forces becoming involved. A ceasefire between eastern and western powers after Haftar's defeat last year paved the way for a UN-led political transition, with a unity government taking power this year to lead Libya to elections.

Libya detention

At least 1,000 women and children in detention centers in the Libyan capital are "at immediate risk", the UN children's agency warned on Tuesday. "Around 751 women and 255 children were among the thousands of migrants and asylum seekers

caught up in recent mass arrests" in Tripoli this month, UNICEF said in a statement. "Five unaccompanied children and at least 30 infants" were among those detained, it said.

The women and children's "safety and well-being... is at immediate risk", the statement warned. Libyan authorities carried out sweeping raids in Tripoli, mostly targeting irregular migrants, earlier this month. Doctors without Borders said at least 5,000 migrants and refugees were swept up in the "violent mass arrests" and detained in squalid conditions.

The operation, which authorities said targeted organized crime and drug trafficking, left at least one person dead and 15 wounded, according to the UN Support Mission in Libya. "Migrant and refugee children in Libya continue to face grave child rights violations including arbitrary detention," acting UNICEF special representative to Libya Cristina Brugiolo said. "Children are held under devastating and inhumane conditions in these detention centers," she said in a statement. "We can assume the actual

number of children held may be much higher as many boys are reportedly placed in cells with adult males," she added.

Following the raids, the International Organization for Migration said last week that guards shot dead six migrants at the Al-Mabani detention facility in the Libyan capital, while at least 24 others were wounded. Libyan officials said some 2,000 migrants escaped in the chaos. UNICEF said the Al-Mabani detention centre, which it identified as Libya's largest, "is holding more than 5,000 people-four times its official capacity-including 100 children and 300 women". The statement urged the Libyan authorities "to protect children and prevent their separation from their parents, caregivers and families".

Hundreds of migrants and asylum-seekers, accompanied by young children, have been holding a sit-in in front of the office of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) near Tripoli for several days. The UNHCR on Tuesday said it was "extremely worried about the continued suffering of migrants and asylum seekers in Libya". Libya is a key departure point for tens of thousands of migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, hoping to reach Europe. Human traffickers have profited from Libya's decade of chaos following the 2011 revolution to carve out a lucrative but brutal trade.— AFP

Ugandan teachers turn coffin-makers after schools shut

BUGOBI: As a COVID-19 surge overwhelmed Uganda earlier this year, Livingstone Musaala, who was forced to quit his teaching job following school closures, turned to coffin-making to pay the bills and help his community. But few welcomed his initiative at first. Family members criticized him for capitalizing on a pandemic-fueled boom in his densely-populated hometown of Bugobi, 140 kilometers east of Kampala. "Of all the business ideas you start selling coffins as if you wish people death?" Musaala recounted a relative asking him.

But the former mathematics teacher realized that he could make and sell coffins for a lot less than the exorbitant prices charged by other carpenters after demand surged due to COVID-19 deaths. "It was a tough decision but people now appreciate it," the 28-year-old told AFP, with Bugobi residents no longer compelled to travel long distances to find affordable coffins. "At the height of the pandemic, we did brisk business, we sold between four to 10 coffins daily," he said, earning between 150,000 to 450,000 shillings (\$42 to \$125) per coffin.

His success prompted some 30 teachers to join him, many of whom were left frustrated and penniless by the ongoing school shutdown. Although coffins have proven to be their biggest seller, the teachers have also taken on other joinery jobs. Some had already been trained in carpentry, but



NAMUTUMBA: A coffin is on display to sell at a workshop owned by private teachers who work as coffin makers now at their workshop in Namutumba, Uganda. — AFP

most have simply learned on the job. Today, many say they have no intention to return to school, even if classes resume—something that spells even worse news for the East African nation's rickety education system.

'Life beyond teaching'

Some 15 million students have been out of school since the government sent them home in March 2020, and activists fear a surge in teen pregnancies and child labor as a result. With no income to speak of, some schools have shut down for good, rebranding themselves as hotels or restaurants. Others have defaulted on loans as interest piles up, putting their future in doubt and adding to the uncertainty faced by out-of-work teachers.

"If I was given an option between

teaching and carpentry, I would take the latter because it is ready cash," Godfrey Mutyaba told AFP as his colleagues shuffled around for pieces of timber to put the final touches on a coffin. "I liked teaching but due to poor pay, I won't go back," the father-of-two said. On average, teachers working at private schools in Bugobi earn between \$100 to \$250 per month.

Despite strong sales, the newly-minted coffin makers have struggled to raise capital to buy equipment like electric saws, and are now confronting a new challenge as the pandemic begins to ease after death rates soared in June and July. Nevertheless, even as coffin sales fall, Musaala has no plans to return to his old job and is turning his attention to making furniture instead. "COVID-19 has taught me there is life beyond teaching," the father-of-two said.— AFP

200 bodies found so far

Widely used chemical linked to 100,000 US deaths per year

NEW YORK: Daily exposure to phthalates, a group of chemicals used in everything from plastic containers to makeup, may lead to approximately 100,000 deaths in older Americans annually, a study from New York University warned Tuesday. The chemicals, which can be found in hundreds of products such as toys, clothing and shampoo, have been known for decades to be "hormone disruptors," affecting a person's endocrine system.

The toxins can enter the body through such items and are linked to obesity, diabetes and heart disease, said the study published in the journal Environmental Pollution. The research, which was carried out by New York University's Grossman School of Medicine and includes some 5,000 adults aged 55 to 64, shows that those with higher concentrations of phthalates in their urine were more likely to die of heart disease.

However, higher concentrations did not appear to increase the risk of death by cancer. "Our findings reveal that increased phthalate exposure is linked to early death, particularly due to heart disease,"

said study lead author Leonardo Trasande. "Until now, we have understood that the chemicals connect to heart disease, and heart disease in turn is a leading cause of death, but we had not yet tied the chemicals themselves to death." Trasande cautioned, however, that the study does not establish a direct cause and effect relationship between phthalate exposure and death, in part because the specific biological mechanisms of that relationship are unclear.

"Our research suggests that the toll of this chemical on society is much greater than we first thought," Trasande said, adding that it "is undeniably clear that limiting exposure to toxic phthalates can help safeguard Americans' physical and financial wellbeing." Other studies have already linked phthalates to more than 10,000 deaths per year associated with reduced testosterone levels in adult men. The study added that the economic loss due to phthalates is between \$40 billion and \$47 billion - more than four times what was previously estimated.— AFP