

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Libya Blocks Visit by Rights Group

Torture, Political Trials, Treatment of Migrants Remain Major Concerns

(New York, December 7, 2004) The Libyan government has blocked a scheduled visit by a Human Rights Watch research team. The team was slated to begin a three-week fact-finding trip on Tuesday, but the Libyan government has withheld the visas, Human Rights Watch said today.

"The Libyan government says it is opening to the world, but it behaves as if there is much to hide," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "They are letting in oil companies and tourists, but keeping out human rights groups."

The United States and European Union have rewarded Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi and the Libyan government for renouncing terrorism and weapons of mass destruction by lifting sanctions and trade embargoes. Heads of state and business leaders have flocked to Tripoli in recent months as the economy slowly reforms.

But internal repression remains intense. Libyan law bans independent political parties, associations and media. Torture is common, and hundreds of political prisoners are behind bars after trials that were deeply flawed.

The visit would have been Human Rights Watch's first to Libya, following more than six months of promises and delays by the Libyan government. Amnesty International spent two weeks in Libya in February, producing a report that criticized a pattern of human rights violations, a failure to investigate past abuses, and a climate of fear.

Human Rights Watch planned to investigate the cases of political prisoners, specifically the arrest and incommunicado detention of Fathi al-Jahmi and the 86 students and professionals imprisoned for supporting or sympathizing with the banned Libyan Islamic Group, also known as the Muslim Brotherhood, although they were reportedly not accused of planning or committing violent acts. On Wednesday, an appeals chamber of the special "People's Court," which tries political cases, upheld the sentences for the group, including for two university professors sentenced to death.

Two specialists from Human Rights Watch planned to investigate the human rights conditions of women and the government's treatment of migrants and refugees. Asylum seekers and migrants living in or transiting through Libya—particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa—face police abuse, arbitrary detention and substandard detention conditions. Deportations and expulsions to countries like Eritrea and Somalia are common, where the returnees are at risk of serious abuse.

Some EU member states have proposed to establish offshore asylum processing centers in Libya, even though Libya has failed to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no functioning asylum system.

"Given Libya's terrible treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, the EU's offshore processing centers would likely violate the right to seek asylum," Whitson said. "The EU would be shifting responsibility for migrants and asylum seekers to a developing country with a poor human rights record."