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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Libya

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Events of 2015

Several years after the 2011 uprising that toppled former dictator Muammar Al-Gaddafi, Libya's political landscape remains fractured. The power vacuum that emerged after the fall of Gaddafi has led to the proliferation of armed groups, each fighting for pockets of control across the country. Conflict escalated into open warfare in mid 2014 and led to the establishment of two rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli, the former with international recognition and backed by armed militias under the 'Operation Dignity' alliance, and the latter backed by 'Libya Dawn' militias. The continuation of fighting throughout 2015 saw a further deterioration of the human rights situation, as armed groups carried out violations including kidnappings, arbitrary detentions, torture and unlawful executions with impunity. With the signing of an agreement between the two ruling factions in December 2015 to establish a unity government, Libya's future stability hinges upon the new government's ability to establish an inclusive and functional political system. This includes taking measures to end legacies of exclusion and discrimination against Libya's minority groups.

The state of prolonged conflict afflicting Libya has allowed extremist groups, including militias loyal to ISIS, to carve out an increasing presence in parts of the country. This has created a dangerous situation for religious minorities living in the country. On 15 February 2015, a video released by an ISIS-affiliated group – depicting the massacre of 21 Coptic Christians, mostly Egyptian nationals, on a beach on Libya's northern coast – sent shockwaves through the region. An estimated 800,000–900,000 Egyptian nationals were working in Libya at the time, but numerous reports of kidnapping of Egyptian Copts in late 2014 and early 2015 began to create a climate of fear. News of the February massacre caused at least 33,000 Egyptians to return home and prompted the Egyptian government to launch retaliatory airstrikes.

On 19 April 2015, another video was released showing the beheadings and shooting of 28 Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians. On 3 June 2015, a further 86 Eritrean Christians were kidnapped south of Tripoli. Their whereabouts are still unknown. Incidents such as these illustrate the heightened vulnerability faced by sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya, who can be easily targeted by militias due to their ethnicity, undocumented status or religion. Amnesty International has documented widespread abuses against migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in Libya,

ranging from threats, physical assaults and theft to abduction, torture and killing. Female migrants are particularly prone to sexual exploitation.

There are fears that the increased presence of ISIS-affiliated groups in Libya could lead to attacks on historical and religious sites, in attempts to emulate the campaign of destruction unleashed by the group in Iraq and Syria. There have already been numerous reports of attacks on Sufi shrines, graves, and celebrations since 2011. On 23 April 2015, militants bombed the ancient Al-Quds mosque in Tripoli, a mosque frequented by Sufis.

Black migrants and Libyans alike have also been targeted by rebels due to the perception that they fought on Gaddafi's side in the uprising, based on claims that he used African mercenaries during the conflict. Following the stationing of government forces in the town of Tawergha in 2011, rebel forces retaliated against the town, forcing more than 30,000 residents to flee and leaving it a ghost town. Ever since, the majority of Tawerghans have been forced to live in displacement camps scattered across the country, and face ongoing harassment. The UN documented multiple cases of abduction of Tawerghan internally displaced people (IDPs) in March and April 2015 after their identities were discovered at checkpoints. In March, eight civilians were reportedly killed when Libyan warplanes bombed a Tawerghan IDP camp. However, in a positive development at the end of the year, the Misrata–Tawergha Joint Committee adopted a Road Map Document providing for the reconstruction of Tawergha and the voluntary return of its residents to their homes. Nevertheless, at the time of writing concrete progress on the principles outlined in the document had yet to be seen.

Amid the upheaval that has characterized Libya's tumultuous transition, the country's main ethnic minorities have become more active and begun to assert an independent voice after decades of marginalization under the Gaddafi regime. This includes Tuaregs, who are nomadic pastoralist tribes living along Libya's western border, and black African Tebu tribes inhabiting southern Libya. Nevertheless, relations between minorities have at times turned violent. In the southern town of Awbari, where Tuareg and Tebu live side by side, conflict that began in September 2014 culminated in the displacement of 18,500 people, most of whom were women, children and the elderly. The conflict has been driven by disputes between Tebu and Tuareg militias, who overlap in Awbari, over oil and water resources, as well as control of the lucrative smuggling trade in arms, drugs and migrants. In July, a week of clashes between Tuareg and Tebu in the town of Sebha left over 40 people dead. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there are also 4,800 IDPs in protracted displacement who have been unable to return to their homes since the January 2014 clashes between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribe, who may have been re-displaced during the renewed conflict. Although a ceasefire negotiated with the help of Qatar in November promises to end fighting and provide for the return of displaced people to Awbari, sporadic clashes have continued to erupt.

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