

Major rise in migrants stopped off Libya: UN refugee agency

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Migrants are seen onboard a Libyan Coast Guard vessel following a rescue operation in central Mediterranean Sea, January 31, 2018. The relentless war in Libya has turned the country into a major conduit for migrants fleeing conflict and poverty in Africa and the Middle East. (Source: Reuters)

Cairo: The UN refugee agency reported Friday that the total number of migrants intercepted by the Libyan coast guard in the past month rose 121% from the same period last year.

The UNHCR said in January alone, it registered 1,040 refugees and migrants the coast guard stopped and brought back to Libyan shores, a dramatic increase from the 469 rescued that month the year before. It classified the population as 70% men, 18% women and 12% children.

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In its attempts to stem the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, the European Union has trained and funded Libya's coast guard to keep the migration crisis off its shores. The figures show these efforts have not stopped people from boarding boats and making the journey.

It's a contentious alliance. The coast guard catches and returns migrants to Libya, where they often land in squalid detention centers, notorious for rape and torture at the hands of militias.

Migrants have told The Associated Press that they were extorted and abused at facilities run by the interior ministry of Libya's west-based government.

Last week, the UNHCR halted its operations at its Gathering and Departure Facility, which was intended as an alternative to detention but was overrun by migrants fleeing other Libyan-run centers. The Associated Press documented the dangerous and dehumanizing conditions at the facility last year.

The agency reported it continues to evacuate migrants to "safer locations", adding that over 300 had agreed to resettle into the "urban community" with aid packages. The facility's closing comes as fighting has intensified around the capital Tripoli.

After a pick-up truck packed with migrants crashed into a fuel tanker Thursday, killing six people and critically wounding 12, the International Organization for Migration warned of the urgent need to prosecute smugglers and traffickers in Libya.

"This incident is a stark reminder of the dangerous journeys desperate people endure, many of whom are fleeing conflict and poverty," said Federico Soda, the agency director.

As a cease-fire in the war-torn country crumbles despite international diplomatic efforts, oil-rich Libya's economy is unraveling. Tribes loyal to eastern-based forces laying siege to Tripoli have shut down oil fields and production facilities,

starving Libya of its main revenue source to gain political leverage. The National Oil Corporation on Friday put the losses at more than \$1 billion.

- AP