

Willing deportation logistician or helper in need?

What is the IOM - the United Nations Migration Office - actually doing in North Africa, the Sahara and the Sahel?

In July, Medico International and Brot für die Welt published a study on the IOM program of voluntary return of migrants (AVR) from Libya to sub-Saharan Africa. Shortly before, the Pan-European channel Euro News had published several reports on that very programme. Both sources criticize the program, saying that this kind of return is not voluntary, not humane:

- **The refoulement industry forces migrants to consent to return (AVR).** The "refoulement industry" (Maurice Stierl) is a kind of cooperation between coastguards, security forces and prison operators in Libya. From the end of 2017 onwards, most migrants in Libya will have experienced this ping-pong. As a consequence of the inhuman and degrading conditions in the detention camps in Libya, many migrants* have accepted the offer of the IOM to return voluntarily (medico 2020).

- **Humanitarian aid only if consent is given for "voluntary" return.** This clearly concerns the work of IOM on the Algeria-Niger border, where stranded people receive unconditional help for 24 hours, but afterwards - especially regarding transport away from the desert city of Assamaka - only if enrolled in AVR programme. It also concerns refugees who had a recognized status in Algeria before they were arrested and deported.

- **Voluntary return from transit countries contributes to the externalisation of border controls.** Compared to deportations from Europe, there is a much higher number of returns from transit countries. From March 2017 to November 2019, 30,869 migrants* were returned from Libya, 29,337 from Niger and 2,522 from Mali. Most of the returnees came from countries that are also considered important countries of origin for sub-Saharan migrants in Europe, such as Nigeria (15,707), Mali (14,628) and Guinea (13,084) in 2018. In this respect one can conclude that the so-called (medico 2020).

- **Euro-centric orientation and priorities of IOM donors determine the offers.**

Mali has established migration routes to Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Angola and South Africa and have often experienced emergency situations in crisis-ridden countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Angola, and to a lesser extent Liberia and Zambia. Malian migrants in the Lake Chad area, Saudi Arabia, Angola and Mozambique have never received offers of organised return in emergency situations. This reveals the euro-centric orientation and priorities of IOM donors.

- **Re-integration aid is modest.** Between May 2017 and February 2019, IOM Nigeria reported that it has assisted about 12,000 returnees* from Libya (89%) and to a lesser extent from Mali, Morocco, Niger and Europe (11%). Of the 12,000 returnees, IOM has been in contact with 9,000 people, 5,000 have received business skills training, and 4,300 have received personal or collective reintegration assistance as a start-up grant. If health care and counselling are added, the return assistance has reached 7,000 out of 12,000 returnees, or 58 per cent. This again means that about 40 per cent received no support at all.

- Forced return can lead to new problems and is not development assistance. Return should therefore not be paid for out of development aid budgets. Alternatives would be the creation of safe and legal migration routes and labour migration programmes, as migrant workers support their communities and families through remittances.

Journalistic reports in The New Humanitarian also highlight the negative effects of IOM returns. Giacomo Zandonini has already shown in earlier research that development aid does not necessarily aim at the development of the recipient countries. The analysis and evaluation of the expenditure of the EU Trust Fund for Africa shows that the majority of the money is spent on biometrics and border control. In June 2020, a complaint was lodged with the European Court of Auditors about the misuse of the EU Trust Fund - concerning the expenditure of IOM in Libya.

Biometrics are done through the MIDAS system, which has been installed by IOM and is now fed with travellers' data at the borders.

MIDAS is the Migration Information and Data Analysis System, a database that can analyze fingerprints and facial photos. Originally developed by IOM to monitor migration movements, it is now used for data comparison with the Frontex offices of the AFIC (Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community). The network includes 31 African countries. Analysis cells have been opened in Ghana, Gambia and Senegal in 2019. Further Risk Analysis Cells are planned in Nigeria, Kenya, Mali and Guinea. The European Union has no agreements with third countries to harmonise these data, but is preparing for a data network.

Also in June, EuroNews reported on IOM return and deportation activities. With descriptions of Eritrean refugees and Nigerian migrant workers, the journalists show that the return programme is not working. In a preview of the publication of Brot für die Welt/ Medico, the effectiveness of the "voluntary" return programme is questioned. Only 10% of the returnees received help from IOM.

Who is IOM

From 2016, the IOM rebranded itself as the UN Migration Agency, and its budget has ballooned from US\$242.2 million (€213 million) in 1998 to **exceed** US\$2 billion (€1.7 billion) for the first time in the autumn of 2019 - an eightfold increase. Though not part of the UN, the IOM is now a "related organization", with a relationship similar to that of a private contractor.

The EU and its member states collectively are the **largest contributors** to IOM's budget, accounting for nearly half of its operational funding.

Source: EuroNews June 2020

IOM responded to the report by BfdW/Medico with a counterstatement on the EuroNews website. . IOM questions the credibility of EuroNews ("missed the opportunity to make its mark as a credible and balanced journalistic resource") and accuses the medium of one-sidedness:

- IOM refuses to describe EuroNews as "Eurocentric" - the researchers have not understood the complexity of the situation in Libya and the Sahara. All measures had been taken in consultation with the African counterparts.
- IOM refers to the "Right to Return" of the United Nations, they have helped more than 50,000 people to achieve this right since 2017. Their work has nothing to do with the

fight against the causes of flight. IOM's work is based on humanitarian protection, health and human rights;

- Like UNHCR, IOM is committed to the principle of non-refoulement. Examples in the report concerning a forced return journey are wrong. Examples of torture in Eritrea after return would refer to a period before the humanitarian evacuations (IHL programme).

- It was IOM that uncovered the slave markets in 2017 and CNN reported only after that.

- EuroNews had concealed in the report that IOM had saved the lives of some 29,000 people in the desert (who had previously been deported from Algeria and abandoned just before the border).

- It is untrue that two thirds of all returnees do not take full advantage of the re-integration measures. Many measures have not yet been completed.

So far, IOM has been relatively unchallenged in determining the discourse on the Libyan evacuations. IOM gives no source for the representation that IOM and not CNN first drew attention to the slave markets. With normal research tools not much can be found either. However, at the end of 2017, various sources, including diplomatic sources, stated that the miserable situation of the migrants in the camps was known. Not even a month after the slave market story, which caused global outrage, the EU-AU-IOM Joint Task Force was set up at the EU-AU summit in Abidjan and IOM was commissioned to carry it out. In September 2019, IOM is praised by the UNHCR for repatriating 48,000 migrants and 4,000 refugees under this mandate.

Interesting are also the numbers of those stranded in the desert. Dying in the desert is cruel, but trying to quantify is absurd. Yet "twice as many deaths as in the Mediterranean" is repeated everywhere. Most of the figures refer to the border region Niger/Algeria, in relation to a concrete political practice: deportations due to the migration law introduced in 2014. But the dead are generally referred to as the dead in the Sahara.

Algeria has been deporting migrants from sub-Saharan Africa on a large scale since 2014. As a rule, they are abandoned in the desert shortly before the border to Niger and thus face death by thirst. Years after Alarme Phone Sahara and later Human Rights Watch became aware of this, IOM started to transport deportees from Algeria out of the desert to Arlitt and Agadez - under the condition to commit to the AVR Return Programme. Although Algeria does not have an official migration agreement with the EU, the media quote "under EU pressure". EU pressure is mainly related to trade in arms and security technology, including a joint venture with Mercedes Benz for the production of military vehicles. In 2018 IOM laments more than 30,000 dead in the desert - its post in Assamaka (Niger, border to Algeria) has been monitoring the situation there since 2016.

IOM carries out intensive public relations work on its humanitarian task at the external border of Europe. Statistics play a central role, as they justify the necessity of IOM projects. IOM relies on strategies of activists and human rights NGOs to count border deaths. Projects are then justified on humanitarian grounds, even if the effect is an increased blockade of migration routes. The humanitarian justification and strategic control of the global discourse gained more and more importance with the recognition as UN authority in 2016.

Sources

[1 https://www.medico.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media/rueckkehr-studie-en.pdf](https://www.medico.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media/rueckkehr-studie-en.pdf)

[1 Die IOM hat zwei Rückkehrprogramme. Das Allgemeine, Assisted Voluntary Return Programm \(AVR\) und HVR \(Humanitarian Voluntary Return\) Programm, das für die Evakuierungen aus Libyen aufgelegt worden ist.](#)

¹ https://www.medico.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media/rueckkehr-studie-en.pdf

¹ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/07/28/Nigeria-migrants-return-Europe>

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¹ EuroNews ist auf den deutschen Bildschirmen wenig präsent, da der öffentlich-rechtliche Rundfunk und die stark regulierte Frequenzvergabe dies nicht erlaubt. International ist der pan-europäische Sender jedoch eine Hausnummer, und hat dank des Schwester-Unternehmens AfricaNews eine starke Afrika-Berichterstattung. Seitdem im April CBS seine Anteile verkauft hat, gehört der Sender überwiegend dem ägyptischen Medienmogul Naguib Sawiris.¹

¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/19/paying-for-migrants-to-go-back-home-how-the-eu-s-voluntary-return-scheme-is-failing-the-de>

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