
Interview: Tunisian workers expelled from Libya

The crimes of Muammar Qaddafi

by Philip Golub and Thierry Lalevée

EIR's Wiesbaden Bureau Chief Philip Golub and Middle East Editor Thierry Lalevée on Sept. 3 interviewed a group of Tunisian workers who had been expelled from Libya by Muammar Qaddafi in August. Golub and Lalevée were in Tunisia as part of a fact-finding team of eight Western journalists (see EIR, Sept. 20, 1985). The interview published below was conducted in the town of Medenine, the capital of Tunisia's southern region.

Between Aug. 5 and the end of the month, some 30,000 Tunisian workers were expelled, *manu militari*, from Libya. Without warning, they were arrested by youngsters in their teens belonging to the "Revolutionary Committees," sent to jail, then herded like cattle into trucks or buses and dropped at the Tunisian border. Most were dropped, with only the clothes on their backs, at the Ras Jedir border point, some 30 km from Medenine, where we met with some 30 of them.

The workers testify to Qaddafi's brutality: families were separated, and some have still not been reunited. In most cases of mixed Libyan-Tunisian marriages, the children were kidnapped and held by the Libyan authorities. Men were beaten and women were raped. The workers lost everything: their savings were frozen in Libyan state banks, their personal belongings, apartments, and furniture, as well as cars and trucks, were seized. The Tunisians had brought to Libya the kind of technical skill that Libyans are no longer taught, under the regime of Qaddafi, especially since all schools were closed in 1980. More than any other foreign workers, the Tunisians ran the Libyan economy, everything from construction projects to trade and shops.

Qaddafi's regime gave them two "choices": to leave Libya or to assume "Arab nationality" (Qaddafi had previously declared that pro-Western Tunisia can no longer be regarded as an Arab country). To accept Qaddafi's "Arab nationality" meant to be immediately sent to military training camps in southern Libya, ultimately to be dispatched to Chad or elsewhere. Quite a few of the Tunisians and other foreign workers who accepted Qaddafi's offer, were found, weeks later, fighting with Nabih Berri's al Amal in Lebanon. According to eyewitness reports, Qaddafi is really running a slave market: Foreign workers are forced to become mercenaries and are sold to the highest bidder.

Before going to Medenine, where we were received by the governor of the region, Salah Bhourri, we visited Ras Jedir, the border post which had received most of the expelled workers. We had arrived in Tunisia the day before, and flew to the Island of Jerba in the Gulf of Gabes. From there we traveled by land-rover to Ras Jedir. A few dozen kilometers from the Mediterranean, the town is located on the edge of the desert, with the scarce vegetation and extreme heat—some 38° Celsius by mid-morning—that precedes the Sahara. After going through a police checkpoint, we reached the border post, two large buildings with military tents, to protect vehicles from the heat, and to receive the expelled workers. The day before, we were told, some 187 had passed across, in the same condition as those before them: on foot. A few were still waiting for buses to drive them to Medenine.

In the middle of the road stood the dividing line between Tunisia and Libya. One sign read, "Tripoli: 169 km," another, faded by time, still read "Tripolitania," after the old name of the country, before the creation of the modern Libya in the early 1950s. At the end of a 20-meter-long no man's land was Libya: a small border post and quite a large town could be seen in the distance. Two Libyan border guards became increasingly agitated as photographers went into action; behind them loomed a 4-by-10-meter steel poster with a picture of Qaddafi welcoming visitors.

Perhaps as a display of wealth, or for reasons that none understood, all the yellow street lights were on—in the middle of the day. The Libyans were blaring out Arabic music, as loudly as possible, from loudspeakers located on a high tower, with sophisticated antennae. Our host explained that this was done every day, from 7:00 a.m. until late into the night, as a kind of psychological and musical warfare.

No troops were visible on either side. But the tension was reflected by a special state of alertness of the Tunisian border guards and the few military officers, and the speed with which one Libyan border guard left his post to report the presence of a group of foreign journalists. As the Tunisians told us, Libyan and Tunisian military deployments take place close to the borders, but not close enough to be seen; to position troops directly on the border would be understood, by the other side, as a declaration of war.

A few days before we arrived, on Aug. 30, Libya evacuated all of its civilian population on a 245 km-long front and to a depth of 50 km, a zone declared "a zone of war." A few days later, Soviet-made helicopters manned by Libyans pilots flew over the no man's land. On Sept. 1, a Libyan jetfighter flew over the territorial waters of the Tunisian Island of Jerba, some 150 km from where we were. The threat of military invasion was on everybody's mind.

By the time we reached the border on Sept. 3, however, the threat had significantly receded. The day before, Algeria's President Chadli Bendjedid had visited Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba at his summer residence at Monastir, making clear to Qaddafi that Algeria would stand militarily on Tunisia's side if Qaddafi invaded.

Q: When were you expelled? How?

A: We were never informed that we had to officially leave Libya; we just had heard rumors, nothing official.

Q: In which town were you, what was your profession?

A: I lived in Benghazi; I was an agricultural technician. I lived there since 1979, first as part of the Tunisian-Libyan economic cooperation treaty, then as a private worker.

On Aug. 11, one member of the Revolutionary Guard came to see me and told me that I should go to the police for my passport. Usually they had a special office, within the police station, dealing with passports. I went there, but they told me they were not responsible anymore. They told me it was the Revolutionary Committees, youngsters of 17, 18 years. They told me to go to see the Committee. I went there and they simply took my passport away.

Q: What is the difference between the People's Committees and the Revolutionary Committees?

A: The People's Committees are made up of Libyan people, they are local Committees. The Revolutionary Committees are made of cadres of the party; they have weapons, money, gasoline, transportation, and everything they need. They have all power; they are the backbone of the regime.

Q: The Revolutionary Committees took your passport away. What happened then?

A: They told me I had to leave the country. Tunisian workers had to leave first . . . then others. Trucks and land-rovers came with people in them . . . some 200 other Tunisians, and they put us in what they called a jail, some kind of large chicken-house. Then they told us we had to pay, but our money was in the banks. . . . We could not get it out of the banks.

Then on Aug. 20, we were driven, some 200 of us, in five buses, all the way from Benghazi to Ras Jedir, accompanied by land-rovers and Mercedes. Twelve hundred kilometers without a stop. For all these days, we only ate a few sardines, a bottle of milk, and bread. We had women and

children in the buses, but they refused to stop to allow us to go to eat in small restaurants along the way.

Q: Why do you think you were expelled?

A: You have to remember that last year, Qaddafi announced that he needed to have one million Arab fighters to liberate Arab lands. He doesn't have one million fighters. We were all presented with a choice: either to leave Libya or to accept "Arab nationality." We were not proposed Libyan nationality, but "Arab" nationality.

What this means in practice, is that you have the same rights as the Libyans, and you have also the same duties. Whoever accepts such a status, is immediately sent to military training camps. Afterward, they are sent wherever Qaddafi wants to send them! Once you have accepted Arab nationality, you are not allowed to go back to Tunisia, except once every five years, via Italy.

Q: Why via Italy?

A: Qaddafi wants to destroy all direct ties between Libya and Tunisia; and doesn't like people just going across the border. They have to go through Italy.

Another worker: Maybe he'll try to build a wall on the border between the two countries. . . .

Q: [To another group of workers]: How were you arrested? Did they use violence? Could you come back with your money?

A: I came back with nothing at all. One day at 6:00 in the morning, the Revolutionary Guards came to my flat where I was living with my mother, my wife, and my two sons. They asked to see my passport. Then they took it and told me to go to their Committee later during the day. I went there and the guards told me: "You have a choice, either you leave the country or you accept Arab nationality."

I told them, "How can I accept Arab nationality? I am already an Arab and a Muslim." Then they began to beat me up, screaming, "You, ingrate, you can go back to your Bourguiba!" They told me I had 24 hours to leave!

I went to the director of the firm for which I was working, and I told him that I needed at least 48 hours to gather my belongings and my money before leaving. He said, "It is very sad, but if the Revolutionary Committees order you to leave, I cannot do anything." He was sorry. I had to go back to the Committee. They took the key to my flat, then they made me pay for all the local taxes, electricity, etc. Then I had to look for a car to go from Benghazi to the border. The driver told me it would cost 360 Libyan dinars for the ride. Usually it was only 100 LD. I had only 330 LD. The driver told me: "It is a very good opportunity for me. You have to understand, I have to earn some money, too." He advised me to find another family, and he would drive us together.

Q: How much money did you leave behind?

A: 3,500 Libyan dinars.

Another worker: I lived in Tripoli for 25 years; I owned a little bake shop. I was expelled to Tunisia last week, without anything. My shop was nationalized and all my belongings had to stay in Libya.

Q: [To all]: Have you seen East German and Soviet advisers in Libya during the years you have been there?

A: Yes, we have seen wave after wave of East bloc advisers. They are especially concentrated around the base of Zawi, some 150 km west of Tripoli. They have a missile base there. We have also seen Russian soldiers a few kilometers from Ghadames. They have a base there. [Ghadames is on the border between Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—ed.]

Q: Were they involved in your expulsions?

A: No.

Another worker: But there is trouble between the Libyan soldiers and the foreign advisers. I know that last year, there were clashes between Soviet and Libyan officers during military maneuvers which were held in Cyrenaica. The Russians were running everything, and the Libyan officers protested.

Q: How do you know that?

A: I was a chief cook in one of Tripoli's international hotels; I heard a lot there.

Q: Did you notice the arrival of more East bloc personnel in recent months?

A: When the expulsions began, a lot of North Koreans were arriving in Libya.

Q: What is the situation like within Libya?

A: **Tunisian official:** One thing you should keep in mind is that close to 50% of the Tunisian workers who were expelled, found refuge among Libyan families before leaving the country, and had the time to gather some of their belongings and to organize transportation, rather than being expelled in military trucks. We have no conflict with the Libyan people; we have a conflict only with the present regime.

A worker: The situation inside Libya is worse than in Tunisia. There are a lot of food shortages. Maybe you can find meat once a month, and in the best periods, once a week. Even if you have money, you can't buy it. And now all the Libyans have to use food coupons to buy whatever is there.

Q: When were these food coupons introduced?

A: Just in the last six months. Some time ago, Qaddafi said that his next step would be to suppress the use of money inside Libya. Tickets have been introduced for everything. . . . He also said that it is not important for the young and mature people to eat well. If you look at his *Green Book*, it says that only the old people require food; the others can do with little.

The Soviets glorify

by Rachel Douglas

The Soviet mass media, led by the military daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) and the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, have begun to make a war cult out of the so-called Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (LCSFA).

The Afghanistan War is not the "Soviet Vietnam," the military quagmire and smoldering hotbed of Islamic fundamentalist revolt, that espousers of the "crumbling Soviet Empire" thesis would have us believe. The Soviet military-political leadership has brutalized Afghanistan not only for the sake of military goals in the region, but as a bloody training ground for officers and troops, who would not otherwise have been tested under fire.

An article in the Aug. 28 issue of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* boasts that this latter purpose has been well served by the fighting in Afghanistan. The author is Aleksandr Prokhanov, a novelist whose purple prose on such topics as the intercontinental ballistic missile's umbilical-cord-like ties to its mother, the Earth, has appeared often in *Krasnaya Zvezda* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. Here is Prokhanov's extraordinarily frank account of what Afghanistan has meant for the Soviet Armed Forces, particularly for eliminating the phenomenon of the senior officer who has never seen combat:

"Officers and senior commanders have worked their way up to high ranks in the peacetime army—the army which, 40 years ago, crushed the enemy in a terrifying war, gained victory, accumulated experience in immense battles, and, for 40 years, has been maintaining peace through its titanic military endeavors. It—the army—flies, sails, watches with radar eyes, learns to use unprecedented equipment, rehearses alternatives for potential battles, and works strenuously with extraordinary defense efforts. All this is done right up to the limits of the possible. *There is only one thing it had not done: It had not shed any blood, neither its own, nor anyone else's. There had been no real targets to be seen exploding through the gun sights. There had been no proper automatic fire thudding against bulletproof vests, leaving traces of blood across the chest. No exploding. No thudding. Until Afghanistan.*

"Gray-haired commanders found themselves under fire for the first time in the Afghan foothills. Saw wounded for the first time. For the first time, they sent servicemen into attacks that were not exercises, but against the firing of an