

Migrants await rescue in the Mediterranean waters off the Libyan coast on Feb. 10.

In Libya's vast southern desert, three men have resumed what they call their "taxi service."

The passengers aren't tourists or locals. They are mostly young men from neighboring African countries desperate to cross the border and head north toward Europe. And with each ride paying \$180 to \$250 even as coronavirus wreaks havoc on some of the world's poorest people, it's a business that's still proving as lucrative as ever.

"We don't reduce our fees because those who want to migrate have no other choice," said one smuggler based near Sebha, a city in Libya's southwest, 770 kilometers (480 miles) by road from the war-torn capital of Tripoli.

Migration through Libya eased during the height of the pandemic after governments locked down and closed frontiers to curb the spread of the deadly virus. As African economies crater because of disruptions to supply chains and farming, violence and food insecurity are increasing—and traffickers say people are on the move again. The alarm has already gone off in the European Union.

North Africa Al-Qaida Refugees

A car travels along a road between Sebha and Ubari in southwestern Libya. Photographer: Paul Schemm/AP

The EU has invested heavily in keeping arrivals at bay since 2015, when more than a million people mostly fleeing Middle East war zones sought safety. It's paid Turkey to house refugees and given money to the Libyan coastguard. But the political damage has lasted as anti-immigrant populists gained succor across the continent.

Back then, the influx came on the heels of a debt crisis that crippled Greece, the EU's gateway to the east, and the country is still struggling to cope. This time, the coronavirus has put Italy, the main destination for people crossing from Libya, in the spotlight as Europe's soft economic underbelly.

In April, the Italian government declared its ports "unsafe" due to the pandemic and said it wouldn't authorize the landing of rescue boats until the end of the emergency.

"In Brussels, the impact of Covid in Africa is something they know they need to address," said Camille Le Coz, a policy analyst at Migration Policy Institute Europe. "The European Commission is preparing for different scenarios. The last migration and refugee crisis in 2015 taught them they need to plan in advance."

On the Move Again

African migrants are heading north to escape the fallout from coronavirus

Europe is facing its biggest financial hit since World War II as the virus ripped through the continent and governments confined people to their homes. The U.K., Italy, Spain and France have recorded

the most deaths after the U.S. But they also have the money. In Africa, where casualty rates are lower, it's a matter of surviving the economic fallout.

On the edge of the Sahara, the south of Libya is bristling with foreign mercenaries and jihadist groups, and illicit trading of everything from weapons to gold. Those in the business of trafficking humans said they are mostly seeing people from neighboring Chad, Sudan and Niger because the trip costs less. But they are also seeing some trekking from further afield, such as Eritrea, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria.

The three Libyan smugglers interviewed for this story were in their late 30s and early 40s, and hail from the country's south. They spoke on the condition of anonymity.

People paying to transit Libya "feel that once they reach Europe, their lives will be better than it is in their countries, where their salaries and income is weak," said one trafficker. "In the world and in stable countries, especially Europe, the situation is good," said another. "They have this belief that their arrival means that they will never go to bed hungry."

One of the men said he recently received a phone call from a contact outside Libya who hadn't been in touch for a long time. After the conversation, he now expects the numbers of new migrants crossing into Libya to increase once tighter border controls in central African countries are loosened.

The drivers said they were busiest in the summers of 2015 and 2016, when they made about 30 trips carrying 20 passengers each time. Last summer, they did only two trips as European efforts to thwart irregular migration started to bear fruit. But the trend is upwards again.

There were 2,800 arrivals in Europe from the central Mediterranean route between Jan. 1 and April 5 this year, five times more than in the same period of 2019, according to EU border agency Frontex. Many of them would have already been stuck in Libya.

LIBYA-EUROPE-MIGRANTS

Migrants in the town of Tajura, east of the capital Tripoli, after they were rescued from the Mediterranean Sea on Feb. 18. Photographer: Mahmud Turkia/AFP

People smuggling through the country has generated annual revenues of as much as \$1.5 billion, according to an estimate by the International Crisis Group.

The "taxi service" meets customers at an agreed point along the Chad-Libya border, a 1,000-kilometer straight line through the red sands of the desert. It's an area that's near impossible to police, so the drivers only really fear rival gangs and Islamist militants. "We can easily move the meeting point to another spot if we have to," said one.

They then travel in groups of a dozen to a western city near the Mediterranean coast. From there another trafficking ring asks for additional fees to ferry the passengers to the water's edge, load them onto boats and direct them across the sea toward European shores. What happens next is simply down to luck.

While just a snapshot of one part of a vast and complicated network, the activity in this regional crossroads is an early indication of the toll that the measures to fight the pandemic are having on sub-Saharan African countries.

Quicktake

Europe's Refugees

EU policy makers are discussing offering humanitarian assistance, building resilience in African health-care systems, and helping economies, said Le Coz in Brussels. There's also a focus on how to compensate for the drop in remittances, the money sent home from successful migrants that's a lifeline to many families.

French President Emmanuel Macron has even called for a moratorium on African debt, saying the continent was already facing unsustainable finances before the pandemic. "Difficulties will continue to arise even if Covid does not become a health catastrophe," he said.

Well before the pandemic there were already plenty of potential migrants in Libya. Fabrice Leggeri, Frontex's executive director, told the European Parliament last month that Covid-19 and Libya's conflict are prompting more people to attempt a crossing. The Libyan coastguard is also having more difficulty stopping them, he said.

Not everyone makes it. Some are arrested and put into Libyan detention camps, others are returned to their point of departure by coastguards. Since the EU ended search and rescue operations, more and more are drowning at sea.

Migrants on an overcrowded boat, as aid workers approach them in the Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast on Jan. 10. Photographer: Santi Palacios/AP Photo

Of course, it's impossible to say how big a new migration flow might be. As Andrew Geddes, director of the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute in Florence, put it, there's a misconception "that the whole African population is sat on its suitcase ready to go to Europe."

Most African migration takes place within Africa, while there's also a route through Yemen to the Gulf. Researchers say the true picture will only become clear in months to come and they caution against using the word "wave."

But some European countries and parties that oppose migration have already started talking about the potential for increased arrivals and the need for more border control.

In Italy, nationalist opposition leader Matteo Salvini has denounced a government plan to give legal status to some 500,000 illegal migrant workers—many of them in the agricultural sector—because of the coronavirus emergency. He said "just the idea" of legal status "fosters crime."

The smugglers say that as long as they have no other means of income, they'll continue their work, and as long as people keep arriving, migrants will keep trying.

"The migrants, especially those who want to go to Europe, follow only good news," said one. All they want to know, he said, is "are there migrants who are managing to reach their destination or not?"

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