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Africans who sought refuge in Libya especially vulnerable

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Rebel fighters gesture in front of burning vehicles belonging to forces loyal to Libyan leade Moammar Gadhafi after an airstrike by coalition forces along a road between Benghazi and Ajdabiya, Libya, March 20. (CNS photo/Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

SASKATOON, Saskatchewan -- Africans who sought refuge in Libya before the recent turmoil are particularly vulnerable and need protection now, said Ellen Erickson, refugee sponsorship representative for the Diocese of Saskatoon.

An already bad situation in Libya for refugees worsened with the outbreak of the internal conflict and Western airstrikes, said Erickson.

While other foreign nationals fleeing the fighting can be repatriated, refugees, including many from Somalia and Eritrea, have nowhere to go, she said.

Erickson told Catholic News Service March 22 that the previous day she had received phone calls from Eritrean refugees in Tripoli, Libya's capital. They had been approved for resettlement to Canada and had been waiting for a flight out of the country when the unrest began in February, so they did not flee to the border. Now they are stuck in the capital with nowhere to go and no organizations to help, she said.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and Canadian officials are at the borders, but refugees would have to make it to the border, she said.

"There's no one there. They can hear the bombs falling," she said. "People have some real tough choices to make."

The Diocese of Saskatoon is one of the Canadian organizations expressing grave concerns about refugees in Libya, some of whom have connections to Canada, she said.

The Canadian Council for Refugees reports that sub-Saharan Africans are particularly vulnerable in Libya. Reports that the Libyan government was using mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa reinforced existing racial discrimination, leading to vicious attacks on black Africans. Many refugees were in hiding.

Some 8,000 refugees were registered in Libya with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and about 3,000 more were seeking asylum.

Erickson described the plight of eight Eritreans living in one room in Tripoli. Four of them had been accepted in principle for resettlement to Canada. Since the beginning of the revolt, they had only once dared leave the room. They were giving money for food to an elderly Libyan woman, but they were running out of money because it

was not safe to go out for work.

One of the men fled Eritrea more than two years ago. He was imprisoned several times in Libya before he was granted a U.N. refugee identity card. His aunt is a parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Saskatoon and was part of a group sponsoring him to come to Canada, said Erickson.

Some refugees managed to escape Libya and were stranded in one of the neighboring countries.

Bishop Giovanni Martinelli of Tripoli told Vatican Radio March 22 that the Western airstrikes and explosions go on all night, making it impossible to sleep.

"The city has become a ghost town. There is silence, death, humiliation," he said. "Many people have left the city to go to their family's villages because it's impossible to stay in the city. Really, it has the air of a cemetery."

Bishop Martinelli said it is time "to put an end to the bombardments, fix a cease-fire and try to see if it is possible -- through mediation, through contacts with people close to the Libyan government -- if there is a solution."

He said that while most people -- including almost all of the Catholics -- who were able to flee did leave, "a little remnant of the people of God remains. I cannot leave, we can't leave the people. It's not just the Christians, but also our Libyan friends who tell us, 'Thank you for staying with us. Thank you for giving us hope.'"

Canada has already been active in its response to the Libyan crisis, including granting $5 million in humanitarian aid. Canadian immigration officials were trying to finalize the cases of privately sponsored refugees who have made it to the Libyan border with Tunisia. UNHCR was working with Canadian officials to move these cases to Canada as soon as possible.

The Canadian Council for Refugees asked the Canadian government to work with other governments and international organizations to promote the evacuation and protection of all affected refugees. In addition, the council urged the government to include refugees with a pending application to Canada in the measures to evacuate Canadian citizens and to fast-track refugee and immigration applications to Canada from refugees affected by the Libyan crisis.

The Diocese of Saskatoon and Jesuit Refugee Service were among those that endorsed the recommendations.

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