



HUMAN RIGHTS ASSOCIATION
SOUTH AFRICA

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HRA Chairman Saad Kassis-Mohamed Calls on Libyan Authorities to Release Gambian Nationals Held in Arbitrary Detention and to End the Systematic Abuse of Migrants

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The Human Rights Association (HRA) today calls on the Libyan authorities to immediately release all Gambian nationals currently held in arbitrary detention across Libya's network of official, unofficial, and militia-controlled detention facilities, and to bring to an end the systematic abuse, torture, extortion, and forced labour to which Gambian and other West African migrants are being subjected.

The HRA's call follows a joint report published in February 2026 by the United Nations Human Rights Office and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, which documents what the UN describes as a 'brutal and normalised reality' amounting to a violent business model targeting migrants in Libya. The report, which covers the period from January 2024 to December 2025, is based on interviews with nearly one hundred migrants from sixteen countries across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Gambian nationals feature prominently among those documented as having been subjected to these abuses.

The testimony recorded by the United Nations includes direct accounts from Gambian nationals. One Gambian man, identified as Lamin, described being detained in a Libyan facility where guards entered with sticks and beat detainees, stole their money and clothing, and broke his teeth. He reported accepting deportation solely to escape the abuse. A second Gambian national, identified as Ebrima, described being arrested at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard, transferred to a detention facility without due process, and subsequently deported to The Gambia without being informed of what he was signing. A third Gambian national, identified as Bakary, was intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard and detained in conditions described by Amnesty International as amounting to torture and inhuman treatment.

The UN report establishes that these experiences are not exceptional. Across Libya, migrants including Gambian nationals are being forcibly rounded up, abducted, separated from their families, and transferred at gunpoint to detention facilities without legal process. In detention, they are subjected to beatings, torture, forced labour, sexual violence, ransom extortion, and the confiscation of their identity documents. Criminal networks operating these detention facilities frequently maintain ties to Libyan state-affiliated actors, blurring the line between official detention and organised criminal exploitation. Since 2015, at least 3,300 Gambian nationals have been repatriated from Libya through assisted return programmes, a figure that reflects the sustained and serious exposure of Gambians to these conditions over more than a decade.



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On 3 February 2026, Libyan authorities conducted mass raids in Sebha in southern Libya, detaining over 2,000 migrants after demolishing their homes, with reports indicating that as many as 1,000 people may have gone missing. The raids took place in an area where numerous cases of violence against migrants have been documented by international human rights organisations. In February 2026, investigators also uncovered two mass graves in south-eastern Libya containing the bodies of dozens of migrants, some bearing evidence of gunshot wounds.

HRA Chairman Saad Kassis-Mohamed stated: “Gambian men have had their teeth broken in Libyan detention facilities. They have been beaten, robbed, and deported without being told what they were signing. They have been arrested at sea and imprisoned without charge. These are not the experiences of people who crossed a border irregularly. These are the experiences of people who have been subjected to torture, arbitrary detention, and forced labour at the hands of entities operating with the complicity of state authorities. The Libyan authorities have a legal obligation under international human rights law to release every individual held in arbitrary detention, to end these practices, and to hold those responsible to account. The HRA will not remain silent while Gambian nationals continue to suffer in these conditions.”

“The United Nations has documented what it calls a violent business model in Libya. Gambian nationals are among those being beaten, tortured, and held for ransom in facilities where state-affiliated actors and criminal networks operate side by side. More than 3,300 Gambians have been repatriated from Libya since 2015. That number is not a statistic. It is a measure of how long this has been allowed to continue without accountability. It must end now.”

Saad Kassis-Mohamed, Chairman, Human Rights Association

The HRA calls specifically on the Libyan authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all Gambian nationals and other migrants held in arbitrary detention across official, unofficial, and militia-controlled facilities; to cease the practice of mass raids and collective detention of migrants without due process; to end the use of detention facilities as sites of torture, forced labour, ransom extortion, and sexual violence; to dismantle the criminal networks operating the exploitation of migrants, including those with ties to state-affiliated actors; to ensure that all returns of migrants to their countries of origin are genuinely voluntary and conducted with full, prior, and informed consent; and to cooperate fully with the United Nations human rights mechanisms that have documented these abuses.

The Human Rights Association is an initiative of the WeCare Foundation, Cape Town, active across Africa, South Asia, and the Gulf region. The HRA works to protect the human rights of individuals facing unjust detention, denial of medical care, and due process violations, and engages directly with United Nations mechanisms to advocate on their behalf. For more information, visit wcrfoundation.com/human-rights-association.