

Death at Sea or Slavery for Africa

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On November 7, 2017, it was internationally announced that 26 young women, estimated to be in the age range of 14-18 had been found dead on the Mediterranean Sea inside a capsized boat. They were presumed to have met their fate about three days earlier.

According to Mr. Tope Adeleye Elias-Fatile, the spokesperson of the Nigerian Foreign Ministry, the women were confirmed to be Nigerians by the Nigerian Embassy in Italy. Subsequently, however, the Nigerian authorities claimed only three were confirmed as Nigerians.

It is not unusual that other Africans willfully or per the will of others, pretentiously and falsely assume the citizenship of Nigeria when circumstances are bad. However, the country of origin of the twenty-six young African intending migrants who perished should not be the focus. The young women were Africans from any of the African countries supplying illegal immigrants to Europe to meet demands over there.

As these deaths at sea were being internalized, it came from CNN's Nima Elbagir that Africans, hoping for Eldorado in Europe, are being sold at slavery auction markets in Libya, for as little as \$400 per person.

António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General immediately reacted to the new knowledge on November 21, 2017 by unequivocally stating that: "Slavery has no place in our world". He further indicated that he was going to look at how mandated UN Agencies can, in a concerted manner, deal with this problem. Different world leaders reacted by condemning the development. The AU-EU Summit in Cote d'Ivoire was not left out. President Kagame offered resettlement in Rwanda to the detained Africans being offered for sale. European leaders who pushed for Libyans to stem the flow to Europe were not as generous as the Rwandan leader. However, President Emmanuel Macron who attended the AU-EU Summit, even reportedly spoke about the possibility of undertaking military action into Libya to put a halt to the reincarnation of the open market auctioning of Africans.

The Nigerian President expressed utter disgust and gave orders to repatriate Nigerians from Libya, a process that had actually been going on in trickles as a result of a collaboration between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Nigerian Government.

Some of those who had been repatriated or those in detention camps waiting for auction or repatriation have been providing insights to the media on a well organised criminal arrangement. In the case of Nigeria, most if not all returnees are from states in southern Nigeria. This is important because northern Nigeria is poorer and with lesser opportunities in comparison to southern Nigeria. Edo state, of the 36 administrative divisions of the country, comparatively stands out on the torrential flow of its indigenes towards illegally entering Italy through the death routes of the Sahara desert, and the lawlessness in failed Libya and the Mediterranean sea.

The returnees who failed in the efforts to reach Europe but survived along the way, have shared the knowledge that family members, including parents of the victims were involved in the criminal mafia-like enterprise.

Parents invest money that are paid to traffickers who promised to ensure they reach Europe. A few do, some die in transit and we now know many are auctioned as slaves. Traffickers earn additional illegal proceeds through the modern day slave trade.

This raises questions about the ability of the African governments to maintain the rule of law and protect citizens. How many of the people, including parents of victims have been arrested by governments of the countries involved as deterrence to other traffickers and their collaborators, including parents? If any at all, they have been so minimal that they have not caught the attention of the media.

The focus on how to stop the wastage of Africans on the death or slavery route is a matter of urgency, and the African Union, Regional Economic Commissions, etc need to focus African think tanks and independent brains into trying to understand the drivers of the lucrative human trafficking organizations which are making money out of African people. Such knowledge should boost the capacities of African and European governments to collaborate in halting a bad trade that may actually end up becoming more vicious than drug trafficking.

The task in handling the problem should not be outsourced to the UN or other international organizations by African governments. Dealing with this problem should start with the engagement of those in public authority in Africa to stop the criminal entities feeding on Africans by facilitating the perilous journey. Bringing as many as possible in the supply-chain for slavery and deaths on the sea to book should be a major priority of African governments. The other side of the equation, in terms of arresting the chieftains behind the demand-side in Europe should also be a priority of European authorities. Arresting captains of rickety boats is not enough. They are mere instruments with relatively low value in the powerful chains.

The huge indifference to public theft of national patrimony in countries like Nigeria need to be halted or reduced in order to realise an increase in the availability of resources for infrastructures and other developments that could give would-be immigrant the hope that he/she can make it in Nigeria or Africa.

European governments had agreed at earlier Summits to support efforts to create opportunities for would be migrants so that they could remain in their respective countries. The deconcentration of access to such funding support to direct beneficiaries as opposed to their governments could encourage people to seek to be small scale entrepreneurs in Africa.

In spite of the withdrawal of the United States from the discussions on “Global Compact towards Migration”, the world needs to come up with a framework that considers and supports the claims that we live in a global world. Why should capital be able to move freely all over the world in search of huge profits but educated African labour is confined to national territories?