

WEST AFRICA: Rights activists urge UN to investigate abuse of migrants

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]

DAKAR, 13 October (IRIN) - While Morocco continues deporting masses of West African migrants in the face of international condemnation, a pan-African human rights group is calling on the United Nations to investigate charges of rights violations linked to border control. "The UN high commission for human rights must open an investigation into rights violations tied to immigration," Alioune Tine, secretary general of the pan-African human rights group, Rencontre Africaine des Droits de l'Homme (RADDHO), told IRIN.

The Moroccan government acknowledged on Thursday that its armed forces had shot at illegal immigrants trying to scale a barrier between Africa and Europe last week, and appealed for a Euro-African effort to tackle illegal immigration and its root causes.

The thorny and long-standing problem came into the world media spotlight in recent weeks, with televised images of desperate African migrants being shot at and crushed trying to enter Europe and scores of others deposited in the vacant sands of Morocco with no food or water.

Earlier this month hundreds of illegal African migrants attempted to clear barbed-wire barriers to enter Spain's enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco. At least 14 were killed - some by crushing, others by gunfire.

Morocco has drawn a sharp reprimand from humanitarian groups and other international organisations for dumping some of the destitute migrants in the desert.

"We are extremely troubled by these events," RADDHO's Tine said. "Troubled by these unspeakable, cruel, degrading attacks on human rights, by people treated like trash, left with no water or food, dumped like garbage."

The Moroccan communications minister Nabil Benabdallah told Radio France Internationale on Thursday that its forces had in fact shot at migrants with live bullets, but said it was "in self-defense."

Benabdallah said Europe and Africa must work jointly to resolve the problem of illegal immigration.

"Morocco alone cannot take on the responsibility for the conditions of poverty and desperation that exist in certain Sahel countries," he said. "Morocco calls for a Euro-African conference on the question of immigration because we think that today the problem is critical and we must decisively take it on."

At a meeting of European and African leaders in Brussels this week, African Union head and former Malian president Alpha Oumar Konare also said it is time to look at the root causes of mass illegal immigration.

"These young people we saw storm the barrier [into Europe] are not criminals," he told reporters on Wednesday. "We must look at and understand why they are migrating. They reflect the impoverishment of the continent."

Green Party members of the European Parliament, just back from a visit to the enclaves in North Africa, are calling for an investigation into Spanish

authorities' involvement in the shooting of migrants.

Dejected Senegalese, Malians arrive back home

The Moroccan government - which has deportation agreements with Senegal and Mali - began transporting nationals from the two countries back home by plane this week.

Over 500 Senegalese arrived in the capital, Dakar, between Monday and Wednesday.

The first Malian deportees - about half of the some 630 to be expelled - arrived in the capital, Bamako, on Wednesday.

Thirty-five-year-old Sekou Barry, gaunt-faced and wearing a tattered shirt, said that after his experience in Morocco he was relieved when he learned the group would be transported back home.

"Our misery began on 3 October, when the Moroccans handcuffed us and put us on a bus," he said. "People were brawling in the bus and Moroccan gendarmes intervened."

He said he and his fellow migrants went without food for three days.

His account echoed that of other Senegalese and Malian returnees, some bearing bruises or other injuries from their ordeal.

Despite the hardship in store for most clandestine migrants, the wave of eager Africans heading north remains constant.

The European Commission says about 20,000 clandestine African immigrants are in Algeria, 10,000 in Morocco, pining for a chance to beat the odds and reach Europe.

Senegalese abroad contribute third of national budget

About 2.5 million Senegalese live overseas - principally in other African countries, France, the United States, Italy and Spain, according to Abdourahmane Kane of the ministry for Senegalese living abroad. Senegal's population is about 11 million.

"In 2004, Senegalese living abroad sent nearly 309 billion francs CFA (US \$618 million) to Senegal - a third of the national budget," Kane told IRIN. "And that does not even include the constant informal transactions." And migrants invest considerably in the building of schools and hospitals.

One knock-on effect of the masses of Senegalese living overseas is that - with their foreign-financed villas and 4x4s back in Senegal - they feed the illusion that Europe is a paradise.

Kane is dismayed at the rush to emigrate.

"The physical and financial effort they put into getting to Morocco - if they would apply that at home with the support of the government, they could build something. But they can't wait. They are mesmerized by Europe."

RADDHO's Tine said it is the failure of development at home in Africa that continues to drive young people abroad.

The UN Office for West Africa in a recent report deplored the lack of opportunity for young people in the region.

Back in Bamako, Barry said he depleted all his means on his failed attempt to get to Europe. "I have nothing left."

He said his prospects for making a living in Mali are no better now than before he set out on his journey.

"I will try to get to Europe again as soon as possible."

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