

Libya's Deserted Borders

Vast cracks have appeared in Libya's southern borders: refugees and smuggled goods flood into the country – corruption is the order of the day at many checkpoints. Not so in Al Luer, where 138 young men fight for justice on their own terms. They belong to the Tubu people, a non-Arab minority determined to find peace in the wake of Gaddafi's death.

PHOTOGRAPHY:
ANTONIA ZENNARO



A checkpoint on the main road connecting Libya and Niger. The Tubu are attempting to secure a 1400 kilometre-long border – a true labour of Sisyphus

Shahafedin Barka takes his knife and carefully cuts open the cardboard box. The path of the blade gradually reveals the briquettes, wrapped in air-tight foil. The overpowering odour of two-hundred kilogrammes of hashish fills the revolutionaries' headquarters, piled high with weapons and ammunition. "Our patrols came across three pick-ups this time, 200 kilometres to the south. Algerian Tuaregs carry the drugs from Mali to Libya – ultimately, they are meant for Europe. We managed to hold up one of the trucks, but the smugglers opened fire. We've lost a

Smugglers regularly use their weapons to ensure their goods reach the other side of the border.

lot of friends in these types of situations." To Shahafedin, such encounters are nothing new. At 22 he seems too young to be a veteran of war – yet that is what they call him here. His quiet sobriety speaks volumes about the past two years of turmoil in his country and his life. Since the beginning of the revolution in February 2011, the heart of the Sahara is no longer controlled by the Libyan state. Muammar al-Gaddafi's soldiers have long fled, with the new government – based 1400 km away in Tripoli – now preoccupied with the post-revolution chaos in the capital itself. And so, young men have come together in the Sahara to take the matter of border security into their own hands. They are dark-skinned Tubu, a non-Arab minority of Southern Libya. Throughout Gaddafi's 42-year reign, they suffered compulsory Arabization and discrimination. Now they protect the southern borders of Libya and their communities. Shahafedin commands 138 revolutionaries, all of them under the age of thirty. "Officially, Libya is



now a free country. But in reality, it is ruled by countless militia groups, while the government remains powerless. It's best to be well prepared," he says solemnly. Al Luer, a former military base located in the middle of the Sahara desert, has become their headquarters. At several checkpoints along the paved road to Niger they inspect passing traders and the small

number of travellers. Those without valid papers are sent back. The work is monotonous and dangerous. There is a constant shortage of ammunition and spare parts for their pick-ups. "But we know every stone out here, and want to do something for our country," says Issa, one of Shahafedin's men who is working at the checkpoint. ▶



Clockwise from left: Daily life in Al Luer: at just 22, commander Shahafedin is responsible for a unit of 138 men; the storage room for confiscated alcohol, smuggled across the desert with the intention of delivering it to Tripoli; one morning at the checkpoint; strict inspection of the traders' vehicles



Top: Standing guard at the checkpoint. Below left: Issa, 26, in front of the empty refugee camp. Last year his brother was killed in a militia battle. Below right: Passport control at checkpoint Al Luer. Those without valid papers are sent back

Yet his country has changed. Over the past two decades, the ancient oases of the desert have transformed into small cities through the arrival of foreign oil companies. Libya is home to the largest oil reserves in Africa. Even before the revolution, the growing prosperity attracted willing workers from neighbouring southern countries. In the searing heat, Ghanians and Nigerians once again toil at the sites, having illegally crossed the seemingly endless sea of sand. In the desert that surrounds the former military base, it feels as though time has stood still for the last ten thousand years. A majestic silence reigns at temperatures of 45 degrees – nothing but sun and sand, with a wind that rises in the middle of the day as the only soundscape. “Water cleanses the body, the desert purifies the soul,” Issa says with determination. Yet their patrols along the 1400 km long section of border are a true labour of Sisyphus – so vast is the stretch of land for which the Tubu feel responsible.

Journey through no-man’s-land. Today, one group is headed for Tommo, the official border crossing to Chad. Between the two official crossings are 70 kms of uncontrolled no-man’s-land. There has been no sign of any Chadian officials along this border for the past two years. “The desert has no actual border. It’s a dream come true for smugglers,” laughs Ahmed Shin as he swings a spare tyre into the back of his Toyota – adding that they would be able to put a stop to the smugglers if they had the right resources. On the road we pass several smaller checkpoints, car wrecks, and traders sleeping in the shade of their parked trucks. Everyone in the car keeps a vigilant lookout for any vehicles on the horizon. Under the tin roof of the Tommo border station, uniformed men search a truck. Blankets, canisters and open suitcases are spread out on the sandy road by their owners, traders from Agadez. A spare tyre appears to change hands. Commander Amir Senussi has worked here since before the revolution. Unlike the young and idealistic men in Shahafedin’s unit, he is a trained soldier, accustomed to asserting his authority with an attitude

“If all stays quiet, time will eventually heal the wounds, as it will in all of Libya.”

very different to that of the young revolutionaries from Al Luer, who were never officially trained as part of the army.

In the lunch break, everyone gathers in a circle around a communal bowl of rice with chicken. “Together with the Tuareg, we are the original natives of the Sahara,” says Shahafedin’s older brother, Galma. “But in the revolution, the Tuareg fought for Gaddafi and the privileges he was granting them, while we fought for our freedom and the recognition of our rights as a minority.” When peaceful protests suddenly turned into a bloody war within the space of a few days, Libya’s 100,000-strong Tubu population were the only group in the southern province of Fezzan to side with the Benghazi revolutionaries. Like the Tuareg, the Arab tribes in Libya’s south predominantly fought on the side of the regime. Ever since the fighting stopped, the Tubu now guard the desert passage to Chad and Niger – but their machine guns at the checkpoints in Tommo and Al Luer also point north.

“Last year, a group of militia-men from the Libyan-Arabian tribe Uleid Sliman attempted to banish all Tubu from Fezzan’s capital Sebha. We left for the city at night, and fought at Sebha Airport for days. 150 people were killed,” says Issa, whose brother also lost his life in that violent battle. A peace treaty, negotiated by tribe elders from the north, put an end to the conflict this summer. The Tubu continue to live in Sebha, side by side with Libyan Arabs, though with an air of mistrust between the two sides. “If all stays quiet,

time will eventually heal the wounds, as it will in all of Libya,” the 23-year-old remains very optimistic. “After all, there is enough land and prosperity for all of us.”

Back in Al Luer. The storeroom is stacked with hundreds of bottles of whiskey, all neatly packed into boxes. Alcohol is strictly prohibited in Libya, but on the black market, one of these bottles would be worth around 80 euros. “Shafadin is totally trustworthy,” Issa laughs, giving his friend and commander a friendly slap on the shoulder as they wrap and store away the confiscated drugs. “I have no idea how much all of this stuff would actually be worth. But of course we know that a lot of people in Tripoli and Europe would happily make a small fortune with it,” they explain light-heartedly. Even on my third visit, the confiscated stock remains untouched. “Virtually all militiamen smuggle goods – why not you?” I find myself asking. Their demeanour is serious again. “We have made an agreement with our local council and tribal elders: from every truck that passes the checkpoint, we take ten percent of their petrol, or in the case of an animal transporter we might take a sheep out of a hundred. This way we can survive, finance the patrols and ensure their safety. Alcohol and drugs are of no interest to us for religious reasons. And our friends did not give their lives so we can end up as smugglers. We are fighting for a new and just Libya.”

Over the past two years, private industry in the north of the country has experienced an economic boom thanks to the successful revival of the oil industry. In Fezzan however, economy is at a standstill. “We have no police, no army, no jobs. So it’s up to us to create order,” Issa says with pride. “But it’s very frustrating. I’d much rather study politics than waste my youth out here in the desert. We are all hoping that the Libyan Army will soon take over border security.” So far, not one politician has visited Al Luer or Tommo, despite the fact that the security vacuum and the country’s open southern borders represent a major problem – and not only for Libya. The Sahara has also always ▶



The Sahara desert, gateway to Europe: refugees continuously attempt to cross the border.

Sun and sand as far as the eye can see: Checkpoint Tommo. Not all Tuabris are committed to a better, more law-abiding Libya – for the right price, many guards are willing to turn a blind eye

been the gateway to Europe. Anyone coming from Ghana, Somalia and Nigeria in search of work is desperate to leave behind the chaos of Libya as quickly as possible, and find a place on a boat to Italy or Malta. Between them, the Tuareg, the Tuabris and the Army could easily solve the problem, Shahafedin explains angrily. “We know all of the passable routes. With the support of Tripoli and Brussels, the border could be brought under control again, just like it was in the Gaddafi era.”

Lucrative smuggling. Some of the revolutionaries are now paid 600 dinars, around 370 euros, a month by the Ministry for Oil and Gas in recognition of the fact that they are guarding the military camp. Spare parts for their pick-ups, ammunition and food however continue to be paid out of their own pockets. Aside from oil, smuggling is currently the largest source of income in Libya, where a litre of petrol costs 4 cents in contrast to as much as 1.30 euros in neighbouring Tunisia and Algeria. Every day, hundreds of trucks loaded with weapons, petrol or people drive across the borders. Getting a lift by one of the convoys from Agadez in Niger to the south of Libya is charged at a fixed rate. At 150 euros per head, up to a thousand people leave Agadez at set times each Monday. Often, they are simply abandoned in the desert, a long way from any Libyan city – not all of them survive the ordeal. ▶



Top: African traders at checkpoint Tommo near the Niger border. Below left: A can of petrol changes hands. Below right: An abandoned petrol station – after the war, the oil industry collapsed. Opposite: Ibrahim Saleh demands support from Tripoli to secure the borders



The elders of Gatrún, an oasis on the main route to Niger and Chad, have worked with Shahafedin and his superiors on developing a set of rules concerning penalties for smugglers. The Tubu militia confiscate their cars and demand a fine of 4000 dinars, equivalent to around 2500 euros. The mostly professional drivers then spend one week in a make-shift prison

at the military base. Occasionally, revolutionaries and smugglers cross paths again on the streets of Gatrún. “It doesn’t matter,” says Issa. “Every man must do what he thinks is right. To us, money is not important, and we refuse to accept money that comes from dealing with smugglers. For others, morality is not considered important. In the end, Allah will judge us all.”

In contrast to drug dealers, people traffickers tend to be unarmed and not dangerous, confirms Mohamed Almani, who is responsible for guarding the African migrants held at the military base. Strictly separated by nationality, they spend several weeks in the prison before being sent back to Niger by the Immigration Office. It is Mohamed’s task to organise the transport for their return, which he can find deeply frustrating. Sometimes he has to hire the same truck drivers who were attempting to pass the border with a full load of migrants in the first place. “We are

“The elders are able to peacefully resolve many conflicts through negotiations.”

the only authority in southern Libya that still sends people back. For a bribe, many of the guards just allow the trucks to pass.”

More support needed. Ibrahim Saleh is among those insisting that a lot more support should be coming from Tripoli. Under Gaddafi’s regime, he was the chief of police in Murzuk, which, with its 13,000 inhabitants, is one of the largest towns in Fezzan. Having immediately joined the revolutionaries – as did all Tubu – he talks about the positive aspects of a tribe-based society. “In the Sahara, the traditional rules of social behaviour governing the tribes and their extended families still apply today,” he explains, talking as he bends over to study a map of Libya.

“It’s true that something like a car accident can easily lead to a conflict between entire town districts or between two tribes. On the other hand, the elders are always able to peacefully resolve any conflicts through negotiations and, once a decision is made, everyone abides by it.” ▶



Top: A group from Al Luer are visiting Tommo. Below left: Illegal refugees are trying to make money in the hope of reaching Europe. Below right: Often, the dream of a better life ends here, in the Al Luer refugee camp. Opposite: Refugees constantly find ways to cross the border and reach the nearest large city

A better life? The writing and drawings on the prison walls of Al Luer tell of the odysseys of countless young men in search of a basic standard of living – most of them set out with nothing more than a blanket and the clothes on their backs. Sanitary conditions in the overfilled cells are poor, with regular fights breaking out during food distribution. Nevertheless, the young militia-men treat their similarly-aged African prisoners with a friendly demeanour. “If it were me, I’d try and leave too,” Issa says to a young Nigerian who pleads with him to finally allow him to move on. “It’s not possible,” says Issa sympathetically. “We have fought for a constitutional state, against the chaos of the Gaddafi era. This is what my brother died for. There’s just too many of you for Libya – I’m sorry.” For a moment, they both seem distraught. Often the Nigerians have been loaned money by their entire village in the hope

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that they can send money home once they reach Europe. Despite lax security measures, no prisoner has ever escaped – no-one would survive the Sahara.

Every three weeks, the revolutionaries return home for one week. Most of them still live with their parents. Marriage, children, their own house and a job – this is what the young Tubu wish for the most. Issa would like to marry next year. “I haven’t saved enough yet.” So now, he drives a taxi in his week off to earn money. He has fallen in love with his neighbour’s daughter. On his taxi drives to Sabha, he often passes checkpoints where guards are willing to turn a blind eye for a fee. “A checkpoint can be a lucrative source of income. But we have vowed that we won’t exploit the fate of the migrants for our own gain. It goes against Islam, and it would be a betrayal of our friends who have died for our freedom.” MIRCO KEILBERTH