

Libyan Christian clergy seek help for stranded migrants

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#)

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Nairobi, February 28 (ENInews)--Libyan Christian clergy have appealed for urgent help for Eritrean refugees who have taken shelter in a church in Tripoli, following days of violent anti-government protests.

"We are mainly worried for hundreds of Eritreans who are stranded here and no one cares for their evacuation. Bishop (Giovanni) Martinelli (the Roman Catholic Bishop of Tripoli) made an appeal to all to help these people. Only Italy is trying to take a small number of 54," the Rev. Daniel Furrugia, the Vicar General of the Vicariate of Tripoli told ENInews on 28 February, as the protests against the government of Moammar Gadhafi entered the 13th day.

Gadhafi's brutal suppression of civilian demonstrators has received wide global condemnation by governments and world leaders, with the UN Security Council imposing sanctions against the Libyan authorities, imposing an arms embargo and freezing the assets of its leaders. It also referred the ongoing repression to the International Criminal Court. The UN estimates that more than 100 people have died in the clashes.

The clergy said the unrest has kept people away from church services. "This morning we had 10 am and 12 am Mass. The attendance was less than usual, but the church was full of Eritreans full of hope to leave this country," Furrugia said on Sunday, 27 February.

Since 16 February, a group of around 40 families of Eritrean refugees, including children, have been stranded in an area close to Tripoli Airport with no means of evacuation, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). The organization said there were other African refugees who have taken refuge in the Catholic Church in Tripoli who needed help.

Furrugia said there was some normality in the city during the day, with shops opening, traffic starting to flow and people queuing in all the banks. "In the evenings, there is a strange silence all around and no sign of protest," he said.

Last week, Martinelli approached Libyan Muslims to ask for the protection of Christians during the unrest. Martinelli was reported in the press as saying the attempt to end the protests had been very strong, and the blood that ran there on the streets of Libya impeded a general reconciliation.

"We entered into contact with the Red Crescent and other Muslim organizations to appeal for protection of the churches, of the convents, of our faithful and of the sisters who work in the hospitals," he said. He had also spoken of the people's desire for more democracy and young people's hopes for a better life.

There are about 80,000 Christians in Libya. The Christians come from Asia, Africa and Europe, and belong to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and some Pentecostal churches.