

Aid group urges European governments to help Libya refugees

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

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Warsaw, Poland, April 15 (ENInews)--An ecumenical aid organisation has urged European governments to do more to help refugees from the war in Libya, and warned that continued inaction could damage relations with the Arab world.

"The European Union should be helping with resettlement facilities -- instead, all we're seeing is the reinforcement of border controls to prevent new arrivals," said Genevieve Jacques, a staffer at La Cimade, an aid group belonging to France's Protestant Federation.

"The governments and peoples of Europe rejoiced at the democratic movement now flourishing in the Arab world. So it's hypocritical and absolutely unacceptable that we're now rejecting the migrants and refugees trying to reach Europe as a result," she said in an interview with ENInews.

Jacques spoke after visiting transit camps on Tunisia's western border that currently house over 200,000 people, mostly former migrant workers displaced by the fighting in Libya between dictator Moammar Gadhafi's troops and opposition forces.

Tunisians showed "extraordinary solidarity" when refugees began arriving in late February, she said, adding that 150,000 migrants have since been repatriated, mostly to Asia and Africa.

However, she added that up to 3,000 have been unable to return home because of war and instability in countries such as Somalia, Sudan and Ivory Coast, and were currently stranded with insufficient food, water and shelter in an isolated desert area of Tunisia.

"The Tunisians told us they'd extended protection and hospitality because they'd just recovered their own dignity in a revolution. But the flow has been so great they can't cope," said Jacques, whose organisation was founded by Protestant students to

help refugees at the start of the Second World War.

"This is why we're appealing to European countries to help these people, who have nowhere to go. Instead of putting up new barriers and security fences, we should be offering resettlement space. This is a highly volatile area and we don't know what will happen otherwise."

Over 400,000 people are estimated to have fled Libya since mid-February. Around 22,000 people arriving by boat on the Italian island of Lampedusa have been threatened with forced repatriation by the government of premier Silvio Berlusconi, while many others are reported to have arrived in Malta and other Mediterranean countries.

"If [Europe is] seen as hypocritical and lacking in credibility at this crucial moment, it won't offer sound prospects for a new relationship with our southern neighbours. Nor will it send a good message if Europe responds to these revolutions by just playing the policeman and protecting its borders," she said.

Jacques said the Libyan economy had depended on 1.5 million migrant workers before the fighting, but added that around a tenth of camp inhabitants had already been refugees in the country.

Jacques said La Cimade representatives would urge action at upcoming talks with France's Foreign Ministry and the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, with support from the Protestant Federation and other church groups.