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EGYPT-LIBYA: Returnees struggle to survive



Photo: Andre Fecteau/IRIN

Mahrous Mohammed at his vegetable stand in Saad Allah village in Egypt

CAIRO, 2 November 2011 (IRIN) - Months after he left Tripoli because of civil unrest in Libya, El Badri Mahrous Mohammed still finds himself struggling to make ends meet in his native Egypt.

"I knew from the beginning that it would be difficult to find work, so I started growing vegetables," he said.

Somebody in his village of Saad Allah, just north of Sohag in Upper Egypt, gave him a small loan to buy a motorized tricycle so he could deliver his produce to customers and bring more vegetables from the Sohag market and sell them at his own stand in Saad Allah.

Mohammed told IRIN business keeps him busy, but the profits are not enough to provide for his wife and two children, compared with his earnings as a tiler in Tripoli for 10 years.

Galal Muawwad Ali has had even less luck since his return last March. "Job opportunities are limited," he said. He had been a contractor for four years in Tripoli but his subsequent job search in

Alexandria, Cairo, Asyut, and Qena proved fruitless.

"I feel desperate. I have lots of time but I don't know what to do," he said. Ali cares for a wife, child, and both his parents.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates 1.5 million Egyptian migrants were working in Libya before a popular armed uprising against Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi began in February. About 200,000 fled the mounting turmoil there, returning to a homeland itself in chaos and an economy severely weakened by the political and social instability created by a separate revolution in Egypt that ousted then President Hosni Mubarak in February.

Economy in doldrums

Tourism revenues, which account for 11 percent of Egypt's GDP, have halved since the protests began in January 2011. Inflation stands at 13.3 percent. Figures released by the Egyptian Ministry of Planning in June showed that private sector investment had fallen by 33 percent and public sector investment by 17 percent in the first quarter of 2011.

"Whether they are returnees or not, Egyptians have problems finding jobs," said Yasmine Fahim, researcher at the Economic Research Forum in Cairo. The last published unemployment rate in March stood at 11.8 percent, but this does not take under-employment into account.

A survey conducted in the first quarter by the IOM at the Egyptian-Libyan border, where migrants were stranded, found that 75 percent of Egyptians intended to remain in Egypt because of the trauma associated with fleeing Libya and hopes that the Egyptian economy would recover soon. Such hopes may have been premature.

Nowadays, some men in Saad Allah are eager to go back to their life in Libya. "I will return when it's completely calm," Ali the contractor told IRIN on 17 October, three days before Gaddafi was killed. The former rebel National Transitional Council now has full control of the country, and while there are many weapons among militias outside government control, the situation has stabilized since the worst days of fighting.

But the revolution in Libya has changed the game for Egyptian migrants, who are mostly low-skilled construction labourers from the poorest regions of Egypt. Finding work in the new Libya might become a problem because of their skills set, said Pasquale Lupoli, IOM's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Right now, Libya needs specialists, but Egyptians are not qualified," he said.

The Libyan economy depends mostly on oil revenues, and its infrastructure has been heavily damaged.

Assistance

In March, the Egyptian government asked the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to help in providing assistance to the returnees' families under a food-for-training scheme, where they learn vocational skills, such as plumbing, or business skills.

The operation, which is coming to an end this week, focused on the Upper Egyptian governorates of Beni Suef, Minya, Asyut and Sohag, where most returnees are from, according to Abdallah Alwardat, WFP's programme adviser in Cairo.

The returnees' situation was complicated by the fact that "Upper Egypt is the most food-insecure area in Egypt", said Alwardat.

The families in Saad Allah received two rounds of food in May and September. They were provided with rice, vegetable oil, date bars, wheat flour, and beans. Upon graduating from the training programme, participants were given another 25kg of wheat flour.

"It's good quality food, but it's all gone already," said Yasmeeen Abu el-Hassan, wife of a returnee, one month after the last donation. In addition to herself and her husband, she is responsible for eight people.

"We used to cook meat every day. Now, it's chicken once or twice a month," complained Fatma Mohammad Abdel Muattalab, with a family of 12.

The training, provided by the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Emigration, was attended by both returnees and family members.

"I started to think about how to help the household," said Sabah Mohammad Ahmad, whose brother is one of the 470 men who returned to Saad Allah. After the training, she secured a micro-loan, bought an oven, and started baking cookies that she sells to schoolchildren. "It brings enough money to cover my expenses and my children's, but they are growing and so too are their expenses," she said. Ahmad's sons are in kindergarten and grade 6.

The 500 Egyptian pounds (\$84) her brother used to send from Tripoli every month was enough to provide for the 10-member family.

Remittances from Libya to Egypt used to account for US\$33 million per year, according to the IOM - the Egyptian Labour Ministry puts this figure at about \$254 million - and were Egypt's third largest source of foreign currency, after revenues from the Suez Canal and tourism.

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