

In Libya, religious continue to offer care, service to migrants

ROME - Despite the worsening crisis in Libya, religious women and men continue to offer pastoral care and desperately needed services to the country's many migrants.

Many of the migrants who have stayed behind have lost their jobs and have nowhere else to go, which leaves them searching for food, medicine, clothing and most of all, rent money, said a nun working just outside of Tripoli.

Sister Shirley of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary told Catholic News Service May 20 that the livelihood of many immigrants depended on the once-strong presence of diplomats, oil workers and other foreign professionals. After those professionals left, there was little to no work left for the lower-paid immigrant workers, she said.

"Everything is so expensive and there are no jobs," she said.

"Lots of (migrants) come flocking to the church looking for help," she said.

The sisters have been able to give out small amounts of cash and they have been distributing food and other supplies they receive from the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees via Tunisia, she said.

Foreigners began fleeing Libya in March when NATO forces began airstrikes to quell a civilian uprising. While most immigrants have left the country, some are stuck in Libya or have chosen to stay.

"The majority of people who left were in Libya for only a short time or Libya was a transit country for them;" others were too frightened to stay or some had no money to stay on, Sister Shirley said.

Of the immigrants deciding to stay, many did so because they have been living in Libya for a number of years and are taking a "wait-and-see" approach, hoping the situation in the country improves, she said. Also, many of them have no home or

work to return to in their country of origin, she explained.

Five religious communities - including the Missionaries of Charity and the Daughters of the Sacred Heart - are working in and around Tripoli.

The sisters at the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary community near Tripoli worked at a government-run home for the elderly or centers for education. Some sisters have been unable to continue their work because they need to use a car to get around, Sister Shirley said. Rising gas prices and shortages have made getting around extremely difficult.

One nun went to the gas station at 5 that morning in hopes of getting some gas, Sister Shirley said, but the line was already so long that the station closed just two cars shy of the nun's turn.

Sister Shirley said she is a social worker and has been able to continue her work helping migrants in the area.

She spoke of her pain after more than 250 migrants were presumed dead at sea in April when their overcrowded boat capsized en route to Italy.

"One lady lived with us for a month. We used to cook together. There were only two of us living in the community" so she had become like family, she said.

Many of those who died lived on the same street as the sisters and had left important documents or money behind, she said.

"It's been a very, very painful event for me personally," she said, "It's very painful to forget."

All of the Catholics in Libya are foreign workers, said Sister Shirley, who is from India.

The majority come from India, the Philippines, Ghana, Congo, Nigeria and Sudan, and some are from Europe.

Father Daniel Farrugia, a priest from Malta and vicar of the apostolic vicariate in Tripoli, told CNS that there had been some 100,000 Christians living in Libya before

the conflict. Many of them have fled the city, but those who have stayed are usually the women working in the hospitals, he said.

The parish church of St. Francis in Tripoli no longer offers Mass after 7 p.m. because people are reluctant to leave their homes in the evening, he said.

The seven priests from Italy, India, Philippines, Poland, Egypt and Malta offer different services in different languages to better serve the immigrant community.

Since Libya is a Muslim country, most people have to work on Sunday and have the day off on Friday, so most Masses are held on Fridays, he said.

“The church was almost full today,” he told Catholic News Service May 20.

“We pray there will be a peaceful solution to the conflict,” he said. While some days seem quiet and free of sirens or bombings, “you still feel there is a question, an uncertainty” about the future.

Sister Shirley added: “Life is not very comfortable. You can see the stress on people’s faces.”