Highlights:

- Steep upward trend in COVID-19 cases continues with 14,624 confirmed cases and 242 deaths as of 31 August 2020.
- Protests increasing across the country against deteriorating living conditions, water and power cuts and corruption.
- 45 migrants and refugees die in worst shipwreck incident this year – almost 8,000 people have been intercepted at sea and returned to Libya in 2020.
- Humanitarian access, while improved in July/August, remains a persistent challenge.

Lockdowns extended amid exponential increases in COVID-19 cases

In August, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Libya saw a four-fold increase, and as of 31 August, stood at 14,624 confirmed cases and 242 deaths. Amid these exponential increases, community transmission has now been confirmed in some of Libya’s main cities, including Tripoli and Sebha.

As a result of continued increases in COVID-19 cases, the Government of National Accord (GNA) announced new curfew measures. The new curfew, implemented from 26 August, included a 24hr lockdown for the first four days followed by a 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. curfew until 8 September. Existing measures on the restrictions of movement between administrative cities’ borders and limiting of large gatherings pertaining to social, religious and/or national events has continued. Major markets and shops were to remain closed during the curfews except for those that provide essential and basic services for the citizens, such as food stores and pharmacies.

Persistent and acute shortages in COVID-19 testing capabilities and supplies, along with adequate health care facilities and contact tracing means the true scale of the pandemic in Libya is likely to be much higher. More than nine years of conflict has resulted in the near collapse of the health system, with approximately 50 per cent of primary health care facilities remaining closed. Those that remain open do not have sufficient supplies, equipment or human resources to care for COVID-19 patients along with maintaining normal health services, including child immunization programmes. An increasing numbers of health care staff are contracting COVID-19 due to a lack of personal protective equipment and adequate infection, prevention and control procedures, placing further weight on an overburden system.

* As of 15 September 2020
Challenges also remain in facilitating timely approval for the importation of health supplies, the release of COVID-19 top up salaries and provision of personal protective equipment to health workers. Improving coordination between the Ministries of Health and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), and understanding where and how COVID-19 funds announced by Libyans authorities have been spent, remain critical to effectively combatting the disease.

Humanitarian organizations are at the forefront of supporting national authorities in the COVID-19 response, through the provision of health supplies and personal protection equipment. A total of 891,000 people have been reached by all responding organizations with assistance to address the impact of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Health Sector Pillars. Of these 182,000 people have been reached with humanitarian assistance that is also aligned with the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), 49 per cent of which was directly through HRP-funded activities.

Support to step up COVID-19 risk communication and awareness in Misrata

Humanitarian partners continued to work closely with authorities to destigmatize the virus and increase awareness to ensure people can and do take proper precautions to protect themselves. Starting on 22 August, the NCDC, supported by the UN, launched a risk education and awareness campaign for COVID-19 in Misrata in light of the increasing numbers of cases in the city.

The campaign included dissemination of information and awareness flyers, displaying of posters in public and gathering places, widespread TV, radio and social media broadcasts, as well as events with local religious leaders. The campaign is similar to one that was conducted in Sebha following sharp increases in cases in June and July. The campaign, which ran from 30 June to 10 August aimed to raise community awareness about the disease and provided guidance on how people could protect themselves and seek support in order to control the spread of the virus.

As part of the campaign, a rapid questionnaire was developed to assess communities’ knowledge and attitudes related to communication. When asking what communication platforms people thought were most effective 93.8 per cent of people identified Facebook, with the remaining identifying local channels.

Where social media was not accessible, respondents indicated that the most impactful means were: signs or posters that were place along roads (61.7 per cent), flyers that had distributed in public places (57.4 per cent) and signs and stickers displayed in mosques, bakeries and other public places (42.6 per cent). These findings highlight the importance of using a number of diverse channels and methods to effectively communicate and raise awareness with communities.
Another important way in which the humanitarian community supports community awareness and engagement is through the Inter-Agency Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM). Since its establishment in February 2020, the WFP/ETS-managed call centre has answered almost 12,000 calls.

While numbers were modest in the initial days, given limited awareness, calls sharply increased at the end of March when it became the official national COVID-19 hotline – going from 50 calls per week in mid-March to 2,400 calls the week after. The call centre continues to play a crucial part in the health response to prevent further spread of the virus in Libya. Since March, the average number of calls has stabilized to around 450 calls per week.

Geographically, most calls (90 per cent) have come from the western region of Libya, Tripoli municipality. This may in part be due to the emergence of the pandemic in Tripoli and the larger presence of international humanitarian partners operating in the region who have been providing awareness materials along with their distributions.

Of all calls received, women account for one quarter of all callers. Already half of the operators of the call center are women, allowing affected populations to provide their feedback and raise their concerns to an operator with whom they are most comfortable. Further efforts are ongoing to ensure that the feedback mechanism is accessible to all groups in Libya and the CFM is currently rolling out a visibility plan, using a variety of means, such as image-based awareness media, to ensure broad reach among the population.

While earlier in the year, the vast majority of callers asked for COVID-19 related information, the proportion of calls related to humanitarian issues has significantly increased in the past few months, to around 40 per cent by August. Since mid-April, most of these humanitarian-related calls have inquired about cash and food assistance (34 and 24 per cent respectively), followed by protection, shelter and non-food items and health assistance (between 10 and 12 per cent for each sector).

In addition to providing critical information on COVID-19, the CFM is enabling people to have easier access to information about all types of assistance available to them, speeds up the resolution of any issues and gives a space for affected people to raise their concerns to humanitarian actors, thereby improving aid delivery efficiency and accountability to affected populations.

Widespread protests over deteriorating living conditions

Thousands of protestors took to the streets in Aziziya, Misrata, Tripoli and other locations in late August, protesting against deteriorating living conditions, persistent water and electricity cuts and government corruption. Throughout August, demonstrations were also reported across cities in the West, as well as in eastern and southern regions, calling on authorities to provide a basic standard of living.

In Tripoli, a number of protestors were injured when unidentified security forces fired shots towards demonstrators on 23 August. Amnesty International also reported that at least six protestors were abducted during the demonstrations. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) called for those arrested to be handed over to relevant judicial institutions, those arbitrarily detained to be released and for respect for people's right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.

The Government of National Accord (GNA) has acknowledged that a GNA-allied militia had fired live ammunition at protestors and opened an investigation into the incident. Despite an announced 24hr lockdown to curb rising COVID-19 cases, protestors continued to take to the streets in the capital.

In Libya, the ongoing conflict and forced closure of oil fields since January 2020 has hit the economy hard and drives the liquidity crisis. Furthermore, crumbling social infrastructure, which continues to suffer from targeted attacks and lack of maintenance, has resulted in rolling water and electricity cuts throughout the country in recent months. This has been coupled with rising prices, lower employment and lack of livelihoods and restricted movements due to COVID-19, which has further stretched people’s coping capacities and impacted standards of living.
45 migrants and refugees killed in shipwreck disaster

At least 45 migrants and refugees, including five children, were killed on 17 August, in a singular incident, when their boat sank off Libya’s coast attempting to cross to Europe. Some 37 survivors, mainly from Senegal, Mali, Chad and Ghana, who were rescued by local fishermen, were subsequently detained by the Libyan authorities.

More than 300 migrants and refugees have died this year attempting the Mediterranean crossing from Libya according to the Missing Migrants Project. Reports of delays in rescue and disembarkation highlight the need for a review of countries’ approach, for a more humane and predictable disembarkation mechanism and for alternatives to detention.

The summer months usually see a higher number of attempted crossings due to calmer weather conditions, while the winter months can see bigger waves, stronger winds and more unpredictable changes making an attempted cross more perilous.

Despite the dangers, migrants and refugees continue to attempt the journey. Many who make the attempt, however, are intercepted and returned to Libya. According to IOM, in August, 1,362 migrants and refugees attempting to cross to Europe were intercepted at sea and returned to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard. This bring the total to more than 7,981 people this year.

Many of those returned continue to be placed into detention. According to UNHCR, as of 28 August, more than 2,400 migrants and refugees remain in official detention centres in Libya, with many more in unofficial sites.

The UN and humanitarian partners continue to advocate for alternatives to detention and for urgent attention to address the lack of agreement on a regional disembarkation mechanism in order to ensure that vulnerable people have access to safe

![Monthly Disembarkation Trends in Libya in 2019 and 2020 (IOM)](image-url)
World Humanitarian Day: Tribute to frontline workers*

August 19 was World Humanitarian Day. In its eleventh year, the day commemorates humanitarian workers killed and injured in the course of their work in memory of the 19 August 2003 bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq. This year, we paid tribute to the real-life heroes who have committed their lives to helping others, who provided life-saving support and protection to the women, men and children most in need, despite the odds.

The best way to pay tribute to what they do is by supporting their work and advocating for their safety. This year, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we paid special tribute to the front-line responders who continued to stay and deliver in Libya.

Riad - Reconstructing homes and hope

“When I see the joy in the faces of homeowners and their children when we help them, it motivates me to keep going and never stop. If all young people left their weapons and tried volunteering instead, I am sure it would change their lives,” Riad says.

Riad is the founder of a volunteer youth group, which launched a popular Libyan campaign, called “Brothers Together”, to reconstruct homes of displaced people affected by war to enable them to return home.

Since the beginning of the campaign, their Facebook page has attracted over 250 volunteers and nearly 285,000 members to gather donations and manpower for reconstruction projects in southern Tripoli. The campaign also includes assisting affected people in assessing the damage to their homes through engineering offices that provide their services free of charge.

Fatima – A refugee stitching together people’s lives

Fatima is a refugee from Darfur, Sudan, living in Tripoli. Since the COVID-19 outbreak emerged in Libya, Fatima has helped refugees and migrants stay safe, enabling access to important health services and spreading information on how to keep themselves safe.

“I’m very happy and proud to be working with a [humanitarian] organization. I’ve always done humanitarian work,” she says.

Fatima also runs a tailor shop - helping train others in a skill to enable them to support themselves. “Despite the work I’ve done, I still feel I haven’t done enough. There are many people in need of help, particularly women. We have to find solutions. We can’t let these problems continue.” Fatima is a health outreach volunteer with an international NGO, providing refugees and migrants with access to healthcare and health services.

* Thanks to IOM, UNFPA, UNHCR, UN Women and WFP for support in contributing profiles for World Humanitarian Day and WHD article.
Hamida – Providing people with the care

“Ten years ago, I lost my husband and became a widow, a single mother of six. I felt responsible not just for my children but towards my community and vulnerable people that live here,” says Hamida.

She is the head of Atta Elkhair, a woman-led local NGO rebuilding communities in Libya’s southern Murzuq region. “I established Atta Elkhair believing that there is no such thing as the impossible”, she says.

Atta Elkhair provides special assistance to orphans and people with special needs in the form of food and non-food assistance, psychosocial activities and community awareness on child rights. They also support the community through awareness campaigns focusing on women’s empowerment through income-generating opportunities.

Halima – A young voice preventing the spread of COVID-19

Halima leads a youth organization to help combat COVID-19 in Ghat, in southwestern Libya. “We as young people have better access to information, and we took it upon ourselves to share this knowledge with our community, in order to educate people on how they can protect themselves,” she says.

Halima’s organization works on gender-related topics, advocating for and raising awareness of women’s rights. The organization worked to educate others on the virus, the importance of curfew and quarantine measures and other measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Halima also launched a media campaign on social media and radio to raise awareness of the disease and the importance of social distancing.

“We all need to adopt a new lifestyle, we still don’t know how the future is going to look like but until a treatment is found for COVID-19, we need to follow all the recommendations coming from experts and we need to stay together as a community. No one alone can beat this virus.”

Leila – Fighting for an inclusive, peaceful Libya

“I work hard to show that women are able to work in any place and on any issue. I believe Libya will only get out of the crisis if we intensify all our efforts and all work together, men and women,” Raja says.

Leila is a member of the Libyan Women Network for Peacebuilding, a female-led activist group to help peacebuilding efforts across the country. The network includes women representing a broad social, political, generational and geographic spectrum of Libya. As soon as COVID-19 became a threat, Raja and other network members quickly adapted their activism to respond to the pandemic. To help her community, Raja has taken a pivotal role, from sewing protective masks and raising awareness about the pandemic to distributing assistance to families.
Access improves but challenges persist

Humanitarian partners reported 673 access constraints in July and August, a 31 per cent decrease in reported constraints compared to June. Nearly half of reported constraints are restrictions on movements into Libya. INGOs continue to face increased delays and difficulties in obtaining Libyan visas for international staff, which has affected operations and likely accounts for the significant reduction in reported constraints. Over 95 per cent of international INGO staff do not have valid Libyan visas and several have been unable to obtain visas for more than eight months. Visas for some UN international staff have also been delayed. Additionally, many visas are provided with only a validity of three months, increasing requirements for visa renewals.

Restrictions of humanitarian movements and activities within Libya represents 32 per cent of reported constraints. COVID-19 precautionary measures continue to pose a significant challenge, with humanitarian partners requiring exemptions for humanitarian movements, the process for which remain vague and inconsistent. Movement restrictions are more stringently enforced in the East and West than in the South. Access constraints impacting the East make up 43 per cent of all reported constraints, followed by the West (39 per cent) and lastly the South (18 per cent). This is the first time since March 2020 that the West did not register as the region affected by the highest number of access constraints.

Reductions in the number of reported access constraints in the West can also be attributed to the withdrawal of the Libyan National Army (LNA) from southern Tripoli and Tarhuna. The conflict has shifted to around Sirte, which poses serious access constraints. The authorities in the East have imposed additional requirements for security clearance that require additional time and can cause delays for implementation. Moreover, health partners continue to report delays of up to one year in securing clearances for importation of health-related items into the country through Eastern ports. The movement restrictions make it difficult to move humanitarian supplies concentrated in Tripoli to the East, which is required for any contingencies should the military situation around Sirte escalate, and the South.

Low operational presence across the South and some areas in the East and West impacts how affected populations are assisted. As of 31 July, humanitarian partners were, on average, only able to respond in 16 of the 22 mantikas targeted in the 2020 HRP. In the West, where most detention centers for migrants and refugees are located, partners reported difficulties in accessing official detention centres to provide protection services and other assistance. Despite the numerous COVID-19 related air traffic restrictions, IOM managed to organize its first repatriation flight from Libya in five months on 21 August with the voluntary return of 118 Ghanaian migrants.

In August, OCHA processed notifications for the de-confliction of two humanitarian movements through the Humanitarian Notification System for De-confliction (HNS4D) with national authorities in the West and East. Both notifications were acknowledged by the authorities and proceeded without incident.

Between January and July 2020, humanitarian organizations reached more than 260,000 people. This included nearly 103,000 people who received unconditional food assistance through in-kind or cash-based transfers and 104,000 people who received non-food items. Health partners increased access to health services, providing more than 100,000 medical procedures, around 30,000 people benefited from essential hygiene items and 9,000 people received water and sanitation services. More than 46,000 people received specialized protection services, including gender-based violence and child protection services and psychosocial support. Mine Action partners have cleared more than 18,000 m² of land of explosive hazards and provided risk education to approximately 27,000 people.