



Humanitarian Information Assessment at Choucha Camp on the Tunisia/Libya Border

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Background

Beginning on February 20, more than 200,000 foreign workers began to flee from intense fighting in Libya, heading towards both the Egyptian and Tunisian borders. The first wave of refugees consisted mainly of Tunisians and Egyptians, who were quickly accepted back into their countries of origin. But in more recent weeks, tens of thousands of foreign nationals, mostly from Bangladesh, have flooded across Tunisia's border, followed by thousands of Malians, Somalis, Nigerians, Sudanese, Ghanaians, and in smaller numbers, other Sub-Saharan Africans.

On February 23, the United Nations (UN), in coordination with the Tunisian Army, began to construct a transit camp about twelve kilometers from the official border with Libya to temporarily host these refugees. Between the opening of the camp and March 15, an estimated 135,000 refugees crossed the border at R'as Ajdir. Thanks to the efforts of the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the local authorities and other humanitarian actors, close to 96,000 of those people have departed the transit camp, mostly heading back to their countries of origin.

Streams of about 2,000 refugees daily continue to arrive at the Choucha transit camp. Many of them will be repatriated within a week, but the remaining, including Eritreans and Somalis, are not likely to be returned to their countries of origin because of legal and security issues. They could be in the camp for a much longer time period, waiting for a viable solution.

UNHCR is conducting the basic management of the camp. UNOCHA is conducting research and assessments based on the situation inside of Libya, using the Choucha camp as its base of operations. The International Federation of the Red Cross is present

and building a second camp to house foreign workers fleeing Libya. At least 20 other UN agencies and International NGOs are present, helping to coordinate and meet the various needs of the refugee population.¹

Internews arrived at the Choucha camp on March 7 to map the local media landscape, assess the information needs of the growing refugee population and the best ways to reach them, including medium and language, and to connect with the humanitarian community to swiftly identify and design best ways to communicate with affected populations.

UNHCR and IOM are the necessary partners to engage in terms of understanding the information needs at the camp, and developing possible strategies to better inform camp residents. After a week of observation and meetings with different humanitarian actors and Tunisian partners, including local organizations, government officials and the Tunisian Army, Internews convened the first Camp Communication meeting and helped organize an implementable plan for an information system at Choucha transit camp. As a result of this collaborative work and this meeting, UNHCR, IOM, Caritas, and Islamic Relief agreed to be the lead actors in a four-pronged information campaign (see more under *Recommendations*). This plan was then presented by Internews at the UNHCR-led Camp Management meeting and the UN Daily Briefing, so all actors, local partners and donors were aware of this effort.

Key Observations and Findings

1. Information blackout for refugees crossing Libya/Tunisia border

The more than 150,000 people who fled across the Tunisian border from Libya were mostly living in an information void. Based on an assessment from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), there was no direct information mechanism delivering relevant news to those who were stranded and waiting to find out about their return status. The only information that these migrant laborers received was upon entry to the border, that they would be taken to the Choucha camp; and very limited news, that often turned out to be rumor, from leaders within their refugee nationality groups.

These migrants had no access to information due to three barriers:

1. Lack of access to functioning radios.
2. Availability of radio programs in the border areas.
3. Language barriers.

¹ All the information on the humanitarian response in North Africa is available at: <http://northafrica.humanitarianresponse.info/>

Even for refugees who owned radios, information was not accessible to them because coverage in the border area from Tunisian radio and television outlets is spotty. Moreover, the majority of the refugees do not understand French or Arabic, the two main languages used in Tunisia.

2. Cell phones as a possible point of information intervention

Many foreign laborers arrived at the Choucha camp with functioning cell phones, and were able to secure Tunisian SIM cards and phone credit (Tunisiana is the local provider) through local vendors that arrived and formed a makeshift market off the border highway. Over the course of a week, various electricity points were established around the camp, mostly informal, where people could charge their phones. Local vendors sold extension cords and groups of refugees took turns charging their phones.

When asked how they were using the phones, many stated they were calling family members back in their countries of origin to give updates. Many were also using phones to play and listen to music.

While cell phones were not part of an overall information strategy development for communication in the camp, it was noted that agencies could try registering cell phone numbers and use these devices as a way to locate specific refugees (via phone call or SMS) to notify them with important news, like return details, in their local languages.

3. Central information zone

As certain groups of refugees began to spend a week or more at the camp, restlessness set in, and the lack of information regarding their situation became a real burden. In an apparent attempt to at least provide camp residents with a distraction, on March 11 a group of local Scouts, organized by a popular Tunisian filmmaker, arrived and set up a stage, a public address system, and a movie screen. Their goal was to provide evening entertainment to the camp residents, acknowledging the need for people to be entertained as well. They secured culturally relevant materials, including Bollywood films (favorites of the Bangladeshi refugees), to share with the camp population. They also opened up the stage at night for a kind of “open mic” where different nationalities shared mainly songs with their peers.

Internews immediately connected with this local cooperative and began to discuss how to share this information space to provide announcements and other important information to the refugee population. They agreed, pending shared payment for the public address equipment, that it would be a good idea to share camp news during the day.

Also, as the established stage was central to the camp, near food distribution and between the growing tent areas, this was deemed an appropriate place to establish two

“information tents” where residents could come and get news throughout the day. A plan for the erection of an information billboard next to the tents was also discussed and agreed upon.

4. Language barriers

The unique nature of a refugee camp made up of so many different nationalities caused unique problems for humanitarian agencies and Tunisian officials. As more and more foreign workers began to flood the Choucha camp, communication was hindered by the variety of languages spoken by the different groups. Arabic, French, Bangla, Hindi, and English were the established majority languages. Only a handful of humanitarian agencies had basic Bangla or Hindi skills, which proved problematic as refugees from Bangladesh comprised at times as much as 80 percent of the camp population.

Also, language became an issue in terms of the Tunisian authorities attempts to provide assistance and logistical solutions to the exodus from Libya. Soldiers lacked the basic ability to communicate with most of the camp residents (only Sudanese, Malian, and some Somalis spoke French or Arabic). This appeared to cause some tension and frustration within the military, which was building tents, managing in and outflow of refugees, and helping with other essential needs.

5. What do the refugees want to know?

Based on a small sampling of residents (more than one hundred) at the camp, the overwhelming question from refugees was, “*When am I going home?*” Depending on the refugee’s country of origin the answer to that question varied greatly. IOM focused intensely on the repatriation of Bangladeshi refugees, who at one point accounted for around 13,000 of the camps 15,000 residents. IOM estimated, based on the projected return of around 4,000 Bangladeshis every two days that the majority of this population would be back in their country of origin within a week.

But for Somalians, Eritreans, and other third country nationals, returning to their country of origin is neither a safe nor viable option. Many of the hundreds of Somalians at the camp, a group that includes the majority of the women and children at Choucha, were asking on a daily basis about their status. They appeared to be growing increasingly weary of their situation as many logged a week at the camp. UNHCR appeared to be in touch with certain members of the Somali population, but many seemed unsatisfied with the information that they had.

During the first few weeks of the camp, many had very basic questions about where food would come from, when lavatories would be available, when they would have water to wash with and drink. After some basic services began to be provided by humanitarian agencies, questions shifted to where to find medical help, dietary

complaints (i.e. a preference of rice over the more locally accepted baguette), and how to find missing friends and family.

6. Communication between camp actors and local communities in the surroundings

While the humanitarian agencies made every effort to collaborate and work side by side with the Tunisian Army, there appeared to be a lack of communication, at least initially, with nearby communities about the situation on the border. Ben Gardane, the nearest town to the Choucha camp, was the scene of regular protests reflecting an evident frustration over a lack of information about the camp and the lack of engagement with the local communities in that area. As the camp began to grow, humanitarian agencies began to access local labor and UNHCR hired 180 locals to help clean up the camp and settle new arrivals.

Internews compiled a list of local actors who could provide basic resources to the humanitarian effort, including printing, public address systems, and other items.

7. Refugee economics

Many of the initial refugees arriving at the Coucha camp reportedly had been forced to leave their money in Libyan banks, or robbed upon entry into Tunisia by Libyan citizens/forces. Later arrivals definitely had entered the country with money, which became very apparent as local vendors began to set up a market area next to the border road outside the camp. Initially vendors were selling food items, but within days cell phones, chargers, SIM cards, and other goods, including electronics, were available. Local moneychangers also became a fixture along the road, offering Dinar, Euros, and US dollars in exchange for Libyan currency.

While refugees took advantage of the resources offered at the camp, it was quite clear that some of them had funds to have a certain level of independence or self-agency. This raised the question of whether or not the humanitarian agency efforts were needed in any sort of long-term fashion.

Local Media Landscape

Internews did a rapid assessment of the local media operational in the Tunisia/Libya border area and their interest in supporting a potential humanitarian information service for stranded communities in those areas. Internews also mapped all the media outlets in Tunisia and shared that information with the Libya Crisis Map (see <http://libyacrisismap.net/> under *media outlets*)² set up by OCHA and the CrisisMappers Standby Task Force, of which Internews is a partner.

² The CrisisMappers Standby Task Force has been undertaking a mapping of social media, news reports and official situation reports from within Libya and along the borders at the request of OCHA. The Task Force is also aiding in the collection and mapping of 3W

National networks Alshaba radio and Zatiouna FM broadcast locally but had no physical reporting presence at the camp. These stations covered the refugee situation in Tunisia through two or three daily reports, grounded in short news spots and some testimonies from humanitarian and government actors. Sources for these reports included the Tunisian Red Crescent, local Tunisian officials, UN agencies, INGOs, and local humanitarian organizations. These stations mainly covered topics related to the numbers arriving to the camp, medical needs, and volunteer needs.

Some newspapers began to arrive at the camp around March 11, when local vendors began to set up an informal commodities market off the main border highway. Refugees who spoke Arabic or French were able to access some news in their languages via local newspapers.

Recommendations

Based on its weeklong assessment, Internews found that a very small, coordinated, low cost and basic information strategy at the camp level could play a very important role in the management, morale, and function of the Choucha refugee camp.

After meeting with a variety of humanitarian actors and the Tunisian Army, one on one, Internews convened the first Camp Communications meeting on March 14 and presented its findings and recommendations on March 15 at both the UNHCR-led Camp Management meeting and the UN Daily Briefing.

Here were the basic recommendations that were agreed upon for immediate implementation:

1. Daily camp announcements (UNHCR)

UNHCR staff will collect basic information from different humanitarian agencies and put together a brief Camp announcement, in all relevant languages every morning and evening. These announcements will be delivered via the public address system and stage managed by the local Tunisian Scouts.

Sample announcement:

Good Morning/Afternoon!
Time and Date

Reminder: Be calm and remain patient. Don't be nervous about your situation. We need your help to keep the camp in order and clean. Do it for you, do it for the people around you.

- Updates on camp
- Changes in camp
- Health tips
- Water and Sanitation tips
- Army announcements

2. Camp arrival card (IOM)

When new refugees arrive at the border, they will be given an informational card, in their most communicable language, which gives them basic details about their situation. This will help them feel more secure and organized as they enter the camp and participate in their return.

Sample camp arrival card:

Welcome to Tunisia, Camp Choucha

1. You will be safe here...
2. Humanitarian agencies are here to help you return to your home or your loved ones. That is our priority.
3. This camp needs your support to maintain proper order, so please act in a safe and orderly manner while you are here.
4. You will be registered by a humanitarian representative so we have an official record of your arrival to Tunisia
5. You will be transported to Choucha Camp with the help of a humanitarian volunteer and settled
6. You will receive accommodation in a tent, please stay in the tent that you are allocated so we know where to find you when it is time to leave
7. You will receive food and drinking water during your stay at the camp
8. You will find latrines and water for washing around the camp
9. You will have access to health care. If you have health issues please ask where you can find medical professionals. Don't wait to check out any medical problems, professionals are here to help you
10. You will have the ability to call your family members or relevant contacts (embassy) for three minutes. The facility for doing this is at the very front of the camp on the road.
11. If you have any issues or important questions, please visit the information tents near the center of the camp.
12. Remember: Humanitarian agencies are working hard to help you leave the camp as soon as possible.

3. Central information tents (Caritas)

Two tents, staffed by humanitarian volunteers, will be set up in the center of the camp where people can come and ask general questions about their situation and camp services. The tents will be open from 9am-4 pm, and managed by Caritas. Refugees can

also leave written comments that will be collected, grouped in themes/topics (i.e. humanitarian clusters) and distributed to the relevant humanitarian actors for reference and information.

4. Information billboard (Islamic Relief Worldwide)

A large billboard will be placed next to the information tents where humanitarian agencies can post important information on health, logistics, returns, and more. A camp daily schedule will also be posted, as well as relevant return/flight information by IOM. A people finder section will be established on the board where camp residents can leave messages for friends or family members they are searching for.

Conclusion

The Choucha transit camp, managed by the Tunisian Army and relevant UN agencies, is meeting the basic food, shelter, health, and water/sanitation needs of the more than 100,000 refugees crossing into Tunisia from Libya, but it has been late in addressing the information needs of this population. Residents need to know more about their situation and the resources that are available to them. Many camp residents are beginning to exhibit signs of frustration regarding their lack of understanding and news about their future. If some basic information strategy measures are implemented, these populations can access important news about their situation, regain their self-agency, and play a more active and positive role in the maintenance of the Choucha camp, and their eventual exit from Tunisia.

“People are in the dark. It’s the worst thing. If they could have five minutes of somebody’s time to listen to their questions, they would feel better because somebody is listening to them.”

Suzanna Tkalek, Caritas, Senior Technical Advisor for Protection

APPENDIX ONE: RELEVANT LOCAL CONTACTS

Thanks to all individuals and organizations that have contributed time and expertise to this rapid assessment.

Humanitarian partners

- UNOCHA
- UNHCR
- Caritas
- IOM
- Islamic Relief

Tunisian Army

Local Media operators (all contact details on <http://libyacrisismap.net/>)

Print

- Al Sabah newspaper

Radio

- Jawhra FM
- Mosaique FM
- Alshabab radio
- Zaitouna FM

Local Logistics Partners in Ber Gardane

APPENDIX TWO:

WHY COMMUNICATING WITH AFFECTED COMMUNITIES MATTERS

In humanitarian disasters people affected by the unfolding tragedy need more than physical necessities. They also have an urgent need for information. In the wake of crises, from earthquakes to armed conflicts, survival can depend on knowing the answers to questions such as: What is the extent of the damage? Should I stay with my family or go for help? Where can I get clean water? Is it safe to go back home? What are the symptoms of cholera? Where is the nearest health facility?

Independent, local media can improve humanitarian relief and enable people in the midst of crisis to access the information they need to make informed decisions and take an active role in their own survival and recovery.

Collaboration between relief agencies and media partners is critical to the success of any humanitarian response. Internews has been building partnerships and working closely with organizations and government agencies at all stages during emergency responses in places like Chad, Gaza, Haiti, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Sudan. To learn more about Internews' humanitarian media work: www.internews.org/global/er/default.shtm.

Aid agencies are increasingly recognizing that the effectiveness and efficiency of any emergency response and development program can be greatly enhanced by sustained dialogue between those affected by disasters and those who seek to assist them. Without participation in the response, affected communities cannot ask questions, make informed decisions, access information and they cannot inform, guide or direct

those services supposedly intended to relieve and support them. Ultimately, they are left further disempowered at a time when it is most critical that they be heard.

Evidence shows that exchanging information with disaster-affected populations through local media and other non-mass media communication channels can:

1. Save lives.
2. Increase aid effectiveness and enhance transparency & accountability.
3. Empower communities and help establish a two-way communication flow.
4. Provide vital psychosocial support.
5. Help manage community expectations.

Internews is also a founding member of Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC), an inter-agency global working group that brings together leading relief, development and media development agencies in a collaboration that recognizes information sharing as a key humanitarian deliverable.

Internews is an international non-profit media development organization working to improve access to information for people around the world by fostering independent media and promoting open communications policies. Internews' programs are built on the conviction that providing people with access to vibrant, diverse news and information empowers them to make their voices heard and to participate effectively in their communities. To learn more about Internews: www.internews.org.