

# Rapid Assessment of Tunisian Returnees

## Tunisia

March 2011



## **Report – Tunisia returnees**

Period: 16 and 17 March 2011

Locations: Governorate of Kasserine, Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid

Subject: Rapid food security assessment

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## **Summary of findings:**

- **Number of returning migrants to rural Tunisia is manageable. However, no systematic record taking or tracking of returnees is conducted.**
- **The immediate food security status is not alarming.**
- **However, the overall economic situation is rapidly deteriorating and the problem is high levels of unemployment.**
- **Key issue at the Governorate level is job creation.**
- **A WFP Cash & Voucher intervention can support this objective provided it is integrated into a broader design to promote jobs with various partners.**

1. As part of the programming and coordination of possible responses of FAO and WFP in Tunisia following the escalation of the situation in Libya, and in preparation of an in-depth food security assessment scheduled to start on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011, a rapid food security assessment mission took place to the Governorates of Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan during 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> March 2011.
2. The overall aim of the mission was to assess the impact of the Libyan crisis and the subsequent outpour of returning migrants on the stability of the food security situation in rural areas of Tunisia.
3. The Governorates of Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan are generally regarded as being among the poorest in the country. The popular uprising in January 2011 started in this area and it is believed that many Tunisian migrants returning from Libya originate from this part of the country.
4. Discussions conducted during the mission were predominantly held with the regional agriculture development offices (CRDA), which are best placed to provide information on local agricultural production, food availability and potential agricultural and rural developments, but are less well informed regarding food access issues and other social aspects. This limitation was mainly due to the rapid nature of the mission.
5. A standard check-list was used to gather information to better understand and assess the food security situation. It focused on the characterization of the local population, the availability and access to food support networks and social assistance, return of migrants from Libya, their profile and impact.
6. The regional authorities appreciated the arrival of the mission. Strong support was expressed for possible interventions by FAO and WFP at the earliest opportunity. Mission members met with the Governor (the highest political authority at the Governorate level) in Kasserine and Kairoaun, a strong message of interest on the part of the local government in possible FAO/WFP support.

### **An assessment of the food security situation in the three Governorates can be summarized as follows:**

7. The overall food security situation is acceptable and there is no immediate risk of significant numbers of households unable to access sufficient food. Absolute poverty levels are perceived to be low, although no poverty data are available to confirm this.
8. The region has a high potential in agricultural production and crop yields are normal to good. The food supply poses no problems. The risk of high and increasing food prices is contained by a system of controlled prices for essential food items, including all cereals, sugar, vegetable oils and milk. Markets are functioning with no shortage in supply. The road infrastructure is very good with excellent road connectivity to Tunis and other parts of the country.
9. The high level of unemployment is the most crucial and urgent problem. This is a structural issue due to lack of investment in these areas but is currently being exacerbated by ongoing job losses due to the slowdown in economic activity, the discontinuation of development projects, collapse of local trade flows between Libya and Tunisia, limited seasonal job opportunities in the tourist sector and the arrival of returning migrants from Libya.

10. There are no statistics available on the current social situation in the region. There are no data on the number of jobs lost or detailed records of the number of migrants returning from Libya.

11. The number of returning migrants seems however manageable. They return to live with their families in rural areas. Most of the migrants are identified as labourers. Some migrants have savings which will help in the coming months. Depending on further developments in Libya, there is a concern for the medium term when savings will have been depleted and, with no hope for employment locally, the migrants may become an economic burden to their families. For some families predominantly depending on remittances from Libya their return means a substantial loss in household income. The extent of which would need to be determined through the planned households survey.

12. With an eye on the escalating developments in neighbouring Libya, there is a risk that Tunisia would have to deal with substantial numbers of refugees. No contingency plans are in place at the Governorate level.

13. An important immediate effect of the crisis in Libya is the cessation of all trade between Tunisia and Libya. This has particularly affected many petty traders operating in the informal sector. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors are also affected by this collapse in regional trade and this has already led to lay-offs of employees.

14. The tourist sector is severely impacted with many tourists avoiding Tunisia. The elections for the general assembly for the development of the new constitution is scheduled to take place on 24 July, during the midst of the tourist summer season. It is therefore likely that tourist will continue to avoid Tunisia for the immediate future. The tourist sector normally provides seasonal job opportunities during the hot summer months when agricultural activities come to a standstill due to the hot weather.

15. The government programmes and regional development projects are "on standby" and the available social assistance programmes to needy families, UTSS (Union Tunisien Securite Social) in this case, either have been stopped or are implemented in a very selective manner due to lack of resources and an overwhelming demand which the government would be unable to meet.

16. In summary, the overall situation remains unstable, characterized by high unemployment levels exacerbated by an influx of returning migrants and worsening economic conditions. At the same time social safety net programmes are on hold or in-effective.

17. Consequently, the incomes of many families are negatively impacted and therefore their purchasing power. This, due to a lack of a functional social safety mechanism, may translate into an increased risk to food insecurity.

## **Kasserine: (Population 420 000)**

18. Kasserine ranks among the poorest Governorates of Tunisia, with an unemployment rate of 30% (according to statistics from before the revolution, which are regarded as an underestimation and to which must be added the recent significant job losses).

19. The impact of events in Libya in this region is twofold. Firstly, the return of migrants, who were generally employed as labourers in Libya, has added to the significant number of the unemployed and the number of families without income. And secondly, the disruption of the informal trade in goods imported through Libya, which provided employment and income to a large group of the population.

20. The urban population was also identified as vulnerable with new satellite towns emerging at the edge of the city where people live in relative more precarious conditions. The neighbourhood of "Ezzouhour" was an example that was cited.

### **Sidi Bouzid: (Population 400 000)**

21. 76% of the population is rural. Agricultural activity occupies 37% of the workforce.

22. The districts of Mazzouna, Meknessi Ben Aoun and Menzel Bouzaiene were identified as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

### **Kairouan: (Population 574 000)**

23. Agricultural activity is dominant with 72% of the population rural. 9 000 needy families currently receive a social benefit allowance of 210 TND per month. But it is estimated that this number would need to be increased to 13 000 to 14 000 families.

24. As in Kasserine, a significant number of poorer neighbourhoods are developing around the city of Kairouan where rural migrants tend to settle.

25. A relative small number of migrants have returned from Libya, estimated at about 650 migrants, including 450 young individuals and about 200 who are head of households. They are looking for employment.

## Conclusions

26. There is no immediate risk to the overall food security status of the population in the three Governorates. However, the lack of employment opportunities compromises people's income levels and may in the absence of effective social protection systems, lead to sustained food insecurity in the medium to longer term due to the inability to access food.

27. Following the revolution of January 2011, the local population has high expectation for change and demand a better future. They want proper and suitable jobs. The local officials are in urgent need of support to stabilize the situation to be able to focus on setting up development programmes and creation of work opportunities.

28. A WFP intervention such as "cash or voucher for work" could be instrumental to prevent deterioration of the overall food security situation and to contribute to generate stability during this transition period. A potential cash or voucher programme should be linked to ongoing efforts by the government and integrated in existing job creation programmes. Some caveats that would need to be taken into consideration include:

- The cost of the programme would be large given a SMIG (minimum wage) of TND 220/month.
- Many of the unemployed are educated and may not be willing to conduct hard physical labour.
- During the hot summer months, agricultural activities normally come to a standstill.
- The programme design would need to take this into consideration and the planned household survey would need to explore opportunities.

29. An alternative option would be to support the social security system (such as the UTSS) in which poorer households can claim support. WFP can assist in re-initiating this system in the Governorates where the system is on hold, advise on beneficiary selection criteria, absorb the temporary additional demand and provide monitoring services. Social benefit support could be coupled with provision of training in entrepreneurial skills or improved agricultural practices.

30. Given the lack of data, the planned household survey of families in need is recommended to assess the actual food security situation and identify needs and opportunities. However, the survey would need to be carefully designed to reflect the higher level of socio-economic development of the population to yield meaningful results that could guide possible response programmes and the design of effective social protection mechanisms.

31. With food prices in Libya doubling according to an inter-agency assessment report, it may be advisable to put into place a light market observation system on market prices of essentials food items and farm inputs and the emergence of parallel markets.



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