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## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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13 April 2004

### LBY42547.E

Libya: Update to LBY37272.E of 24 July 2001 on the situation of Berbers (*Amazighs*), including their treatment by authorities and whether there are any known Berber opposition groups (2001-April 2004)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

The Berbers, also known as *Amazigh* (plural *Imazighen*) (literally translated, the term means "free") (BBC 12 Mar. 2004), are an indigenous North African tribe (arab.net 2002) found in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Libya (BBC 12 Mar. 2004). In Libya, the largest Berber population is in the north-west of the country, in the Jabal Nafusah escarpment (arab.net 2002; *Global Prayer Digest* Nov. 2001; BBC 12 Mar. 2004), and in the cities of Zuwarah and Ghudamis (ibid.). Currently there are six Berber groups in Libya, including the Tamacheq people who reside in the south of the country (*Global Prayer Digest* Nov. 2001). Although they possess their own language and culture, most Berbers in Libya are to a certain degree influenced by Arab culture and language, except those who reside in Jabal Nafusa (*Global Prayer Digest* Nov. 2001). Jabal Nafusa houses the largest Libyan community of Berbers who have successfully preserved and maintained their culture, and who as a consequence, are least likely to marry out of their community (ibid.). According to one source, Berbers who live in Jabal Nafusa exist in comparative isolation (arab.net 2002).

Prior to the arrival of Arabs in the 600s, some members of the Berber community belonged to Christian faiths, but upon the arrival of Arabs and over the next 100 years, Berbers became and remain Muslim (*Global Prayer Digest* Nov. 2001). However, unlike Libyan Arabs, all Berbers belong to the Ibadite branch of Islam (arab.net 2002).

According to a November 2001 report published by the *Global Prayer Digest*, a Christian daily digest,

The Berbers in Libya are weaker and fewer in number than their cousins in Algeria and Morocco.

Things do not look good for the future of Berber cultures in Libya, especially since the government policy has been pro-Arab ever since 1969 (Nov. 2001).

Following Libya's independence in 1951, the Berber community was optimistic about having its language and culture officially recognized on an equal standing with the Arabic language and culture, but this optimism was short-lived due to a rise in Arab nationalism and the 1969 coup (arab.net 2002). According to a 2002 source,

[t]oday's Berbers continue to live a completely separate life from the rest of the Libyan population, and maintain their very different culture with a sense of pride (ibid.).

Following the consideration of Libya's periodic report, submitted to the United Nations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, in its 64th session, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted that "there was no recognition of Amazigh language and culture in Libya and Amazighs were impeded from preserving and expressing their cultural and linguistic identity" (UN 12 Mar. 2004).

*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003* also stated that the Libyan government maintained firm control over ethnic and tribal minorities, including the Berber community (25 Feb. 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### References

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- United Nations (UN). 12 March 2004. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. "Press Release: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Concludes Sixty-Fourth Session." <<http://www.unhchr.ch/>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2004]

#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International (AI), Dialog/WNC, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Freedom House, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Imazighen in Libya, Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United States Committee for Refugees (USCR).

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