Dear Madame/Sir,

I would like to provide feedback to your letter regarding the situation of persons whose asylum claim was rejected in the framework of UNHCR’s operations in Shousha transit camp in Southern Tunisia.

According to its mandate and with the agreement of the Tunisian authorities, UNHCR conducted interviews with people of various nationalities who had fled Libya and expressed fears of persecution in their country of origin. These interviews were aimed at assessing their needs for international protection and were carried out based on procedures allowing the persons concerned to provide all elements relating to their situation in the country of origin. The procedure consisted of two phases, namely a first interview and a possibility to appeal in case of negative decision. UNHCR was thereby able to apply its mandate in an emergency context, identifying people in need of international protection and those who are not. The process led to the recognition of more than 3,000 refugees.

Thousands of people fleeing the situation in Libya, of which the majority were migrants, were accommodated in Shousha transit camp. UNHCR and its partners worked hard to meet humanitarian standards according to the existing international framework. A multi-faceted assistance was put in place for the people residing in Shousha, including food distribution, free medical services, social activities and education for children. This humanitarian assistance was tailored to the needs of the different groups of people residing in the camp and according to the size of the camp population, which decreased regularly due to the resettlement departures to other countries willing to accept them.

As of the end of November 2012, UNHCR started reducing its level of assistance to persons not falling under its mandate (rejected asylum seekers) who are still residing in Shousha transit camp. However, these people continue to benefit temporarily from some of those services on strictly humanitarian grounds, such as shelter, access to water and sanitation infrastructures. They also have access to education, recreational activities in a community centre and a clinic, which provides free healthcare and medication. Persons requiring specialized care continue to be referred to medical experts outside the camp. A baby has recently gone through surgery for heart related problems and a Sudanese national who underwent back surgery has regular access to rehabilitation sessions.

In conclusion, UNHCR wishes to emphasize that its assistance programmes and legal protection in the transit camp of Shousha is implemented without discrimination and in conformity with international standards. Procedures for determining refugee status described above have led to the determination of refugee status for more than 3,000 people of various nationalities (over 20 countries) and backgrounds. The vast majority of these refugees were accepted by resettlement countries, within the framework of the Global Resettlement Solidarity Initiative.
Persons whose application for refugee status was rejected following a detailed and professional analysis of their individual situation, were and are still offered the opportunity to return home within a program implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and funded by the Swiss government. UNHCR, IOM and the Tunisian authorities encouraged these rejected asylum seekers individually to consider this option, which would allow them to return to their country of origin in safety and dignity.

Ursula Schulze Aboubacar
UNHCR Representative in Tunisia