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Libya: Attacks against Misratah residents point to war crimes

Attacks by forces loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi on civilian and residential areas of Misratah may amount to war crimes, Amnesty International said today in a new report on the bleak situation in the besieged city.

[*Misratah: Under Siege and Under Fire*](#) accuses al-Gaddafi forces of unlawful killing of civilians due to indiscriminate attacks, including use of heavy artillery, rockets and cluster bombs in civilian areas and sniper fire against residents.

It also documents systematic shooting at peaceful protesters and enforced disappearance of perceived opponents, which can amount to crimes against humanity.

"The scale of the relentless attacks that we have seen by al-Gaddafi forces to intimidate the residents of Misratah for more than two months is truly horrifying," said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's senior adviser currently in Libya.

"It shows a total disregard for the lives of ordinary people and is in clear breach of international humanitarian law."

Amnesty International called on the Tripoli authorities to put an immediate end to indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks against civilians or civilian objects.

Since Misratah declared its allegiance to opposition forces in February, al-Gaddafi's forces have used their positions around the city and in the centre to launch relentless indiscriminate attacks into the city's residential neighbourhoods.

Scores of residents not involved in armed confrontations have been killed and hundreds injured, many by indiscriminate 122mm Grad rockets fired from up to tens of kilometres away, and by mortars and 155mm artillery shells.

Rockets, mortars and artillery shells are designed for use against massed infantry or armour. Under international humanitarian law, none of these weapons should ever be used in populated residential areas.

Early in the morning of 14 April, a dozen residents were killed and many more were injured when several salvos of rockets rained down on the Qasr Ahmad neighbourhood of Misratah. Many of the victims were standing in a queue outside a bakery.

On 15 April, Amnesty International found evidence that mortars containing cluster submunitions were being used in residential areas, including in the city centre.

The organization said that cluster munitions, which cannot discriminate between civilians and soldiers,

should never be used in any circumstances and that their use in residential areas was a flagrant violation of the international prohibition on indiscriminate attack.

Amnesty International also found that sniper fire was used by al-Gaddafi forces to target residents in areas under the control of opposition fighters, preventing them from moving around freely.

33 year-old father of three Ibrahim Ahmad al-Dernawi was shot and killed in his parents' house, apparently by a sniper. His father told Amnesty International:

"He was holding his six-month-old son in his lap and we were talking. I suddenly heard the sound of the glass breaking but the window did not shatter. Then I saw blood pouring from my son's face. He died instantly."

Many residents remained trapped for weeks in areas near the front line particularly around Tripoli Street, unable to leave for fear of being shot at by snipers.

Amnesty International also found evidence suggesting the use of human shields by al-Gaddafi forces. In the Gheiran neighbourhood, south-west of the city centre, tanks were positioned next to civilian buildings, seemingly in a deliberate attempt to shield them from possible air strikes.

"Shielding" is a violation of international humanitarian law and constitutes a war crime.

Amnesty International also highlighted the plight of thousands of migrants who remain trapped at Misratah's port, now being increasingly targeted by forces loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi as they attempt to deprive the city's remaining residents of their last lifeline to the outside world.

On 4 May four members of a family from Niger, including two children under two years old and their aunt and uncle, were killed in a rocket attack as they waited for evacuation from Misratah.

Amnesty International called on the international community to support the international investigations into human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Libya, in particular the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council.

On 4 May, ICC Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo told the UN Security Council that he will ask ICC judges to issue arrest warrants against three individuals for crimes against humanity committed in Libya.

"The people of Misratah have had nowhere to turn for safety or support in recent months," said Donatella Rovera.

"The international community must give all possible support - financial, legal and practical - to those bodies trying to bring to justice those responsible for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Misratah and elsewhere in Libya."

Background

The findings of [*Misratah: Under Siege and Under Fire*](#) are based on an Amnesty International delegate's visit to Misratah between 14 and 20 April. The report also draws from an Amnesty International visit to Tunisia between 6 and 20 April, which interviewed injured residents from Misratah and their families who had been evacuated for treatment.