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Libya: Detainees killed by al-Gaddafi loyalists

Amnesty International has uncovered evidence that forces loyal to Colonel Mu'ammur al-Gaddafi have killed numerous detainees being held at two military camps in Tripoli on 23 and 24 August.

Eyewitness testimony from escaped detainees described how loyalist troops used grenades and gunfire on scores of prisoners at one camp, while guards at the other camp shot dead five detainees they were holding in solitary confinement.

“Loyalist forces in Libya must immediately stop such killings of captives, and both sides must commit to ensuring no harm comes to prisoners in their custody,” said Amnesty International.

“Even as Colonel al-Gaddafi is cornered, with an ICC warrant active for his arrest on charges of crimes against humanity, his troops continue their flagrant disregard for human life and international humanitarian law.”

It is a war crime for any party to a conflict to kill or torture prisoners.

Escape from Khilit al-Ferjan

Detainees who escaped from a military camp in Khilit al-Ferjan in south-western Tripoli described how, on the evening of 23 August, about 160 detainees began to flee the metal hangar they were being held in. Two guards had told them that the gates were unlocked.

As the detainees barged through the hangar gates, two other guards opened fire and threw five hand grenades at the group. It is unclear how many survived but to Amnesty International's knowledge, at least 23 detainees managed to escape, including four who received medical treatment at a Tripoli hospital.

Hussein al-Lafi, a 40-year-old father of five from al-Zawiya, survived. He told Amnesty International how his three brothers were killed while attempting to escape:

“I was standing by the door when I spotted two guards. They immediately opened fire, and I saw one of them holding a hand grenade. Seconds later, I heard an explosion, followed by four more. I fell on the ground face down; others fell on top of me and I could feel their warm blood. I couldn't see anything from the smoke. People were screaming and there were many more rounds of fire.”

“When the shooting finally stopped, I got up and started looking for my brothers. I first saw Jamal's [aged 44], body. He was dead. Then, I found Osama [aged 31], who was still speaking. He didn't make it; he was shot in the heart and had other wounds on his leg. My brother Mohamed [aged 52] didn't die immediately either. I tried to stop the bleeding from his thigh, but didn't succeed. I then escaped with three more people through the back of the hangar. I have no idea what happened to the bodies of my brothers.”

Hussein al-Lafi and his three brothers were taken by loyalist soldiers from their farm in al-Zawiya on 29 June on suspicion of supporting the opposition. He said that during their detention they were frequently beaten.

Another former detainee at Khilit al-Ferjan, Akram Mohamed Saleh, had been held in the hangar for about two months. During the escape, he sustained a gunshot wound to his left leg, as well as injuries to his head from exploding grenades.

Saleh and 19 other detainees managed to escape, and at least four of them sought medical treatment at a Tripoli hospital.

He told Amnesty International: “I was in shock when the grenades exploded. There was so much confusion around me, smoke all around, people screaming for help and trying to flee. I saw dozens of bodies, and I was covered with blood and human flesh.”

Killings at Qasr Ben Ghashir

On 24 August, five kilometres away at Qasr Ben Ghashir military camp, guards loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi shot dead five detainees whom they were holding in solitary cells. They were among some 75 people captured during the conflict who were being held at the military camp.

Former detainees later told Amnesty International that they had heard guards opening five of the cells before gunshots were fired shortly afterwards.

Detainees panicked and broke out of their cells fearing they were about to be executed. By the time they got out, the five guards on duty had fled the scene, leaving behind the five victims' bodies.

They included three men from Zliten, a town between Tripoli and Misratah, and two doctors. One of the doctors is believed to be Ali al-Darrat, from Misratah, who was taken prisoner near the eastern frontline in July and had not been heard from since.

Former detainees told Amnesty International that in the days before the killings, guards promised that all detainees would be released before the Eid festivities at the end of August.

Both the Khilit al-Ferjan and Qasr Ben Ghashir camps were reportedly used by the Khamis Katiba brigade, headed by Khamis al-Gaddafi, Colonel al-Gaddafi's son.