Libya’s leadership urged to prioritize human rights

Libya’s political leadership – including elected members of the General National Congress (GNC) – must take immediate steps to end ongoing human rights abuses and establish the rule of law, Amnesty International said today.

In its Human Rights Manifesto for Libya, Amnesty International warned Libya’s leaders that unless they rein in armed militias and bring them to account, Libya risks reproducing the same human rights violations that led to the “17 February Revolution” against Mu’ammad al-Gaddafi’s repressive rule last year.

“Every day, we receive desperate pleas from victims of human rights abuses all over Libya asking us to intervene and protect them,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“We hear of individuals being abducted by armed militias, tortured including to death, driven out of their homes and killed or injured during armed confrontations. Such practices should have vanished with the end of the al-Gaddafī era, but they are ongoing in a climate of impunity.”

On 24 September Amnesty International presented the GNC’s newly created Human Rights Committee with its Manifesto’s 10 key steps aimed at bolstering human rights. Although GNC President Mohammed Magaraif and 59 other elected members supported the organization’s request to address the whole Congress, GNC members voted down the proposal last week.

In a meeting with Amnesty International on 21 September, Magaraif acknowledged the ongoing human rights abuses and indicated his commitment to seek to put an end to them.

The GNC President noted that past violations by al-Gaddafi’s government cannot serve as a justification for the ongoing abuses, revenge and reprisals against his alleged supporters. He echoed Amnesty International’s calls for the need to disarm militias, reform the security sector, and revamp the judiciary.

“Victims have nowhere to turn to seek justice and redress as the judiciary remains virtually paralyzed,” said Hadj Sahraoui.

“Screening members of the judiciary to remove judges involved in arbitrary detention, unfair trials and other serious violations and ensuring the independence of the judiciary is paramount to ending the cycle of abuse. If victims trust that the judiciary can safeguard their rights, they won’t feel the need to take the law into their own hands and seek revenge.”

Thousands of detainees accused of fighting for or supporting al-Gaddafi’s government remain detained without charge or trial – some for more than a year.

Armed militias still abduct individuals and hold them in unofficial places of detention. Torture and other
ill-treatment are rampant, leading to dozens of deaths. Tens of thousands of people have been driven out of their homes and continue to be scattered across the country.

These abuses are taking place amid a climate of fear where human rights activists, lawyers and journalists are reluctant to speak out publicly. Their fears are justified, as several have faced threats, arrest and even physical violence.

“The GNC has an opportunity to break with the cycle of human rights abuse, impunity and repression of dissent that characterized four decades of systematic human rights violations in al-Gaddafi’s Libya. It is high time for the new political leadership to translate human rights commitments into action,” said Hadj Sahraoui.