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Libya: International community must urgently increase aid to Misratah

The international community must immediately step up humanitarian aid to the Libyan city of Misratah, Amnesty International said today, as many of its residents remained without communications, electricity and water supplies.

The city has been besieged for weeks by forces loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi, who have cut off power and water in parts of the cities holding out against them.

"The people under fire in Misratah are caught up in what is rapidly becoming a full-fledged humanitarian crisis," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa

"While Colonel al-Gaddafi's government publicly promises to allow humanitarian access, there has been no let-up in his forces' shelling of Misratah's port area using indiscriminate weapons and adding to the toll of civilian casualties. Their assault on the city is continuing and they have taken no steps to allow civilians to escape."

"Although the UN has been granted access to investigate, their team may not reach Misratah for days, and we already know how dire the conditions are in the city. The people there need help urgently, and they need it now," said Malcolm Smart.

The Libyan authorities have cut off all communications networks, leaving Misratah's residents without any ability to contact each other or the outside world.

Long lines for bread and petrol have formed as supplies dwindle.

Despite Libyan government assurances yesterday that a humanitarian corridor would be created, ongoing fighting in Misratah is obstructing the supply of desperately-needed medical and food aid and preventing safe evacuation of the wounded and of thousands of foreign workers who remain at the port area desperate to leave.

Amnesty International is calling on all parties to the conflict, including NATO, to take all necessary measures to establish an effective humanitarian corridor, and is urging the local authorities leading the opposition to Colonel al-Gaddafi in Misratah to prioritize the evacuation of civilians who have been wounded.

"The medical situation is acute and worsening, with serious shortages of medicine, hospital supplies and electricity generators. Thousands of people have been wounded and clean water is in short supply," said Malcolm Smart.

In a welcome move, the UK government has said it will fund more evacuations by ship from Misratah.

Amnesty International is calling on other states to send medical supplies, food, communications equipment and emergency electricity generators to the civilian population.

The battle for the city has displaced thousands of residents, many of whom fled their homes with only the clothes on their back. Their safety is constantly imperilled by rockets and mortars fired by Libyan government troops, who have also been using cluster munitions against civilian areas.

“Judging by their track record to date, public assurances by the Libyan government that they will cooperate to protect civilians ring hollow and lack credibility. We cannot rely on them. The international community must do all it can now, with real urgency, to provide more humanitarian aid to the people of Misratah and ensure the protection of civilians there,” said Malcolm Smart.

An Amnesty International delegate has been in Misratah since 14 April.