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Libya: Journalist killed for denouncing abuses by armed group

Amnesty International condemns the killing of Muftah Abu Zeid, editor-in-chief of *Burniq* newspaper, on 26 May in Benghazi. The organization calls on the Libyan authorities to immediately conduct a thorough and independent investigation, and bring those responsible to justice in a fair trial. As violence escalates in Benghazi, the investigation must be given all the powers and resources to be effective, Amnesty International said today.

According to an eyewitness interviewed by Amnesty International, Muftah Abu Zeid was shot dead at about 10:30am on 26 May as he was parked in his car on Istiqlal Street, one of Benghazi's main and busiest roads. Muftah Abu Zeid had just returned to his car after delivering copies of *Burniq* newspaper to a nearby bookshop when an unmasked man approached and opened fire at him with a rifle. He is said to have died immediately after he sustained gunshot wounds to his head, chest and left hand. According to the account, the assailant immediately climbed into the passenger seat of a vehicle after which he and a driver drove off. The authorities failed to appear immediately after the shooting, and have apparently not investigated the crime scene as of yet.

Muftah Abu Zeid, aged 40, regularly commented on the current state of Libya's political affairs, in particular the spate of assassinations and other serious abuses by militias and other armed groups in Benghazi. The evening before he was killed, he made an appearance on Libya al-Ahrar TV station, in which he spoke about the current political crisis. According to his colleagues and family, he had received numerous death threats on his mobile phone and Facebook page prior to his assassination. In the absence of a functioning criminal justice system in Benghazi, he was not able to report these threats to the police.

Muftah Abu Zeid is the third case of a deliberate killing of a journalist in Libya since the beginning of 2013. It follows the murders of al-Hurra TV presenter Ezzedine Kousad and Tripoli FM manager Radwan al-Gharyani respectively in August and in December last year. Muftah Abu Zeid is also the second journalist to have died since the beginning of 2014 after Abdallah Ben Nuzha, *Fasania* newspaper correspondent was killed while covering armed confrontations in Sabha on 20 January 2014.

Other journalists have faced assassination attempts, abductions, recurrent death threats and ill-treatment by non-state actors in relation to their reporting. Media offices in Benghazi and Tripoli have been attacked, including with rocket-propelled grenades, vandalized or set ablaze. In some cases, threats, intimidation and physical assaults have pushed journalists into self-censorship, or forced them to go into hiding, relocate, seek asylum abroad or abandon their profession altogether. Some activists in Benghazi told Amnesty International that they have started

refraining from expressing their views in the media for fear of reprisals.

According to the Libyan Centre for Freedom of Press, at least ten journalists have survived assassination attempts since the beginning of 2014. On 16 May, unknown assailants opened fire with an assault rifle at photographer Abdallah Doma's car, moments after he got out to buy groceries from a nearby bakery. Some 32 bullets were fired in the vicinity of his car. He told Amnesty International that he had received threats from a militia a few days prior to the shooting. The threats related to his coverage of an attack on the Police Headquarters in Benghazi on 2 May, which was attributed to the Islamist armed group Ansar al-Sharia. On 5 May, unknown assailants fired three bullets from a handgun with a silencer on Libya al-Ahrar correspondent Hassan al-Bakoush as he was travelling in a taxi in Benghazi. Although he came out of the incident unharmed, he decided to leave the country a few days later after he heard reports that unidentified men were watching his house late at night. He is currently residing in Qatar.

Amnesty International notes a government statement made on 26 May condemning the assassination of Muftah Abu Zeid. However, the authorities must immediately follow through by conducting a thorough and independent investigation, which has the necessary powers, including the power to compel officials to testify, expertise and resources necessary. So far, there have not been any meaningful investigations into attacks against journalists, and perpetrators have not been brought to justice.

Deliberate killings and other attacks on activists, judges and security officers have been a routine feature of life in Benghazi since the end of the conflict. The inability of the authorities to address security in the area is cited as one of the reasons behind "Operation Dignity", a military action against Islamist armed groups accused of abuses, which was launched on 16 May by General Khalifa Haftar, a retired army officer. The move has deepened the current political crisis and has led to an escalation of violence in both Tripoli and Benghazi, including reckless firing of heavy weapons, which have at times led to civilian casualties.

On 23 May, Minister of Justice Salah al-Marghani said at a press conference that investigations into cases of "terrorism and assassination" were ongoing, but were hindered by poor security and required technical assistance. According to the statement, investigations have resulted in a limited number of arrests and interrogations, and led to the prosecution of two individuals only. But activists in Benghazi cite hundreds of assassinations and killings as a result of explosions in Benghazi alone since the end of the 2011 armed conflict.

While Amnesty International fully recognizes that attacks against police stations, courts, judges and security officers in Benghazi are one of the main obstacles to the functioning of the justice system, the organization reiterates that Libya has an obligation under both international and domestic law to uphold and protect the rights to life and to security of the person.

The authorities must also protect the right to freedom of expression, including by ensuring that journalists are able to report on politically sensitive topics free from threats, physical attacks and intimidation. A failure by the Libyan authorities to effectively investigate the killing of Muftah Abu Zeid will only entrench a culture of impunity and lawlessness and facilitate further assassinations and attacks against journalists.