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Libyan paramedics targeted by pro-Gaddafi forces

Libyan medical teams have told Amnesty International how they came under fire from pro-Gaddafi security forces yesterday while carrying out their medical work.

Two medics from the Libyan Red Crescent trying to retrieve a body near the town of Misratah were injured by shooting from a nearby military installation belonging to the Hamza Brigade, a military force loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi.

"This was a deliberate attack on medical professionals, who were wearing full medical uniform and arrived in two clearly marked Red Crescent ambulances," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa director.

"This disturbing assault indicates that pro-Gaddafi forces are prepared to use lethal force indiscriminately even against those whose role it is to care for the wounded and pick up the dead."

A convoy including two ambulances travelled from Misratah to collect the corpse of a man who had been shot on Monday in unclear circumstances close to the Hamza Brigade base, and had been killed or left to die in his car.

The leading ambulance stopped a short distance from the car containing the dead man, who was slumped onto the passenger seat of the car, and three medics in Red Crescent uniform got out to collect his body.

As they did so, they came under fire from the military building. The first shot struck the ambulance, which sped away leaving the medics to duck for cover as gunfire persisted for about three minutes.

One of the ambulance workers was struck in the forearm by bullet splinters and another was struck in the chin, apparently by splinters from the academy's fence or possibly a bullet fragment. Neither was seriously injured.

Libya has been gripped by an escalating human rights crisis since protests began last month as part of a social network-led "Day of Rage", inspired by similar pro-democracy movements in Egypt and Tunisia.

The deadly crackdown by the government in Tripoli has led to Libya being suspended from the UN Human Rights Council and referred to the International Criminal Court, whose chief prosecutor says he is investigating Libyan leader Colonel al-Gaddafi for alleged crimes against humanity.

"Colonel al-Gaddafi must rein in the security forces that remain loyal to him - all those responsible for carrying out attacks on civilians and medical workers must know that they will be held to account," said Malcolm Smart.