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Libya: Campaign of enforced disappearances must end

Libyan forces loyal to Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi have carried out a campaign of enforced disappearances in an attempt to crush growing opposition to his rule, Amnesty International said today in a new briefing paper.

Libya: Detainees, disappeared and missing, details over 30 cases of individuals who have disappeared since before protests began, including political activists and those suspected of being rebel fighters or supporters of fighters.

“It appears that there is a systematic policy to detain anyone suspected of opposition to Colonel al-Gaddafi’s rule, hold them incommunicado, and transfer them to his strongholds in western Libya,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Director.

“Given the circumstances of their enforced disappearance there is every reason to believe that these individuals are at serious risk of torture and ill-treatment.”

“Colonel al-Gaddafi must halt this outrageous campaign and order his forces to abide by international law.”

Disappearances began taking place even before protests against Colonel al-Gaddafi had turned into armed rebellion.

Father of two Atef ‘Abd al-Qader Al-Atrash, a prominent blogger, was last seen attending a gathering near Benghazi’s port on 17 February, when he is believed to have been seized by forces loyal to Colonel al-Gaddafi. A relative told Amnesty:

“We kept trying to call his phone but never got through, until some days later when a man who spoke with a western [western Libyan] accent answered and said: ‘this is what happens to those who throw stones at us’. But ‘Atef had never even thrown stones.”

As rebel forces seized control of Benghazi and pro-Gaddafi forces retreated, they appear to have seized a number of protesters, including children. Amnesty International has documented a number of people who were last seen in or near the Kateeba al-Fadheel military compound on 20 February.

A relative of 14-year-old schoolboy Hassan Mohammad al-Qata’ni told Amnesty International:

“I haven’t slept since he’s gone missing, nobody in my family has slept; we are so worried; he is just a kid; we don’t know what to do, where to look for him, who to turn to for help.”

As the conflict has developed, disappearances have continued. A number of individuals have gone missing in or near the frontline town of Ben Jawad. Some are believed to have been fighters, others to be civilians who went to the area in order to assist the wounded, and still others may have merely been

onlookers.

One source told Amnesty International that his relative was taken prisoner by Colonel al- Gaddafi's forces early on 6 March in Ben Jawad but had been able to phone while being transported with dozens of others to the Kateeba al-Sa'idi military compound in Sirte.

Subsequently, a brother of the detainee received phone calls from members of Colonel al-Gaddafi's forces using the detainee's phone in which they reportedly threatened: "We will burn you along with your family, your mother and siblings."

Amnesty International called on Colonel al-Gaddafi and those around him to allow immediate independent access to those detained in order to check on their safety and help protect them from torture, and to urgently inform their families of their whereabouts.

The organization also urged those holding detainees to ensure that all alleged or known fighters who are captured are treated humanely in line with international law, and to give them immediate access to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"Colonel al-Gaddafi could be held responsible in an international court for any crimes committed by his forces during this conflict."

"All those who are detained simply for peaceful activities in support of the protests must be released immediately and given safe passage home," said Malcolm Smart.

Background

Read [*Libya: detainees, disappeared and missing*](#). The paper is based on the work of Amnesty International's team in eastern Libya.

The cases documented by Amnesty International are believed to represent only a small proportion of the total number of people who have been detained or have disappeared in the custody of Colonel al-Gaddafi's forces in recent weeks. The true number is impossible to establish, as the authorities in Tripoli generally do not divulge information about detainees they are holding and because many areas of the country are not accessible for independent reporting. Some relatives of detainees are also unwilling to publicize their names for fear of possible reprisals.

Foreign journalists who were detained by Colonel al-Gaddafi's forces have reported that they were beaten, assaulted and threatened with execution, in some cases even being subjected to mock execution, and have expressed concern about Libyans who they saw being mistreated in detention.

Thousands of unresolved cases of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions have occurred during Colonel Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi's rule.