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Libya must protect demonstrators from 'out of control' militias or risk new bloodshed

The Libyan authorities must actively protect protesters from attacks by armed militia during ongoing demonstrations this week or risk further bloodshed, Amnesty International said today.

The Head of the Tripoli Local Council has called on Tripoli's residents to pursue a general strike until all armed groups leave the city. Large demonstrations are planned for this Friday in Tripoli's Al Quds Square. Activists have also called for demonstrations outside militia compounds.

The calls follow the deaths of 43 individuals and hundreds of injured, including children as young as 11 at a peaceful demonstration and subsequent clashes in Gharghour area of Tripoli on 15 November.

"The Libyan authorities must guarantee that protesters taking to the streets on Friday will be protected from violence by militias. Anything short of that could result in a new tragedy," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"Two years of militia appeasement have led to a situation where abductions, torture and killings have become the norm in Libya. Those who once fought for freedom are now turning into criminal gangs."

Last Friday, protesters in Tripoli called on militias based in the neighbourhood of Gharghour to leave the city and demanded that the police and national army return to the streets to ensure public order. The demonstration, which had received authorization from the authorities who promised to take measures to protect them, was held in protest at heavy clashes in the capital between Misratah and Tripoli militias on 7 November.

Eye-witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International's delegates in Tripoli said that police had failed to protect demonstrators or intervene when they were being shot at by militias. Most police units stayed behind as the demonstration started marching towards the militia compounds in Gharghour. They failed to take any preventive action to protect demonstrators from militias known to be heavily armed and reckless.

A 51 year old man told Amnesty International's researchers: "Many of the demonstrators were old people who had just come out of the mosque after prayer. They were not armed and carried revolutionary and white flags and posters with peaceful messages. The police were in the background but did not do anything to stop the shooting. I was hit by shrapnel in my left leg, which had to be amputated."

Bystanders were also injured by stray bullets. Mabrouka Muhadab, 42, told Amnesty International: "I stepped out onto the balcony to get my son's blanket when I was hit by a bullet in the back. Libya Shield brigades [a grouping of militias under the Ministry of Defence] were protecting our area, and the fighting was taking place some 10 to 15 minutes away from our home."

As the violence continued, at about 10pm militias shot at a nearby camp for internally displaced

Tawarghas, wounding a man in the knee. The next morning, militias attacked the camp again with rifles, killing one man and injuring two others. Despite previous such attacks by Misratah militias, the authorities failed to provide protection to the camp.

On 17 November, the Libyan General Prosecutor told Amnesty International an investigation into the events had been initiated. The organization's delegates were able to observe the handing over of official forensic reports to families of victims at the morgue.

“The fact that an investigation has been initiated is positive. However, experience shows that investigations into militia abuses in Libya rarely result in successful prosecutions. Letting it happen again will only further embolden militias,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“These deaths and injuries could have been avoided had the Libyan authorities been serious about fighting impunity and investigating militia abuses since 2011.”

In March the General National Congress, Libya's first elected body, issued a decision ordering all “illegal armed formations” to leave Tripoli. However, the government has been unable to implement the decision since then. Nor was it able to successfully disarm and demobilize militias. Since the end of the 2011 armed conflict, hundreds of anti-Gaddafi militias have refused to disarm and reintegrate into civilian life; most are based in Tripoli and the west of the country.

Following the violence on 15 November and calls by the Tripoli Local Council, Misratah militias started pulling out from the capital. Other cities such as Gharyan have started withdrawing their brigades as well.

In parallel, the government announced a new plan to remove militias from the capital by integrating them into state security forces.

Amnesty International urges the government to ensure that any disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts are compliant with human rights standards. No one responsible for human rights abuses should be integrated into state institutions.

“As militias withdraw from Tripoli, the government must put in place measures to fight impunity and ensure that perpetrators of abuses are held accountable for their actions and brought to justice. Otherwise it is merely shifting around the problem,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “People throughout Libya – not only in Tripoli – must be able to live without fear of militia abuses.”

For more information and testimonies from those injured during the 15 November protests in Tripoli, please see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE19/012/2013/en>