

# State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Libya

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The Libyan revolution began with protests in the eastern city of Benghazi on 15 February 2011 and, like the other Arab Spring uprisings, caught most observers by surprise. By late February, opposition to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule had transformed into an armed struggle that spread across the country. The opposition formed the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Benghazi. On 17 March, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1973, which paved the way for the imposition of a no-fly-zone against Gaddafi's forces, led by NATO. The Libyan capital, Tripoli, eventually fell to rebel forces in late August 2011, and Gaddafi was captured and killed on 20 October 2011 in the city of Sirte. On 16 September, the UN General Assembly recognized the NTC as the legitimate representative of Libya.

In November 2011, a report by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon expressed concerns over alleged war crimes committed by rebels, particularly against black Libyans and Sub-Saharan Africans. The report said many of the 7,000 African detainees, including women, had been beaten and tortured.

According to rights groups, rebel fighters killed and detained black Libyans and sub-Saharan African migrant workers, claiming they were pro-Gaddafi mercenaries. However, allegations that Gaddafi employed many Africans from neighbouring countries such as Chad, Nigeria and Sudan as mercenaries appeared to be heavily exaggerated. Many Africans worked in civilian jobs. There have been reports of harassment and violence towards sub-Saharan African migrant workers from rebel fighters and civilians alike, and security missions have allegedly turned into persecution of Africans based on their skin colour. During a field mission in September, HRW reported that Africans held in Libyan prisons were in overcrowded cells with appalling hygiene standards and no access to clean drinking water. In addition, many sub-Saharan Africans have been displaced by the fighting and for fear of reprisals; the largest group of displaced Africans was in the port of Janzur between Tripoli and Zawya, housed in camps with poor hygiene and sanitation conditions. Residents of the camp complained to HRW that armed Libyans frequently entered the camp to harass them and rape women.

During the Libyan revolution, government forces attacking Misrata were partly based in the town of Tawergha, east of Tripoli. Following Gaddafi's fall, Misrata rebels have been accused of serious abuses against unarmed Tawerghans, including arbitrary arrests, beatings and torture. This forced many Tawerghans to abandon Tawergha, which is now described as a ghost town. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that Tawerghans fled mostly to the Jufra region, south of Misrata. An estimated 15,000 people were displaced, and 4,000 Tawerghans sought refuge in three refugee camps. Others have moved to Benghazi, Tripoli, or to southern Libya. Forcing all residents of Tawergha to resettle permanently as a form of collective punishment would constitute a crime against humanity for deportation or forced transfer, HRW said in March 2011.

Libyan Amazigh, also known as Berbers, are the country's largest indigenous minority and faced discrimination and harassment under Gaddafi's rule. The Amazigh language, Tamazight, was outlawed, and Gaddafi passed laws which banned the use of non-Arab Amazigh names on official documentation. Amazigh New Year celebrations were considered un-Arab by Gaddafi, and Amazighs who expressed their culture and heritage were often persecuted by the state.

Amazigh living in the Nafusa Mountains in north-west Libya were among the first to protest against Gaddafi on 18 February 2011. Protesters in the main Nafusa towns of Naluf and Yefren called for Gaddafi's downfall, and an end to the marginalization of Amazigh people, demanding improved infrastructure and political representation. Fighting in the Nafusa Mountains between rebel forces and Gaddafi forces blocked access to food, medical supplies and fuel. As fighting intensified by May, thousands of people fled across the nearby border into Tunisia – nearly 55,000 according to the UN OCHA.

Following Gaddafi's fall, Amazigh activists demanded that Amazigh identity be recognized in Libya's new constitution and for Tamazight to become an official language. Following the expulsion of Gaddafi forces from Amazigh regions, there has been what observers have called a cultural and linguistic renaissance. Schools have begun to teach Tamazight, and a weekly Tamazight newspaper was launched. But the draft constitution outlined by the NTC only vaguely alluded to Amazigh culture and rights – Tamazight was not recognized as an official language for example – and the cabinet of Prime Minister Abdurrahim al Keib appointed in November 2011 did not include Amazigh ministers. This angered Amazigh who fought against Gaddafi forces. Amazigh demands extend beyond cultural and linguistic rights to full political participation. The overthrow of Gaddafi has allowed the formation of indigenous advocacy groups like the National Amazigh Libyan Congress.

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