



# Libya: Militias Kill Unarmed Protesters

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Militias from Misrata fired assault rifles, machine guns, and heavy weapons at overwhelmingly peaceful protesters in Tripoli on November 15, killing several people. Ensuing clashes between armed groups and militias left 43 people dead and at least 460 wounded. State security forces present at the initial protest apparently failed to protect protesters or to arrest and disarm the militias.

The Libyan government should immediately make good on its promise to disarm the militias and investigate the events, and hold militia members and commanders to account for the attack, Human Rights Watch said. The government also needs to explain why police and military forces failed to intervene as the killings continued.

"Libyan citizens have paid with their lives for the reckless acts of unaccountable militias," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Libya needs security forces who don't stand by as militias kill unarmed protesters."

The Tripoli Local Council, in charge of administering the capital, called for a peaceful protest on November 15, 2013, rallying citizens to demonstrate against the presence of illegal armed groups in Tripoli. According to organizers of the protest, thousands of people marched peacefully from al-Quds Square toward the neighborhood of Gharghour, where militias from Misrata have occupied homes belonging to former Gaddafi officials. Members of these militias often operate under the umbrella of police or army forces.

Human Rights Watch spoke to eight eyewitnesses, including protesters, journalists, and bystanders, who were present at the demonstration. Human Rights Watch also visited two hospitals in Tripoli during the night of November 15, and spoke to medical staff, victims, and families of victims. All eight witnesses told Human Rights Watch that they saw no arms being

carried by protesters at the beginning of the demonstration. They said militias from Misrata based in the area started to fire both directly and indiscriminately at protesters when they approached Gharghour in the early afternoon.

Moez, a protester who was present from the beginning of the demonstration, told Human Rights Watch that Misrata militias started to fire on protesters from three villas in Gharghour when demonstrators turned onto Gharghour Street. He said demonstrators were not using or threatening violence, but were chanting, "Tripoli is free, militias should leave," and "We want the army, we want the police, Libya is in a mess."

Moez said the first two victims were men - one, an older man in traditional Libyan dress, was shot and died, while another was shot in the arm and leg. He said he saw seven wounded at this initial stage.

Around one hour after the Misrata militias started to fire on the crowd, armed men and members of various Tripoli-based militias arrived to defend the protesters, Moez said.

It is unclear how many protesters were killed during the first round of shooting by the Misrata militias. The government said 43 people died during the day and at least 460 were injured. The 43 dead include people who were apparently not involved in the protest or the clashes - at least two medical staff on duty, a journalist, and some students - as well as fighters who came in support of the demonstrators. According to the state news agency LANA, three militia members from Misrata were also killed during the clashes.

Human Rights Watch visited the emergency departments and morgues of Abu Salim Trauma Hospital and Zawiya Street Hospital in Tripoli, which received the dead and wounded during the night of November 15. At both hospitals Human Rights Watch saw armed men from various militias moving freely through the facilities.

In Zawiya Street Hospital, Human Rights Watch researchers counted seven dead bodies, including that of a young woman whose face was blown away by heavy weapons, according to medical staff. Human Rights Watch staff counted a further 18 corpses in the morgue of Abu Salim Trauma Hospital, including the body of a young male with a decapitated head and the body of another young male cut in half at the torso.

According to medical staff at both hospitals, most of the wounds were caused by heavy weapons, including anti-aircraft weapons, Hawn rockets and rocket-propelled grenades. Some injuries were from lighter arms, including Kalashnikov assault rifles and machine guns.

Two of the victims appear to have been medical personnel who were trying to retrieve wounded people. One witness told Human Rights Watch that a doctor with the family name Abdelmunem was killed and a nurse named Mohamed Jbali was wounded when the ambulance in which they were traveling was shot at by machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons around 8:00 p.m. on Gharghour Street, near where the main fighting took place.

"We had already evacuated one dead person we had with us in the ambulance," a medical worker who was present told Human Rights Watch. "All of a sudden, the firing started. They were shooting at us with all types of weapons, including heavy anti-aircraft weapons. They hit the doctor who was with us in the ambulance in his neck."

Two other medical workers, who did not witness the attack, said that the doctor and nurse were hit while in the ambulance.

According to Reporters Without Borders, Saleh Ayad Hafyanaa, a cameraman covering the clashes for the Fasatou press agency, was among the 43 killed. Three other media workers were injured while covering the events and a local news station, Tobacts, based in the Gharghour area, was attacked and burnt by unknown armed men, Reporters Without Borders said.

One media report said that eight students from Tripoli University were among the 43 casualties. The students include six men, Abdul Ati Zendah, Luay Al-Harathi, Mahmoud Waddan, Abdulrahman Kayim, Abdulaziz Bin Musa, Akram Al-Sharef, and two women, Aisha Sadiq and Marwa Amer.

Gharghour is an affluent area of Tripoli with villas previously housing senior members of the Gaddafi government. Since Gaddafi's fall in July 2011, the area has effectively been under the control of numerous militias from Misrata, who have taken over large parts as their base of operations in Tripoli. Protesters marched to the Gharghour area to try and convince militias to lay down their arms and leave Tripoli.

Two eyewitnesses told Human Rights Watch that state security forces were present during the initial demonstration. Protest organizers had announced their plans for a demonstration after clashes in Tripoli on November 7 between militias from Misrata and Tripoli had left several dead and injured. Prime Minister Ali Zeidan confirmed this on November 16 when he said that armed forces present at the demonstration, including the police and army, had orders not to intervene. He explained that security forces could not intervene because they were weaker than the militias.

Prime Minister Zeidan also said the General Prosecutor would launch an investigation to determine who was responsible for the killings at the demonstration. Human Rights Watch welcomed this announcement, but urged the government to act swiftly to disarm militias, particularly those responsible for violent attacks on citizens.

Describing a related incident, a witness reached by phone told Human Rights Watch that armed men from Misrata entered Tripoli's al-Fallah camp for displaced residents of Tawergha on November 16 and fired indiscriminately at residents, leaving at least one man dead and three injured.

These militias and local Misrata authorities have prohibited around 35,000 people, the entire population of Tawergha, from returning to their homes in the town, which has been extensively damaged by Misrata militias over the past two years. Misrata militias accuse the population of Tawergha of having committed serious crimes against people in Misrata during the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi.

"What will it take to rein in the violent militias terrorizing the people of Libya?" said Whitson. "For too long the government has said it's too dangerous to disarm the militias - now it should be clear that it's too dangerous not to do so."

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