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## Libya: End Violent Crackdown in Tripoli

Disappearances and Torture Major Concerns

MARCH 13, 2011

(New York) – Libyan security forces controlled by Muammar Gaddafi have launched a wave of arrests and disappearances in Tripoli that has gripped the city with fear, Human Rights Watch said today.

According to credible and consistent accounts given by Tripoli residents to Human Rights Watch, security forces have arrested scores of anti-government protesters, suspected government critics, and those alleged to have provided information to international media and human rights organizations. Some detainees have apparently been subjected to torture.

"Gaddafi and his security forces are brutally suppressing all opposition in Tripoli, including peaceful protests, with lethal force, arbitrary arrests, and forced disappearances," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Given Libya's record of torture and political killings, we worry deeply about the fate of those taken away."

The government has released some people after brief periods of detention, Human Rights Watch said, but the location and fate of many others remain unknown.

The Libyan government has not released any information on the number or location of those detained, or the charges they face, if any.

The government crackdown in Tripoli began around February 20, 2011, when anti-government protesters converged on the city's central Green Square. Three witnesses to that protest told Human Rights Watch that security forces opened fire on the peaceful crowd, killing and injuring an unknown number.

"I watched two guys get shot, they fell right in front of me," said one protester who wished to remain anonymous. "I saw them shoot a third guy point blank."

That night, heavily armed security forces deployed throughout the city, especially in the neighborhoods of Tajoura and Fashloom, where many of the anti-government protests had begun. Tripoli residents have told Human Rights Watch that some arrests began that night, including detentions of wounded protesters who had gone to local hospitals for medical care.

The government again used lethal force against peaceful protesters on February 25, responding to protests following Friday prayers that day. Human Rights Watch spoke with one protester who said he was shot in the leg that day after leaving a mosque.

"I had no time to say anything and he [a policeman] just opened fire immediately with a shotgun," said the man, who also requested anonymity for fear of reprisals. "I learned later that the guy next to me was shot in the stomach and another guy in the back lines was shot, I think with a rifle."



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*Gaddafi and his security forces are brutally suppressing all opposition in Tripoli, including peaceful protests, with lethal force, arbitrary arrests, and forced disappearances. Given Libya's record of torture and political killings, we worry deeply about the fate of those taken away.*

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch

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The wounded man said he sought medical attention at home rather than at a hospital because he feared arrest. "We can't go to the hospitals," he said. "We know for sure that they will pick up people who went to the hospitals."

Other sources who have visited Tripoli hospitals told Human Rights Watch about the presence there of internal security forces looking for wounded protesters.

The man shot in the leg at the protest said he slept at the homes of different relatives to avoid the security forces conducting night searches for protesters. Five other protesters he knew were arrested, he said, all of them men. He believed that one of the men was being held in Jdeida prison in Tripoli, but the location of the other four was unknown to him.

Arrests and disappearances continued after February 25, Tripoli residents said, with internal security forces looking for individuals who had participated in protests or communicated with foreign journalists and human rights organizations. Individuals providing information on arrests said they were too afraid to continue to communicate about abuses.

"The fear in Tripoli is palpable," Whitson said. "The arrests and disappearances have stunned people into silence, while pro-Gaddafi demonstrators freely wave flags and chant in the streets."

In one case documented by Human Rights Watch, around February 20, security forces detained a Libyan man from Tripoli together with his son. The man, who must remain anonymous to protect his safety, had been providing information about anti-government protests to human rights organizations abroad. According to the family, the man and his son were still missing as of March 12.

In another case, on February 28 internal security forces arrested Abdulrahman Sewehli, a retired Libyan academic, and three of his sons, according to a fourth son, Ahmed Sewehli, who lives abroad and was in contact with his family on the day of the arrests. Abdulrahman Sewehli had been critical of the government on Arabic-language television stations, Ahmed Sewehli told Human Rights Watch.

According to Ahmed Sewehli, security forces released his youngest brother Mohammed, 19, on March 6, but his father and two other brothers remain in custody.

Human Rights Watch learned of other cases in which detainees were released, some reportedly after being beaten. But in most cases, the families of those detained have no official information about the location of their relatives. Some say they have heard unofficially where their relatives are being held. Possible detention facilities in Tripoli include Abu Salim prison, a facility notorious for the massacre of some 1,200 prisoners after a prison uprising in 1996, as well as Jdeida prison and Ain Zara prison.

Human Rights Watch has documented a record of politically motivated arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances by Libyan internal security forces prior to this crisis, including the 1996 mass killings in Abu Salim prison.

The only known eyewitness accounts of the fate of recent detainees come from three BBC journalists who were held by the army and internal security at three different military barracks for 21 hours starting on March 7. Two of the journalists said they were beaten and all three were subjected to a mock execution by security forces, despite having official permission to work in Libya.

One of the journalists, Feras Killani, a Palestinian with a Syrian passport, said a captain with three stars on his shoulders beat him with his fists, boots and knees. "Then he found a plastic pipe on the ground and beat me with that," Killani told the Guardian newspaper. "Then one of the soldiers gave him a long stick."

According to Chris Cobb-Smith, a British citizen who was not beaten, the three journalists were lined up against a wall, apparently to be shot. "I was the last in line - facing the wall," he told the BBC. "I looked and I saw a plain-clothes guy with a small sub-machine gun. He put it to everyone's neck. I saw him and he screamed at me... Then he walked up to me, put the gun to my neck and pulled the trigger, twice. The bullets whisked past my ear. The soldiers just laughed."

The BBC journalists said they saw Libyan detainees at two of the barracks, including some who said they had been arrested after speaking to foreign media. Others complained of beatings and showed signs of physical abuse.

Killani told the BBC: "Cars were coming and going. I saw them bring in a guy and three girls, prisoners, too. Two of them told me they had broken ribs. The four who were masked, I helped them breathe by lifting their



masks, saw they had been badly beaten. The four said they had been three days without food and with arms and legs cuffed. They said where they were now was like heaven compared to where they had been. They said they had been tortured for three days, and were from Zawiya."

At another barracks, Cobb-Smith said he heard screams of pain from the second floor and saw security forces moving detainees with handcuffs and hoods.

Despite promises of free movement from the Libyan government, other international journalists have faced physical attacks and detention, Human Rights Watch said. A cameraman from Al Jazeera, Ali Hassan al-Jaber, was shot and killed on his way back to the rebel-held city of Benghazi on March 12, in an apparent ambush. Wadah Khanfar, director-general of Al Jazeera, said the killing came after "an unprecedented campaign" against the network by Gaddafi. Two other Al Jazeera staff were wounded.

One reporter from the London-based Guardian newspaper – Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, an Iraqi national who has won numerous journalism prizes – has been held in custody for six days.

According to the Guardian, Abdul-Ahad was last heard from through a third party on March 6 from the outskirts of Zawiya. He was apparently traveling with Andrei Netto of the Brazilian newspaper Estado do Sao Paulo, who was detained and released on March 10. According to the Guardian, Libyan officials have confirmed that they are holding Abdul-Ahad.

Libyan human rights groups based abroad have also released information on arrests in the country's west, which Human Rights Watch cannot confirm. Libya Human Rights Solidarity, run by Libyan exiles in Switzerland, listed the names of seven young men who it claims were arrested in Tripoli after participating in protests. According to the organization Libya Watch, based in the UK, pro-government forces have arrested two journalists in Tripoli, Salma Chaab and Souad Trabelsi, as well as a political activist in nearby Subrata, Mohammed Salim Dabbashi.

The Libyan opposition website al-Mostakbal lists the names of 73 people it claims have been arrested from Misrata.

"The arrests and disappearances in Tripoli have cowed many who were peacefully protesting the government," Whitson said. "It shows how much the government headed by Gaddafi is relying on intimidation."

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