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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Libya: Governments Should Demand End to Unlawful Killings

Death Toll Up to at Least 233 Over Four Days

February 20, 2011

Update: Death Toll Up to At Least 233

The estimated death toll from four days of protests in cities across Libya has risen to at least 233 according to information from hospital sources in Libya, Human Rights Watch said today. From Benghazi, staff at Al Jalaa hospital said they recorded 50 dead on February 20, 2011, while the 7 October hospital reported another 10 dead the same day, giving a total of 60 killed in Benghazi on February 20. This raises the overall death toll from protests in five Libyan cities to 233 since February 17. Human Rights Watch was unable to contact two other hospitals in Benghazi.

(New York) - The African Union and African, Western, and Arab countries that have relations with Libya should urge the Libyan government to stop the unlawful killing of protesters, Human Rights Watch said today. In the last three days, the death toll of protesters reported to Human Rights Watch by hospital staff and other sources has reached at least 173.

Accounts of the use of live ammunition by security forces, including machine gun fire, against protesters near the Katiba in Benghazi on February 19, 2011, resulting in dozens of deaths and injuries, raise serious concern that the authorities are using unjustified and unlawful force. The government has shut down all internet communications in the country, and arrested Libyans who have given phone interviews to the media, making it extremely difficult to obtain information on developments there.

"A potential human rights catastrophe is unfolding in Libya as protesters brave live gunfire and death for a third day running," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Libya is trying to impose an information blackout, but it can't hide a massacre."

Eyewitnesses told Human Rights Watch that at least 10,000 protesters are protesting in the streets of Benghazi on February 20, after the funerals of the 84 protesters shot dead the day before.

According to witnesses who spoke to Human Rights Watch, the violence started on February 19 after thousands of protesters had gathered for funeral prayers of 14 of the protesters shot dead by security forces the day before. Followed by thousands of protesters, the funeral procession walked from the square in front of the Benghazi court to the Hawari cemeteries. On the way the marchers passed the Katiba El Fadil Bu Omar, a complex that includes one of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's residences and is heavily guarded by state security officers.



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A potential human rights catastrophe is unfolding in Libya as protesters brave live gunfire and death for a third day running. Libya is trying to impose an information blackout, but it can't hide a massacre.

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

Three eyewitnesses confirmed that the security officers in distinctive uniform with yellow berets fired indiscriminately on protesters. One protester, A.G., told Human Rights Watch, "it was at this stage that they opened fire on us. We were walking along peacefully but were chanting angrily against the regime and Gaddafi."

Another lawyer who was at the protests said to Human Rights Watch, "I could see the men with yellow berets shooting at us with live gunfire, and dozens fell to the ground. This went on for a long period of time, and I left with the injured to the hospital." Later in the afternoon, Human Rights Watch spoke to another protester who said he had left the area because "anyone who goes near the Katiba is shot." In the evening, thousands of protesters were still gathered in front of the Benghazi courthouse.

Human Rights Watch spoke to a senior medical official at Al Jalaa hospital in Beghazi who said the dead started coming in at 3:00 p.m. and that by the end of the day, he had received 23 bodies. By the morning of February 20, the number of dead who arrived at the hospital had risen to 70. He said the deaths and the vast majority of those injured showed gunshot wounds of 4cm x 4cm sustained to the head, neck, and shoulders. Medical officials at Hawari hospital in Benghazi told Human Rights Watch that they had received 14 bodies, Human Rights Watch also confirmed the death of at least one protester in Misrata on February 19, bringing the total number of those killed on February 19 to 85. Human Rights Watch calculates the total dead in four days of protests at 173.

Human Rights Watch calls on the African Union, the European Union, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other governments with ties to Libya to:

Publicly demand an end to unlawful use of force against peaceful protesters;

Announce that those responsible for serious violations of international human rights law must be held individually accountable and will be subjected to appropriate measures;

Impose an embargo on all exports of arms and security equipment to Libya; and

Tell Libya to restore access to the internet.

The Libyan government cut access to the internet on February 19 and had not restored service on February 20. Craig Labovitz, Chief Scientist at Arbor Networks, an international network security provider, confirmed that internet traffic in Libya dropped to zero on February 19 at 2:00 a.m. in Libya.

A lawyer told Human Rights Watch that early on February 19, security officers had arrested Abdelhafiz Ghogha, one of the most prominent lawyers in Benghazi who represented the families of those killed in 1996 in Abu Salim prison, bringing the total number of activists, lawyers and former political prisoners arrested since the demonstrations began to at least 17.

"In 1996, Libyan authorities killed 1,200 prisoners on one day in Abu Salim and they still haven't acknowledged doing anything wrong that day," said Whitson. "Today the Libyan government has shown the world that it is still using ruthless brutality against its population."

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