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ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

Libya: ICRC steps up presence in Benghazi

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Geneva (ICRC) – The situation in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi was calm on Sunday according to staff from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who arrived there from Egypt late on Saturday. They reported that some shops were open, food was available and people were out on the streets.

Local health workers told the ICRC that the city's main hospitals were short of nurses because the bulk of their nursing staff were foreigners who had been evacuated by their embassies. A group of doctors in Benghazi, charged with coordinating health activities in the city, reported that 256 people had been killed and 2,000 injured in the unrest.

In response to medical needs, Libyan Red Crescent staff and volunteers have been collecting blood, evacuating the wounded and working in the hospitals themselves in recent days.

"We're here to support the Libyan Red Crescent, who have been doing an excellent job over the past week responding to the violence," said Simon Brooks, the ICRC's team leader in Benghazi. "We hear that surgeons and orthopaedic specialists are needed in Benghazi's hospitals, as well as medicine for patients suffering from chronic illnesses. Our initial assessment is that there is no urgent need for food supplies. It's difficult to know, however, what the needs are outside the city."

A medical team from the ICRC and the Norwegian Red Cross crossed into Libya from Egypt on Sunday afternoon and is expected to arrive in Benghazi Sunday night. The team, made up of two surgeons, a doctor and two nurses, will begin working in support of local health-care personnel as soon as possible. Truckloads of medical supplies are also due to arrive in Libya from Cairo in the coming days.

Despite the relative calm in the east, the ICRC is very concerned about the situation from a humanitarian viewpoint in the west of the country, where the organization has not yet been able to send delegates.

"We're trying to get a clearer picture of the conditions and needs throughout the country, including in and around Tripoli, but information is scarce," said Georgios Georgantas, who is in charge of coordinating ICRC relief efforts in Libya and neighbouring countries at the organization's headquarters in Geneva. "Our colleagues in Tunisia tell us that the arrival of tens of thousands of displaced people along the border is putting a strain on local infrastructure and that the need for basic services, such as sanitation facilities, is likely to increase as the numbers continue to rise." Meanwhile, he added, ICRC staff in Egypt were reporting that the situation along the border there was calm.

The ICRC is supporting both the Egyptian and Tunisian Red Crescent Societies in dealing with the influx of people driven from their homes by the violence. ICRC tracing experts have been sent to both the Egyptian and Tunisian borders to help people get in touch with their families. The ICRC in Tunisia said it had helped around 200 displaced people contact their loved ones over the weekend. Meanwhile, a team of ICRC and Finnish Red Cross doctors will travel from Tunis to the border on Monday to help meet the medical needs of people fleeing from Libya into Tunisia.

The ICRC is working closely with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to coordinate the Red Cross and Red Crescent's humanitarian response to the crisis.

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