

Tripoli, Libya, February 1 (Infosplusgabon) – Armed groups in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi are preventing thousands of internally displaced families from returning to their homes in that city, Human Rights Watch said on Thursday.

The armed groups, some loyal to Libyan National Army forces (LNA), accuse the families broadly of “terrorism” or “supporting terrorism.”

The LNA, headed by General Khalifa Hifter, is allied with one of two authorities vying for legitimacy and territorial control in Libya.

Since May 2014, when Hiftar announced the start of Operation Dignity to root out “terrorists” from Benghazi, an estimated 13,000 families have fled Benghazi for elsewhere in Libya or abroad.

Human Rights Watch said displaced people it interviewed said LNA-linked groups have seized their property and tortured, forcibly disappeared, and arrested family members who remained in the city. If proven such attacks on civilians would amount to violations of the laws of war. If committed with criminal intent, they would be war crimes.

“General Hifter needs to act resolutely to end the attacks on civilians in Benghazi,” said Eric Goldstein, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Senior LNA commanders who have stood by since 2014 while their forces torture and disappear people and plunder their property can and should be held to account by local or international courts.”

As a result of armed conflicts in the country and political divisions, central authority collapsed and subsequently three competing governments emerged, now reduced to two.

These are the Interim Government based in the eastern city of al-Bayda, which is aligned with the LNA and supported by the House of Representatives, and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, backed by the UN Security Council. Key institutions, most notably law enforcement and the judiciary, are dysfunctional in most of the country. Basic services have collapsed.

The armed groups in Benghazi are preventing at least 3,700 families from returning to the city, according to the Benghazi Committee, a body based in Tripoli that coordinates relief support to displaced people from eastern Libya.

On January 6, 2018, Hifter issued a statement denouncing the looting, destruction and appropriation of private property as well as the forced displacement of people from Benghazi.

He instructed forces under the LNA to facilitate the return of Internally Displaced People (IDPs), unless there were “legal justifications.”

Human Rights Watch said it conducted 27 interviews with displaced people in October and November 2017 in the western cities of Tripoli and Misrata, including 24 in person and three by phone. Some of those interviewed said their relatives had fought against the LNA. Others said none of their relatives had participated in the hostilities, even if they were not in support of the LNA.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed photographs, death certificates, medical reports, and burial documents provided by interviewees which appeared to corroborate their allegations of the abuse of their relatives who remained behind in Benghazi. In one case a Human Rights Watch researcher observed the injuries and marks on the body of a former Benghazi resident who said an LNA-linked group had tortured him in October 2017.

All of those interviewed said they were unable to return to their homes in Benghazi due to threats by LNA-linked groups. Most said they had left Benghazi in October 2014, after armed confrontations intensified between the LNA and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), an alliance of armed groups opposed to the LNA. Some said they had been prevented from returning after receiving direct warnings from pro-LNA armed groups to stay away, or after pro-LNA armed groups attacked their relatives as a warning.

Given the serious crimes committed in Libya and the challenges facing the authorities, the International Criminal Court's mandate to investigate the worst crimes in Libya since 2011 remains essential to ending impunity in Libya, Human Rights Watch said.

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