

NATO-backed Libyan regime persecutes black Africans

Peter Symonds
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The widespread racist persecution of immigrant African workers and black Libyans by forces opposed to Libyan ruler Colonel Muammar Gaddafi is a damning indictment of Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) and its Western backers.

The US and its European allies launched their neo-colonial war against the Gaddafi regime on the pretext of protecting civilians and have hailed their new client regime as the beginning of a new era of democracy in Libya. Mass racist reprisals in NTC-held areas are yet another devastating exposure of these tattered lies. As well as killing and maiming civilians through its relentless bombing, NATO bears responsibility for the arbitrary arrest, physical abuse and extra-judicial killings of thousands of black Africans by its NTC proxies.

US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called for an end to the systematic detention of black Africans accused of fighting as Gaddafi's mercenaries. HRW regional director Sarah Leah Whitson stated: "It's a dangerous time to be dark-skinned in Tripoli. The NTC should stop arresting African migrants and black Libyans unless it has concrete evidence of criminal activity. It should also take concrete steps to protect them from violence and abuse."

Prior to the outbreak of war, there were between 1 and 2 million African migrants in Libya. The overwhelming majority were not mercenaries, but worked in menial jobs.

HRW officials visited two among scores of makeshift jails throughout Tripoli, where hundreds of mainly black prisoners—young and old—were being held in

overcrowded, squalid conditions. In most cases, the only supposed evidence of prisoners' guilt was their skin colour. Reports indicate that thousands have been arbitrarily detained throughout Tripoli.

Tripoli NTC members speaking to HRW defended the arrests as necessary—in the words of NTC member Abudlrzag Elaradi—to "secure the revolution." Mohammed al-Alagi, whom the NTC appointed as justice minister, told the media this week that conditions in detention centres were "up to international standards."

The NTC's token appeals for its forces not to abuse prisoners are purely for international consumption. As part of its anti-Gaddafi propaganda, the NTC has stirred up racism against African immigrant workers, claiming they took jobs from Libyans, and against Gaddafi's aid to other African countries.

Vilifying African immigrants and black Libyans also serves to divert attention from the corrupt and criminal character of the NTC itself—composed of ex-Gaddafi officials, CIA assets, and Islamists. Those with blood on their hands include NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil and NTC Interim Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril who were justice minister and national economic development board head, respectively, in the Gaddafi regime before switching sides. The NTC military commander, before he was assassinated in July in unexplained circumstances, was Abdel Fattah Younis, formerly Gaddafi's interior minister.

Many African workers have already left the country, while tens of thousands have fled their homes and crowded together into makeshift camps for security.

Aminu Zimbo from Ghana told *Voice of America* that black foreigners were being targeted by anti-Gaddafi militia.

“They just came. They were shooting guns. We ran. Our passports were in the room. We just escaped because they killed lots of Ghanaians there. They kill all blacks. That is why we decided to run,” he said.

Last week Reuters stated: “Reporters saw the bodies of 22 men of apparent African origin at a Tripoli beach Saturday, people who locals said were mercenaries killed by anti-Gaddafi forces. Elsewhere in Libya, dead men of African origin have been a common sight since the uprising, as has been the sight of ill treatment of Africans by Libyan anti-Gaddafi fighters.”

Black Libyans from tribes in the south of the country are particularly vulnerable, as they have nowhere to flee. Amnesty International has called for a halt to reprisals and the arbitrary arrest of Tawarghas, who were being detained and severely beaten in Tripoli. “Others have simply vanished after being arrested at checkpoints and taken from hospitals by armed revolutionaries (*thuwwar*),” the human rights organisation said.

The US and international media, which have cheered on the imperialist war in Libya, have largely ignored the systematic maltreatment of black Africans or downplayed its extent and significance amid the trumpeting of a new dawn of democracy in Libya.

In fact, the brutal methods used against African workers emerge directly from the character of the Libyan war and of the NTC itself. The US and the European powers, who had collaborated closely with Gaddafi over the previous decade, turned on their former ally to seize critical oil resources and establish the NTC as a proxy regime—serving as a bulwark against the revolutionary uprisings against US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East.

Now, the NTC and its imperialist backers, who are busy signing contracts handing Libya’s oil wealth over to major Western energy conglomerates, intend to use

the most brutal measures against any popular opposition. They hope to escape all criticism of their actions thanks to the whitewashing of their political image by the international media.

In the forefront of this reactionary enterprise are various left-liberals and pseudo-radical organisations that have supported NATO’s “humanitarian” intervention in Libya. Among them, University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole has consistently acted as a political apologist for the war and for NATO’s NTC proxies in Libya.

His blog last week dismissed reports that “some African mercenaries may have become victims of reprisal killings” as “sketchy,” echoing official NTC claims to oppose mass reprisals—and ignoring mounting evidence of systematic racist abuse.

The persecution and killing of black immigrants and Libyans is a devastating refutation of all those who claimed that imperialist war could bring democracy to Libya. They bear full political responsibility for the war’s cost in destroyed and ruined lives.

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