

Two years after US-NATO war, torture rampant in Libya

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Two years after the end of the US-NATO war in Libya, thousands in the North African country remain imprisoned without charges and are being subjected to systematic torture, according to a report released Tuesday by the United Nations.

The report, entitled “Torture and deaths in detention in Libya” recorded 27 cases in which the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has gathered evidence substantiating that detainees have been tortured to death. The agency knows of many other cases that it has not been able to investigate. At least 11 of the documented torture deaths took place during the first half of this year.

All of the known deaths this year are reported to have taken place in “detention centres under the nominal authority of the government but effectively under the authority of armed brigades.” There are an estimated 8,000 individuals held in these centers.

Those who are arrested disappear into the network of detention and torture centers, without their families knowing their whereabouts. An unknown number are being kept prisoner by armed militias in secret sites ranging from apartments to farms and former government offices.

Grabbed from the streets, their workplaces or homes without any evidence presented against them, many of these prisoners have been subjected to arbitrary and indefinite detention as well as torture for nothing more than the color of their skin—black Libyans and other Africans have been mercilessly repressed by the pro-NATO “rebels”—or tribal affiliation.

“Some have been detained apparently on the basis of belonging to certain tribal or ethnic groups, including Warfalla, Tawergha, and Mashashia, as these groups are collectively perceived by some as having supported the former regime. Given the arbitrary nature of the arrests and lack of judicial oversight, cases of personal score-

settling are not uncommon,” the report states.

Security conditions in Libya are so bad that it was impossible for UN personnel to investigate conditions at detention centers in the eastern part of the country. The report likewise acknowledges that throughout the country “armed brigades remain in effective control of territory and State functions, including detention and interrogation, and many have swelled their ranks since” the US-NATO war for regime change.

Most of the detention facilities visited by the UN investigators, according to the report, are formally under the control of the centralized state, but this control is “often little more than nominal,” with real power being exercised by armed militias, many of them Islamist groups, from which the prison guards are drawn.

The brutalization of detainees, virtually none of whom have been charged with any crime outside of allegedly supporting the former regime of murdered Libyan head of state Muammar Gaddafi, has become so endemic that the UN agency warned of “a danger that torture will become institutionalized within the new Libya.”

The UN investigators reported that prisoners had told them “they were constrained in contorted positions; beaten on the soles of their feet (falaqa); beaten all over the body with whips, cables, plastic hoses, metal chains, bars and wooden sticks; and given electric shocks with live wires or taser-like weapons. Several said they were hanged upside down and beaten for hours, burned with cigarettes, had hot liquids poured on them, and were exposed to burning metals.”

Others “reported rape by having sticks or bottles inserted into their anuses, or said they were beaten on their genitals.” The report cites the case of a detainee in his late forties who was held in solitary confinement for four months “and beaten with a metal bar, chains and water hoses,” suffering four broken fingers and a broken leg.

“He also said that he was forced to sit on a glass bottle several times and had a large bullet forcibly introduced into his anus, causing bleeding for several days,” the report states. “He added that other cell mates had similar symptoms when they came back from solitary confinement, but they never talked about it because they found it shameful.”

The report states that detainees visited by UNSMIL personnel were suffering from “not just broken limbs but also disabilities, such as deafness and blindness apparently caused by their treatment.”

“Some detainees who said they had been recently beaten could barely walk,” according to the report. “Several detainees developed chronic diseases apparently because of lack of adequate nutrition, ventilation and sunlight; exposure to humidity; and poor detention conditions in general. Others suffered from poor medical care, and several died in custody apparently as a result of lack of adequate medical treatment.”

Among the 11 deaths documented by the UN agency between January and June of 2013 was that of a 51-year-old man, Ali Mas’ud Ahmad al-Etri, who on June 14 was grabbed from his home by Islamist militiamen and taken to the Mitiga detention facility for the offense of drinking alcohol with friends. According to a preliminary forensic report, “the death is caused by a cerebral bleeding and cardiac arrest; the corpse had several traumatic bruises. The death was caused by beatings and torture.”

Abdelhakim Belaid al-Tajuri, a 46-year-old man, was dragged from his home in Tripoli by members of the Ard al-Rijal brigade and transported to Misrata on March 23. The government’s Combating Crime Department admits to having held him for “a few days” and says it then released him for lack of evidence and had no knowledge of what happened to him afterwards. His body was found at the gate to the department’s headquarters. A preliminary forensic report said that “Abdelhakim died as a result of widespread traumatic injuries to his body and bleeding inside the head cavity.” Witnesses said that his face was swollen and there were fresh injuries to his hands and feet.

Another victim was Hasan al-Mabruk al-Triki, a 39-year-old doctor who was himself taken prisoner in February while tending to the wounds of detainees at a detention/torture facility operated by the al-Isnad II brigade in Tripoli. “He had called his family to tell them that he was being detained at his workplace, but when the family called back one and-a-half hours later, they were told by an al-Isnad II member that he had died,” the report

states. “According to the preliminary forensic report “the victim sustained severe traumatic injuries to his body and particularly to his head and face. His death was caused by internal bleeding.”

The recommendations made by the UN report include a number of measures to end torture and prosecute or release the many thousands of Libyan detainees. In the end, however, they all amount to appeals to a powerless central government to exercise control and to bloodthirsty Islamist militias to stop torturing and murdering their captives.

The UN report provides a chilling glimpse of the political situation in Libya two years after the Obama administration claimed victory for a “humanitarian” intervention that it said would protect civilians and promote freedom and democracy.

The country has been fractured by rival armed militias, with its government under a continuous state of siege and its oil facilities taken over by armed groups pressing various demands, including regional autonomy. Libya has seen oil production and exports fall to barely one-tenth of their pre-war levels, and major energy conglomerates, including ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell, suspend operations because of violence and instability.

The Libyan regime of Prime Minister Ali Zidan has responded by offering more lucrative deals to big oil and pleading with the Western powers to intervene in defense of the powerless government. “The situation is not going to improve unless we get real and practical assistance,” Zidan told a Libyan investment conference in London last month.

It remains to be seen whether that “assistance” will take the form of a new US-NATO intervention in defense of the West’s economic and geostrategic interests in Libya, which boasts Africa’s largest proven oil reserves.



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