

After protests in flood-hit Derna, Libyan officials order journalists to leave

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Protests erupted in Derna on Monday, as anger exploded among workers in the city against authorities who failed to take critical measures to protect it from flooding. When Storm Daniel hit the region, Derna's poorly maintained dams burst, and a massive wall of water descended on the city, killing an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people.

The response to the protests of officials in eastern Libya, where Derna is located, underscores the complete contempt of the Libyan authorities and their NATO backers for the population. They have ordered journalists to leave the area and are blocking access to foreign search-and-rescue teams. The few reports available from the area speak of mounting fear that the eastern Libyan authorities, which have longstanding ties to NATO, are preparing a bloody crackdown in Derna.

The protest revealed the growing mass opposition to the corrupt patchwork of militias and local warlords put in power by the NATO war in Libya in 2011 that destroyed the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

On Monday, protesters gathered in front of Derna's Al Sahaba mosque and denounced the eastern Libyan regime led by former CIA asset General Khalifa Haftar, and especially the speaker of the eastern Libyan parliament, Aguilah Saleh. They chanted slogans like: "The people want parliament to fall," "Aguila is the enemy of God," "Thieves and betrayers must hang" and "The bloody of martyrs must not be shed in vain."

They also chanted slogans against the decade-long civil war in Libya that followed the NATO victory in the 2011 war: "Aguila we don't want you, all Libyans are brothers."

Aguila had provoked outrage last week by declaring that Libyans should not "exchange accusations" over who is responsible for the deaths, as "The disaster that

struck the country is a natural one. ... It is in God's hand."

Protesters in Derna also read out a statement listing their demands against the Haftar-Aguilah regime. They called for "a speedy investigation and legal action against those responsible for the disaster." They also called for a probe of Derna's present and previous budgets, the opening of a UN office in the city, and the launching of its "reconstruction, with compensation for affected residents."

Later, on Monday night, protesters gathered outside the house of Derna Mayor Abdulmenam al-Ghaithi, stormed it and burned it down.

At 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning, mobile phone networks in Derna all suddenly shut off. The Libyan Post Telecommunications & Information Technology Company (LIPTIC), which operates these networks, attributed it to a "rupture in the optical fiber" link in Derna. LIPTIC added that it "could be the result of a deliberate act of sabotage" and added: "our teams are working to repair it as quickly as possible."

Throughout the day Tuesday, eastern Libyan authorities took sweeping measures to prevent reports of events in Derna from reaching the outside world and limit the number of foreign rescue teams working in the city.

Initially, the eastern Libyan government declared that "health reasons" meant it was dangerous for journalists to remain in Derna. After Libyan health authorities confirmed that there were no health advisories currently in effect for Derna, the government changed its reason for telling journalists to leave. It said the large number of reporters was "hindering the work of the rescue teams."

As it claimed to be doing everything it could to help the rescue teams to justify making reporters leave,

however, the eastern Libyan government asked a number of international rescue teams to leave Derna and blocked others from arriving.

Spanish and Maltese rescue teams have already left the city, and UN officials have said that the eastern Libyan authorities are blocking their teams from reaching Derna. “We can confirm that search and rescue teams, emergency medical teams and UN colleagues who are already in Derna continue to operate,” UN spokesperson Najwa Mekki told Reuters. “However, a UN team was due to travel from Benghazi to Derna today but were not authorized to proceed.”

This has led to a number of reports on social media, largely from diplomatic or security personnel working for think-tanks with connections to Libya, that a crackdown is being prepared, and that Derna is bracing for an attack from Haftar’s forces.

On Twitter/X, Emadeddin Badi of the Atlantic Council wrote: “Media blackout on Derna now in place, (communications) off since dawn. Make no mistake about it, this isn’t about health or safety, but punishing the Derna’is for protesting. Turkey and Algeria’s Search and Rescue teams, journalists and Tripolitania’s medical teams have been given orders to leave” by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), Haftar’s military force.

Similarly, Tarek Magrasi of the European Council on Foreign Relations tweeted: “Extremely dark news from a Derna still reeling from horrific floods. The city’s communications are shut down with Libyan and international aid teams kicked out. Locals are now terrified of an impending military crackdown as collective punishment for yesterday’s protests and demands.”

The catastrophe in Derna is a devastating exposure of the consequences of the 2011 NATO war and of the subsequent decade of civil war into which it plunged Libya. NATO countries’ banks and oil companies were able to loot Libya, which was once Africa’s wealthiest country per capita and with its longest life expectancy. The local administrations that emerged after 2011 under the neo-colonial regime in Libya rule with utter contempt for working people.

Significantly, among the many pseudo-left academics who agitated for the NATO war in Libya 12 years ago, one particularly popular argument was that NATO intervention was necessary to keep Gaddafi from

possibly massacring protesters in eastern Libya.

Professor Gilbert Achcar, a member of France’s Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) who has now been exposed as a paid adviser to the British army, denounced left-wing opposition to NATO’s imperialist war in Libya, asserting: “Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it. The attack by Gaddafi’s forces was hours or at most days away. You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians.”

This potential massacre by Gaddafi’s forces in 2011 did not materialize. Now, however, there is mounting evidence that the eastern Libyan regime set up by the NATO war is preparing a very real crackdown in Derna. In its latest report on Libya, Amnesty International explained how Haftar’s regime treats protesters who challenge its authority, writing:

Militias and armed groups used unlawful force to repress peaceful protests across the country. Dozens of people were arrested, prosecuted and/or sentenced to lengthy imprisonment or death. ... Militias and armed groups systematically tortured and otherwise ill-treated detainees with impunity. Beatings, electric shocks, mock executions, flogging, waterboarding, suspension in contorted positions and sexual violence were reported by relatives and prisoners...

Any repression in Derna by Haftar’s forces would directly implicate the NATO imperialist powers who helped install him in power, and who still maintain ties with him to get access to eastern Libya’s oil wealth. Opposing such repression requires mobilizing workers and youth, in Libya and internationally, against not only the corrupt Libyan authorities but the NATO powers and their political accomplices.



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