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Militias, armed groups and security forces continued to arbitrarily detain thousands of people, some for over a decade, without allowing them to challenge the lawfulness of their detention. Scores of journalists, politicians, government employees and civil society activists were abducted, forcibly disappeared and tortured or otherwise ill-treated on the basis of their actual or perceived political, regional or tribal affiliation and/or activism connected to planned elections. Militias and armed groups killed and wounded civilians and destroyed civilian property during sporadic, localized clashes. Attacks by armed groups on water infrastructure undermined access to clean water for millions of people. Authorities continued to integrate into state institutions and fund militias and armed groups responsible for war crimes and serious human rights violations. Authorities failed to protect women, girls and LGBTI people from sexual and gender-based violence or to address discrimination. Ethnic minorities and internally displaced people faced barriers in accessing education and healthcare. Militias and security forces used unlawful lethal force and other violence to arbitrarily arrest thousands of migrants and refugees, while EU-backed Libyan coastguards intercepted at sea thousands of others and forcibly returned them to detention in Libya. Detained migrants and refugees were subjected to torture, unlawful killings, sexual violence and forced labour. Military courts convicted scores of civilians in grossly unfair trials.

Background

The UN-mediated process led to the swearing-in of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in March, tasked with preparing for presidential and parliamentary elections. Political divisions persisted and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), an armed group, retained effective control over large parts of eastern and southern Libya.

On 22 December, presidential elections scheduled to begin on 24 December were postponed after authorities failed to confirm a list of eligible candidates. Disagreements over the eligibility of candidates and the constitutional and legal basis for elections persisted, with various political constituencies dismissing electoral laws announced by parliament's spokesperson as invalid because of the absence of a parliamentary vote, procedural irregularities and breaches of the UN-backed roadmap. For a period in December, after AbdelHamid al-Dbeibeh announced his candidacy in elections, deputy prime minister Ramadan Abu Janah assumed the role of prime minister.

Despite an August agreement by GNU and LAAF representatives on the gradual withdrawal of foreign fighters, thousands remained in the country.

Libya's economy showed signs of recovery, in part due to the resumption of oil production. However, failure to adopt a national budget and unify the Central Bank curtailed the population's enjoyment of socio-economic rights and led to repeated delays in wages for public sector workers.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the Fact-Finding Mission to investigate crimes under international law committed in Libya since 2016.

Arbitrary detention and unlawful deprivation of liberty

The GNU and LAAF announced the release of scores of prisoners, including al-Saadi al-Gaddafi, son of former ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi. However, militias, armed groups and security forces continued to arbitrarily detain thousands of people; some had been held for over 10 years without charge or trial.

Throughout the year, men and women were arrested for their actual or perceived political or tribal affiliation or activism in connection to elections, and subjected to enforced disappearances or held incommunicado for up to seven months.¹

In March, the Internal Security Agency, an armed group affiliated with the LAAF, abducted Haneen al-Abduli from a street in Benghazi and detained her in al-Kouwifyia prison until 28 June, after she had publicly called for accountability for the murder of her mother, lawyer Hanan al-Barassi, who was gunned down in 2020.²

Military courts in LAAF-controlled areas convicted dozens of civilians in grossly unfair trials.³ The right to adequate defence, a reasoned judgment and genuine review were routinely flouted.

In September, the LAAF released journalist Ismail al-Zway, who was serving a 15-year prison sentence imposed by a military court due to his media work.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Militias and armed groups systematically tortured and otherwise ill-treated detainees in official and unofficial places of detention with impunity. Beatings, electric shocks, mock executions, flogging, waterboarding, suspension in contorted positions and sexual violence were reported by prisoners held by the Special Deterrence Force, Stability Support Apparatus, Brigade 444, Public Security Agency and the Security Directorate Support Force militias, as well as by armed groups including the Internal Security Agency, Tareq Ibn Zeyad and the 128th and 106th brigades.

Prison officials, militias and armed groups held detainees in cruel and inhuman conditions, characterized by overcrowding, denial of healthcare and lack of hygiene, exercise and sufficient food. At least two men died in custody after being denied adequate healthcare.

Libyan legislation retained corporal punishments, including flogging and amputation.

In June, a Tripoli military court sentenced a soldier to 80 lashes for drinking alcohol; military police carried out the flogging.

Unlawful killings

The bodies of at least 20 individuals were found following their abduction by militias and armed groups. Some had marks of torture or gunshot wounds.

In August, the body of Abdelaziz al-Ogali, a 56-year-old man abducted in November 2020 by armed men believed to be affiliated with the LAAF, was found in Benghazi.

Freedom of association and expression

Throughout the year militias and armed groups in areas controlled by the GNU and LAAF threatened and ordered dozens of activists and politicians to cease their activism and political involvement in the elections, arresting at least 20 men.

After the National Youth League, a state body, called for protests against the postponement of the elections, armed men abducted its director Imad al-Harati from his Tripoli office in September and held him incommunicado for nine days.

In October, parliament passed a cybercrime law that severely limits free expression online, allows for government surveillance and censorship, and punishes with imprisonment the dissemination of content deemed “immoral”.

Militias and armed groups continued to target journalists and social media users through arbitrary arrest, detention and threats, simply for expressing critical views or carrying out their work.

In October, unidentified armed men in military uniform abducted journalist Saddam al-Saket during his coverage of a sit-in by refugees in Tripoli. His whereabouts remained unknown.

NGO registration, funding and activities were subject to opaque and lengthy procedures. A case against undue restrictions to the right to freedom of association in Decree No. 286/2019 regulating NGOs, remained pending at a Tripoli administrative court.

Humanitarian actors reported increased access restrictions to Libya and communities in need.

Unlawful attacks

While the national ceasefire in place since October 2020 held, militias and armed groups violated international humanitarian law during sporadic, localized armed clashes, including indiscriminate attacks and destruction of civilian infrastructure and private property.

In June, clashes involving machine guns between the Criminal Investigations Unit, a militia based in al-Zawiya city, and a militia led by Mohamed al-Shalfoh, based in the neighbouring city of al-Agiliat, left two women and one man dead and damaged civilian property.

In October, a boy was killed in the southern city of Sebha during clashes between Brigade 116, an armed group affiliated with the LAAF but nominally commanded by the GNU, and a local armed group.

Landmines planted by LAAF-affiliated non-state actors before their withdrawal from Tripoli in 2020 killed and wounded at least 24 civilians, including children. In March, a man and a boy were killed in two separate landmine explosions in Tripoli’s southern outskirts.

Armed groups repeatedly attacked the Great Man-Made River (GMMR) infrastructure, a network of waterpipes that transports water from aquifers in the south to coastal areas, limiting access to water for millions of people. In August, armed men affiliated with the Magarha tribe forced the GMMR administration to cut water supplies to western Libya for a week, demanding the release of their tribal leader Abdallah al-Senussi, a former intelligence chief who was sentenced to death in 2015.

In June, the Islamic State armed group claimed a suicide attack on a police checkpoint that killed six civilians in Sebha.

Several countries, including Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), violated the UN arms embargo established since 2011 by retaining foreign fighters and military equipment in Libya. Verified videos showed militias using UAE-manufactured and exported armoured vehicles in a raid against migrants and refugees in Tripoli in October, which were likely seized by GNA-affiliated militias (the previous Government of National Accord) from the LAAF during the 2020 hostilities in Tripoli.

Impunity

Officials and members of militias and armed groups responsible for crimes under international law enjoyed near total impunity. Authorities continued to fund abusive armed groups and militias without vetting and to integrate them into state institutions.

In January, Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, commander of the Abu Salim Central Security Force militia, was appointed head of the newly created Stability Support Authority tasked with law enforcement and intelligence, despite credible reports about his militia's involvement in war crimes since 2011.

Libyan officials and those with de facto control of territory ignored ICC arrest warrants, with Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, who had been indicted by the ICC on charges of crimes against humanity, running for the presidency.

In February, Al-Tuhamy Khaled, wanted by the ICC for crimes against humanity and war crimes, died at liberty in Egypt. In March, Mahmoud al-Werfalli, wanted by the ICC for the murder of 33 people in Benghazi and surrounding areas, was assassinated in Benghazi.

In April, the GNU released Abdelrahman Milad, also known as Bidja, following a decision by the public prosecutor citing lack of evidence. He remained under UN Security Council sanctions, imposed in June 2018, over his involvement in human trafficking. He resumed his role as head of the Libyan Coast Guard-Western Branch in al-Zawiya. Osama al-Kuni remained director of al-Nasr detention centre in al-Zawiya, despite being added to the UN Security Council sanctions list in October for his role in crimes against detained migrants and refugees.

In June, the LAAF claimed that members of the Tareq Ibn Zeyad armed group killed Mohamed al-Kani, a commander of the al-Kaniat armed group, while he was resisting arrest. Hundreds of mass graves containing bodies of men, women and children believed to have been unlawfully killed by al-Kaniat were uncovered in Tarhouna after al-Kaniat's withdrawal from the city in June 2020. Although authorities announced investigations, no suspected perpetrators were brought to justice.

In October, the Fact-Finding Mission found that all parties to the conflict had violated international law, and that abuses against refugees and migrants may amount to crimes against humanity.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Libyan authorities failed to protect women, girls and LGBTI individuals from sexual and gender-based violence as well as killings, torture and unlawful deprivation of liberty, by militias, armed groups and other non-state actors. Women and girls faced barriers to seeking justice for rape and other sexual violence, including the risk of prosecution for engaging in sexual relations outside marriage, criminalized in Libya, and revenge by perpetrators. Women activists and politicians, including Najla al-Mangoush, GNU's minister of foreign affairs, and presidential candidates Laila Ben Khalifa and Huneida al-Mahdi, faced misogynistic abuse and threats online.

In February, following a family dispute, student Widad al-Sheriqi was abducted by armed men led by her father, tortured and held captive in a private location in al-Zawiya until she escaped in March.

In July, the Special Deterrence Force captured and forcibly returned a girl survivor of parental domestic violence to her family.

Armed groups and militias continued to attack, harass and arrest LGBTI people. Consensual same-sex sexual relations remained criminalized.

In September, a transgender man fled Libya after an armed group affiliated with the LAAF threatened to kill him and his friend in Benghazi.

Discrimination

Ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities

Some Tabu and Tuareg, especially those without national identity cards, faced discrimination in southern Libya in accessing essential services, including healthcare and education, as well as sports clubs. In al-Kufra, Tabus were unable to access the south-eastern city’s only university as it is located in an area controlled by rival armed groups. In September, the prime minister announced the establishment of a committee to review contested Libyan citizenship claims mainly by ethnic minorities.

Internally displaced people

Nearly 200,000 people remained internally displaced, some for over 10 years. Thousands of internally displaced people from eastern Libya were unable to return home due to fear of reprisals by armed groups and destruction of their property. Thousands of residents of Tawergha city, forcibly displaced since 2011, were unable to return to their homes due to lack of security and essential services.

Internally displaced people faced barriers curtailing their access to education, healthcare, housing and employment due to the failure of successive governments to prioritize their rights, including in national budgets, and to protect them from arbitrary detention, threats of eviction and other attacks by armed groups and militias.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Refugees and migrants were subjected to widespread and systematic human rights violations and abuses at the hands of state officials, militias and armed groups with impunity.

EU-backed Libyan coastguards endangered the lives of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean by shooting or otherwise deliberately damaging their boats, leading to loss of life (see Italy entry). They intercepted and forcibly returned 32,425 refugees and migrants to Libya, where thousands were detained indefinitely in harsh conditions in facilities overseen by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM).⁴ Thousands of others were forcibly disappeared following disembarkation.

Refugees and migrants were also arbitrarily arrested in their homes, on the streets and at checkpoints. In October, Libyan security forces and Tripoli-based militias used unlawful lethal force and other violence to round up over 5,000 men, women and children from Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

Guards and militia subjected those in their custody to torture and other ill-treatment, including sexual and gender-based violence, forced labour and other exploitation, including at the al-Mabani DCIM detention centre opened in January in Tripoli. Guards in the Shara’ al-Zawiya DCIM centre in Tripoli raped migrant women and girls and coerced them into sex in exchange for food.

DCIM authorities in eastern Libya expelled at least 2,839 refugees and migrants to Chad, Egypt and Sudan without any due process.

Libyan authorities prevented departures of several resettlement and evacuation flights for refugees and asylum seekers out of Libya.

Guards, men in military uniforms and militia unlawfully shot at refugees and migrants in DCIM centres or during escape attempts, killing at least 10 and injuring dozens in al-Mabani detention centre and Abu Salim-controlled detention centres in separate incidents in February, April, July and October.

Right to health

The Covid-19 vaccine rollout began in April, but was marred by delays, initial exclusion of undocumented people, and failure to prioritize health workers and other at-risk groups. Libyan authorities failed to procure sufficient vaccines, raise awareness or ensure accessibility to at-risk groups. Migrants, refugees and internally displaced people faced additional barriers in accessing the vaccine due to nepotism and discrimination, while militias and armed groups did not vaccinate people in their custody. By the end of the year, only 12% of Libyans and less than 1% of foreign nationals were fully vaccinated.

The health sector struggled due to limited and damaged infrastructure and equipment, leading to the closure of several Covid-19 isolation centres. Armed men abducted and violently attacked healthcare and humanitarian workers.

Death penalty

Libyan law retained the death penalty for a wide range of offences not limited to intentional killing, and death sentences continued to be passed. No executions were carried out.

In May, the Supreme Court quashed the conviction and death sentence against Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi and eight others, citing fair trial concerns, and ordered a retrial.

1. [“Libya: Authorities must address violations after elections postponed”, 22 December](#)
2. [“Libya: Government of National Unity must not legitimize militias and armed groups responsible for harrowing abuses”, 6 August](#)
3. [“Libya: Military courts sentence hundreds of civilians in sham, torture-tainted trials”, 26 April](#)
4. [“Libya: Horrific violations in detention highlight Europe’s shameful role in forced returns”, 15 July](#)
5. [“Libya: Unlawful lethal force and mass arrests in unprecedented migrant crackdown”, 8 October](#)

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