

Many IDPs return but concerns persist for certain displaced groups



Civilians walk along Tripoli Street in displacement-affected Misrata.

UNHCR/ H. Caux, June 2011

The armed conflict in Libya, which has led to the end of the 41-year rule of Muammar Qadhafi, has caused several waves of internal displacement. The repeated advances and retreats of both pro-Qadhafi and opposition forces left cities and villages deserted, with civilians increasingly bearing the impact of the combat. The death of Qadhafi in late October enabled Libya to enter a new phase of political reconstruction.

The total number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in late October was still uncertain. In late September, between 100,000 and 150,000 people were believed to be internally displaced. However, the fluidity of the situation, the limited access to areas of fighting and to in-country information sources, and the lack of comprehensive monitoring of IDP movements have made information difficult to verify.

Displacement in Libya has mainly taken place in urban areas, with most IDPs being accommodated with relatives, host families or in other sites such as public buildings. Despite the challenges their basic needs have generally been met.

In mid-October, ongoing hostilities in Sirte and Bani Walid, the strongholds of Qadhafi loyalists, were still causing new displacements. In other areas of both eastern and western Libya where fighting had subsided, the improvement in security had already allowed significant numbers of IDPs to return to their cities and towns. The fall of Sirte in late October gave hope that IDPs would be able to return there, too.

Nonetheless, concerns remain over the situation of certain displaced groups, including foreign nationals and those known to be loyal to the Qadhafi government.

Background

Colonel Muammar Qadhafi's 41-year rule in Libya ended in 2011 after eight months of armed conflict. In late August the rebels entered the capital Tripoli, forcing Qadhafi to flee (BBC News, 26 August 2011). The death of Qadhafi in late October, and the capture of his final stronghold Sirte, enabled Libya to enter a new phase of political reconstruction under the guidance of a transitional government.

The uprising started in mid-February 2011 after government forces fired on protesters in Benghazi who were demanding the end of Qadhafi's rule. Within four days the protests engulfed a number of cities, including Al-Baida, Ajdabiya and Misrata. By late February, an armed conflict had developed between pro-government and opposition forces. Opposition groups formed the National Transitional Council (NTC), in which they were joined by several high-ranking members of the armed forces.

In mid-March, while Qadhafi's forces were gaining the upper hand, increasing international concern at the escalation of violence and continuing serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law led the UN Security Council to pass Resolution 1973, which endorsed a no-fly zone over Libya and called for "all the necessary measures to protect civilians". On 24 March, NATO began to implement the no-fly zone while a multi-state coalition targeted ground units. Although Resolution 1973 did not authorise support for the rebellion, this intervention altered the course of the conflict in the rebels' favour (UN News Centre, 25 March 2011).

The UN Human Rights Council set up the International Commission of Inquiry for Libya to investigate acts of indiscriminate violence against civilians during the conflict. On 1 June, the Commission concluded that both government and (on a smaller scale) rebel forces had committed acts amounting to war crimes. While international attacks had caused civilian casualties, the Commission did not find evidence that NATO forces had engaged in indiscriminate attacks on civilians. On 27 June, the International Criminal Court charged Qadhafi, his son Saif al-Islam and intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi with crimes against humanity committed during and following the brutal repression of protests in February (HRC, 1 June 2011; BBC News, 27 June 2011).

The frontlines have moved back and forth across Libya, with government forces initially controlling most of the west of the country including Tripoli and opposition forces controlling the east. The repeated advances and retreats have frequently caused local populations to flee. Cities and villages have been left deserted with houses locked and shuttered, while their residents have either fled or gone into hiding within the city. The conflict has been particularly intense in certain conflict areas, such as the western Nafusa Mountains. Some cities, such as Ajdabiya and Misrata, have faced sustained sieges or attacks, with prolonged shelling and street-to-street fighting leading to significant displacement.

As of early October, although fighting had subsided in much of the country, hostilities in the last strongholds held by Qadhafi loyalists continued to cause new displacements (AFP, 2 October 2011; IMC, 11 October 2011). The capture of Sirte and the death of Qadhafi in late October, however, enabled the NTC to plan a formal announcement of Libya's liberation and a timeline for elections (Reuters, 20 October 2011)

Scale and patterns of displacement

Numbers of IDPs

As of mid-October, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Libya was still uncertain. UNHCR and the humanitarian community estimated that there were between 100,000 and 150,000 IDPs in Libya, primarily in the zones around Bani Walid, Sirte, Misrata and Tarhouna, as well as in sites in and around Tripoli and Benghazi. This was down from an unverified estimate of over 240,000 reported in mid-June (UNICEF, 13 October 2011; OCHA, 16 June 2011). As of 3 October, about 50,000 children were reported to be internally displaced (OCHA, 3 October 2011).

The rapid evolution of events, the limited access to in-country sources and areas of fighting, and the lack of comprehensive monitoring of IDP movements have made information incomplete and difficult to verify. Some estimates have been based on anecdotal reports and feedback from organisations with access to conflict zones, or has been limited in scope to specific areas or groups. More accurate information has been available in eastern Libya, where the Libyan Committee for Humanitarian Aid and Relief (LCHR) of the NTC worked with local religious authorities and Scouts to obtain and analyse data on local families and IDPs (UNHCR, 15 June 2011; LCHR, 23 April 2011).

The battle for control of Ajdabiya caused several waves of displacement, with 70 per cent of its 120,000 residents reportedly fleeing. They went back and forth between Ajdabiya and other cities; in April Albayda, Derna and Tobruk were hosting between 900 and 1,200 displaced families, while Benghazi was hosting about 100,000 IDPs as of May (FAO/WFP, 25 April 2011; OCHA, 9 May 2011). Residents of Brega and Ras Lanuf were also forced to flee towards the east and south of Libya as the fighting approached. In September, a UN mission to Brega reported that of an estimated pre-conflict population of 3,000 families, only 400 families had returned; the whereabouts of another 400 families were unknown, and the remaining families were still displaced (UN, 8 September 2011).

Heavy clashes in the south-eastern desert town of Kufra also led hundreds of people to flee, either to the west towards Sebha or to the north (Telegraph, 1 July 2011).

In western Libya, about 300,000 residents of Misrata were trapped within the city for months under daily attack. In April, as the frontline shifted into farmland on the outskirts, about 24,000 people fled from the periphery towards the city centre (OCHA, 12 April 2011). On 1 June, a UN-led inter-agency mission reported that some 49,000 people had left the city to seek safety in Sirte, Bani Walid, Tarhouna, Tripoli, Jufra, Al-Khums, Tawergha and Jaffaran (OCHA, 2 June 2011). Around Misrata, as the conflict intensified again in August, the frontlines moved towards Zlitan in the west and Tawergha in the south, resulting in new waves of displacement from these areas. All the 25,000 inhabitants of Tawergha fled before the rebels approached, as the town had been a centre of military operations against Misrata during its siege (Guardian, 13 September 2011).

On 15 June UNHCR reported an unverified estimate that the fighting in the Nafusa Mountains had internally displaced about 100,000 people since the crisis began. IDPs had moved back and forth between Yafran, Gharyan, Jadu, Zintan and Nalut, the towns which were most affected by the violence and the interruption of supply routes.

In late August, after the conflict had appeared to be at a stalemate for months, it intensified, particularly in Tripoli and the surrounding areas. Tens of thousands of people fled southwards into the Nafusa Mountains, with about 800 families per day reportedly passing through the Bir-Ayyad checkpoint. As of 8 September, there were an estimated 35,000 IDPs in the Tripoli area, many of them from Tawergha (OCHA, 26 August and 8 September 2011).

Before the unrest started, Libya was host to between 1.5 million and 2.5 million foreign migrants. As of 23 August, almost 670,000 of them had left Libya since the beginning of the crisis. Many others have been displaced within the country, but reported IDP figures usually do not include them. Many have found themselves stranded in besieged cities or in border camps, unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin (Reuters, 15 July 2011; IOM, 25 August 2011).

Patterns of displacement

Most IDPs have taken refuge in urban areas. They have often fled to nearby villages and towns or moved to safer neighborhoods within the same city, as in Misrata or Tripoli. Most have sought shelter with relatives or host families, or in public buildings (including schools), coastal holiday resorts, factories or construction sites. There have been also reports of IDPs staying in improvised settlements in the desert, out of the reach of support. This has repeatedly been the case for families from Ben Jawad and other towns along the coast to the west of Ras Lanuf (ICRC, 15 September 2011; Protection Cluster Minutes, 20 September 2011).

According to the LCHR, the internally displaced population included a significant number of female heads of households, who were either widowed or separated from their husbands as a result of the conflict (LCHR, 23 April 2011).

Main protection issues

Physical security and integrity

Throughout the conflict, the indiscriminate nature of the fighting has dramatically affected civilians and caused many displacement movements. The government's response was very violent from the beginning of the protests; it carried out extra-judicial arrests and executions, as revealed by the increasing number of mass graves reported since June. Government armed forces launched artillery, mortar and rocket attacks against residential areas, and used inherently indiscriminate weapons such as anti-personnel mines and cluster bombs (HRC, 1 June 2011; Amnesty International, 13 September 2011; Human Rights Watch, 26 August 2011).

As of October, although the fighting had subsided in most parts of Libya, many barriers to security remained. The significant presence of landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) in conflict areas represented a serious risk, with IDPs particularly exposed due to their forced movement and the contamination of many buildings where they sought shelter. It has also affected IDPs' capacity to move back to their areas safely and recover economically (JMACT, 2 September 2011).

There have been many reports of restrictions of movement imposed by both sides. Qadhafi's forces have for instance tried to prevent civilians from fleeing Sirte, while rebel forces have reportedly restricted the movements of certain displaced groups, or in some cases have not allowed escaping families to cross their checkpoints (Protection Cluster Minutes, 28 September 2011; UN, 26 August 2011).

Foreign migrants displaced within Libya, particularly Sub-Saharan Africans, have been harassed and targeted as existing racial tensions have been fuelled by Qadhafi's reported use of African mercenaries, but their sheer numbers and the limited support of their governments have caused many to miss out on humanitarian support. This was the case in Tripoli, Misrata and Sabha (IRIN, 24 August 2011; IOM, 1 September 2011; AFP, 25 September 2011).

IDPs belonging to tribes known to be loyal to the former government, such as the Tawergha, Qawalish and Mesheshiya, have also been subjected to harassment, intimidation and discrimination and other human rights abuses. Opposition forces reportedly arbitrarily arrested hundreds of Tawergha IDPs, including women and children, bringing them to Misrata for detention and interrogation, often mistreating them (Human Rights Watch, 13 July 2011; Guardian, 13 September 2011; OCHA, 3 October 2011).

In July, a child protection assessment conducted among IDPs in Benghazi highlighted the lack of capacity to respond to the needs of children exposed to violence due to the conflict, and of adolescents participating in fighting or in support roles (OCHA, 28 July 2011).

Basic necessities

The conflict has disrupted supply lines, damaged infrastructure and left people facing shortages of drinking water, fuel and medicine. It has reduced access to health care and education, with schools and hospitals heavily dependent on local volunteers after the huge exodus of migrant workers. However, as of early October, the fighting had subsided in many areas and the situation was returning to normal, with shops and markets reopening, access to hospitals and basic

services improving, and many IDPs enjoying the opportunity to return home. The basic needs of those who returned have been met, and many returnee families have been housed with relatives.

Nonetheless, in some parts of the country, shortages of clean water, food and life-saving medical supplies have continued, particularly among poorer communities and those recently affected by the conflict. Some areas have also been without the fuel needed to restore electricity supplies and water and sanitation services. Foreign migrants displaced within Libya have also struggled to access food, water, shelter and medical care (IOM, 1 September 2011). People displaced by the conflict in the last strongholds of the former government have also remained in need of emergency assistance including shelter, food, drinking water and medical supplies (Xinhua, 9 September 2011; OCHA, 9 September 2011; ICRC, 30 August 2011).

While schools in government-controlled areas completed the school year in June, many schools in NTC-held areas were closed from March due to fighting and in solidarity with areas of the country remaining under the control of Qadhafi loyalists. During the conflict, no educational activities were reported in IDP settlements in the Nafusa Mountains, but recreational activities and non-formal education for children were provided in some IDP settlements in the east.

IDPs who had taken refuge in schools were helped to find alternative solutions so that schools could reopen, and most primary and secondary schools had reopened by October. However, some schools in north-western areas where fighting was ongoing were still occupied by IDPs as of late September, and UNICEF reported that many internally displaced children were not able to attend formal or informal education (Protection Cluster, 20 September 2011; UNICEF, 29 September 2011).

Durable solutions

Most internal displacement has been short-term, with significant numbers of IDPs returning to their homes when the fighting has moved on. Most IDPs surveyed in settlements in and around Benghazi in July wanted to return to their place of origin, and many were able to do so: the number of IDPs in the eastern parts of the country rapidly decreased from an estimated 94,000 in mid-June to an estimated 23,000 in mid-September, as the frontline moved westwards and southwards (OCHA, 16 June and 7 July 2011; Protection Cluster Minutes, 14 September 2011).

In the Nafusa Mountains, significant numbers of internally displaced families returned to their towns of origin as security and access to services improved, particularly in July and August in order to be home for Ramadan. However, some families were reportedly displaced more than once (OCHA, 7, 21 and 28 July 2011; ICRC, 12 August 2011).

Achieving a solution to displacement – whether through returning, integrating in their place of displacement or resettling elsewhere – is proving more difficult for those IDPs belonging to tribes known to be loyal to Qadhafi. Some have been unable to return to their homes and have faced reprisal attacks and arbitrary detention. In October IDPs from Tawergha were still displaced in Tripoli, with most of them among host communities or in one of three IDP settlements. Restrictions to their return to Tawergha had been reported (Human Rights Watch, 13 July 2011; OCHA, 8 September and 3 October 2011).

National and international response

National response

The former government's response to displacement appeared significant. IDPs in government-controlled areas such as Tripoli, Zlitan, Al Khums and Gharian were housed in hotels, dormitories and seaside homes, and were provided with assistance by the government and some private charities. A UN mission to these areas in July reported that IDPs seemed to be coping, and that their major humanitarian needs had been met (UNHCR, 15 June 2011; OCHA, 21 July and 8 September 2011).

In opposition-held areas, new coordination structures have emerged to address the hardships caused by the absence of government: local councils with important coordination functions have been built from scratch. They have played a major

role in assisting the displaced population. In the Nafusa Mountains, where access has been possible, food assistance provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners has been managed and monitored by local councillors in charge of humanitarian relief, organised in local relief committees. UNICEF's intervention in response to the water crisis has targeted IDPs identified by NGOs and relief committees, and their volunteers have been responsible for the distribution of bottled water (UNICEF, 29 September 2011). A UN-led inter-agency mission in October found that communities displaced from Sirte had also organised themselves efficiently through local relief committees, using contributions from local charities (OCHA, 10 October 2011).

The extent of participation has reportedly been high: volunteers have for instance repaired badly damaged facilities, making hospitals and clinics functional again; they have volunteered as nurses, or assisted people in their neighbourhoods particularly with child care and assistance to older people (ICRC, 3 June 2011; MERIP, 7 September 2011; IRIN, 1 September 2011).

Libya's culture of hospitality and its significant middle-income population have enabled the provision of adequate support for much of the displaced population. However, there have been reports that some families have hosted up to seven or eight displaced families in their homes, putting a heavy strain on both the IDPs and hosts in a situation without salary payments or working banks (AllAfrica, 7 June 2011).

The growing recognition of the NTC as the sole legitimate government, leading several countries to release frozen Libyan funds, has significantly eased the NTC's acute cash shortage and improved its capacity to support the population.

International response

From the onset of the crisis there was a rapid response by the international community including many Arab States as well as regional organisations such as the Arab Medical Union and Islamic Relief. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) already had an established presence in Libya dealing with refugees and migrant workers.

The international response was initially concentrated at the Libyan borders, focusing on transit camps and the transportation needs of the hundreds of thousands of people who fled the country. Activities within the country remained limited. A humanitarian coordination mechanism – the cluster system -- was activated in April, and in May a revised regional flash appeal was published, which marked a shift of focus to the needs of people remaining in Libya, including communities hosting IDPs, while taking into account the needs of people who had left the country or were stranded at borders. The appeal was extended for a month to the end of September, to enable needs assessments to determine which humanitarian activities should continue and to inform an early recovery plan to cover the period from October to December (UN, 18 May 2011; OCHA, 9 September 2011). By mid-October, \$260 million of some \$407 million requested had been donated (Financial Tracking Service webpage, accessed 17 October 2011).

Humanitarian organisations struggled to respond to fast-moving fronts and new waves of displacement. The limited access, mainly due to security constraints, hindered their ability to verify information, assess needs and plan responses. The first UN inter-agency mission took place in April in eastern Libya and the first one in the Nafusa Mountains only on 1 July, even though some international medical NGOs had been there since March. The fact that most IDPs have fled to urban areas, and stayed with relatives or host families, has also made it more difficult to identify and reach them. Libyan organisations have therefore provided critical knowledge of IDP concentrations and their needs (WFP, 19 April 2011; IRIN, 24 August 2011; International Relief and Development, 1 August 2011; Global Logistic Cluster, 21 July 2011).

Food assistance and other relief supplies have been moved through different humanitarian corridors, by road from Egypt and Tunisia and by sea into the main ports along Libya's coastline. But there were areas where humanitarian actors could not access civilians in need. During August, additional food was needed in areas to which people returned to observe Ramadan (OCHA, 15 July 2011; UNICEF, 1 August 2011; USAID, 13 August 2011)

Humanitarian organisations have been active in responding to the ERW threat in Libya. In May the UN, the ICRC and various INGOs partnered to form the Joint Mine Action Coordination Team, which has undertaken assessments, spot task clearance, risk education and medical training (JMACT, 2 September 2011).

The Protection Cluster has been active with working groups on issues including gender-based violence, mine action and child protection. The Child Protection Working Group has made efforts to address the rights and needs of displaced children, for example supporting the creation of child-friendly spaces and facilitating psychosocial support activities. However, its capacity to respond has been limited due to lack of funding (OCHA, 28 July 2011). The education sector has also been short in funding: by early October, none of nearly \$4 million requested for the education sector in the May flash

appeal had been received (UNICEF, 1 August 2011; UNICEF, 8 September 2011; Financial Tracking Service webpage, accessed 6 October 2011).